TAKING PART IN THE FOUNDOING OF THE LCMS MISSION TO THE ENGA PEOPLE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

This is a brief account of what it was like to be used by God as one of His first servants to proclaim His love in Christ to the Enga people of the central highlands of Papua New Guinea.

It was not in my life plans to be sent as His messenger to anyone. Engineering was my career choice and in 1940 I entered the then Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy in my home town El Paso, Texas. While attending the now University of Texas at El Paso, my Christian organic chemist professor, Dr. John Leo Abernethy profoundly influenced my life. The Holy Spirit used him and others to bring me again to a saving faith in Jesus thru the reading of the Bible. I had gotten away from Him after confirmation, but God pursued me like a heavenly hound.

So deeply had He changed me, I left my engineering pursuits and began to study for the ministry. I prepared at St. John's College and went on to Concordia Seminary St. Louis in 1943. Thru the years at St. John's College and at the seminary, the Lord gave me a deep interest in doing mission work, especially among Latin Americans. But later He had New Guinea in His plans. After a postgraduate year at the seminary, during which time I obtained my STM degree, I was called to New Guinea in 1948.

On June 27 of that year Jeannelle "Jill" Karcher of Vernon, Texas, and I were married. Almost one month after our marriage, I was ordained and commissioned by Dr. O. H. Schmidt in my home congregation, Zion El Paso. We then began preparing for life and work in New Guinea. We planned to travel to New Guinea with Bill and Elinor Burce, but the discovery that Jill was with child changed that. We decided that I precede Jill and go out to NG alone with the Burces, since housing and hospital care were uncertain.

After a really difficult parting with Jill at El Paso, the train took me to San Francisco where I met the Burces. On September 19 the kind and very accommodating pastor and members of West Portal Lutheran Church put us on the plane to Sydney, Australia. Instead of sailing by ship 40 days and nights thru the Panama Canal as did the Dickes on their initial trip, we spent 40 hours in a 4-engine Pan American propeller aircraft to Sydney. The flight pattern was the same as for those who followed later: Honolulu, Canton Island, Fiji (our first sight of native men wearing knee-length loin cloths called lap laps), New Caledonia and finally Sydney.

We were pleased with the standard of living that we found in Sydney, in spite of the antiquated pitcher and washbowl for washing in the room and the toilet down the hall in the hotel. We bought supplies and learned as much as we could about Australia and our Australian Lutheran brethren. Pastor Noske of Sydney helped us to get used to the traffic speeding (!) along on the wrong side of the street, hotels locking their main doors at 10 pm, the strange pronunciation of the English Language, "lift" for elevator, "chemist" for drugstore, "tram" for street car. While we were purchasing some supplies, Rev. O. E. Thiele, Secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia Mission Board, also acquainted us with the "strange" idea that missionaries in New Guinea slept on mattresses filled with coconut husk fiber. Bill and I opted for a kapok filled mattress on a frame that could be broken down to fit in a small airplane. Out of what we bought only the mattresses made it to the inland. Later it was necessary for me to construct my own bed frame, beginning with a ten-foot log and a pit saw.

We sailed from Sydney on the newly reconverted passenger ship the Bulolo, overnighted at Brisbane where we met some more hospitable and helpful Australian Lutheran brethren, and at last reached the shore of Papua New Guinea at Port Moresby. It was exciting, to say the least, to see real live New Guineans unloading and reloading the ship, diving in the bay water for money and walking on the Moresby streets. As a reminder of the recent war with Japan, part of the sunken hulk of the "McDewey" rose out of the bay. Likewise, at Lae a sunken Japanese transport jutting out of the water near the end of the main airstrip and the landing barges and ships strewn along the coastline were reminders of WWII.

Dr. Schmidt and Rev. Thiele had flown up from Australia and with American Lutheran Mission Superintendent John Kuder of Lae met us as we disembarked at Lae. We picked up more supplies and
a lot of helpful information from experienced missionaries. Also, we were privileged to witness the first post-WWII group baptism and confirmation of hundreds of Lae and Markham Valley catechumens which took place amidst very instructive pageantry and ceremony. In Lae before the baptism we heard the deep melodic pipe organ-like tones of the conch shell band first organized by Missionary Zahn. Each member of the band blew across a hole cut in one conch shell when his number came up in the music which Zahn wrote. The rendition of "Gracious King of Glory, Ruler of All Living" was fantastic. Elinor Burce left us and went to Finschhafen to pick up some nurses training, since at that time women were not allowed inland where we were going.

