



*Memoirs  
of  
Sr. Mary  
Bernadette  
Howard, MSC*



# MEMOIRS.

## Childhood and Youth.

I have often been told, I should write my memoirs. Probably no one will read them, but, if it makes me more conscious and grateful for the Lord's presence in my life, it will be worth the effort.

To start at the beginning; my parents - Joe Howard was a city boy, his mother an Irish immigrant, father English. The father died when Joe was a baby, leaving Gran with four children. She married again an Irishman, a hopeless alcoholic. Gran had four more children before he drank himself to death. Dad's childhood was pretty rough and, as he did not like school, he got very little. He worked at various jobs including ship's cook (though he couldn't boil water when he took the job). Later he worked as a coal miner in Wonthaggi. Dad's sister had married and was living near Warrnambool, and Dad, visiting her, met my mother Katie Drew, a country girl; her mother, a German immigrant, father Irish, fifteen years her senior. Granma Drew was a Lutheran. Irish Father insisted that she taught the children the catechism and prepare them for their first Holy Communion and, being an intelligent woman, she learnt it herself, and received her first Communion with the older children. They were poor country folk. Mother left school when she was ten years old and went to work with one of the well-to-do farmers. Her education, however, did not stop then; she read much and was able to converse with anyone.

In 1910 Joe and Katie were married and went to live in Wonthaggi; Dad had a bakery there at the time. It was there that I was born, the fourth child, on the 17<sup>th</sup> May 1917, Ascension Thursday, reportedly a bonny baby weighting twelve pounds. Shortly after this, the family shifted to a farm in the area "Archie's Creek". Disaster struck; a bush fire left only the house and the cattle. This forced another move; this to a place called Eltham only a few miles from Melbourne, at that time very poor farmland. The cows died one after the other and we were very poor, not knowing where the next meal was coming from. Mum's great faith brought something along, when the cupboards were bare.

Baby number 6 was on the way, and Mum had to go off to the city for delivery and leave her family with 9 year old Mary in charge. My very first memories are of this time. One of post and rail fences along the road, another of a snake I saw near the clothes line, how I ran inside and hid behind the door, another our visit to the Zoo and being lost there. Dad was heroic to take 5 young children aged 2-9 to the Zoo. Lucy, 8 years and myself 4 years lingered watching the monkeys while the rest moved on and we couldn't find them in the crowd. Lucy was wise enough to make her way to the entrance where they would have to go out, so we were found.

Dad's youngest sister owned the Continental Hotel in Sorrento and she offered him a job there. So we moved to Sorrento to a rented house on the Portsea road. Another memory, which has never left me, was at that house. It was a dream or rather a nightmare. I was being cheeky to a man who was carrying a fish basket which he threatened to open and let the snake it contained out after me. Screams brought Mum, who took me into the cot in her room. But the fright remained, and every rattle of the venetian blinds brought more screams. It was here also, though I can't remember the incident, that I defied my mother and said "I won't". I don't know what Mum said or did, but she often said that that was the first and last time I disobeyed her.

Dad's mother helped us to get a house; it was brought all the way from Melbourne, I don't know how, perhaps by bullock or horse drawn wagon and put on a 20 acre block about 10 minutes walk from the town. There it was reconstructed; 6 rooms and a large bungalow at the back. We had 3 or 4 cows, poultry and a large vegetable garden. The idea was to provide milk and vegetables and poultry to the hotel; the refuse from the hotel was to feed a few pigs.

Sorrento was a seaside village with a shifting population. In the summer crowded, in the winter only a few local residents with nothing to do most of the time, not the best place to bring up a family. There were



three hotels in the town, including the Continental where Dad worked. Fortunately Dad did not drink, a fact he took no credit for, saying only "The stuff makes me sick". The rest of his family were in the hotel business and some drank heavily. We shifted to our new house when I was 5 years old. During the summer we had casual labour to help with the cows and garden. An incident happened at that time, which had a profound effect on me, though it was years after that I realized this. A young man took me on his knee while he was milking the cow and he began to expose himself before me. I broke loose and ran to tell my mother. Needless to say the man was promptly sacked, but I bore the emotional scar for years. The only school at the time was near Portsea about 4 miles from us, a long way for a beginner so Mum was reluctant to enrol me. However, when I was nearly 7 years, the lower classes were held in a hall about half that distance, and I started school. The teacher was not pleased that I was so much older than the rest of the class, so, as I was a bright student, I was soon in second class. During that year, the Sorrento State School was built and it was there that I spent the rest of my school days.

There was no resident priest in Sorrento those days; we had Mass very seldom, only during the holiday weeks at Christmas and Easter when there was usually a priest on holidays. We belonged to the Mornington parish some 35 miles away, a long way then when few people possessed a car. Should someone die, a priest would come for the funeral and any babies born in the meantime would then be baptized. One of the local young ladies had Sunday School for the children, she taught only what she herself knew, the contents of the penny Catechism. Mum saw to it, that we knew it from cover to cover. With this preparation in the small limestone church St Mary's Star of the Sea, I received my first Holy Communion on Christmas Day 1925.

About this time a wedding was arranged, an Irish Catholic man and a Protestant girl. There was a Mission to be given by the Redemptorist Fathers, so the wedding was to be on the Saturday at 3 p.m. However, the priests were not properly informed and did not arrive till 4 p.m., much to the annoyance of the bride's parents who called them for every thing including accusing them of being drunk. The couple were married, but the Priests, in true Redemptorist fashion, called down fire and brimstone on the town and threatened to leave without giving the Mission. After Mass next morning, Mum gathered the few faithful Catholics around her. I remember going around to the sacristy, I hiding behind Mum's skirt (they were long enough then). They begged the priests to give the Mission for the sake of the few faithful; they did.

After that a petition was drawn up and signed by all the Catholics asking Archbishop Mannix for a resident priest. The Oblates O.M.I had recently asked to work in the Melbourne Archdiocese, so they were given the Sorrento Parish. We then had not one, but three priests, living for the time being in a cottage owned by my aunt. We then had daily Mass and religious instructions once a week. A choir was formed, the Howards forming half of it, dad, mum and the two eldest girls. Jack became the first altar boy, and graduated to become M.C when he was too tall, before we left in 1934. Mum was anxious about our religious education, so she managed to get the three eldest billeted out to relatives for a time, so they could attend Catholic school. I missed out on this privilege, but according to the others home was better.

Dad had started a greengrocer business after the Continental was sold, so each one, as they left school would become shop assistant, busy in the summer, freezing cold in the winter. When I was 13 years old I got my merit certificate and was allowed to leave school, 8<sup>th</sup> grade. There was no opportunity for High School in Sorrento; the nearest being the Convent of Mercy in Mornington, 35 miles away.

The Parish Priest was insisting that I be sent to High School. That would have meant boarding and well beyond our financial position. Mum thought that because Fr Hayes wanted it, it should be done and was quite worried. One day I saw Fr Hayes coming across the paddock and I said: "Here comes Fr Hayes. I wish he would stay at home and mind his own business." (I knew what it would mean for the rest of the family, if I were sent to school). Mum told Father what I said, and he said: "If that's the way she feels, I will say no more about it, but have her taught music," and so I had 18 months piano lessons. Even that was hard enough to pay for, and I did not get far, only enough to amuse myself and annoy everyone else.

When I was 14 years old, I was confirmed and I must say, I was more interested in my new dress which Mum had cleverly made from a piece of old lace for the skirt, a new piece for the top. The Confirmation by Archbishop Mannix was in the new church in Rye. Receiving the Holy Spirit was about the last thing in my mind as I strutted about in what I thought was a very special dress.

The Mercy sisters came to Sorrento that year and the Catholic school was opened. I admired the nuns from afar, but also took objection to the obvious separation of lay and choir Sisters. There were only three Sisters, two teachers and one lay Sister, who was always alone while the other two met visitors and went about together. It was suggested that I go back to school for a while, but I did not take kindly to returning

to Primary at 15 years.

I had loved school and was a good student; had even gone for 4 years without missing one day, and was most upset when, at the end of the fourth year, two of the family had scarlet fever and we were not allowed to go to school.

When they recovered, Doctor suggested that they go for a holiday. So all the women folk, Mum and the girls with Leo, the 6-year-old, rented a house in the Dandenongs. It was so different from Sorrento, and we enjoyed it so much, that it was hard to settle down again. We all made rash promises; we would do anything, if Dad would sell Sorrento and buy a farm. We would milk cows, ride horses, stack hay, just anything to get out of Sorrento. Mum also had her promise; we would say the Family Rosary.

Our pleas prevailed and we sold the place in Sorrento, 10 acres for less than they are asking now for one building block, and bought a farm 6 miles from Korumburra in East Gippsland. We were of course "New Chums," but willing to learn. It was 117 acres had 40 cows, 4 horses, pigs, fowls and the rest. We went there in September; there was knee deep mud around the cowsheds, and a privet hedge in bloom round the house, a fact that caused problems every year. We all seemed to be allergic to it. By this time the family had grown to 8; 6 girls and 2 boys aged 4 years to 21 years.

The first year on the farm we struck a bad time; butterfat, our main product, went down in value and we could hardly make enough to feed the family and pay off the farm. Dad was not very happy; he missed Sorrento, his friends and the social life there, we being too far from the town to join the choir or like activities in Korumburra.

We had passed in the van we had used for the vegetable business and bought a Dodge tourer, a seven seater, into which 11 of us packed on Sundays for Mass. At one stage we even attended the Mission every evening for a week. Mum had to use all her persuasive power to get our driver Bert (a non-Catholic) to take us. Dad never learnt to drive; his eyesight was not good. A book could be written about our faithful Bert. I'm sure he never got a regular wage, but he was at home with us, sharing our good times as well as our hard times. He was just like a big brother. He was with us for years and, although he would ridicule our religion, I'm sure he secretly admired us. We girls, growing to young women, had nothing to fear from Bert; in fact he would sometimes admonish us for our frivolity.

True to her promise, Mum began to say the family Rosary every night, fitting it in with the few social events. If the older ones were going out, the Rosary with the trimmings would be said early.

We loved the farm and worked hard. Being a family with 4 young women, our home was soon the home of all the young male farm workers. We sang and danced, and had a lot of fun at home. The older ones would play cards with Dad, while the rest would gather around the piano. Looking back, I wonder how we managed with only kerosene lamp and candlelight. We would go to dances in a nearby school, where a neighbour would provide music with his accordion till early morning, we having only a couple of hours sleep before time to milk the cows.

Most of our neighbours belonged to a sect "Pentecostal Christians" who had let it be known that they soon would have the Catholics out of the place. They were not too friendly and looked aghast at our harmless pranks, and our attire, usually overalls and gumboots, not very ladylike, but very practical.

If I were to go into details of our happy family life on the farm this story would never be finished, it was a happy time and I must say "Thank you, Lord", for it.

Soon the farm could not support us all, so the eldest went off to work in Melbourne. Then the second followed, Jack being the third was necessary for work on the farm, so, after a couple of years, I joined the work force. First, taking Mary's job when she married, I was house-cum-shop girl in a bakery. I was there about 6 months when Lucy married and I thought her job would be more to my liking; little did I know. The position was housemaid at a presbytery, where a housekeeper-cook and her brother gardener - driver were employed. There were three priests in a big suburban parish. Lucy had worked there for 2 years and, although she did not encourage me to take the job, she never mentioned the problem that was so very hard for me to take.

The Parish Priest was a tall, austere looking Irish man. He appeared dignified and unapproachable, I was soon to discover that he was an alcoholic and needed constant care and often had to be hospitalized to sober up. I was horrified. Priests had always been "on a pedestal". After six months on the job, with

various encounters with the house keeper, (for tipping the whiskey, she had taken from the bar, down the sink) and with the Parish Priest himself, I was a nervous wreck and when my mother came to see me and wanted to know what was wrong, I told her and, for years after, scrupled about telling even my mother that a priest was an alcoholic. We had never been exposed to anything of that kind in our home. Mum hated drink and Dad had only an occasional drink; there was never any strong drink in our home.

## Following God's Call.

During my six months there, I danced every opportunity I got; I was lonely and didn't have any close friends, always wary of closeness. I belonged to the Children of Mary, went to Mass every morning and gradually began to be dissatisfied with the life I was living. I read mission pamphlets and C.T.S. booklets about Damien the leper. The desire to do something better with my life gradually possessed me; I wanted to be a missionary. A Redemptorist priest was coming to supply on Sundays, so I spoke to him. I told him I did not want to be a lay nun, and I didn't know any Congregations. He advised me to try the Josephites who did not have lay nuns.

I did not get in touch with the Josephites; the Lord seemed to have other things in mind for me. I used to go to St. Francis for confession, there I met Fr. Fox who had been directing the first girl who had wished to enter the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, she had died of cancer some months before. Father directed me to Mena House to see Mother Liboria. This I did and though very shy, I was really impressed by Mother Liboria, and thought to enter in six months.

