

## *Chapter 11*

# *BACK TO OUR FIRST LOVE*

*1968 - 1972*

Have you ever lived in the tropics? We were so happy to get back to the warmth, the humidity, the familiar faces and the people we loved at Balimo. I must admit that it becomes quite confusing when you look on three different places as 'home'- Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. However, during our time in PNG the Western Province where the Gogodala's lived was certainly our home. We just loved it. And so the excitement rose as we got closer.

Murray had done a great job of packing the twin pusher, two high-chairs, a sink, phones and numerous other items that we had been given. These came around by ship so there was quite a wait for it to catch up with us. In the meantime we pushed the girls around in a 'cart' that he made up out of a fruit box, an axle and wheels. Another



*The twins in their makeshift pusher*

wooden box was cut in half and sufficed as high-chairs. There's a lot to be said for a simple life uncluttered with too many possessions!

Our first priority was to catch up on language study and to renew friendships with the local people whom we knew. There were plenty of stories of what had been happening. The twins settled very quickly and naturally there was never a shortage of teenage girls waiting to take them for a walk.

Then a little surprise came! We were asked to take over the responsibility of the 'Guest House' at Balimo. I had no idea how much this would involve. That year we had 326 visitors through. This was made up of a variety of types of guests. Some were friends and family members visiting workers on the field. A lot were Government officials, like School Inspectors, visiting the station for one reason or another. A number of people came to work with us on one project or another, improving our power supply, doctors and dentists, you name it. Occasionally there were tourists who had no idea what to expect. They would often fly by larger commercial planes between Port Moresby and Balimo and from there travel on smaller MAF planes to other stations.

Supplying meals for all of these folk was a challenge with the restricted food supply we had, but I never remember going hungry. We used a lot of local fruit, sago and taro, as well as some vegies that were flown down from the highlands. Local game was acquired by village men who went out hunting. Folk brought in fish that they had caught, including Barramundi, and eggs were available so long as you were prepared to take the risk of getting some feathers or bones in them.

All of this was on top of the normal daily work programme. As the MAF Cessna planes flew over you would stand and wonder who or what was about to appear. We were also given the job of monitoring the radio schedule. This involved coming up at the appointed time to receive messages and answer questions as they came in. We did this five times a day plus any special requests to standby.

As I have shared with you previously, so often I have seen

the hand of God preparing me for what lies ahead. Do you remember that I always wanted to be on the radio when I was a teenager! How amazing that the Lord had given me a voice for this very purpose. Try picturing the scene. You come up the steps to our back verandah, which is enclosed and has a child-proof door at the top. The twins are cooling off in a large galvanised tub each for a bath, and I am sitting at the radio trying to give the in-coming pilot an accurate weather report for him to land. I then have to get on the telephone and make sure that Murray, or the lad who drives the jeep, is aware of his ETA so that they can be out at the air-strip to meet him. If I had been told that he had a patient on board, I would ring the hospital to notify them. They would give us instructions as to whether a medical person had to go out to the plane. Hopefully if somebody was coming in to stay the night, I would have had prior warning. If not, there would be a scramble to make up beds and prepare a meal.

It was quite demanding on us as a family, especially in the areas of discipline and quality time together. We just had to make time for games, picnics and plan well ahead for holidays, which were an annual event. I guess the other missionaries working with us were like an extended family. The children were never short of ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’, and



*Robyn Conway (nee Gilchrist)  
with the twins during a visit*

so birthdays and Christmas were great fun. We should have kept a diary and recorded Jenny and Linda’s response to some of these visitors. One evening a visitor spent a long time in the bathroom and when she eventually emerged she was a transformed person. One of the girls asked if this was the queen. Another day one of them asked me why this particular woman was wearing an ‘earwig’. “Shoosh”, came the reply, “It’s not an earwig but a wig. I’ll explain later.”

The children were never short of entertainment with an

abundance of cubbies, tree-houses, canoes, the lagoon to swim in and any number of national children prepared to play with them. One of their sheer delights was when the large football field near our home had just had the grass cut. Because there wasn't a catcher, the grass lay thick on the ground. So late in the afternoon when the heat had gone out of the sun they would be out there gathering it up and making a plan of a huge house. "This is the toilet mummy and that's your bedroom!" It was an idyllic atmosphere for young children to grow up in, secure, free and loved by all.