Our first contact with highland New Guineans came on October 28, '48 at an inland Lutheran Mission New Guinea (LMNG) among the Chimbu tribesmen at Ega managed by Missionary Bergmann and his wife. Schmidt, Thiele, Burce and I boarded a small fabric covered biplane, a De Haviland 83 called a "Dragon", and flew into Ega. A few hundred Chimbu met us on the grass covered airstrip. We were curious about the kind of people who lived in that region, and they were as curious about the kind of creatures who came from the sky in a "balus". During our stay at Ega we learned quite a bit about inland mission work and life. Supt. Kuder followed us into Ega by plane to help officiate at the first post war baptism among the Chimbu there. Thousands of Chimbu gathered to watch the pre-baptismal demonstrations depicting the putting off the old life and putting on the new, to witness the baptism and confirmation of 151 of their fellow men, women and children, and to join in the celebrations and feasting. The rumor had spread that anyone receiving baptism would die. But Satan's trick did not work.

From Ega Burce and I took our first long hike (25 miles) to Kerowagi. The two mission secretaries rode on horseback. Nursing a terrible sunburn the next morning I boarded a twin engine monoplane trainer with the other men and we flew off to Enga territory. We flew over beautifully forested rugged terrain, around Mt. Hagen and buzzed the Yaramanda station established in August by Rev. A.P.H. Freund and Mr. Armin Kleining. We had hoped to land at Wapenamanda. But we soon discovered that the airstrip still had mounds of dirt that needed to be leveled. So we flew on to Wabag. Missionary Freund and some mission helpers had walked to Wabag to meet us. Yabem speaking evangelist-teacher Yasapung and Hagen evangelist-interpreter Pokon, who had much to do with the founding of the mission, were among those who accompanied Freund. Imagine how green I was at the time. After picture taking (Freund had a photographer's eye for the historical and meaningful and even did his own developing wherever he was), I asked the government patrol officer if there was a post office where I could mail some things home. He looked at me disdainfully and replied, "You are in New Guinea now, son!" At the airstrip we experienced another thrill upon seeing Enga people up close. We tried to communicate with them with smiles and gestures. Freund told us to speak to them in English, even if they could not understand, so that they could see and hear that we were human.

That same November 2nd afternoon we all set out on foot for Yaramanda. We spent the night in a government patrol grass thatched shelter at Birip about halfway to Yaramanda. I had come prepared to do battle with the highland fleas which feed voraciously on animal and human alike. I had bought some DDT powder in Lae for just such an occasion. But the fleas just hopped over the powder barriers around my bedroll and were not even affected by the powder inside my bedroll. Next morning the many itchy bites were proof of their contempt.

We walked the length of the Wapenamanda airstrip which we had seen from the air and then cut off from the road onto a narrow track that eventually led thru the 800 ft.deep Rae River gorge, over a vine-supported light pole bridge, and across up the gorge, and on to the Yaramanda hill sitting in the center of 5 tribal areas between 3 large rivers. (Experienced missionary Freund had negotiated for a tract of land in which the surrounding tribes had considerable interest, even going to war over it, so that the mission might have the interest of all the tribes.) As we ascended the Yaramanda hill, very tired from walking long and hard in the mile-plus altitude, we were stopped at the crest by a temporary cane fence about 7ft. tall with a cane and grass door in the middle of it. We were asked to stop and stand before the door while Pokon spoke a word of welcome and a prayer in Enga, asking God to bless our coming and our work. There was some hymn singing and the door was pulled open. We had no idea that we would receive such a welcome. On the other side of the fence stood a welcoming line of evangelist-teachers who had come
with Freund (Teoc, Yasaptung, et alia), Pokon and local Enga leaders and workers. They shook our hands as we passed by. A group of local men armed with bow and arrow, spear and hatchet, confronted us in sort of platoon formation and danced and chanted us all the way up the path to the large thatched "bush" house that Freund and Kleinig had the locals build for headquarters. That night after an Aussie bush supper, I bedded down on an army cot-like bed sail in a room that later was used as a washroom.

