

**PNG**

## *Papua New Guinea- Land Of The Unexpected*

Eleven intrepid travellers, representing our parish, schools, St Vincent de Paul and Social Justice Group, ventured to Aitape on the N.W. coast of PNG. last May. We wanted to become familiar with life in this remote place, to understand how best to work with people there, especially in their efforts to provide health care and education for their families.

On Monday, 7<sup>th</sup> May, we reached Port Moresby, where we stopped overnight. We toured by bus in the afternoon, visiting a beautiful Nature Park, then Moresby's Seminary where Fr. Mike McEntee, former parish priest of St Joan of Arc was rector for some years. The Bomana War Cemetery was next.



Thousands who died in WWII are buried there including many Australians. It was sobering to view hundreds of graves whose white crosses were inscribed, 'Known only to God'. There are two other large War Cemeteries in PNG and we were told that more Australians lost their lives in PNG in WWII than any other country. We reached the imposing Parliament House as it was about to close, but the friendly curator delayed closing to allow us to inspect this fine building.

Tuesday started early with a flight to Wewak on the North coast where we were met by a group of Presentation Sisters who greeted us with a special song of welcome, and provided refreshments while we waited for the two trucks and drivers to take us on a six hour drive to Aitape. The travellers finally believed that we would be crossing over 50 rivers, over half unbridged! Some experienced this trip as an adventure, others appeared somewhat jaded!

Sadly we arrived in Aitape after sunset so missed the decorations and welcome prepared by the Sisters and neighbours. Our hosts were sad to have to tell us that torches would be needed to find our way around as there had been a bad storm which had removed an important light pole which ended up in the river. We were to discover that most people in PNG don't have electricity anyway, except in some town or lucky villages with a generator or two.

We had just three days to visit the hospital and schools of Aitape. On Wednesday we went to the Haus Sik and Nurses Training Schools where we met the three students being assisted by the parish. We were very impressed by them and they are very happy to be able to undertake their Nursing studies thanks to the interest of our parishioners. Staff members were most gracious and showed us around the wards, the little operating theatre, physio room and other specialist areas. The nurses and two doctors are very committed, but work under difficulties, due to lack of amenities, medicines needed, equipment etc.

Thursday was busy, as our hosts wanted us to visit five local schools – two primary schools, a secondary school, a technical (trade) school and centre for the disabled which included a pre-school. In all of them we were struck by the friendliness of students and staff, but also by the lack of resources compared with our local schools. Important contacts were made, with plans to continue to exchange information and understand the needs as they see them. All became very conscious of how well-off we are when compared with our next-door neighbouring country, as their people receive very few of the government benefits we take for granted.

Friday, our last day, featured a trip to 'town' being a market day, plus a visit to the kalabus which is really a remand centre. However, the inmates often have a long wait for their cases to be heard and live in unfurnished cells, with only one meal a day. The police do their best under trying conditions, but the prisoners were pleased to see us and very pleased to accept the food offered to supplement their diet that day.

Some enjoyed a swim in the afternoon, others revisited the hospital then there was packing to do. Our new friends had been gathering to prepare a wonderful final meal, speeches and dancing. Each of us was presented with a beautiful gift – all the more touching when we understood that they had worked to raise the funds to cover the cost of these!

Our final day, Saturday, began at 2.30am! when we took off after a few hours' sleep for the return trip to Wewak. The Sisters there again looked after us, supplying us with breakfast and organising a quick tour of the town including the purchase of bilums and other souvenirs and a quick inspection of the war memorial honouring all who had died there during the war – Melanesian Nationals, Australians, Americans and Japanese. (Important Peace negotiations were conducted in Wewak in 1945).

Some slept during the three flights back to Melbourne, where we arrived about 10pm that night, worn and weary but much wiser and able to appreciate home comforts. If this sounds rather grim, we found PNG to be a beautiful country and enjoying its friendly peoples wherever we went and came to experience their richness of cultures.

Special thanks to Fr Martin who organised the trip, but was not well enough to join us; thanks too, to our parish secretaries Elaine and Robyn for all their work, and to Gerard Warrenner, whose great photos and filming we hope you have a chance to see.

*Sr Felicity Corder*

## Vivid Images Of PNG

There is a saying in PNG that “if anything can go wrong – it WILL go wrong” - and we were to learn the truth of this very quickly. We had a long delay whilst they traced our lost truck and driver – apparently he was in trouble with the police - but after a few hours our truck and a replacement driver appeared.


*Margaret Fox & Sheila Howell*



The level of poverty in the village is extreme and I honestly wasn't prepared for it. There is poor and then there is really poor. Luxuries such as televisions and other electronic devices are not part of the makeup of houses. In the village, health issues surrounding Tuberculosis (TB), HIV and other diseases impact greatly on life expectancy, which is 62 at the moment and even lower in remote villages like Aitape. What struck us towards the end was that we never met any elderly people. *James Best*

What became blatantly obvious was that Sister Felicity was Papua New Guinea's Mary Mackillop. Everyone who met her and saw the tireless work she did felt privileged, humbled and committed to helping her with the work. *James Best*





After rising at 1am to start the long journey back to Wewak, through the dark jungle and the 50 rivers, we held our breath when ten bandits (opportunists!) with machetes held up our vehicles and demanded money. More negotiations and more time lost but eventually we were allowed to continue our journey.

*Margaret Fox & Sheila Howell*



Our whole group learnt of the culture of PNG people, the strength of their Catholic faith and the vibrancy and warmth of their communities. Our final farewell dinner was an outside affair with the whole community gathered for feasting, singing, dancing and speeches - even though we still had no power!!

*Margaret Fox & Sheila Howell*



Facilities and resources in the school were very basic and the total school budget per annum for a school of 600 children was less than our school spends on our cleaning contract. *James Best*