By the middle of 1969 it was a great thrill to be able to share with friends and relatives that we were expecting an addition to our family the following February. Praise the Lord, I was keeping good health and it appeared to be a single pregnancy this time.

But changes were coming. There had been growing concern about the Fly River and its change of direction opposite the mission station at Wasua. Large sea-going vessels were no longer able to berth at the Wasua jetty and so Wasua was not suitable as a supply base. It was decided to re-establish the base on the Aramia River at a site called Kawito just below Awaba. At the same time it was decided to move the Headquarters up to Tari in the Highlands. Wow! The dynamics of everyday life changed enormously. However, the group who were most affected were the local people, those who had previously found employment there, the church with its various activities and the general trade which had been sustained. Because there had been a fairly large population of expatriates at Wasua there was a good standard of medical care, education and social life, not to mention the church work.

It shouldn't have been such a shock to me when Murray came home one day and said that the Field Council had asked if we would return to Wasua to be the resident missionaries. At that time there were still two or three other couples there, but in a very short time we would be the only expatriates left. Wow! What a flood of mixed emotions came in. Of course we loved Wasua and her people. That would be no problem. But what

about our children? They would surely miss the interaction with other white people. But following on top of that thought came the sure conviction that God, who had met our every need thus far in our lives, would do the same in the future and so the answer could be nothing else but, "Yes Lord." As packing and planning got under way the anticipation steadily grew!

I was doing my best not to lift heavy things but by the end of each day my energy was fully spent. There was a very strong sense of purpose in this move and we had an underlying peace about every aspect of it. Everything was packed. A few of the large things would go around by boat but most of the cartons were flown over to Wasua. Murray very nobly put the cat inside his shirt and held her, not such a good idea in hindsight! He ended up with one mass of scratches and the cat nearly had a nervous breakdown faced with Murray's woolly chest!

The pilot at that time was Ted Crawford, one of those men who put his life on the line every day for the sake of others and God's kingdom. His wife, Elsie, was also expecting. It was good when we arrived to find there was a nurse and some other European company, although there was a fairly negative atmosphere abroad, especially concerning the church work as almost everything was in 'wind-down'. Murray was immediately thrown into action with the demands of being Station Manager and advisor to the church. I fluctuated between standing looking at the boxes and sitting on them! As it got closer to Christmas, I started to get agitated about things not being unpacked or the curtains not up and told myself that if anyone was going to do it, it would have to be me.

Christmas Eve is indelibly imprinted on my mind. I didn't feel so well that morning and decided to stay in bed. Murray let Elizabeth, the nurse, know but she had a difficult case in progress in the maternity ward. Later, when she came to see me, she grunted and said that she thought she should speak to Dr. Kath about it. In the meantime, Elsie had come into premature labour and they were trying to get in touch with Ted on the radio for her evacuation. By this time, I also had lower abdominal pain and it was decided that I should go over to Balimo too. Elsie was

forthwith delivered at Balimo, whereas I was diagnosed as ‘Ante-partum haemorrhage’ and would need to be flown into Port Moresby. Not quite as easy as it sounds.

The months of November and December are notorious for north-westerly storms which the locals call ‘Gogos’, and the sky was certainly most threatening and building steadily. When Ted came up to the Air Traffic Authorities they refused permission for a single-engine plane to fly across the Gulf into Port Moresby and so I was taken to Daru where they had twin-engine planes stationed. But unfortunately it was Christmas Eve and the pilots were at a party and not in a fit state to fly. It was fine by me to stay on the ground. Having been admitted to the Daru Hospital I was asked by the doctor whether I knew my blood group. On informing him that I was ‘O negative’ I was told that there was no-one on Daru Island with negative blood. All the nationals have ‘positive’ and there was no-one else that he knew of.

It was rather surreal lying there for the next twenty-four hours on I.V. fluids, having nothing orally, and patiently waiting for the pilots to sober up. The Lord’s still quiet voice kept reminding me that I was in His hands and not the hands of men. After lunch on Christmas day a fellow sauntered into the ward and said, “I believe there’s someone here that wants to go to Moresby.”

Murray was having quite a rough time of it at Wasua trying to cope with the station, home and the girls. He very wisely decided to fly Teletele our house-girl from Balimo over to be with the twins. They were overjoyed and settled down straight away.