The Engas were amazed at Dr. Schmidt's corpulent size and just had to feel his arms and legs. In fact, one of the Enga men took a "tape measure" measurement around one of his thighs with a banana palm fiber "string", while another man measured around his middle. Then they tried the string around themselves for comparison. They bit their bent forefinger in delightful amazement. One at a time they even tried to lift him. At times the Engas also felt our arms and legs. We learned later that some were testing whether we might be the bleached out ghosts of their ancestors or living human beings as they.

All of us spent several days in meetings to organize the mission and talk over future plans. A number of crucial decisions were made: the name of the mission would be New Guinea Lutheran Mission--Missouri Synod, NGLM for short; it would not be a joint endeavor with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA) as planned, because of the enormously difficult task of a "triangular" mode of administration, but solely a Missouri Synod operation; the first mission officers were selected, Freund - chairman, Burce - treasurer, Hintze - secretary (first minutes were kept in a school notebook which, I believe, are in the Concordia Historical Institute archives); we would try the same communal system of living as the LMNG; we would employ skilled lay people wherever possible to help in the gigantic task of proclaiming the Gospel to the Enga people; with God's blessings make a mission paradigm shift from other Missouri Synod mission types to a strong wholistic approach for the establishment of a truly indigenous church; to request the LCMS Board of Missions to extend a call to a third missionary, an Australian, Rev. Ian Kleinig; and that missionary Freund be loaned to the new mission for two years, after which he would be under the jurisdiction of his Australian Mission Board. (In 1950 Freund and family moved to Menyamya among the fierce Kukakuka tribespeople to begin ELCA's new mission work).

On November 7 at the first Sunday worship service conducted by NGLM among the Engas Dr. Schmidt's address to the small gathering of locals had to be first translated into Pidgin English by Freund and then into Enga by Pokon who was raised as a child in the Enga area. Shortly thereafter Secretaries Schmidt and Thiele walked all the way back to Wabag to catch the plane to the coast where they visited, settled remaining matters and made appeals for more New Guinea teachers and evangelists. (Later more of these New Guinea co-workers were sent to us from the Yabem and Kotte speaking congregations. They were the backbone of our early expansion efforts into outstations surrounding the main stations.) Then in February of 1949 Burce moved westward to Irelya near Wabag to establish our second main station. The third main station came a little later in 1949 at Yalbos where Rev. Ian Kleinig began the work.

Following the much appreciated visit of the two mission secretaries, our days were filled with all sorts of experiences. We began to learn Pidgin English from the coastal mission assistants and the Enga from Pokon and others. Writing down the Enga was difficult, since we had no training in phonetics and phonemics. We also began relating to the Engas in a very personal way by helping them with their medical needs with the first aid supplies brought in by Freund and Kleinig. There was a lot of building bush houses and furniture making out of raw materials for which we had little training. Some of my Boy Scout work helped me in these areas. It was more difficult without power tools. Missionary Freund was an invaluable help with pit sawing a log into slabs, mortise and tenoning furniture joints, removing the emulsion off used x-ray plates from army hospitals to use as window panes, use of bamboo for pipes, getting the right pitch for a thatched roof, setting the width of a door, the height of a chair of table, etc. He helped us with buying food, planting gardens, understanding the world view and thinking patterns of the New Guineans, taking long walking trips to get acquainted with the people in the outlying areas, and so many other things.

On those walks and on the main stations we spoke to people about who we were, why we had come, the existence of God (we had to introduce a name for Him, Anatu, a coastal name for God, since they had no word we could use), that they were His and that He had a lot of things to say to them, especially Good
News of forgiveness and life thru His plan of salvation in Jesus. We used known concepts as much as possible to introduce the unknown. Having to talk things thru according to their custom and having to use an interpreter and the audience sometimes arguing with the speaker, extended the first church services and encounters to as long as three hours. From the beginning we used Enga ways of communication, teaching objects, Concordia Bible picture rolls, and Enga words and melodies to sing and proclaim God's Message. Simple orders of service were introduced in the Enga Language only. Services were held outdoors until the people themselves built a culturally fitting edifice in which to worship. We did not use clerical robes in the beginning for fear of magical misinterpretation. I often felt that Satan caused an inordinate amount of disturbances during our gatherings to distract the people from absorbing God's Word. But the "Word of the Lord grew" despite everything.