Then I wrote and told Mum of my intention; I thought she would be delighted, as she often said to us girls: "I wish one of you girls would be a nun," to which I answered: "Tell Nell. She is the stuff nuns are made of." Nell married and had seven children later. Though Mum did not discourage me, she said it was not easy for her. Dad on the other hand thought I should wait a while. Though it was not necessary, I told him I would go anyway, when I was 21. Dad made no objections, when I left a few months before my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

The thought of leaving home often had me in tears and Mum would say: "You don't have to go; we would love to have you at home". But my mind was made up and I was sure that this was what the Lord wanted of me. Bert joined the ones who tried to discourage me saying "I won't see you again" (He did however visit me a few times later). Knowing my love of dancing and fun, many did not believe that I would persevere. One uncle said: "You won't last three weeks".

Mum needed a pelvic operation; she decided to have it before I left. She was operated on in St. Vincent's Hospital and I went home to keep house, while she was away. The few months at home did not make it easier to go. But on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1938 (Mum's birthday) I got the train from Korumburra to enter the next day.

My sister Mary met me and I spent the night with her, and what a night it was. Mary had been in the country with her in-laws over Christmas, and had taken the blanket from the spare bed with her. Evidently she had brought a bed bug back home in it – on my bed.

I woke at 12 am itching all over and covered with wheals; I found the offending creature and killed it. My brother-in-law noticed my light on when he returned from work (he was a baker). He inquired if I were OK I said that I was not and Mary came in. The bug could not have bitten me so many times, so I presume I was allergic to it. In any case the blue bag was produced and I painted on every weal with it. At last I got a few hours sleep and endeavoured to get the blue off in the bath before we left for Mena House that afternoon.

I had queer ideas about convents, having never really known any nuns. The prospectus I had received had no mention of nightdresses; Mum thought I should take some any way, but I had read somewhere that religious slept in their habits. It was soon discovered that the nightdresses were missing, and Mary had to go and buy some with the few pounds I had saved for Mum.

I felt very strange and shy. The Novice Mistress had a very severe appearance, and the two novices seemed very holy and subdued. When January 6<sup>th</sup> came and the old German custom of having three beans in the cake was observed (the one who happened to get the black one had to give a speech), I really did not want any cake and felt too grown up for such childish things; after all I was almost 21 years old.



A week or so after I came, the Sisters had been offered a house in Sorrento for a couple of weeks. Our Novitiate was some rooms in the Rest Home, where several old and deranged ladies were cared for. I was curious to see them, particularly one in our corner; unearthly yells used to issue from her room. My opportunity came, when two Sisters went to Sorrento. I was told to feed two of the old ladies. My interest died immediately and I was very tempted to go home; somehow I overcame my fear and did what I was told.

I can't say, that any of this time I was filled with faith and enthusiasm. Prayer and everything I did just seemed something that had to be done if I were to become a nun. Something like eating, necessary if one wanted to live, even if it didn't taste too good. The tasks I had to do were not too demanding, but lessons and prayer time were a real ordeal, I would fall asleep as soon as I sat down and struggled with sleep every time I was in Chapel.

## Novitiate.

The Novitiate in Mena Rest Home was a very small area and those days Novices did not leave that area. Of course, I had no idea about the Novitiate. I thought I'd be a nun when I entered the door and be in the Mission before the year was out. I had a lot to learn. There are lots of things I could say about the Novitiate that are probably best unsaid. Those were the days when one was supposed to be seen but not heard. To be humble and ready to accept everything as coming from on high. I was always convinced that I had a vocation, but often thought, and was afraid, I would be sent home. My prayer then was "Lord I'm here and I'm going to stay. If You don't want me, then You send me home. I will not go of my own accord".

Mother Clothilde was passing through from Africa to P.N.G and though she spoke in German, I was able to understand a bit and was again excited about going to the Mission. She interceded for me, asking that I be made a Postulant while she was in Melbourne, so on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1938 I became Sr. Bernadette. I had been given a choice. I had asked for Magdalene as I was feeling a great sinner in the midst of so many holy people. Bernadette was my second choice, every one thought that fitted better.

We had German lesson every day, and most of our prayers were said in German. This never worried me; I loved to learn and speak German. We were expected to have one German sentence at morning recreation. I took the silence and routine of the Novitiate as a matter of course and it never worried me much. On the occasional recreation day, big feast days, the two Novices would ask me to sing for them, I willingly obliged with Mother Machree or some other Irish lyric.

It was a kind of unreal life for me, but I went along quite comfortably with it. I soon became known as the sleepy one, quite unused to early rising. Long prayers and hours of adoration on First Fridays were particularly difficult; the little chapel was stifling and, despite my struggles, I was only half conscious most of the time.

No visitors were allowed during the Postulancy, but on May 17<sup>th</sup>, my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, an exception was made and my sister Mary and her girl friend arrived with a beautifully decorated cake. Mum had made it, and sent it down to Mary, who had it decorated at the bakery where her husband worked. Though I was pleased to see them, the cake was the cause of embarrassment for me; one didn't want to have anything special. Next morning Mother Liboria was invited to share the cake with us in the Novitiate; I could have gone through the floor.

The day came for my Reception after 8 days retreat. I can't remember much about that time, no special consolation or desolation, only a kind of rugged determination to persevere. The family came to the ceremony and even Dad's mother, then over 90 years, came in the afternoon. It was great to see them all. Gran was looking for me and I said: "Here I am. " She said, "Oh, I thought you were one of the Sisters". Yes, there I was in the religious habit at last. I still had a long way to go.

The two Novices had already had two years preparation and I just joined them for instructions and often felt that I missed a lot. This added to my feeling of inferiority, because I had never been to a Catholic school.

On August 15<sup>th</sup> 1939, after an 8 days retreat, I made my First Profession, vowing Poverty, Chastity and Obedience for one year in the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In October, Sisters Marie Therese and Damien Rush completed their second year novitiate, and there had been no one entering since myself, and Sacred Heart Hospital was about to open its doors, the Novice Mistress went there to do the office work and the Novitiate stopped for the time being.

I joined the Rest Home community, working in kitchen and pantry and caring for the patients. Lots of sad and funny things happened during those two years. The war had broken out, my brother Jack enlisted and was sent to the East, only to be called back to go to P.N.G. The German Sisters suffered much from isolation and often felt the prejudice of doctors and others. One group of Sisters had arrived just before the war started and heard nothing of their families until the war was over.

## **Nursing and Sacred Heart Hospital.**

I had never really thought what I would be doing in the convent. I had no particular talent or desire, though I was able and ready to learn. When asked, if I would like to train as a nurse, I was very happy. Sacred Heart Hospital had applied to have a training school, so I went to S.S.H. in April 1941. The permission, however, did not come through till 1943. About this time a Sister was needed to relieve the kitchen Sister in the Rest Home and I was sent to take over the kitchen. I said as I was leaving, "I feel like a sheep being led to the slaughter". Little did I think that in a few days I would be ill and diagnosed as acute appendicitis and operated on. That was the end of my kitchen days, and the beginning of a fellow feeling with my patients. Bishop Fulton Sheen said that a good nurse needed a sense of humor and an incision. I think he was right.

Back at S.S.H. we had a few lessons in bedside nursing and helped in the wards, the war had absorbed many nurses, so staff was short. Training began in earnest in 1943, at that time Merit Certificate was sufficient basic schooling for entrance. I did not find the studies hard, although at times words cropped up which were foreign to me, but not to those, who had gone through High school.

Our spiritual training was not so intense, and apart from daily Mass, weekly confession, an occasional conference and annual retreat, not much was offered. Our formation had prepared us, to accept everything that came along and I would never have asked for anything else. I was a very good student, usually top of the class. Though others had to study late at night, I was always tired and ready for bed before time. Thank God for the good memory He gave me. State examinations were passed without much trouble and I was a capable nurse especially in the operating theatre.

I had always felt that some day I would go to the Mission and voiced my preference very often in the early years. In 1947, when Sr M. Gertrude was appointed for P.N.G., I was asked, if I were jealous. I could truthfully say, "NO".

After passing finals with flying colours, topping the State that year, Midwifery training started at S.S.H. and I was in the first group. In our general nursing we had barely touched on sexuality, male and female sex organs, fertility, conception etc. These studies filled me with awe and wonder at marvel of our being I loved it. After nine months we graduated as midwives – double certificated nurses.

## **Going to the Mission.**

In December we had our first official visitor from Hilstrup, Mother Felicitas. She had had a hip operation and was rather helpless. As they were leaving for the airport on January 6<sup>th</sup> they called in to say goodbye, but did not get out of the car. As each one shook hands she had a word with each. She pulled me close to her said in German "I must tell you something today on the Feast of the Epiphany. you are going to the Mission". I answered "That makes me happy" to which she answered with finger to lips, "Don't tell anyone". So, I was bound to secrecy. The hardest was, when I was on night duty with Sr. Damien (Trish Rush) and could not confide in her. Also, when Mum came in tears and so upset that Leo was told by the O.F.M. that he should not come back, he had been there 2 years trying to catch up with his studies, he was 21yrs and had only done grade 8. Mum had so longed to have a son a priest, and now I would soon have to tell her that I would be going to P.N.G.

Mother Liboria came in February. I expected her to say something about the appointment during the

retreat interview. She didn't, so I asked if she knew what Mother Felicitas had told me. She said: "Oh, she didn't tell you, did she? Well, keep it quiet a bit longer." She was going to the first General Chapter after the war in May and the announcement was made just before she left. I had kept the secret so long and well that everyone was surprised.

I was on night duty for 3 months before I was to leave in September. I did not have the enthusiasm I would have had earlier. It was not easy to leave. I was respected by staff and doctors as being an excellent nurse and could have gladly stayed and enjoyed that glory. News came from the Chapter that Mother Clothilde was to stay in Melbourne and I was to go with Sr. Theodoretis to Rabaul (incidentally, Sr. Theodoretis was in Mena House when I first visited and had opened the door to me). As there were changes in administration, and Mother Liboria had not returned, and none of the Sisters responsible for preparing liturgies for receiving Mission Cross and sending, these ceremonies were pretty low key.

I was allowed one week at home, but since my parents lived at the gatehouse at Mary's Mount, I spent the day with them and slept in the convent. My sister had had a premature baby in Mansfield and could not travel with it, so I was allowed to visit her.

My brother Jack came and drove Mum, Dad, and myself to Mansfield, 2 or 3 hours drive. We stayed the night, then drove to Korumburra, stayed a night there then back to Melbourne visiting my sister Nell on the way. We said our good byes then, and I asked them not to come to the Station. Dad was the only one who shed tears in public; Mum, the valiant woman as always, probably shed hers in secret, as I did.

There wasn't much preparation; clothing had been prepared for Mother Clothilde, and as I was about the same size (about 4" less around the waist) I took her trunk. We traveled by train to Sydney where we were to board the ship "Bulolo". It took a few days during which we stayed at Kensington with the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. We were treated as guests, ate in the parlour etc.

Eventually we boarded and the journey began. I had never been more than 80 miles from Melbourne before, and as we had lived almost a cloistered life, even though nursing, I felt very shy and odd with company. There were three M.S.C brothers, two Marist Priests and a Brother. They had all been in the Mission before. Two of the Brothers were always telling me hair raising stories to scare me, while another would always tell me it was not so bad. We had Holy Mass every day on board.

In Brisbane we anchored for a day, the passengers went sightseeing but Sr. Theodoretis didn't think it proper for us, so we stayed on board; our next stop was Port Moresby. We stayed on board again and I watched with interest the way the cargo was unloaded. Cases of precious Johnny Walkers marked "This side up. Handle with care" banging together and the precious fluid leaking from almost every box.

The sea had been calm so far, but a heavy swell, when we left Port Moresby, made for a few very uncomfortable hours. I had always said I could never be seasick, I had lived near the sea most of my life. However, I was mistaken and was soon making an offering to Neptune. We arrived in Rabaul on Friday September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1948.

The mission boat "St Theresa" was there to meet us with Mother Secunda and Fr. Copas, so after a few formalities we transferred to "St Theresa" and sailed back down the coast to Vunapope.

It was the First Friday of the month and the annual retreat was in progress, that meant silence, and it was taken seriously those days. Not at all welcoming for a newcomer, most did greet me quietly. Retreat ended on the Sunday and I was able to get to know a few Sisters I had not met before; most had been in Melbourne after the war, so I knew them well.

The culture shock then began. The first visit to the hospital was too much. Naturally everything was very primitive, buildings having been quickly put up with any material available, to cope with the desperate condition of the people, malnourished and very anaemic. There were patches of what I thought was blood everywhere. I was disgusted even when I found it was bettle nut. It didn't do much to appease me.

I had always been told that I was coming to be midwife in Vunapope. I was soon to discover that Sr. Theonilla was the chief and I learnt how little I knew, especially of working in such conditions. I was not happy with the way things were done; sterility was rudimentary to say the least. I felt that the doctor asked how things were done in Australia, just to find out how much I knew, not to perhaps change things.

Communication was poor those days. In the beginning of November a message, it was thought came from



Valoka, that Sr. Emilina was sick and may need an operation, so a boat was going to pick her up. I was asked to go and take her place; she was a nurse. However, a second message said it was Sr. Imina in Bitokara who was ill; Sister was a teacher.

