

Growing Up in Dutch New Guinea

By Curt Masters, Headmaster

I was born in Three Hills, Alberta, Canada, where my American parents were attending Prairie Bible Institute after having finished college in the states, to prepare for mission work. There they heard a missions speaker named Ebenezer Vine share the need for those who would respond to God's call to go and share the gospel message to those in places so remote that they had never heard the good news of salvation through faith in Christ, and particularly in a new outreach in the mountainous and remote interior of Dutch New Guinea. The name of his mission organization that they eventually joined, fittingly enough, was Regions Beyond Missionary Union, evoking the powerful words of II Corinthians 10:16, and that old hymn written by Albert and Margaret Simpson in 1904: "To the regions beyond I must go, I must go Where the story has never been told; To the millions that never have heard of his love I must tell the sweet story of old."

My parents' decision to respond to God's call to the mission field led them to Dutch New Guinea (the big island north of Australia, which would later be called Irian Jaya, Indonesia) to work with stone-age tribes-people in the interior highlands. My parents learned the local language at an already established mission station, and then my father walked into a new area to open a new station located about seven days' difficult trekking from the nearest airstrip.

The idea of building a mission station may sound simple. But it involved choosing a site near villages that would allow an airplane to land, learning a language among people who regarded strangers as enemies, finding a way to purchase enough land to build an airstrip in the open area between the five villages, and then actually building a landing strip by hand, before finally bringing in the rest of the family by small airplane months later. Large boulders in the path of the runway had to be heated with fire and then cracked with water carried from a nearby river. Food, wheelbarrows, the generator, and other supplies were dropped from the air. Sometimes the force of landing after being pushed out the door of the flying airplane caused complications. Wheelbarrows in particular seemed to lack impact resistance. I remember, among other stories my dad told, that at some point they decided to eat dinner after dark so they would not have to take so long to pick all the bugs out of the rice flown in from the coastal area.

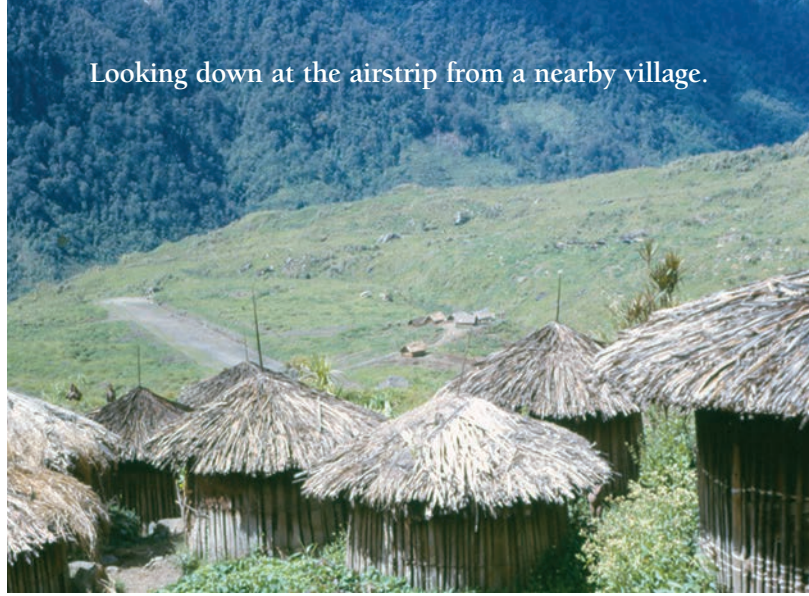
When the airstrip was finally built, we flew in to join my father. It was not until years later that we learned that the local leaders had planned to kill all of us when we got off of the airplane. But when one of the chiefs saw my mother's red dress, he took it as a sign of blood and a bad omen, so he and others stopped the plan to shoot all of us. (I am confident that God could have used a blue dress just as well to move the chiefs from their plan, but it seems safe to say, "Good choice, Mom!")

