

# ONE MOMENT IN TIME

## A series on our PNG experience. Part 3

*By Dennis Catchpole*

One of my first actions was to look at the plantations that the church owned. They were collectively losing money in the previous year. Now in the commercial world from which I came, this would be straightforward. I would just close the plantations that were not being productive.

Not the case here, as a whole village might depend on the work - therefore the income from that plantation. So, any decision had to be a social one as well - not so easy. I set about devising a plan to return a plantation to the people. In this way they could extend their gardens, and gain some income from the plantation itself.

I was dealing with people called the Tolai. I divided up one of the plantations called Vunakanau, into 2 acre blocks, and we planned to return to the nine villages around this plantation an equal number of blocks.

Sounds like a good plan right? All the villages had to pay for was the survey cost. This would have worked well except one village believed that the plantation should be divided according to what they called "Native Boundaries". This of course meant they would get much more land.

Sounds fair you might think. The problem was that the plantation was purchased, as all the church's plantations were, from an expat, and these so-called "Native Boundaries" had long gone, to be replaced by surveyed boundaries when the Germans annexed PNG many years ago.

I don't know how the original owners acquired the land. Remember it was all bush at that time - I suspect it was purchased from the natives. It was then developed and became valuable as a working plantation growing Copra and Coco. I had many meetings with these villagers over the time I was in PNG, but I was never able to resolve this issue. I finally met with the Governor, and told him "These are your people - you sort it out".

Just to give you an idea of the challenges I faced, one village represented by an Educated Lawyer, asked me if I could devise a plan so that there was a corridor of land between each block, therefore they wouldn't fight over the boundaries. My answer to him was "Surely it was a time to get on with their neighbours and live in Harmony".

The largest Plantation, 12,000 acres, called Put Put presented a very different problem. This plantation was in the middle of the Baining people, these were unlike the Tolai. They were a much more peaceful people, short in stature - maybe 5 feet tall, and very community minded. They requested of the Church that it retained the title to the land,

but they can use it, as they were very afraid of the Tolai getting hold of it by way of the local government, which was made up of mostly Tolai.

Then the Baining people would lose the land. So when it came to land issues, emotions ran very high. When I went out to meet the people, usually under a Mango tree, I always took a Tolai Bishop or Police commissioner with me for protection. Remember I could not understand or speak Tolai or Pigeon. One very enterprising character decided to sell off land telling the people that he had the right to do so, and this resulted in me having to take legal action against him, and force him to return all the deposits to the people. This resulted in me being physically threatened which was not exactly pleasant.

On another occasion the elders of a village, which was in the middle of our 1000 acres planation very near the Mission, came to me requesting more land as they were running out due to their families expanding. I asked them to come back to me with some numbers and as a result I was able to convince the Archbishop to grant them a further 35 hectares of land. So sometimes we got a good result.

Much of what June and I did up there cannot be covered in this series. We had a great range of tasks, from managing many millions of Kina - the local currency - to managing funds in other parts of the world - Germany for example. We had a staff of around 250 including Priests who were paid a stipend.

Also from time to time, we had to deal with the occasional death of a person, and remember unless you were what they called a "Big Man," you were not embalmed, and due to the heat had to be buried on the same day.

So, we had to keep coffins on hand. We got to know many Australians who managed Companies up there, and the Chinese, many of whom were millionaires, ran the trading stores. We oversaw a great deal of building including a fully air conditioned conference centre so we were well looked after by the local businesses.

I became known as "The Bishop" due to the fact that I wore a very big cross given to me by the New Zealand church, which I hoped would protect me. It didn't protect me from Malaria - I got that twice. Not pleasant.

June was known as "Calendar girl" for obvious reasons and became the "Mission Mother" as she was always helping some sole or another - usually when I needed some typing to be done.

Cherie, our daughter, became fluent in Pigeon and pretty good in Tolai, and started to learn Mandarin. She loved her time in PNG as we all did.

I have never worked so hard for so little, but have been so well rewarded.

We also made some life time friends as well. I could write a book on our experiences. Did we make a difference? I would like to think that we did, but others have to be the judge of that.

*Dennis*