Dr. Furst, Sr. Jeremia and myself prepared everything for an operation if necessary and boarded the "St. Theresa". The trip was about 18 hours; all went well and the sea was calm. When evening came, I was tired and longing to go to bed. Our beds were set up on the deck, another shock; we were to go to bed right there in front of everyone. It was rather embarrassing, but later I got used to it. We removed our veils and lay down as we were. "Rocked in the cradle of the deep, I lay me down in peace to sleep, secure I sleep upon the wave for Thou, oh Lord, has power to save," was my thought then and often after, when I was to spend nights aboard the small mission boats.

We reached Bitokara Sunday morning and found Sr. Imina very sick, but, certainly not needing an operation; fortunately, for I truly don't know how we would have managed. It was a case of hepatitis. Doctor decided to take Sister back to Vunapope with us. So with a bed set up on deck for Sister, we set sail after lunch. All went well at first, but, in late afternoon, the crew began to fasten any loose cargo, drums etc. and the sky looked very threatening; the cook boy got the evening meal ready (no one ate it). At six o'clock the North West monsoon struck. The ship tossed and rolled and we lay on the deck hanging on for dear life, at first I was too sick to be frightened, later too frightened to be sick. Doctor stood beside Sister's bed all night. For six hours we were tossed by the storm, then, as we went around a point somewhere, we had the wind behind us and could relax a little. Of course we were wet and dirty. As we were nearing Vunapope Sr. Jeremia decided to change, no sooner had she done so, when a wave washed over her and she was no better than I. The rough trip did the patient no harm; she improved from that day and was soon able to return to Bitokara.

## Lihir.

Shortly after that a Sister was needed in Lihir, to relieve Sr. Aggritia, so that was my next experience. Mother Secunda accompanied me, this time on the "Paulus M.V". We had a pleasant trip, the first night was spent in the harbour "Port Breton" the site of the ill-fated expedition of Marques DeRay. What a beautiful spot; I was simply enthralled. Then we called at mission stations, Siar, Anir and Tanga, then to Lihir where I was to spend my first Christmas with Sisters. Gustava and Aquillina, two great missionaries. Sr. Gustava had spent some years in Japanese prison camps in New Ireland. For her introduction into mission life I am really grateful; we had a wonderful Christmas.

The hospital consisted of one permanent building consisting of outpatients, labour ward, and medicine store room. The wards, two Quonset hut, with mother earth for floor, bamboo beds, a fire smoldering between each pair of beds. Two other large wards were entirely of bush material. I wasn't quite prepared for this, but I was in charge and could do my own thing. The most common complaints were tropical ulcers, the like of which I had never seen, some of them years old, having had no treatment all during the war. The patients, malnourished and anaemic with little resistance and with no antibiotics, very hard to treat. Yaws were epidemic, and malaria very prevalent. Mothers preferred to have their babies at home as they had been doing for years.

I was there three months and had only two or three deliveries one of whom became quite famous in later years (Deputy Governor of the Bank of P.N.G, another became a Priest).

Then it was back to Vunapope and in the maternity section with Sr. Theonilla for a year. I was able to gain a lot of experience during that year, but not really enough to prepare me for my next term in Lihir.

Lihir is a beautiful place, but at that time was very isolated. On March 18<sup>th</sup> 1950. I was back to replace Sr. Aggritia on a permanent basis. The mission had been on Lihir only about 20 years, so the people were still very primitive, not long out of cannibalism, but, as one old man explained, though he had tasted human flesh I had nothing to fear since they were now Catholics. They were a beautiful simple people and I learnt to love them very soon.

A book could be written about Lihir and the experience there; just a few stories – We had a couple of goats, so the farmer in me helped me to propagate them and we soon had a herd. A goat house was built under my instruction with a bail similar to what we had for the cows, but on level with the bamboo floor, so, that I could stand while milking. The milk provided much needed nourishment for the sick children. I was

always afraid of heights and was terrified of crossing rivers on bridges of a single log. Between the goats' house and the hospital there was one such bridge, the log was quite a big one, so did not frighten me too much. But one day, carrying my pail of milk, I walked across and stepped on a loose stone, and found myself in the creek. Anxious to save the milk, I had more milk, a bit diluted, when I climbed out.

Another time we had to take the girls to a garden, 2 hours walk from us; there were always a few girls living on the station with us, either going to school or learning domestic arts, and so helping us with the many tasks that had to be done. Sr. Dorothea went with us. Sister was over 70 years, but pretty lively; she also was afraid of log bridges. There was a fairly wide river just before we got to the village. As I knew of Sister's fear, I pretended to be fearless, stepped on the log, putting my hand back, to lead Sister across. I made the crossing safely, turned around to help Sister down, only to discover that I had a young man by the hand, and Sr. Dorothea stood in the middle of the log having a good laugh at my embarrassment.

We had a community of 3 or 4 most of the time, Sr. Gustava teaching and studying the language and stories, which Fr. Neuhaus, a linguist, had written and translated into German. He had also compiled a large Dictionary German-Lihir, Lihir-German. This was a great help and I learnt enough Lihir to converse and understand the people. My Pigin English was not good, so I had much to learn. The early years and my association with Sr. Gustava were a great help to me, we both loved music and would often sing together and had a lot of fun. Sister had a great knowledge of plant life, having been some years in prison with Fr. Pekel, who was an experienced botanist as well as a very holy man. It was a joy to go bush walking with Sister and learn about the various plants.

Though totally inexperienced to deal with the medical cases and emergencies that came my way, the Lord seemed near with His help, when it was most needed. There were three important people in every village; 1 Luluai, the chief, 2. Tultul, his assistant; 3. Docta Boy. Every Monday the whole village must assemble in line (a rather crooked one) before the three. The Docta boy would march up in front of the line and pick out those who were sick or had sores, then he'd go behind the line and inspect the soles of the feet for the presence of plantar yaws. Those who needed attention that could not be obtained in the village would be marched off to the hospital for a shot; this could be an injection of Neo-salvasan for yaws, and I often would have 50-60 or even more to give in the morning. This had a dramatic effect. The lesions dried up in one or two days, re-infection happened almost as quickly. Those villagers, who did not need treatment, would then be obliged to work for the community and, if something was needed at the hospital e.g. grass for a new thatched roof or bamboo for walls or beds, Monday would be the day to ask.

I often felt inadequate for the job, lonely and longing for some contact with medical personnel, but when a doctor did come, perhaps six times in the 10 years, he didn't seem at all interested in my problems. There had been a lot of dressings and medicine salvaged from the Japanese, which were very valuable, those early years. Later reasonable supplies came from the Administration.

Sometimes I had an orphaned baby to care for. One, little Bernadette, was reared on goat's milk; she was with me about 4 years. At that time, Fr. Schweiger was Parish Priest. He was just crazy about children. He would take Bernadette by the hand and lead her to my garden of peanuts; there he would dig peanuts for her. I was not very pleased, but he enjoyed it, so he planted a patch of nuts near his house. They were growing nicely when Father had to go away for a week. When he returned, the garden was bare, only tiny footprints told the story.

Another time I was washing Bernadette under the tap; she had been playing in the dirt. Sr. Damia got too near and the wind blew her veil on to my wet Bernadette; result, one brown veil, sister said: "Oh, I didn't know the colour came out".

Our contact with the outside was non-existent except for the mission boat which came every three months; that was also the only time we received mail and could post ours. Lihir mission had a workboat for patrols, the only means of transport except for "shanks's pony". Our ship "Helen" ran on to the reef in bad weather and we were unable to contact Vunapope, and get help for three weeks; by that time "Helen" was a wreck. They had managed to salvage the engine somehow.

The next boat "M.V. Robert" was to take us on many a trip. We Sisters, teacher and nurse, would go along with Father when he went to the outlying islands, 2, 3 and 4 hours away. Teacher would check on teachers, and nurse would see and treat the sick. Once we had a bit of spare time, so we went with the Catechist to see the gardens, a sheer climbs up a coral cliff. With the help of few young men I managed to the top, coming down was worse; that was the only time I can remember my knees actually knocking. There was a severe shortage of water at the time and Sr. Gustava had suggested that they pray for rain. While we were

having our evening meal, the Catechist came up, put 5 shillings on the table and said: "Father, you must say Mass that we get rain, but it must come this week." Father explained that was not the way we should ask, making conditions with God. The house, where Sister and I were to sleep, was in bad need of repair, and as we settled down for the night a thunderstorm blew up, bringing very heavy rain with it. We ended up sleeping under our umbrellas. Once I was asked to go and see a pregnant woman in a village, about ½ hour's walk away; she seemed O.K. and there was nothing I could do. Next morning during Mass there was a mother and baby sitting behind me. She had had the baby during the night and walked to Mass that morning.

In 1954 Fr. Schweiger had been to Kavieng for a meeting and, on his way back from Namatanai, "Robert's" engine failed. Namatanai to Lihir is a 4-5 hour trip on an open sea. He was able to contact Vunapope, so they sent "M.V. Theresa" to the rescue. However, Father managed to get the engine going again and they got back safely that night. Was it coincidence? I would rather say it was God's loving providence. Our oldest member, Sr. Agatha, had an attack of malaria and was disorientated, needing constant care. So when "M.V. Theresa" arrived, I was able to take Sister to Vunapope. When we arrived, I was sick too with a very bad cold and took to my bed for a few days.

Some new Sisters had arrived in Vunapope, so I was able to take Sr. Fidelia back with me. She had had a whirlwind trip from America to Rabaul in 3 days; it was to take us 10 days from Vunapope to Lihir. We boarded "M.V. Theresa" with Bishop Scharmach doing a Confirmation trip. The first stop was Siar; the Sisters were not allowed off the boat as there was no place for them to sleep, and the anchorage was not good, so we sailed down the coast to Metlik and stayed on board there for two nights.

The people in Siar had given the Bishop a pig. We were to spend another night in Anir. Bishop thought we should kill the pig there, but I, thinking that the sisters in Tanga had the necessary savvi and saucepans etc. to do a better job, persuaded him to wait till next day. Man proposes. We boarded next morning and set off for Tanga. About half way there, 2½ hours out, the sea became very rough. All took refuge in the steer room, I, feeling a bit off, preferred to stay on deck. The Captain, seeing it was not wise to go further, skillfully turned the boat to go back to Anir. I, sitting on my deck chair, was unaware what was happening. As the ship turned, a great wave came over it and me. At that time we were still wearing our starched headgear, so you can imagine what I looked like. The Bishop was first to emerge from the steer room; the sea, now being behind us, was calmer. He saw the apparition and called the rest to come and see the bedraggled nun.

That was not the worst, we now had to kill the pig, or it may not have survived another day, tied up as it was. It was a good initiation for Sr. Fidelia. We did the best we could with the help of Fr. Dargas' houseboy and the few pots he had. The Bishop later sent me a cartoon-like certificate of "Good Seamanship". One of the Fathers had drawn it. It showed a bedraggled nun with a wave, with a fish in it, coming over her. I'm sorry I did not keep that certificate.

Living in such isolation, in small communities, was often very difficult. Personality clashes are unavoidable. Sr. Gustava was to start a new station in Unea and so was transferred and I was made Superior. I took it very seriously and as a great responsibility, later reflecting on it, it really wasn't. I had in Community 2 or 3 adults, who had at least as much good will as I had, though some difficult characters; compared to young married women my age with 3 or 4 children to care for and educate as Christians.

We had changes in Parish Priests and also, during that time, Kavieng Diocese was established and Lihir celebrated 25 years as a parish. I had seen a play in Pidgin English called "KUST" a beautiful story of the advent of Christianity, and its influence on the people. I suggested putting it on for the Jubilee, and practice began. It was hard work, but eventually they caught on and got involved. I picked out one young man, a good actor who in the play had to die in agony; he was great, but a week before the play was to be staged, a boat came recruiting labourers, and my actor took off. In desperation I called for volunteers, the only one I could get was not so gifted and unable to die so dramatically. However, the play was a success even though rain poured all day; it cleared up long enough in the evening for the show.

The health had improved dramatically during my stay in Lihir, mainly due to the fact that the Government had launched anti-yaws campaign in 1955-56; during this time every native was given 3 injections of procaine penicillin. This wiped out yaws and gonorrhoea. It did not however wipe out the, what I called, the "shoot complex". Having had to have injections for their ills over the years, they wanted a shot for every thing and were not happy, if it was not forthcoming. Antibiotics were available, but, often scarce.

One had to be doctor, nurse, surgeon, and anaesthetist all in one, and was commonly called "Sister Docta".



We had village Docta boys as assistants, most of whom knew nothing about medicine. Sr Aggritia had asked one fellow if he knew how to read the thermometer, he proudly said he did, then announced the reading "Half past nine".

Over the years, the buildings needed constant attention; new grass roofs, new beds and walls and sometimes whole buildings needed to be replaced, so one became building foreman, cabinetmaker. Our cupboards were usually made from the wooden boxes that the supplies came in. So in fact one had to be a "Jack or Jill" of all trades.