Our home was simple, with dirt floors and pole walls covered with burlap bags, thatched roof and outer walls, a wood stove, and an outhouse. We had running water after my dad found a spring up the side of the hill (that he fenced off to keep pigs out) from which he then ran a water line to a barrel on the side of our house. The first one awake (well, strictly speaking, the first one out of bed) each morning lit the fire, naturally, and I love the picture I saw often of my mom and dad sitting by the fire with their Bibles open on their laps, reaching forward every now and then to stoke the growing blaze in the wood stove. Eventually my dad built a house out of sawn lumber. He had the



Phil Masters (Curt's father) with Rob, Becky, Chrissie, and Curt at their mission station at Koropun, in the highlands of Irian Jay (formerly Dutch New Guinea).

Looking down at the airstrip from a nearby village.



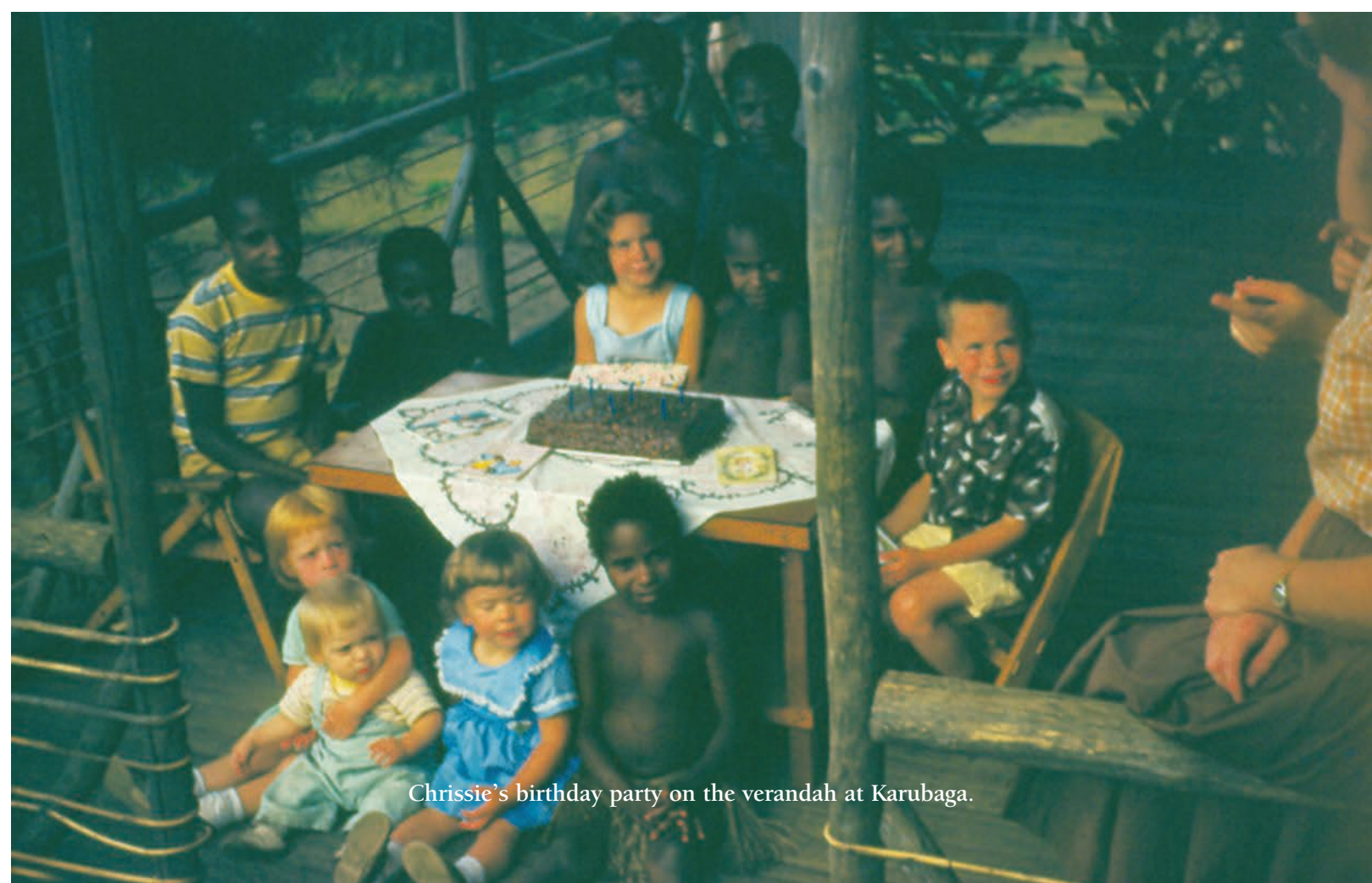
sawmill engine flown in, and built the mill and the house from scratch, with local help in felling trees and dropping them to the base of one of the many cliffs surrounding our valley, where he cut boards that became our floors and walls. One addition to the new house was a tin roof and actual glass windows (the small luxuries that we take for granted.) If you have not fallen asleep to the sound of rain on a tin roof, I will just say that it ranks right up there with the comfortable snap, hiss and pop of a wood fire.