Mercifully, when I arrived in Moresby I wasn’t admitted but allowed to go and stay with a friend, Bev Burke, and attend the hospital for regular check-ups. Friends in Moresby were most supportive and the time passed very quickly. It’s horrible being separated from your husband and children for a month before a confinement. I often wonder how much damage is done to your emotions when you have to shut down and rationalise how you are feeling alongside accepting something you know to be inevitable. I probably wasn’t scarred for life! Back in those days

I don't think we acknowledged our feelings enough. However with these sacrifices comes joy and peace of mind from blending your life with the will of God. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Miriam Anne was born on the January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1970, and was a tiny little sparrow. Perfect.

Jenny and Linda, now two and a half years old, were beside themselves when I arrived home with a little sister for them. It was a full-time job supervising their playtime. Jenny got the idea that the bouncinette made a good shanghai and tried catapulting Miriam across the room. They both wanted to bath her, walk her and dress her. We were full of thanks to the Lord for the way He had so richly blessed us as a family.

Murray got to and made a great little 'A' frame cubby for the girls with the roof of plaited Pandanus leaf, somewhat like a Sepik house. And then another addition to our family was a baby wallaby which someone had brought to the door. We fed him by hand for sometime until he was onto grass and could survive outside. He was called 'Go-go' which perfectly described his activities. He never stopped jumping up and down our passage-way. Go-go eventually took up residence in a small enclosure that Murray had made for him.

Mum and Valda came up to visit us for the twins third birthday which was a special treat for all of us. Up until then, Nana had merely been a voice on a tape-recorder and the source of all marvellous Christmas packages that came off the plane as they had no memories of meeting her as babies. She was hardly a person. It was very hot and I don't think Valda was too impressed. Mum nearly fainted when a



*Mum with some local women outside the maternity ward*

young lad arrived at the back door holding his finger that had been cut off, asking if I could sew it back on. They were both fascinated with the clicking sound the geckoes made. It sounded like kissing. One of them fell, plop, off the roof one day landing at their feet. Yes, we had lots of fun and it was sad to see them go.

Part of my work at Wasua was to conduct medical clinics so that babies and children in the villages could have health checks and vaccinations. Mostly they were only accessible by canoe and this involved taking a team of workers, gear, vials and medicines kept cool in eskies, plus the family. It was a great day out. Although I now need to see a dermatologist regularly I must admit that I have come away from those days very well off. So far there has been no major skin cancers appear but when I look back on how slack we were, ignorant I guess of the affects of the sun's rays, I am truly amazed. We sat for hours with legs stretched out in front of us on those out-rigger canoes without protection. We were able to weigh and vaccinate the infants, give health talks on a wide range of topics and generally catch up on all the family news.



*Trekking through a banana plantation  
to a village clinic*

When we returned from one such day we very sadly found that Go-go had died. The wind had blown up and brought down a wire fence which cut him off from his water supply. It was not easy for any of us but a lesson from nature on the frailty of life.

The weather was terrific. It was not uncommon to be 90 degrees Fahrenheit in temperature and 90 per cent humidity, but it wasn't the main topic of conversation as it is in Melbourne. You didn't sit up in the morning and wonder what the day would be like because it was usually the same. There were seasonal





*The girls assisting me at the Baby clinic*

changes of course and I always found November difficult as it would hover between the dry and wet seasons. The children quickly learnt the local language and were in their element on these clinic days when they could stand near the scales (which were

hanging from a tree branch), help me read them and then call the next woman with, “Eta Bae?”, that is, “where is the next one?”

There was very little source of income for the local people. Their best option was to have a member of the family in Government employment with a good wage. But of course there was a limit to the number of people who had that privilege. And thus a sewing club which I was running for the village women and girls gradually grew until we were able to make enough clothes to sell in the local trade-store. I saw this as an opportunity to further their income. As more women were trained, the variety of garments expanded and we were soon taking orders from other mission stations. It became a real little cottage industry. The women would arrive early in the morning, each carrying her sewing machine. That would be a table model which was operated by turning the handle as there was no power. One lass was trained to be the quality supervisor whilst another was in charge of fulfilling the orders and packaging them in time for the plane. It was most encouraging to see their initiative.



*Assembling an order*

One of our constant goals was to work ourselves out of a

job by training others to take our place. Furlough was looming up and I didn't want the whole thing to fall flat without me. The training of a coordinator, over-seer of the standard of work, a book-keeper and other roles was the highest priority. I was so proud of them. It was a delight to see them bloom with the responsibility and they did well.