I had been in Lihir almost 10 years, when circumstances forced me, for my good and that of others, to ask for a transfer. After much writing, back and forth to Vunapope and even to the General, the transfer came. I felt sure it would be back to Vunapope and I dreaded it. I also went through a very difficult time, as I had always accepted what came my way, the very asking for a change was repugnant to me.

Eventually the day came, November 1<sup>st</sup> 1959, All Saints day. Lots of people had come in for Mass, as was their custom on big feast days. It had always been a joy to see the crowds that came, some having walked hours the day before, and had to walk home the next day. So, the day before I left I had to shake hands with hundreds of grimy hands, each of which had a gift of a shilling, the result over £40. I cried all day and night. I had grown to love these simple people; it was hard to leave them.

Next morning we boarded the ship for Vunapope for the last time. I had had many trips back and forth over the ten years, most of which could have a story written about them. This boat was the "RUSKAI" the first one belonging to the Kavieng Diocese, which had been taken over by the American M.S.C. since 1957. About half way between Lihir and Tanga, we came within a few meters of a huge whale; we didn't wish to get too near, as the creature appeared to be at least as big as our boat, and could have turned it over with not much effort. He was also not interested in us and lay just below the surface rising for air and sending up a spout of water every few minutes. The rest of the journey was uneventful. Calling at Tanga, Anir and Siar and spending a night at each place, it took four days to get to Vunapope.

## Vunapope.

Then a new chapter of my life began. First I was sent to Bitokara to relieve Sr. Theodoretis for three months. Apart from looking after the hospital, I was to care for the fowls that Sister kept, selling the eggs to gain money for necessary material and maintenance etc. Sister explained, that her fowl house was snake proof but, in spite of that, I was to check every night, and a spade was left at the door, just in case. The very first night it was raining (a favourite time for snakes). With two girls and a hurricane lamp, we went to do our duty. There was the snake, 6-8 feet of it. I held the lamp and expected the girls to kill it; I should have known better. I had some experience in Lihir; P.N.G people for the most part are afraid to kill snakes. I could see that the snake would get away, so I took the spade, and gave them the lamp, with which they ran and left me in the dark. My pleas brought them back and I was able to kill the snake. All well that ends well.

Bitokara has a history of having an abnormal number of multiple births. Sr. Theodoretis had had many sets of twins and had even successfully raised triplets as well. In my time, there was only one set of twins. The hospital was quite busy, but, nothing that I could not manage. The wet season had begun and I remember the heavy rains. Bitokara is a very beautiful place, overlooking the sea and adjacent islands. I spent three months there, from early December till March, then Sr. Theodoretis returned and I went back to Vunapope to commence my work in the maternity section, where I was to work for the next 18 years. Sr. Hermengildis had become Regional Superior, so I took her place.

By this time two large Quonset houses had been obtained; one housed - examination - cum - minor operation room for gyne, labour ward with two beds, shower and toilet, baby bath room and wards for postnatal. All very basic and primitive, but better by far than we first had. The second Quonset hut was for the antenatal mothers who came in droves for treatment, and often stayed for weeks before delivery, often suffering from hookworm, malaria, and severe anaemia. They needed treatment in preparation for delivery. Part of this house was reserved for the occasional private patient, European or mixed race. These were Sr. Theonilla's special property.

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Don't think there would have been any complication in the obstetrical field, which we did not have to deal

with over those years. We usually had a volunteer doctor on the staff, but often had to manage without his help. The experience gained over those years was invaluable, and also served to show me how ill prepared I was for the Lihir experience and how grateful I should be to God for His guidance and protection all those years.

The training school for nurses had become firmly established; a three year course, known as Maternal and Child Health nurse, later the course was upgraded to General Nurse and, later, Post-graduate Course were offered. Though not involved directly in teaching, I was responsible for the practical training in obstetrics and we had sufficient work in that field to train them well. The hospital was very spread out those days; maternity and paediatrics were close, but the operating theatre, dispensary, and X-ray were a few hundred metres away. The male section was even further away. Any emergency C section etc had to be wheeled through the grounds on a trolley, or, from the male section, emergencies had to be carried on a stretcher as the road was too rough for the trolley, and this in all kinds of weather. Eventually we were able to build a new Maternity, just a few yards from the O.P., much more convenient. We Sisters designed the buildings, which have proved over the years to be very practical. We moved in 1972 or 1973; I was not very concerned about statistics at that time, but we were delivering from 900 to 1200 babies a year.

Many special cases come to mind. I will mention one, a tiny baby boy, who was delivered. He had only one leg and weighed less than 2lbs. The other leg had had the blood supply cut off by a cord arising from the amnion and so the leg had been effectively cut off mid-calf. Baby survived, but, as mother didn't seem very interested and, in fact, could not cope with such a tiny deformed baby, (she had several other children) we kept him; he grew strong and was a very bright boy. When he was about 18 months old, I made him a little wooden leg, which he tried very hard to use. So with the help of the blacksmith, I designed a better one and soon our Peter was up and about. He was so eager to have his leg on in the mornings, that once he tried to get it out of the locker drawer, he pulled the locker over on top of himself, fortunately getting no more than a fright and a small cut on his forehead. His mother took him when he was about 4 years, but he was always in touch, having to have his leg renewed as he grew. Eventually he got a proper prosthesis made in Lae.

There were several Sisters working in St. Mary's Hospital at that time and many a life was saved, by the Spirit that guided them. The teamwork was just wonderful. An emergency; all hands were on deck. X-ray and lab technician, theatre staff, doctor, anaesthetist, and every one were ready at a moment's notice, day or night.

Many important things happened during my time in Vunapope. In 1960 I had been in P.N.G. 12 years, and had never thought of the possibility of ever going home, although my mother had said as I was leaving "You'll be back in 1960". The General Chapter was held in June 1960 and it was decided that, after 12 years, a home visit would be allowed. As my parents were to celebrate their Golden Wedding in September, I was among the first to go and was there to celebrate with them.

So many changes had taken place during those years; the city of Melbourne had spread and former wide-open spaces were now built-up areas. The family had also increased and multiplied; I had by then more than 50 nieces and nephews. The older ones expected me to know them, but 12 years makes a big difference to 5-6 year olds. The Golden Wedding celebration was a lovely event with just the immediate family. Mum was very frail, but stood the day well.

My Mother was a saint; some years before I left for the mission she had confided to me that she was quite worried about herself, fearing that she was getting too religious. She said: "The thought of all the Lord has done and suffered for us is with me all the time. I just cannot get away from it". I thought, that is what is called infused contemplation and I had to confess, I was not so gifted.

Mum was now no longer able to go to Mass, but eagerly waited for Father to come with Holy Communion every week. Mum had a pile of prayer cards, which she felt obliged to say every day. I was with her one day and she was worried, for she had mislaid her glasses and was unable to say her prayers. I said, "Oh Mum, don't worry. Just speak to the Lord in your own words". She looked at me and said: "Don't you tell me how to pray. I was doing it before you were born". It was hard to return, for I knew I would not see my Mother again. But she was brave, for she knew that too and said goodbye without a tear.

In April 1963 I received word that Mum was dying; there, at that time, no thought of going home, so I was resigned to pray and wait. April 7<sup>th</sup> was Palm Sunday and also Sacred Heart Sodality Sunday, that meant Communion in the morning and Benediction in the evening for the members. All the family were members. Mum was then unconscious; they had been with her all day, knowing that Mum would wish them to go to

Benediction, they decided to go. When they returned, Mum had passed quietly and peacefully away.

Being so far away and not hearing news immediately made it very unreal for me. Mum was 78 years old. She had enjoyed, worried about and counseled many of the grandchildren. She had 60 before she died.

Dad of course was very sad and lonely after Mum's death. He wanted to see me, so decided he would come up. I got a shock when my sisters wrote to tell me the plan. Dad was 81 years old and I feared he may get sick or feel the heat too much, but he wanted to come, so it was arranged he should come by plane and return by boat "Bulolo" after two weeks. He got off the plane, after an all night trip, looking as fresh as though he had a good night's sleep; knowing Dad, he probably had. The first week was fine; Dad would sing all the old favourite songs for the Sisters and impressed them with his still beautiful voice. Then he got fever and diarrhoea and I was very worried for a few days. I thought he should return by plane, but he would not hear of it, he wanted to go by boat. He enjoyed the trip back and was quite well again by the time he reached Sydney, even went to the races in Randwick.

I was to celebrate my Silver Jubilee of Profession in August 1964. In May there was a new Health Centre to be started in Guma on the South coast of E.N.B. It was the first to be staffed by the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (a local Congregation). I was asked to go along and help them get established. The manager promised that I would be back for the big day, August 15<sup>th</sup>.

So we left, 3 F.M.I sisters, a trained nurse, a carpenter, his workers to build the hospital and the material to build it with and myself, on a mission boat. It was a trip of 12-14 hours. There had been a bush building prepared for the Sisters, but not large enough for us all. So I made myself as comfortable as I could in the sacristy. Guma was a real bush station experience; we established clinics in remote areas. My fear of crossing rivers over logs was severely tested. One day we walked 6 hours in order to get home in a day and enjoy a shower. No roads, only tracks, the very rugged coast was not ideal for sea travel.

We would be away for a few days at a time; meanwhile the building was going up, not exactly as I wanted it, but it was usable before I left in 4 months time. When August came, I was watching every day for a boat that should pick me up, but none came, so we celebrated the big day in Guma. Back in Vunapope we celebrated again on December 8<sup>th</sup>.

In August, my sister found Dad unconscious in his house (he lived alone). He never rallied completely and went home to God on the 31<sup>st</sup> October in time to sing with all the saints on November 1<sup>st</sup>. He had been in church choirs all his adult life.

In 1968 I had a second home visit. It was strange without Mum and Dad and also many changes had taken place in the Church, and in the Convent. Changes in habit, prayer, liturgy etc. I felt that I had to hold on tight and trust in the Lord, Who had always been faithful and was still in charge.

It was about this time that the Australian M.S.C. Sisters were given the opportunity, after Silver Jubilee, to visit Rome and Germany. I was excited about it, but not quite at peace. I felt I had to have a valid excuse, so I volunteered to accompany a sick Sister home to Germany. For reasons known to God and the Superior, my offer was not accepted and another Sister went instead. That gave me time to think about it. So many people who had not made a vow of poverty had not had such an opportunity and could never afford it. So when asked when I wished to go, I had to say that, that was not my idea of poverty and I would rather not go.

In 1973 the Eucharistic Congress was in Melbourne and I was able to be home for that. It was during this visit that my nephews suggested that I should have a motor bike. I said I would not ride one unless it had three wheels. When they said: "Honda has one with three wheels," I began to get interested and inquired. It would cost 900 dollars, was also very big and clumsy looking, I didn't like the look of it, nor the price. They informed me, there was smaller model in a place in South Melbourne, an "Ariel". I rang, the price \$75.00 I couldn't believe it, then, they explained that the bike could not be registered for the roads in Australia, it did not meet specifications: tyres too narrow, no rear vision mirror, things that wouldn't matter in Vunapope. I fell in love with it when I saw it; they had two, but when I asked if I could get spare parts, they did not think so, I said no. My nephews were disgusted; "You're mad", they said. "Even if you used it until it fell apart it would be worth that much."

So, after some thought, I rang the shop, and said that if they would give me the two bikes for \$100.00 I would buy them; they agreed. Then the fun began. I got them to Mary's Mount, and tried to learn to ride (I had never even ridden a pushbike). I was very nervous and a slow learner. Sr. Veronica thought she would



try; she went off down the hill, and had no idea where the brake was and she ran into the rockery, damaging the bike and sustaining a broken nose. I was more upset about her nose than about the bike. My nephews came to the rescue, had the bike mended and my sister paid to have them sent to Rabaul; it cost her more than the bikes cost me. I soon mastered the art of riding and, for the remainder of my years in Vunapope, I was able to get to the Hospital in a few minutes without being exhausted, as I used to be, when called for an emergency.

During this visit, I met Dr Billings and his wife and learned of the natural method of family planning. When the Women Religious had the Conference in Vunapope, I aired my knowledge with the result that I was asked to represent P.N.G. Women Religious at a Seminar on population in the context of integral human development in Manila. The Seminar was sponsored by the Asian Bishops' Conference.

That was an eye-opener, an experience not to be forgotten. P.N.G. did not have the problems other Asian countries had, but the Government was beginning to advocate contraception in all its forms.

The obvious poverty and class distinction in the Philippines was depressing for me. I was there for two weeks and stayed in the heart of Manila with the F.M.M. Sisters the first week. I had one hair-raising bus trip to Bagio in the mountains, to visit two F.M.I. Sisters who were studying there. The trip took 6 hours and the roads very scary and narrow. The second week I stayed at the East Asian Pastoral Institute. Fortunately there was a curfew at the time, so no traffic from midnight till 4 am, one could get at least 4 hours sleep. The traffic is bedlam, very colourful and noisy, bells, horns, trumpets, and appears to have no particular order.