On scheduled trips, Mission Aviation Fellowship planes would stop by every week or two to bring in a mailbag and supplies from the coast. Sometimes what we ordered from the coast was out of stock and we got replacements. So it was that our ordered assortment of Knorr dried soups showed up as a large case of pea soup (no longer a favorite of mine), and our order of assorted Kraft canned cheese came in as a case of caraway seed cheese (an acquired taste that I enjoy much more now than I did then). Our contact with the outside world was rare enough

that we treasured letters, and the packages that held delicacies from “the states” were ceremonially opened. New books were devoured immediately, while news magazines and candy were strictly rationed to last as long as we could drag them out (three M&Ms for you, and three for me).

One feature of choosing to build our house on land located between the surrounding villages right near the airstrip (also happily situated so as not to be “for” one village or “against” another) became clear quite soon. Where would disputes between villages in that valley be settled? On neutral territory, obviously! So our front yard was occasionally the setting for loud exchanges that led to arrows being fired back and forth. (All men over the age of puberty carried bows and arrows everywhere they went, with most of the arrows designed for people, and perhaps a few pig or bird arrows.) One of the great injustices of life, or so it seemed at the time, was that when the fighting was going on while we lived in the house with the grass roof, Dad made us kids get under the folding metal table as the arrows were being launched into the air around us (not at us, but in our “yard”), while he

Chrissie's birthday party on the verandah at Karubaga.





Phyliss and Phil and family after his return from a trek into the new mission site at Koropun. (Becky was not sure about the guy with the beard!)

got to stand in the doorway and watch! At least once a chief named Momas (we called him Superman because he was so big and strong) stopped my father from intervening, moved him bodily back to our doorway and said, “You don’t bother us, and we won’t bother you!”

Another vivid memory involving Momas began in the early predawn light, when a woman burst into our house, gasping and crying, and found her way under my older sister Crissie’s bed. Momas slammed the door open shortly after her, followed the sounds she was making, reached under the bed and dragged the woman outside. He then yelled at her briefly (something like “Don’t you EVER...”) and shot her twice in her hand, and three times in her thigh. She was one of his wives, and she had done something to upset him enough that he shot her, but not to wound her seriously. In that culture, women were treated as property, with roughly the value of one of the pigs. Years later, when I returned in 1992 to the valley, I saw that woman still alive and well, with the three scars on her thigh and the two on her hand.

As a brief aside, let me mention that Dad was offered several pigs for my older sister when we arrived, perhaps as a gesture of good will once they decided that we were not going to be killed. Although I can joke now about how I thought, “SELL!” in fact it was more than a little scary to contemplate such transactions as a second grader.

After learning the language well, my parents began to have an impact in at least four areas. First, they were teaching any who would come to “school” how to read and write their own language (first put into writing by my parents). Second, they treated sickness and injuries with antibiotics, dressing changes, and such first aid as they could apply. They treated burns from kids rolling into the fire in the middle of their hut in their sleep, toothaches that required a tooth to be pulled without anesthetic, arrow wounds, cuts, worms and parasites and many other ailments, sometimes with advice from a doctor over the radio, and rarely with a doctor flying in or a patient being flown out to get help. Third, they gave out seeds liberally and without charge, to try to provide more nutrition to supplement the common problem of malnutrition and a lack of vitamins

in the diet composed primarily of sweet potatoes. Then they bought back the produce for salt or other trade goods, and shipped the vegetables to the coast, where the land did not support gardens as well. Fourth, and most importantly, they began to gain the trust and understanding of the people well enough that they could share the hope that they found in knowing Jesus Christ as their personal savior, translating and teaching Bible passages and truth.