It was also in our plans from the beginning to establish a system of education, even though the Engas had no written language and no acquaintance with the place, tools and manner of formal education. Missionary Freund and coastal evangelist-teacher Tecc built the first school house and began teaching. At first a few older men came with the young boys to be educated. The girls were kept at home for work there. So were some of the boys. Girls were allowed to attend at a later date. The first students wanted us to pay them to attend school. To teach them to read and write in their own language put pressure on us to quickly reduce the language to writing. This was in addition to our great desire to be able to translate and put God's Word in writing.

Rev. John Gall, a classmate of Burce's and mine, who was preparing to do mission work among the Muslims at the Hartford School of Missions, sent us a copy of Dr. Kenneth Pike's 1947 PHONEMICS, which laid out a method step by step how to reduce an unwritten language to writing and analyze its grammar. That was a Godsend. We devoured the book and began the arduous task of reducing the Enga to writing. First it had to be written phonetically, analyzed for the phonemes, given a written orthography. Then came the morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, etc. This approach is called descriptive linguistics. We hurried to translate Bible History stories, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We had many a meeting with regard to the linguistics and Bible work. My first informant was a young lad by the name of Naipu. Later Pokale, Yale and Kundi (another Hagen man) assisted in that work of language analysis, interpreting and Bible translation. While on first furlough Burce analyzed the sentence structure of the Enga and translated the Gospel of Mark into Enga as his doctoral dissertation. His was the first attempt to translate a complete portion of the New Testament. During the summer of 1956 I wrote a grammar of the Enga while attending the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the U. of Oklahoma in Norman. Shortly after our return from our first furlough I was aided by Wycliffe Bible Translators, Alan Healey and his wife, to discover the tonemes and tonal system of the Enga.

Then we began translating the New Testament in earnest. Many an hour and day were spent in translation meetings going over the texts which had been prepared by individual missionary translators with their informants. A group of informants from various areas helped us with the final rendering. Later individual missionaries with a corps of informants were given the task of translating the New Testament. Harley Kopitske and Leroy Eckert respectively were asked to head up this wonderful work. The New Testament was completed under Eckert.

Before being moved to Irelya in 1963 to do more research on the Enga and begin an Enga language learning school for missionaries, I completed translating and tone marking a book of Bible history and a set of Sunday pericopes from various parts of the Bible in the Laeapo Enga. Jill did all the stencil typing with the tone marks. While at Irelya I wrote a pedagogical grammar and abridged dictionary in the Mai Enga, the dialect that had been chosen for Scripture translation, and in which I conducted the language learning for a couple of years for about 70 missionaries in all. After returning to the States in 1965, I finally completed in 1966 the detailed phonology of the Mai Enga which came to be printed in KIVUNG, the Journal of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea. Language work was an exciting fulfilling venture.

There were times when I felt that I was putting in all my time on language and translation work, as builder, paramedic, school superintendent, trader, repair man and what have you, instead of being a missionary.
I had to build my own bush house and several others, sheds, school buildings, meeting rooms, trade stores; assisted in the construction of a permanent weatherboard corrugated iron roofed home, the preliminaries of a hospital and hydroelectric plant, a steel cable bridge over the Rae River, a 2100ft. airstrip at Yaramanda, a couple of New Guinea style church buildings, and so on.

Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit thru the communication of His Word at Sunday worship services and airstrip workers' evening devotions, began to draw together individuals from the different surrounding tribes into a catechumen class. Daily instruction began in Bible history, Luther's Small Catechism and in Christian life and work. A repertoire of 44 hymns was composed, all sung to the same Enga melody. Many were composed by evangelist Kundi and Enga leaders in Kundi's house, and others in catechumen class. Some of the more knowledgeable and apt young men in the class were specially prepared on Saturdays and sent out on Sundays with a roll of CPH Bible story pictures to conduct worship services and preach at selected outstations. They were the first Enga evangelists who later were trained to become the first Enga pastors. Replicating all these efforts were the Yabem and Kotte speaking evangelist-teachers sent to us by the Lutheran Mission New Guinea coastal and nearby hill congregations. They and their families settled in different tribal locations, taught school, proclaimed the Word and conducted catechumen classes. Eventually these catechumens were baptized, formed their own congregation and sent out evangelists around them. All these assistants were a great help in the spread and growth of God's mission.