In 1975 my sister Lucy and her husband came to visit me. I took the time off; we were given the use of a car, and took in all the sights around Rabaul. They had a wonderful time and I enjoyed their company. We flew to Kavieng to see Sr. Mary Gertrude, visited Anelaua, the former leper station, and Mongop High School to see Sr. Jacinta. The beauty and fertility of the country made a great impression on them.

On the Gazelle Peninsula I believe, is the largest one-language group in P.N.G. In my years there, I learnt enough to understand and make myself understood. I loved the people, and I think was loved by them, especially the women, some of whom I had seen have many children. They loved children and were not very interested in family planning except that it may help them to have children and, perhaps, to space their pregnancies. A couple came to see me regarding family planning; I inquired how many children they had. "Six". I said: "So you want to have a rest now?" Husband was very quick to answer. "Oh, no My wife has not had a baby for 4 years and we want a big line". I didn't have much to say except that they were very fortunate to have a family, and thank God for them.

Vunapope is a beautiful place, as well as being the headquarters of the mission. Being here so many years enabled me to join in many great celebrations, although I was pretty tied down with my work. P.N.G. people, and this area in particular, are very gifted. The singing and participation in liturgies is just wonderful and a joy to be part of, apart from Church Celebrations, priestly Ordinations, Religious Professions and special Feasts: Christmas, Easter week, Sacred Heart feasts. There would be Bishop's feast day, school concerts etc.

## Gerehu.

The wide experience and the number of obstetrical cases over the years I was in Vunapope would have made me one of the most experienced midwives in the country. Then, in 1977, there was talk of starting a station in Gerehu in Port Moresby. There was a lot of excitement about it. The main work there was to be a Youth Development Centre, which would help to keep young people off the street and teach them some skills, with which they would hopefully be able to earn a living. A house in Moresby would be convenient for Sisters travelling in and out of the country; there would be easy access to immigration etc.

One day the question was asked in recreation: "Who will go to Port Moresby if we go there?" Without much thought and, not in earnest, I raised my hand and forgot all about it. I never even thought, that I could be done without in Vunapope. I was going on leave and, before going, I asked if I should pack as though I were coming back. Sister said: "Oh, if we start in Gerehu, you will be going there". What a shock! My thoughtless raising the hand was taken as volunteering.

Before coming to P.N.G. the earth had always been or seemed to be a good solid place to be standing on, but after my years in Vunapope, having experienced 3 major earthquakes with magnitudes of 6.8-7.4 and many minor quakes and tremors, I was not so sure about it. This may not be the place to mention this, but from now on I would be out of the area where most quakes are felt.

The last few years in Vunapope were probably the most difficult in my religious life; great responsibility, much misunderstanding and friction in community, made me turn more earnestly to the Lord and seek His presence. I had asked to have some kind of spiritual renewal during my home leave, as I felt really burnt out and in need of a boost, totally unprepared for my new appointment.

The M.S.C. Fathers at Douglas Park were preparing to have the Spiritual Institute for the first time in January 1978 with Fr. Armand Nigro and Sr. Miriam from America; I applied and was accepted. I felt very apprehensive and inadequate, when I went there a couple of days before it was due to start. I met one of the directors, a Loretto Sister, while walking in the garden. She asked if I had done a Directed Retreat before. To my "no" she said: "You're taking on something big to start with, aren't you?" This did nothing to ease my apprehension. When told that it would be better to leave the choice of director to the Lord, I felt that He would not mind if I made a reservation and asked, that my director would be a priest, hoping that it would not be Fr. Cyril Connelly M.S.C. and sure enough, it was he, and of course, he was the right one.

Every evening Fr. Nigro would give a talk and suggest a text for the next day's consideration. On the first or second night he suggested a text from Jeremiah and I did not get the right number. When I opened my Bible at the verse number I had written, this is what I read: -

"Work for the good of the city, to which I will exile you,  
and pray to God on its behalf, for in its good  
you will find your own."

This and many other things touched me deeply during those days of the 14 days Directed Retreat and 14 days sharing, and prepared me for my work in Gerehu.

Sr. Raymond had gone to Gerehu with two Sisters; one to train as a dentist, the other a nurse to work in the Clinic which was held in the Community Hall on mission land. Fr. Barr M.S.C. had given us his house for a start; it had only one bedroom, toilet and shower, small kitchen and an office upstairs, a chapel and parish office downstairs. A small bedroom with toilet and shower was being prepared there too. We put two beds in the office upstairs, and so we began in Gerehu.

I arrived in February; there were already some students, a few girls and 8-10 boys. One building, a classroom, was nearly completed. Two young men, one a former seminarian, the other just able to read and write himself, were employed as teachers. Lessons, given in English, and Maths were given in the Community Hall, while Clinic was going on in the other end of the hall. The girls came to me and I tried to teach sewing in the open space under our house.

The whole idea of Youth Development Centres was to boost the morale of the young people, who had not had the chance to go to High School, that meant two thirds of children left school after grade six, 13-14 years of age.

I had also to learn to drive as, in Port Moresby, one could hardly manage without a car. I had had some experience before I entered, 40 years before, but had never had a licence. While on leave, I had 2 or 3 formal lessons, but now had to start in earnest. I found a former taxi driver in the Parish, who was a good teacher and, on my 61<sup>st</sup> birthday, I went for my licence and failed. How disappointed I was! That was the first of three failures, before I finally got my licence, and was off on my own for shopping and doing the airport runs.

The Youth Development Centre was dedicated to St Charles Lwanga, an African Saint. His heroic life and martyrdom and his suffering for upholding Christian morals, was to be the model for our boys and girls. The Centre was my biggest problem, and I often felt quite unable to cope; somehow the "Inner wheel" (ladies Rotary) got to hear of Gerehu, and the work we were trying to do. They came to see the place and invited me to be the guest speaker at their next meeting. This prompted one of the ladies to volunteer to help, so she came each morning to teach the girls sewing.

In the meantime we were in the process of building our Convent. Next to the Priest's house, where we lived, there was a basketball court; then a playing field, the space intended for other buildings: for the Centre, including carpentry and mechanic workshop, the class rooms (one building), another for sewing

room, library and kitchen, then a staff house and, finally, our house.

The plan was simple, not too grand, so that it fitted well into the area. Upstairs, there were six bedrooms, toilets and showers; downstairs, dining room, kitchen, office, laundry and, last, but not least, the Chapel. Sr. Astrid had returned from India and was with me for some time; she was a great help, especially by looking after the finances, applying for funds, and watching over the building projects. In August 1979, our Convent was completed and we moved in and did all we could to improve it. We managed to get some cheap vinyl tiles and put them down ourselves and, soon, we had a very comfortable home.

Funding and staffing the Youth Centre was to be a constant worry. Small, irregular subsidies were given by the Government, but we had to be continually begging grants from Funding Agencies in Germany, England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The S.D.B. brothers had come to Port Moresby and they were having some trouble finding land and getting a start; I asked if they could help in Lwanga. We then had two Salesian Brothers for two years, a great help.

By this time we had most of the buildings completed, so the school was established with 60-80 children. On one of my home visits I had learnt the art of Pokerwork and brought some electric Pokers with me. As many of the boys were very artistic, this was a great draw. One boy, a grade six leaver, not particularly brilliant but very artistic, was so gifted that I felt he should have some further training, but didn't know how to get it for him. Normally without Grade 10 it is impossible, but, after consulting the Guidance Officer, we were able to apply for a Scholarship for Goroke Technical School by just presenting some of his work. So, Henry was accepted for a course in art and designing. He was there for 2 years; he has been working ever since for an advertising firm, and even gave an exposition of his work at the Art Gallery. That was one success story from Lwanga Youth Development; there were others not so spectacular. We taught English, Maths and General Studies as well as Cooking, Baking and a variety of Arts and Crafts, even recycled paper and, using our artist's designs, made cards and envelopes for Christmas one year.

On the completion of our house in 1979, I was really exhausted and was offered a holiday in Fane in the mountains behind Port Moresby, a very wild place, with an air strip for small planes on the side of a hill; quite scary, but beautiful. There it was very cold at night, but pleasant during the day. Three O.L.S.H. Sisters worked there and two M.S.C. Fathers. I enjoyed such luxuries as strawberries and fresh vegetables for ten days.

Sr Mary Drum was part of the Gerehu community at that time, being employed as a Contract Officer with the Department of Primary Industry. Sister was a Food Technologist and worked very hard, under difficult conditions, to establish a laboratory to find the best ways of food preservation. I learnt much from Mary, and came to love her as a true friend and sister.

After the S.D.B. Brothers built their place in Bidili, we were able to obtain volunteers from Germany. They were Michael and Margaret Hartong. They contributed much to the development of Lwanga. Michael's trade was in woodwork, but he really was a Jack of all trades. His favorite saying was "Kein Problem!". Though there were many, he was able to solve most of them. Margaret taught the girls sewing and baking. They were with us for two years.

"One day in Gerehu," thank God, not a typical one. It was a Saturday; Fr. Barr was away in Goroke, and had asked me to be available, if the carpenters, who were building the new Primary School, needed anything. So I could not go with the Sisters, who had asked a friend to take them to Sogeri, an hour's drive in the mountains. They took our bus and he left his car parked in our back yard. I had lost my keys the day before, so I asked Sr. Astrid for hers. They left after breakfast, and the carpenters wanted something from town. I took Fr. Barr's car and went for it. When I returned I found that Sr. Astrid had given me the wrong key, so I was locked out; I was so upset. I got into Father's car and backed out of the garage into the friend's car. "Oh, what will he say?" There was not much damage, just a dint in the boot and a damaged taillight on Father's car. At least I had Father's keys; I went up to his house, went into the office, put the keys on the table and rang the place, where I was sure I had lost my keys. They hadn't seen them. Someone came to the door and, when I stepped out to speak to them, the wind blew the door shut, keys inside. Car keys on the same ring, so I couldn't go far.

The lady at the door had her little boy with her, so with her help I broke in, removed a louvre blade and got the little boy in to open the door. It was lunchtime by then; I went upstairs, raided Father's fridge and took my siesta on his bed. The picnickers didn't come home till after 5 p.m., the breakfast dishes were still in the sink and no meal prepared. But we survived, even after such a frustrating day.



There were many special days as well. The Archbishop celebrated his Silver Jubilee; Fr Barr was a musician and had charge of the liturgy. Fr Dave Smith M.S.C. was then Assistant Priest in Gerehu. Fr Barr had a great idea; the children would have balloons filled with helium, which they would release at the Offertory (the celebration was to be in the Boroko sports ground). Fr Smith had the problem of finding the Helium and filling the balloons. All went well until time to release them; there was a strong wind blowing and big rain trees surrounded the grounds. The result, instead of rising to the heavens, most of the balloons got caught in the trees and very soon those trees were full of children outside the grounds trying to get a free balloon.

The feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was always celebrated at the Seminary at Bomana, a real family feast, Fathers, Brothers, students, O.L.S.H. Sisters, we M.S.C. Sisters as well as other religious and mission workers. There would be an evening Mass and a meal together. The seminarians provided the music and choir; being gifted musicians they often had songs composed by one of the group. They also had an organ. One young man played the keyboard, another, sitting on the ground, played the pedals.

Another highlight was the visit of Pope John Paul in 1984. When I saw the video of the Pope's visit to England, I thought our people could never show such enthusiasm. I was very much mistaken. The response was amazing, an unforgettable experience. How His Holiness stood those three days of strenuous packed schedule, I don't know. There must have been special help from above. I was able to accompany a sick person, so got to shake hands with the Pope.

## Going to Europe.

In the early 80s the General Administration decided to have International gatherings of Sisters from every Province visiting the place of the beginning of the Congregation, and sharing their experiences. These meetings were held every year or two. There was one such gathering to be held in June-July 1983. Sr. Odilgard, the Provincial at that time, said: "You are going to the International Conference". So, the choice was not mine and I could go without scruple.

Three weeks before I was to leave, one of the Sisters took sick and was threatened with blindness, if she did not return to Germany immediately. She needed a companion, so, though not really prepared, I had to buy a suitcase and prepare in a hurry, two days' notice. We managed the trip pretty well and were warmly welcomed in Germany, which was of course beautiful at that time of the year. I felt very much at home in Germany and happy that I could understand and speak so much German.

I visited our Volunteers' parents for a few days, they live in Osnabrück, and I saw many interesting things. When the Conference began, we visited the House, where our Sisters started and other very interesting places around Hilstrup, the famous clock in Münster and a place of pilgrimage, I think it was Telgte. Then we went to Paffrath, near Cologne, where our Sisters have a Study House, a Nursing Home for old people (many of our elderly Sisters are there) and, at that time, the Provincial House.

We spent a day reflecting on our charism and spirit. A few days were spent sharing our experiences in our various countries. This was very enriching. We then travelled by train from Cologne to Rome. I had heard so much about the Rhine and its surrounding castles and its beauty; it was a joy to see it in reality. It was 6 p.m., when we reached Basle in Switzerland and, being summer, we still had 4 hours light, as we travelled through the Alps. That was a wonderful experience for me who had only seen snow once before; it was truly beautiful. It was otherwise a long, a not very comfortable trip. Early morning was also beautiful, passing through Italy's fields of sunflowers.