Little by little, people began to believe in Christ, and to trust Him for forgiveness for their sins and for freedom from fear. While the notion of the “noble savage” may seem appealing, the reality is that whatever the veneer of culture, civilization and sophistication surrounding people, each of us has a need for forgiveness and for a personal relationship with God that can come only through faith in Christ. And in the customs and realities of life in those tribes, fear of each other and the constant warring, fear of the spirits that mysteriously controlled massive earthquakes, frequent landslides, and the torrential rainfall that could wipe out the food supply, fear of the traditions that treated women as property and strangers as enemies, and fear of the unknown all kept people enslaved to fear. So the message of hope and a loving God brought with it a freedom from fear and forgiveness from the sin that binds each of us. As some began to respond, they brought others to hear the message of the gospel as well.

Early in my seventh grade school year (September, 1968) my father and another missionary, Stan Dale, made a trip by foot from our mission station to Ninia (the Dales’ station) to find a place to build another airstrip. With people responding to the gospel close to our stations, a new airstrip would make it easier to spread the message of hope in the rough territory that took seven days of hard walking to traverse. On that trip my father and Stan Dale, along with several native men, were shot and killed by people from the Seng Valley. When they did not check in by radio as scheduled, we did not know what had happened, but eventually a few men who had been with them found their way to another mission station where they told how the men had been followed by a large group of men, then attacked and killed. The people of that valley were determined that they would not allow outsiders to influence their ancestor and spirit worship, and this clearly seemed a setback to the work that God had called my parents to do. I am reminded again of a later verse of that same song:

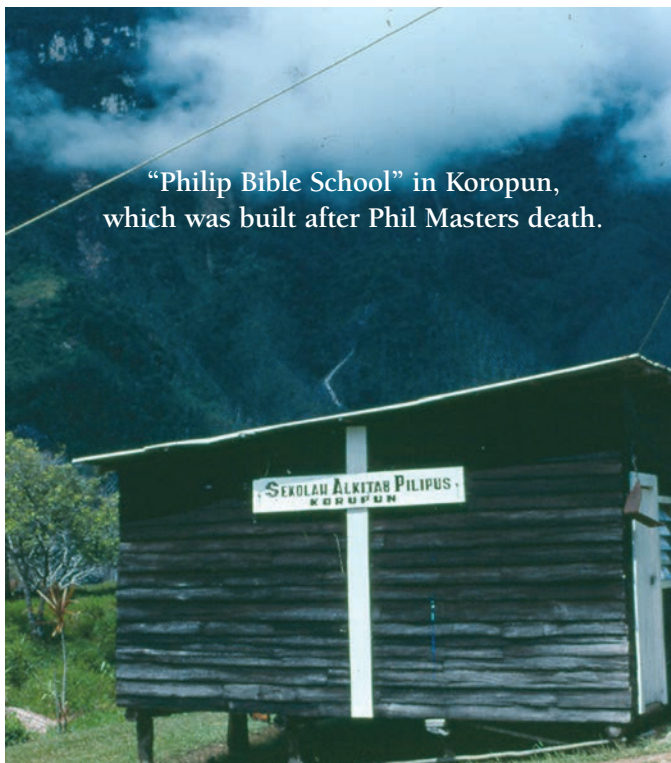
“To the hardest of places He calls me to go,
Never thinking of comfort or ease;
The world may pronounce me a dreamer, a fool,
Enough if the Master I please.
To the regions beyond, I must go, I must go
Till the world, all the world,
His salvation shall know.”