Murray also spent time with the village men encouraging them in their wood-working. They produced interesting artefacts which gave them a small income. One of the other demands on his time was refitting the 'Redbill' with a new deck and other repairs. The mission had bought this second vessel in 1964. The 'Redbill' was being used in conjunction with the 'Maino' to transfer supplies to out-lying stations. The mission sent one or two extra staff to assist Murray with this project.



*Murray working on the deck of the 'Redbill'*

Being on our own by this stage, we welcomed visitors to the station. Ian Wulff, from Portland, lived in a nearby house but ate with us for two years and as a ship-builder made a great contribution to the decking. Keith Lanyon, from Boort, was also with us for some time working on the boats. One day Murray slipped on the deck and a piece of flat iron cut into his Achilles tendon and it was Keith who came racing up to tell me and to get a radio message out to the doctor. The tendon was not completely severed, but even given time it didn't heal properly. Some time later, when we were on holidays at Tari and he was playing tennis, the tendon snapped completely and he was flown out to Mt. Hagen for it to be repaired, but a very bad repair was done with the tendon sewn together with wire. Later, the work had to be redone by Dr. Ken Cleazy, a plastic surgeon working amongst lepers in the Western Province.

We loved our basic little house at Wasua, but there were some features which rattled me. It was low to the ground which was unusual. The Gogodala's probably didn't approve of that. They always built theirs up on stilts to avoid snakes. How sensible they were, I thought as I saw this nice fat python coming in through the front door. Another time we found an unwelcome 'visitor' in the spare bedroom. The motto was 'Stay alert and always calm'. It sounds easy!

The other feature of this house was the long passageway with the bedrooms coming off it and above this ran long aerial wires for the radio. My heart still does a slight tremor when I remember the lightning running along those wires. You could hear and see it. Crash, bang, fzzzzz. We faced North-West, I think, because as we looked out over the air-strip and beyond it to thick jungle, we could at first hear and then see the 'Gogo' coming. The wind would come with a ruuuuush and you would barely have time to let down all the shutters on the windows when down would come the torrential rain, inches at a time. The village children loved to grab some soap and have a shower under the overflow from the water tanks. And of course the Marx girls would join them. The worst thing you could acquire at such times was leeches!

As time progressed, we were planning to go south for furlough near the end of 1972. Sewing was very much on my agenda with three young daughters. Mum Marx was just amazing the way she got up to us all the things we needed. First of all patterns. Then fabric for three each of overcoats, dresses and blouses. Murray became proficient at making buttons, bless him. We were determined not to freeze as we had the first time and to look somewhat 'with it'. I must admit the girls looked beautiful in their new outfits; even their dolls wore matching clothes. The only thing missing was shoes and socks.

In the midst of this, Jenny went down with Hepatitis, followed by Miriam. Jenny was only sick for about three weeks and Miriam for one, but it gave a scare to the folk we were planning to stay with in Sydney. Then the rest of us had to stand 'bottoms-up' for Gamma-globulin injections. Not received too

well by the bachelors! But nobody else succumbed and the Lord was very good to us.

The usual procedure was followed. Everything had to be packed before leaving the station. Most of our stuff was locked in one room and then the rest of the house left available for other folk to come over from time to time to visit. The children couldn't understand why we kept saying that we were going home, and pointed out that here at Wasua was home! Fair enough. This actually became the root of a real emotional hurdle for the girls as they grew and moved from one place to another.

Finally we packed, said goodbye to all and sundry, and sat with our cases on the airstrip with close friends around and waited for the plane. As we watched the weather closing in and time was gradually passing the inevitable hit us. We weren't going anywhere tonight. It brought to mind the verses in the book of James. 'Some say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town" whereas you do not know about tomorrow. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that."' A very timely lesson. I guess it's good for us to have lessons in adaptability! We had emptied the fridge and given away all the food, stripped the beds and locked it all away. But once again we were humbled by the abundant provision of God and the generous hospitality of the village folk. They had indeed become our dearest and closest friends. Why had I ever doubted for a moment what it would be like living in the middle of the jungle, the only white people about ten hours walk away and completely isolated from the doctor, shops and all normal facilities? It was precious and completely satisfying. I can honestly say my heart longed for nothing else.

And so we laughed and gave thanks as we tucked into scrummy sago coconut, fresh steamed fish and bananas. After a restless sleep we pricked up our ears to the welcome sound of the little Cessna. Having heard it we searched the clouds for that little black speck. "Mummy, Uncle Ted is coming to pick us up."