In Rome we had one week with Fr. Patsy Kelly M.S.C. He was just so imbued with the spirit of the Founder, the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The days were so uplifting, so positive, so affirming the fact that God loves us, that we are His work of art, precious in His sight, though sinful and weak, loved and forgiven, were the topics Father reiterated. We saw many famous places, saw the Holy Father a couple of times, but nothing came any where near the spiritual experiences I had during those days. They speak of being born again or a conversion experience. Well, I suppose that is what I had. The Lord was very near, very near perhaps, preparing me for the trials ahead of me in my last years in Gerehu.

One of my main jobs in Gerehu was picking Sisters and Lay Workers up at the airport, bringing them to Gerehu, usually for the night, then taking them back next day and sending them on their way. Perhaps, if there was time, we would do a bit of sightseeing as well. I also did most of the cooking and became quite

good at the job.

In 1985 the General Conference was held in Vunapope; that meant that all the Major Superiors from every Province came to Vunapope. So, I was busy picking all the important people up, when they came and sending them on to Vunapope, then, two weeks later, receiving them back from Vunapope, and sending them off to their various countries. It was just a few days before this operation was finished that Sister asked me if I had had the bus registered; of course I had; or had I? I got a shock to find that the registration was one month overdue. It was a Friday so I could not do anything until Monday, with a few trips to be made before that. There was a curfew in Port Moresby at the time with roadblocks every day. The Police never questioned me, always just waved me on. It has always touched me and humbled me, too, to see the way these people trust the Sisters; they would never suspect us of breaking the law. Never the less, I was relieved when I had the bus registered on Monday.

I had now been in Gerehu 9 years, in charge, and felt and hoped, that I could stay on in a lesser capacity, as I felt that I was part of the place. So, when a letter came from our new Provincial asking me if I would go to Mongop (I was then nearly 70 years) I was shocked. Mongop was the last on my list of priorities; I felt, as though I was being put on the shelf. The next morning, the opening prayer at Holy Mass was, "My thoughts for you are for peace, not disaster". That was clear enough, though I still had a struggle. The fact, that the outgoing Provincial Superior was to take my place in Gerehu was a consolation, as I knew, that I was leaving it in good hands.

I left Gerehu to go home for my sister's Golden Wedding. I had been bride's maid, when Lucy and Harold were married in 1937. A great family gathering, the whole of the wedding party were still alive, and it was great to be with them again. They also celebrated my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday while I was there. On my way back I was to call at Gerehu and be officially sent off. I was treated like a V.I.P. when I arrived at the airport; an official met me and welcomed in the name of Gerehu Parish, took my Passport, collected my baggage and attended to all formalities. The official send off was not easy, and I'm afraid my response was a tearful one. I received many gifts, the best of which was a Jerusalem Bible, which is still a treasured possession.

## Mongop.

Going from Gerehu to Mongop seemed like going from the sublime to the ridiculous. Gerehu had a Bank, Post Office and a Supermarket almost next door. Mongop - any chance of shopping in a one-horse town "Kavieng" was 2-hour drive away on a mostly very rough road. At first I thought I would never drive on that road, but the next week I drove both ways, and did so many times over the next 7 years.

I arrived in Mongop in June 1987 at St. Jude's Provincial High School. We had 4 Sisters there: Sr. Kath, whose place I was to take in the community, Sr. Stephanie and a junior Sister who was studying. Sr. Kath and Sr. Stephanie were teaching. So I really didn't have much to do. We had a girl in the house, who was supposed to do the cooking, but, as she was often missing, I slowly took over that job and soon managed without the girl.

The wife of one of the teachers was a trained nurse and cared for the sick students. There were more than 500 boarders, boys and girls. At the end of the year, Sr. Kath went to Vunapope to be Superior there. Her health had been a worry to me the few months before. I was happy that she would receive the medical attention, which she needed. The nurse and her husband were also transferred, so the nurse's job was vacant and I was happy to take it on a voluntary basis. At times it was hectic; the campus was very large; girls on one end, boys on the other, a Sickroom and Dispensary on either end. At that time the school was not really Co-ed, only Grades 9 and 10 were taught together, dinning rooms and other classrooms were strictly separated. Only in the early 90s were all boys and girls brought together in classrooms and a common dining room for all simplified things. However, Sick rooms and Dispensary were on either end. I used the bus to run from one to the other, or it would have been too much for me.

Many of the students were from Lihir and were children of the babies I had delivered there 30 years before. It brought memories of those day back, and I enjoyed trying to speak the language, much to the amazement and joy of the students. Lemakot Health Centre, run by our Sisters, was ½ hour's drive away; so, anything I could not manage was taken there.

I learnt to love the children, especially the boys, who so needed a mother, and I so needed someone to mother. The girls seemed to mother each other and so didn't need me so much. Sometimes students from

the islands did not get home the whole school year; transport being so difficult and expensive. They really needed a mother, especially the Grade 7s. Students were often very sick and needed professional care, and then the inevitable injuries, fractures, cuts and the occasional black eye. This provided me with about 4 hours work each day, which was enough to make me happy and feel useful.

## Golden Jubilee.

In August 1989 I was to celebrate my Golden Jubilee of Religious Profession, for which I had decided to go home. So, before I left Mongop, Sr. Stephanie prepared a liturgy for a celebration in Mongop. The students sang beautifully, as they always did; Lihir students took the lead, they are quite advanced in introducing the culture into the liturgy, and have a special gift for it. On this occasion several young men (probably Grade 10s) came in at the Consecration having somehow smoking leaves in their mouths; they solemnly and reverently walked around the altar and blew smoke like incense into the air. It was a moving experience. Bishop Karl Hesse was the celebrant and several priests concelebrated. During the Offertory one of the girls placed a string of shell money around my neck. In the evening all the near-by Priests, Brothers, Sisters, Seminarians and Staff shared a meal with us in the back garden.

A few days afterwards, I went to Vunapope, where, after a Directed Retreat with Fr. Brian Cuneen, I celebrated with the Community. I was to spend one night in Port Moresby on the way home. Unbeknown to me, Fr. Neville Dunne had arranged another celebration. All the M.S.C.'s in Moresby, several of our young Sisters were at Xavier, the Gerehu Sisters, Fathers, Brothers and Seminarians gathered at the M.S.C. Centre where we had a lovely Mass and a meal together.

In Australia my brother Jack had hired the church hall at Noble Park, and arranged a Mass at 1.30 p.m. Of course the whole clan were there, sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, M.S.C. Sisters, two O.L.S.H. Sisters from P.N.G. and friends. They all took part in the singing and liturgy. I was fine, until Pat started to sing the Responsorial Psalm, she sang so beautifully, then Father gave a talk in "This is your Life" style. So when the time to renew my vows came, I could only stammer between sobs of joy and emotion. One of the relatives had a video camera. After the Mass he said I have it all on video, but sad to say, he had only one verse of the psalm and all of my stammering.

After a pleasant holiday with an opera and beautiful music, liturgies etc., I returned to Mongop. There were many highlights at Mongop, Graduations every year, usually over 100 Grade 10s. It would take the whole day. Beginning with Holy Mass with the Bishop, then Graduation ceremonies followed by kaikai and singsings. I have to admit that I found it very tiring and was glad when those days were over.

Our Bishop Karl Hesse was made Archbishop of the Rabaul Archdiocese and so transferred to Rabaul. For this occasion we had visitors from Australia; Sr. Frances and Sr. Carmel stayed with us one night. It was great to have them.

Then came the consecration of our new Bishop Ambrose Kiapseni, a Lihirian. This was a wonderful occasion with plenty of Lihir customs interwoven in the Liturgy. This was of course in the Kavieng Cathedral. Many visitors came, Bishops, Priests, Officials and thousands of people.

There were priestly Ordinations in Kavieng and also in Namatanai, Silver and Golden Jubilees as well. So we were either celebrating or preparing to celebrate. We had visitors from Rome on a few occasions during my time and I also had a visit from my nephew Philip; his interest in orchids, as well as love of me, had brought him to P.N.G. Yet for the most part we were pretty isolated, not upon the beaten track.

Our Sisters had been in Lemakot for 75 years, another celebration; they had a Nursing School there, and the nurses made it a great day, to have a Past Students' Reunion. The M.S.C. Brothers have a Vocational School at Fissoa, ½ hour's drive down the road, a beautiful place with a swimming pool in the river. Our young sisters loved to swim, so we had an occasional picnic there. I found it too cold. Graduations there and at Lemakot Nursing School were also on the Programme.

In 1968, the Novitiate in Matanatava had opened its doors to young women wishing to enter our Congregation, so in 1993 it was time for Silver Jubilee. This was done in great style and many visitors came from Rome and Australia. I did not go in, but Sr. Gabriel came to Kavieng for just one night. I drove in to meet her and spent the afternoon and evening with her. I was hoping that Sr. Catherine would



drive home, but she was too tired. Sr. Gabriel was very nervous when she saw that I was at the wheel at 11pm, to drive the 1½ hours back to Mongop. She didn't know how tough I was.

I had another home visit at the end of 1993; the highlight of that visit was a week in Sorrento with the family. Sr. Carmel had offered us Kilvenny, and it was to be the last time that the eight of us were together. That was a trip down memory lane; we visited old haunts, told old stories, even had a photo taken in front of the house in which we lived for years as children. It was too cold to swim, although Leo did venture in once. I was satisfied to walk along the beach at dawn every morning and wonder at the beauty and grandeur of God's creation and appreciate it a lot more, than I did as a child.

Back to Mongop, I settled down to work as usual, but on my birthday, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1994, I went to Mass as usual, feeling fine. Suddenly I felt giddy and was afraid I would fall. This lasted the whole of Mass. I got Sr. Paula to sit near me, and after Mass I was fine again. This happened a couple of times before I went to Vunapope for Retreat in July. After one more turn in Vunapope, I decided to see the doctor. He took it seriously and thought I should go South for further tests. I was not happy, since I had only returned from leave earlier in the year. However, as others thought I should go, August saw me back in Melbourne. After three weeks running to doctors, having X-rays, scans, ultra sound, you name it, I had it, nothing serious was found; 100 mg Aspirin every day should control the T.I.A.S (mini strokes).

## Volcanic Eruptions.

I was booked to return on September 21<sup>st</sup>. I was staying at St Joseph's Tower in Kew. I met one of the Sisters in the morning about 9 am; she had listened to the News, and just mentioned causally, "The Rabaul mountain has erupted. Tavurvur, on one side of the harbour, first at about 6 a.m. Vulcan, on the other side, at about 7 a.m. Rabaul was destroyed. Was I excited! I ran to the phone and believe it or not, I was able to get through to Vunapope and speak to Sr. Raymond.

The Sisters were all safe, though the house in Rabaul was under the ashes. There was no hope of getting through to Rabaul; travel was restricted, the airport being under the ashes. I sat in front of the TV every News session and was longing to return. I stayed on one week, then took my chances. Even in Sydney I was questioned and had to produce evidence, that I was a P.N.G. resident.

I had asked my family to give me some cash, as I had heard that that was a problem in Rabaul with all the banks out of action. I made the appeal on Sunday, and when I went to say goodbye on Wednesday they had collected \$1700.00; a great effort, for they are working people and pensioners.

When I got to Port Moresby, I applied for permission to go to Rabaul and got no answer. Brother John, who had managed to get the Fathers returning from leave through, advised me to get in touch with Robin Bishop at the American Embassy. I did that, but being a bit excited, I asked for "Bronwyn" Bishop. She had been in the news, while I was in Australia. I did get the right person and had no trouble to get to Rabaul on the American army plane, which was taking supplies; it was the last of the relief planes. It was rather a novelty, like riding on the back of a truck rather than in a sedan. It took 2 hours. Sr. Peter Mary, the O.L.S.H Provincial, managed to get on the same flight. She was anxious to see how her Sisters had fared.

What a shock! The devastation was unbelievable! Thousands of people had to flee from Rabaul and a large area around including several large villages. There were Care Centres every where; Vunapope had tents up in every available space. The District Hospital, Nonga, had to be evacuated and Vunapope had to take both staff and patients.

The stories the Sisters could tell were heartrending, how parents were separated from their children and some took days to find them. As usual, Catholic Mission was in the forefront with help; our Archbishop Karl himself loading trucks with food and helping the people in every way, his friend, the Anglican Archbishop, was with him helping where he could.

The first time I went to Rabaul was two weeks after the eruption; the scene was beyond description. There were two volcanoes, Tavurvur and Vulcan. Vulcan perhaps did the most damage; there were 8-10 km of utter destruction and thousands of tons of gray ash every where, like a moonscape. The beautiful Church in Malanganan was destroyed, while the Father's house next door was intact. Our Provincial House in Rabaul was almost covered with ash, as were all the building in that area. Over the following week heavy

rains caused extensive damage to roads which were still intact.

I intended to return to Mongop, but, in the first week after I came back, I had a couple of giddy turns; so Superiors thought it better that I stay in Vunapope. Ironically, I have not had a turn since. It was Graduation time, so I went back for Graduation, packed my things and said goodbye to Mongop.