We cannot always see the fruits of our efforts in the short term, and the measures of success that God uses are eternal, not temporal. One thing is certainly clear - God is a master at turning defeat into victory, and God used a plane crash and the survival of one nine-year-old boy in that same valley months later to open the hearts of those same people whose hearts had been hardened. Although there is certainly still spiritual warfare going on in that area, I have had the rare privilege of meeting one of the men who helped kill my father, who is now a pastor carrying that message of forgiveness and hope on to others.

I am reminded of Joseph's comment to his brothers when he said in Genesis 50:20, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good..."

When I returned to Koropun, our mission station, in 1993 for a 25th anniversary memorial service for my father, I was 36 years old, the same age that my father had been when he was killed. An old man came up to me and said, with his gnarled hand on my nose, "You have the face of your father!" Of course that was an emotional time, but I think of the spiritual parallels there, as our relationship with Christ continues to mature and we see His likeness in those who grow in Him. And it was in that way that I saw the face of their Father in those spiritual leaders who had come to know Christ personally because Phil and Phyliss Masters introduced them to the message of hope and forgiveness through faith in Him.

After Dad was killed, my mother decided, after much prayer and discussion, to stay on the mission field. She was three months pregnant at the time, and although she faced many difficult questions about her direction and purpose and provision, God used her scripture memory to keep speaking to her. (One especially difficult thought was the idea that the people, who were cannibals, had eaten the bodies of the men they had killed. Early on we were told that they had been afraid to eat the bodies, and had been talked out of doing that, but later when the people were more comfortable sharing what had happened we found out that the men's bodies had been eaten.) For about a year and a half she had been "hiding God's words in her heart," memorizing a verse each day so that she had a treasure of truth that God kept bringing to her mind when she felt overwhelmed or discouraged. God reminded her of Luke 12: 4, for example, which says, "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." Another verse that was a great comfort was Isaiah 43:2, where God promises, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you: when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon you." We were and are so grateful for the way God used many people's faithful and sacrificial support to enable Mom to carry on her work as a missionary. An essential part of this included making it possible for her to pay the tuition for all of us kids to go to an "mk" (missionary kid) school, which is one reason



"Philip Bible School" in Koropun, which was built after Phil Masters death.

why I have such an appreciation for the sacrifices that many supporters of our school make to allow Brentwood Academy to provide need-based financial aid.

Again, at first blush this may seem like a natural decision, but it was my father who was the ordained minister and the one who had done most of the public speaking. But when we returned to the states for furlough two years after Dad had been killed, God gave her a confidence and a personal testimony of His faithfulness that opened doors to ministry in ways that she had never anticipated. She returned to the mission field until she retired, and all of her five children graduated from high school overseas before returning to the states for college. To this

day, although she has retired from the "field," she still speaks at missions conferences and churches, shares with women about serving the Lord as a single woman, or being a single mom, or following God's calling and trusting Him whatever the circumstances. She is especially fervent in her ability to encourage Bible memory, as God used that commitment so strongly in her own life.

As I reflect on how God has provided for all of us, it seems important to note that although God does promise a special reward for those who die for their faith, and that He will provide for those who lose loved ones for Christ, neither my father nor my mother chose this path of my father being killed. In fact, few if any of us will have much say in how or when we will die. The choice we do have, and the choice my parents did make, is how we will live. Will we respond to the call to serve God wherever He places us, whatever the cost? The reason that I appreciate my parents so much has nothing to do with what they could not control and would not have chosen, but rather with what they did choose to do with the opportunities God gave them, and the choice they made to spend their lives to share their hope in Christ with others. May we have the boldness to do the same!

(If you want to hear my mom, Phyliss Masters, sharing her thoughts during a Brentwood Academy chapel, you can find the link at www.BrentwoodAcademy.com by clicking on the "Streaming Media" link in the middle of the page, then choosing "Special Guest Speakers" on the next page, followed by clicking on "Phyliss Masters.")



Phyliss with Crissie, Rob, Curt and Becky and holding Timothy Philip, born six months after Phil's death.

Editor's note: Additional parts of the above story may be read in *Lords of the Earth* by Don Richardson and in *To Perish For Their Saving* by Helen Manning.