After being stationed at Yaramanda 8 years and 8 months, and after some of the catechumens had received 7 years of instruction, we baptized and confirmed an entire congregation of 298 men, women and children on Pentecost Sunday June 9, 1957. Beforehand, it took me 2 weeks to personally examine each of the catechumens. Three days following the baptism, the Yaramanda congregation was formally organized. Other group baptisms occurred at Yaramanda and the outstations, and the total number of baptized at that time in the Yaramanda circuit grew to be over 800.

Being father and mother to 6 children on the mission field was a God-given privilege for Jill and me. During our stay in New Guinea and on furlough, the care and education of our 5 living children (Nathan Gary died 10 minutes or so after birth and is buried in the Mambisanda cemetery) presented us with rich opportunities, challenges and much pleasure. As a family we tried to set an example for the Enga people by living and working together as Christians. In their own way our children reached out to them with the Gospel in playing together, in school efforts, in outstation visitation, in youth work and in other ways.

For us to be the Spirit's instrument in bringing so many New Guineans out of satanic darkness into God's Kingdom thru faith in Christ was and is the joy of our lives. Another thing for which we are thankful to God is the establishment of an autochthonous church, the Good News Lutheran Church, which was one of the goals which we had set for our work. Also, we had the privilege of orienting and training so many of the mission personnel to speak the Enga Language. Linguistics, Bible translation and Bible teaching were not only a necessary work but deeply satisfying. Our New Guinea experiences have been extremely useful in carrying out the post-New Guinea ministries to which the Lord called us: 1965-1976 Professor of Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary Springfield, 1976-1988 World Areas Secretary (2 yrs.) and Latin America Secretary (10 yrs.) for Synod's Board for Mission Services in St. Louis, and following retirement in 1988 to the present time Minister of Inreach and Outreach at Ascension Lutheran Church in St. Louis.

Realizing that all the above was not us working, but the grace of God that was with us, stirs our hearts to profound gratitude and praise to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

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left to right:
Sec. O. H. Schmidt
Sec. O. E. Thiele
Rev. Willard Burce
Rev. Otto Hintze

Wabag, Nov. 2, 1948
Hintze, Freund, A. Kleinig, Burce 1948
Pokon, Hintze learning 1948 Enga
Yaramanda church service Christmas 1950

Freund making furniture out of firewood. 1949

Hintzes, Heppners, Freunds August 1949
Coastal Evangelist-Teachers and families March 1949

Yaramanda baptismal procession (298) Hintze, Burce, Strackbein June 9, 1957

Second Enga church - Yaramanda 1960

Levelling Yaramanda airstrip 1950
Teaching staff conversational Enga 1964
NAMBA WAN samting yumi mas soim ol long AKEN SO...

soim Jisas i stap long bel bilong yumi

Lait bilong yupela i mas lait long ai bilong ol manneri, na ol i ken lukim ci gutpela wok bilong yupela na litimapim nem bilong Papa bilong yupela i stap long heven.

Matiu 5:16
Tisapi Waiakaripi Katena Reami-pyaa

Akari rogo dupame edakari yuu enege dupanya kalyaminu dupa kaitikisa kaitini dokonya pena rao Wai Pii Epe doko ramaia ra paanya masiamu-pyaa.


Kaipyakoo yuu dokonya pii epe doko ramaia patamina rao tisapi waiakaripi 24 katena reami-pyaa.

Kadepe Wake yuu dokonya patamina rao akari 13 katena reami-pyaa.

Poketa Paiarapi yuu doraponya patamina rao akari 5 katena reami-pyaa.

Lyaiyi yuu dokonya patamina rao akari 8 katena reami-pyaa.

Maramuni yuu dokonya akari 5 patami. Tarua yuu dokonya akari 5-aka patami.

Waiakaripi tisaapi pyasatara 60 ijooy kalyaminu. Wabataepi enege dupapi pyasatara akari 240 ijilyamui.

Naima Kupi Kamogu Yesusa akari dupa karai pina reamo doko rao mbu pyamana. Akari dupame karai epe dokonya yore nyetamina rao, naima mununi Yesusa rao mbu pyamana.