There was to be an Ordination in Lihir; I had been back there only once since I left in 1959, that was for the first Lihirian Ordination, Fr Andrew Pong, in 1968. Now I went over Lihir on my way to Vunapope for Fr. Bart's ceremony, I had known his father well. The ceremony was very long, at least half of Lihir's population attended and all contributed to the liturgy and, of course, to the feast and dancing that followed.

## Retirement.

Another chapter of my life began; not an easy one. I was well and fit and thought I could do anything, but of course would not have been able to do much. I had to find ways to occupy myself.

The Holy Father was to come to Rabaul in January 1995 for the Beatification of P.N.G.'s first Blessed. Blessed Peter ToRot was a Tolai Catechist, who had been killed by the Japanese during the war; because he refused to neglect his people and continued his work as Catechist in the absence of the Priest, who was in the Japanese prison camp with the other Missionaries, (Bishop, Priests, Brothers, Sisters).

Because of the eruption and the confusion that followed, the plan was changed and, much to the disappointment of the Tolai people, the ceremony took place in Port Moresby. By this time the airport was upgraded and able to take the bigger planes and many went to Port Moresby for the occasion. It was a very wet day, and we were more comfortable watching the ceremony on TV than those who were there. Despite the rain, many attended the moving Ceremony.

Sr. Tarsitia was very sick at the time, and I had volunteered to sleep beside her the last few nights, Sister was over 80yrs and so ill, I said to Blessed Peter ToRot "Please take her home" This he did. Sister died on the day of the Beatification. The Sisters, who had come for the ceremony, were in Vunapope for the funeral. A funeral in Vunapope is something worth witnessing. Mass in the big Church, then procession to the Cemetery about ¼ mile away, singing and praying all the way, the hundreds of people blessing the coffin and throwing a flower into the grave. It is something worth dying for.

The new Basilica for Blessed Peter was not yet completed, so, when his remains were brought back from Port Moresby, thousands of people met the casket at the airport and with great joy and faith accompanied the Casket to Vunapope; where a solemn Mass was offered. Each week a group of villagers would come with as many as 20 trucks, decorated with flowers, and loaded with happy, singing people. They would take the casket to their villages, have day and night vigil with it, and bring it back to Vunapope for the next set of villages to honor him in the same way.

From the time the casket arrived at the airport in January with more than a hero's welcome, until the Church was completed in July, the people showed great devotion. July 7th was to be the feast day of blessed Peter ToRot, and that was the day the new Basilica was blessed and consecrated, and the casket was placed in a glass panel beneath the altar in the small chapel dedicated to Blessed Peter. Stained glass windows in this chapel show the life and death of Blessed Peter.

It was a great day; there would have been 12 Bishops, 40-50 Priests and many thousands of people. The Basilica is very large and beautiful, but not nearly big enough for the crowd that day. It has been a place of pilgrimage ever since.

Now it was a matter of my getting used to not having any set work to do. I began to care for the flower garden (with the help of the girls of course), looked after the indoor plants, helped a bit in the sewing, started to do embroidery, and found that I was quite good at it. There is however a limit to the useful things one can do in that area.

I kept an eye on the volcano, which had continued erupting since it started in September 1994. It was fascinating to watch. The power behind the eruptions was unbelievable; every few minutes volumes of smoke were sent hundreds of metres into the air. We were happy during the SouthEast season, when the dust and ash was blown away from us. Though we were 10 km away, we could sweep up dust all day

when the wind changed to NorthWest. The activity quieted down after and finally stopped for a few months after Easter 1995, only to start again in November. It has been performing ever since.

In 1904 five of our Sisters, together with two Priests and three Brothers, had been murdered in the Baining Mountains at a place called St. Paul. Each year on August 13<sup>th</sup> a pilgrimage goes there to honour their memory and pray for the missions. I had not been there for 40 years. At that time we could go a bit more than half way on a trailer behind tractor, and walk the rest - 1- 1½ hours. I heard there was a road all the way up, so I decided to go in 1995. It had rained heavily all night in Vunapope and was still raining when we left at 6 am. The first hour of the trip was on sealed road and we were feeling a little nervous as to how the rest of the trip would be; we need not have worried. The rain stopped and the road was good, we had a 4WD with Sr. Genevieve driving, so had a nice drive. At the foot of the hill there is a Formation Centre for young men preparing for the priesthood; there the Archbishop decided that we should walk the rest of the way, ½ hour up. I managed very well though a little slower than the younger ones. Nine of our "Martyrs" are buried at St Paul's, while the Parish Priest is buried in the church in Vunamarita down on the coast.

We had Holy Mass in the little church in St. Paul, then a ceremony at the graves. A big crowd of local people attended as well as many others, who had come from Rabaul and other villages. After the walk back to the Centre, we had lunch and drove down to Vunamarita to visit the grave there. After a very pleasant day and a safe drive we arrived home at about 4 p.m.

There were still elderly sick sisters in the house and though I did not have the responsibility of caring for them, I did spend a few nights with each of them before they died, one of them being my old friend Sr. Gustava who was 91 years old.

At Easter or shortly after in 1995, there had been a beautiful play staged in Melbourne "Agape" by Marty Haugen. My sisters Tess and Pat and niece Bernadette were in the support choir, which had been gathered from the Church Choirs around Melbourne. They were so excited about it, so I asked them to send me a Video of it. It was just so beautiful and impressed so much that I longed to do something like it here. I mentioned it to the young sisters and they said: "You help us and we'll do it for Sr. Helmtrude's Golden Jubilee." I spent hours trying to get the words from the audiotape they had sent me. I had copies made for the Novitiate and Tapo and started to practise. It was frustrating to start with, but after a while all began to get interested and it was easier.

The theme was the Mass, gather, listen and remember; Kyrie, Gloria, Stories, and Eucharist. After three months we were ready to present "Agape" on the feast of Christ the King. It was a great success, so much so, that the Archbishop, who had to give a talk at the Charismatic Renewal that evening and had said, he would not be able to stay for the whole performance, was still there singing and clapping with the rest of us, when the show was over. That gave me a new lease of life and an entirely different relationship with the young Sisters, who had enjoyed producing it. Our people are born musicians and they love to sing. One song I thought was too long and I suggested leaving a few verses out, "Oh no," they said, "Leave it alone, we love singing!" We did however simplify many of the choruses; I don't know if Marty Haugen would have approved. We also altered the stories and told stories of saintly people here like our martyrs, Blessed Peter ToRot and others.

In December 1995 we had our Provincial Chapter. I was not an elected member this time, but as observers were invited, I went. Chapters have always been a great experience of togetherness for me this one was no exception. On the Wednesday of that week, my niece rang from Sydney, to tell me her mother, my sister, was ill. As she had the phone at her bedside, I was able to speak to her. She was to go for X-ray on Friday, when I rang on Friday morning my niece was very upset saying that Nell was very bad, but they were going for X-ray. At 12.30 my nephew rang saying Nell had just died while having the X-ray. Nell was the first of our 8 to die. She was 77 years old. It was during this Chapter too that the last of the 4 old Sisters died. Sr. Theodoretis had had dementia for many years after having led a very active mission life, even having receiving an O.B.E. for her work here. I was now the second in age in the Province, at 78 years. After the Chapter we staged "Agape" again, changing the stories to include our Founders.

One of the Sisters who had died during the year was an artist. She had left behind brushes, paints etc., though not her talent. So for want of something better to do, I started diddling around with brush and paint. It's quite easy to obtain off cuts of card from the printing office. Using tracing paper and carbon, I have made some rather nice cards, though very amateurish, they are much appreciated by the Sisters and brought some joy.



In October 1996 there was a Clergy Conference, and all the Priests of the Rabaul Archdiocese were in Vunapope for the occasion. Many of them had not seen the volcano in action, so a special show was put on for their benefit. It was the day the Conference was to close with Holy Mass at 5.30 p.m. At 1.30 p.m. Tavurvur started to explode every few minutes with huge volumes of smoke and ash thrown 1000s of metres in the air. During Mass the explosions intensified; it was deafening. This went on all night, windows rattling, house shaking; there was not much sleep that night. As I tried to pray next morning, I was so tense I suppose, and each time I endeavoured to be quiet; there would be another bang. I just had to laugh and say, "Ok Lord, you win, how great Thou art" The sight that night was just "terribly beautiful" really awesome, even from here, 10 km, one would see the red hot rocks thrown into the air. Fire-works are no comparison.

## 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday.

I was to celebrate my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on May 17<sup>th</sup> 1997, so I asked for some kind of renewal before that. I chose a Mini Sabbatical, 5 weeks at the Cenacle in Brisbane in January. I went home for Christmas with the family, and back to Brisbane.

The Cenacle is a lovely spot, with plenty nice walks on which one could study the Koalas in the trees around. The Mini Sabbatical however was a bit disappointing; there was very little input and as the other Sisters were much younger than I; while they spent a lot of time sight seeing and taking trips, I was a bit out of it. I did have plenty of time for prayer in a quiet atmosphere, and many hours walking. The time included a Guided Retreat in Holy Week so the Easter Triduum was very devotional. Somehow, after years up here, it's hard to imagine Easter, Christmas and other big feast days without crowds participating and singing so beautifully. There were no really good singers at the Cenacle and I am a bit croaky myself, so I missed that.

In Melbourne the family were preparing for the birthday party. Because there was to be a reunion of Sacred Heart Hospital nurses on the 17<sup>th</sup>, they decided to anticipate the birthday by a week.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, there would be Mass in St. Kevin's Church Ormond followed by lunch in the hall. The family spirit instilled by Mother years ago was very much in evidence. I'm sure looking down on us from heaven, she must have been very proud and happy. The Mass was beautiful. All joined in the singing and prayers, and Fr Paul gave a very nice talk.

The 170 invited guests were all seated in the beautifully decorated hall and the delicious dinner prepared by the different families was enough for all, almost perfectly calculated, only a little over. My brother-in-law had his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday a few days before so was included in the event.

After the meal the family put on a small show, only one item each. Tess sang first, then Leo with "The Impossible Dream", Pat, "White Rose of Athens". Then Mary, at 86 years, sang "I'm Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage". As usual, she brought the house down. Jack was M.C., Lucy called me up to the stage, and presented "This is Your Life" After that I was supposed to say something, and I knew I would not be able to say much; so after an emotional attempt I started to sing and all joined in.

*We thank you Father for the gift of faith  
in Jesus Christ your Son  
and for the gift of life with each other  
in this our family.*

These were not empty words, I meant every one of them. Each time I am home and see the way each member of the family is ready to help the other, and that the individual families have the same spirit, it gives me much joy and reason to thank God.

During the week after the party, my throat was a bit sore and by Friday, when I was supposed to return to Campbell Rd., I was really sick and had to spend my birthday in bed, was not even able to go to Mass on Pentecost Sunday. I made my return booking a week later than I intended, and arrived back in Rabaul early June.

## Reliever.

There had been something in a letter from Vunapope that made me think that I may be asked to go to Lemakot on my return, just as a Senior Sister, as the other Sisters there were not yet finally professed. So I was more or less prepared when the Provincial approached me. I would have preferred to settle down in Vunapope again, but was also prepared to go where I was perhaps needed.

Lemakot is 1 hour's drive from Kavieng on a very good road. They have a Health Centre there and a Training School for Community Health Workers. I was not involved there, only with the community, doing a bit of cooking and shopping in Kavieng about once a week.

The Sisters had a small bus in the garage and no one to drive it. My licence had expired. After I left Mongop, I had been advised not to drive, but since I had had no further giddy turns, I just could not see why I should pay a driver every time I went to town. So, I went to see, if I could renew it. I explained that I had been away for a while and asked if I could renew my licence. The Police Officer looked at my licence and said: "Yu no ken wori, you have a valid licence". Then his eyes opened a bit wider, he said: "1917, how old are you Sister?" "80" I said. "How long have you been in this country?" I said: "Nearly 50 years". "Well, of course you can renew your licence". No thought that perhaps I may have a problem at my age. The driving problems were over, but I must admit, I was a little nervous the first few trips. My stay there was to be 4 months, but as often happens with these temporary appointments, when the time comes to leave another reason crops up, so I stayed for 8 months. Christmas was drawing near, and as I checked the Crib figures, I found them in very bad need of repair; our Lady's hands were broken off, this was a job I had not yet tackled, but I was determined to have a try. With the help of a few plaster bandages and a piece of wire netting, I did a plastic operation, and although I am sure Our Lady had very much nicer hands, she didn't look too bad. Of course the statues had to be painted; St Joseph and the Infant had to match.

There was a very bad drought that year, and though we had a good water supply, the pump was out of order a few times; generators went on strike, so I was again reminded of Out- Station woes.

There had been a crisis in the Gerehu Community, and on my return from Lemakot I sensed, that perhaps I would be asked to go there. Sr. Nicola from Rome was in Vunapope to inaugurate the preparations for the Centenary of our Congregation in 2000, and Sr. Pat from Australia was also there to collect stories for the same purpose; so we had a busy time with them.

When the Provincial said she would like to see me, I was ready. I thought, I had made up my mind about and was ready to go to Gerehu. But when Sister a bit hesitantly asked, if I would mind going to Lihir for 2 months, I was taken aback, not really prepared for that. Lihir is a very different place than it was when I left it 40 years ago, but it is still "out back" around the mission station. They do have a road around the island now, but 4WD are often needed.

At the Mine site there are two Supermarkets and a few other Stores; there are also several planes every day. They have a beautiful Hospital with every convenience, that is 1 hour's drive from the mission. The mission has grown considerably since I was there, Schools, Vocational School, a Hospital complex, and Staff Houses. The church has been enlarged and a new Parish Centre has been added to the few buildings we had then.

Lihir comprises a group of 4 islands; most of the 6-7000 people are Catholics, and they take an active interest in the church, though the mine and its activities have made an impact. Money and the things it can buy, especially drink, videos etc, are not to the best interests of the people. But it was good to see that the Church was full, even overflowing on big feasts days, when thousands come together to celebrate. Confirmation, Pentecost and August 15<sup>th</sup> were some of the big days I could be with them.

I could often use my talent for cooking and baking, and Mr. Fixit had many things to do. The Kerosene freezer was out of order, I struggled with that the first few weeks. We just could not get a wick to fit it. We had at least a dozen that didn't fit. In the end I was forced to change one and make it fit. We then had a freezer that stayed on zero, not quite cold enough but better than nothing.

The washing machine was also out of order and I could not do much about that, at least it was sent in for repairs. Lihir is a very wet place and managing the big wash without a machine is very hard work which our young Sisters take on without complaint. Some youngster had tried to shoot a bird with his catapult,

instead had managed to break the glass on the solar hot water system panel. I didn't know the whole story but there was no hot water. After begging the man, who was supposed to know something about it, to go up on the roof and have a look, he went up three weeks before I was to leave, we then had water but it was not hot. The cold shower, especially on cool, wet nights, was the worst I had to suffer there. When I got back to Vunapope I was determined to do something about it. They said it would need a new panel K400.00. Another man was sent up to get the serial number, he noticed, that it was not connected properly, he did the job and they have had hot water ever since.

Many older people remembered me and gave me a great welcome in Lihir, and ex-Mongop students greeted me everywhere I went. It was almost 50 years since I first set foot on Lihir I had done the full cycle. Of course, the 2 months stretched to 3½, but on the whole the time was quite pleasant, and I was back in Vunapope to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my arrival there September 1948.

## **Back at Vunapope.**

I started again where I had left off, got my paints and brush out and made cards by the dozen. Then I found a few other jobs to do. Bookshelves had gathered books and dust over the years, and needed sorting out and putting in order.

I found a book "Dark Symphony" written by an Afro-American, who had suffered all her life from Racial discrimination. A nice book, the most interesting thing for me was, that she mentioned a Fr. Fox who had been so good to her, but had been transferred to Melbourne to St. Francis. It was Fr. Fox who had directed me to go to the M.S.C. in Mena House, when I told him of my desire to be a Missionary Sister.

Fr Fox had directed the first young lady who wished to enter our Congregation, but had died of cancer before she attained her goal. When she was dying, Father. had told her she must not die, but pray to Blessed Peter Julian for a miracle (They were working on his Canonization Process and needed miracles). She was so ill and asked Father's permission to die. Then he said: "Alright, send some one else along" Was it coincidence or Providence that I was the next one to approach Fr. Fox?

I have more time to notice things here in Vunapope – the weather, the wind, the storm, the calm, the beautiful sunrises and sunsets. The thunderstorms and the frightening lightening, which seem to be more frequent and severe since the volcanic eruption in 1994. These things never cease to make one wonder at the beauty and grandeur of the world God has given us.

There is a colony of birds, Siberian Curlews, which of all the corrugated roofs in Vunapope choose ours when they come every September, and when they are not out searching for food, are sitting or rather standing on one leg on our roof. There are three distinct types, but still one united family. They leave again in March for Siberia, I am told, they sure like a change in climate. Willy wagtails wake us every morning with their song, and another colony of Pink Eyes nests in our ceiling and makes a terrible racket. Occasionally we see a Kingfisher and hear different bush birds piping a bit further away.

Though most of the flowers and shrubs around here are not native to the area, they are beautiful. Orchids, bougainvillea, hibiscus, oleander, frangipani, poinciana, poinsettia, crotons, and many other lovely plants flourish and provide a feast for the eyes all the year around.

Fruit is plentiful, pawpaw, mangoes, pineapple and dozens of different types of bananas and avocado. Many kinds of green vegetables, yams, sweet potatoes and taro are always available here in Rabaul, and being so near the sea fresh fish can usually be had at a reasonable price. The chicken farms around provide enough eggs. We are spoilt children of God, but just in case you think this is a tropical paradise, there are a few rather unpleasant things as well.

Just to mention some of them; an occasional major earthquake, and very frequent tremors, the volcanic eruptions which destroyed Rabaul and the volcano which continues to erupt after 4 years, and fills the air and everything with dust. Then it's hard to imagine how many living creatures the Lord has made. There are Mosquitoes of all types and sizes, some carrying disease malaria or dengue others apparently just to annoy us. Armies of white ants, which can destroy a house in a very short time, if a constant watch is not kept on them. Cockroaches abound and increase and multiply at an amazing rate, a variety of flying creatures, rain flies by the thousand, sand flies so small that they can hardly be seen, but their bites can be felt for days. Flying foxes, bats, wasps, beetles, bugs etc. etc.



I suppose I could go on writing for ever, and though I am sure the world would have no trouble to hold the books that could be written, there would be a few more pages than these.

Before I finish, there are a few things I must mention. God has been very good to me, and has placed wonderful people along my way. First my parents especially my saintly mother, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews who have always been so good to me. The many holy and dedicated M.S.C. Sisters, I have lived and worked with over the years whose example has often inspired me and encouraged me when the going was hard. Fellow missionaries M.S.C., Fathers and Brothers, O.L.S.H Sisters, F.M.I. Sisters Christian Brothers, and many others whose companionship and help I have enjoyed all these years.

The many Priests I have worked with, Retreat Masters, Spiritual Directors, and Parish Priests who have helped to keep me on the straight and narrow path.

The volunteer Doctors with whom I have worked over the 18 years in Vunapope, from whom I learnt so much, and who were always ready to learn from me; I had the experience, they the theory and knowledge of modern methods. Other generous Volunteer Workers, Nurses, Teachers in Vunapope and Gerehu, must be gratefully remembered.

Most of all the beautiful people of Papua New Guinea, especially the women, mothers, heroic and wonderful women, their faith, prayerfulness and longsuffering an inspiration.

Although I must confess to sometimes wishing for at least one cool day, I have not suffered much from the heat or anything else in my 50 years of mission life. Now in the sixtieth year as an M.S.C Sister for everything, the pleasant as well as the unpleasant, I must say a heartfelt "Thank You Lord, You have guided, protected and loved me through it all."

*How can I repay the Lord  
For His goodness to me?  
The cup of salvation I will raise;  
I will call on the Lord's name.*

*My vows to the Lord I will fulfill  
Before all His people  
Your servant, Lord, your servant am I;  
You have loosened my bonds  
A thanksgiving sacrifice I make;  
I will call on the Lord's name.*



*In our overalls going to milk cows.*



*Me in 1931. I had the photo taken for the family.*



*The family 1936.*

*Dad's visit to Vancouver 1961*

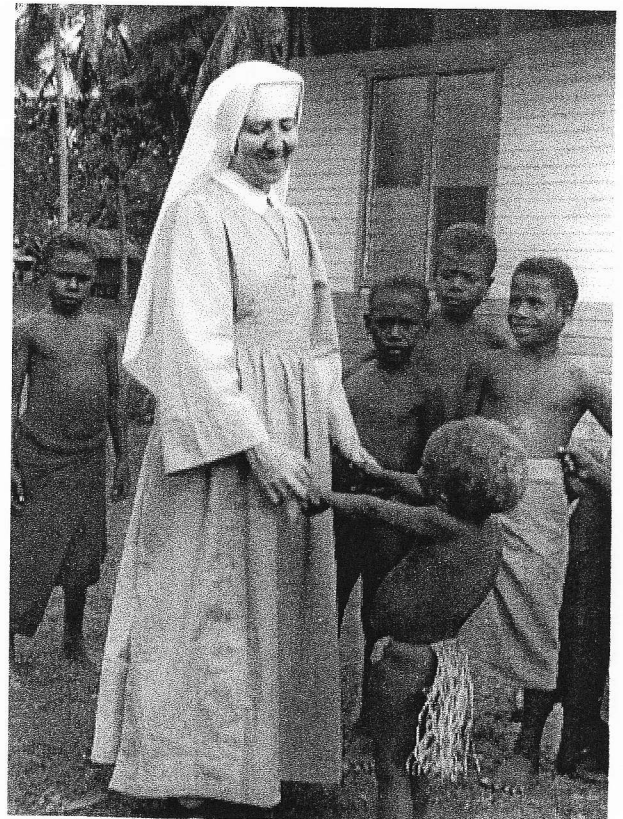
*Making friends with children in Guinea 1964*



*Before leaving for P.N.G. in 1948.*



*Dad's visit to Vunapope 1963*

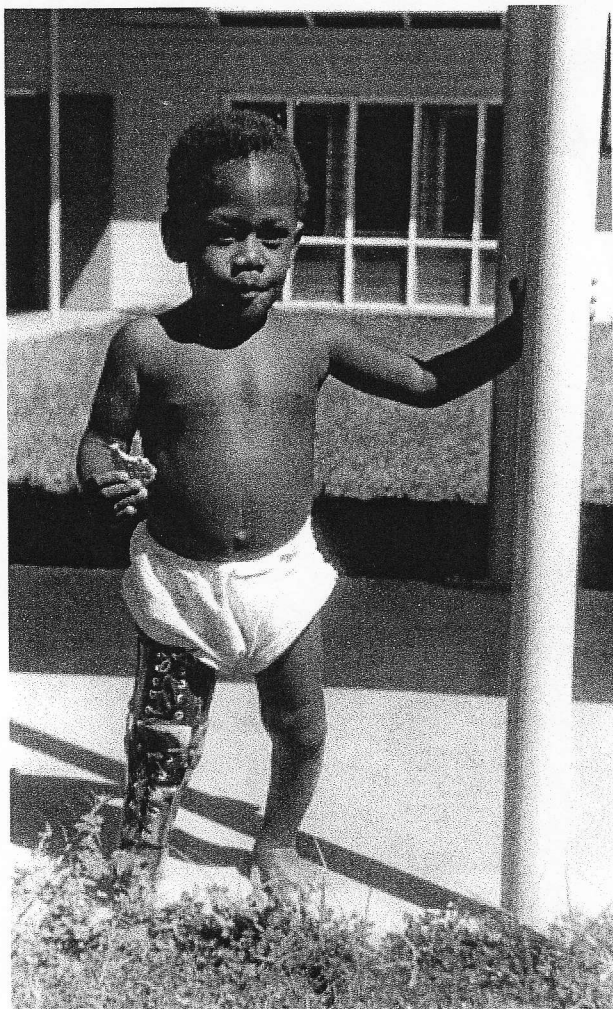


*Making friends with children in Guma 1964*

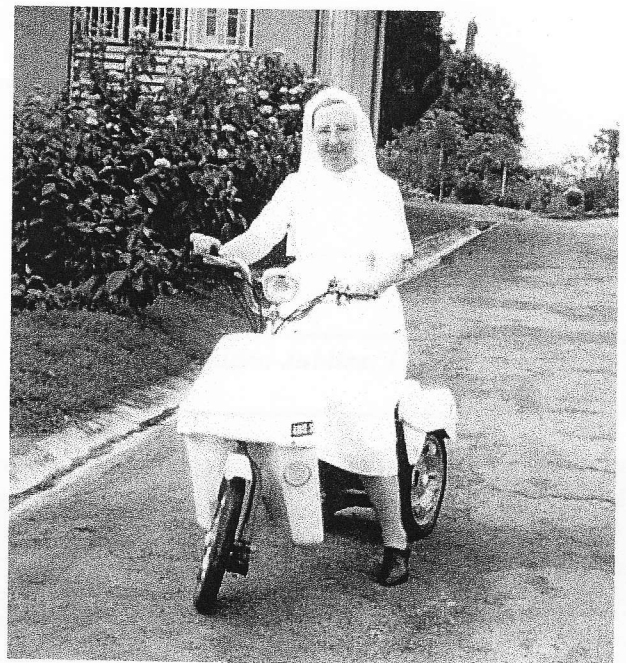




*Vunapope Hospital*



*Peter for whom I made the wooden leg*



*On my bike in Vunapope.*

*Lucy's Golden Wedding 1987.*



*Golden Jubilee in Vunapope, 1989.*

*Family at Golden Jubilee, 1989, Noble Park.*







*The family in front of our old home in Sorrento, 1993.*



*Family at 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party 1997.*