

The establishment of Lutheran Aviation

After circling the airstrip high up in the Finnisterre mountains preparatory to landing, the mission plane flew off, much to the surprise of the waiting missionary. When the plane came in to land at Lae Airport, another pilot noticed a wheel wobbling strangely and reported it to the tower. Upon inspection, it was found that the wheel was near collapse. A landing on the rough, narrow, mountain strip would likely have ended in disaster. The only reason the pilot had not landed was because his HF radio had suddenly malfunctioned and he was therefore obliged to return to Lae. Men like Ron Johnson and Harold Ziegler, who were operations managers for Lutheran Aviation in New Guinea, had many headaches with pilot sickness, bad weather and planes needing mechanical repairs. But this was one occasion when Harold prayed, "That you, God, for radio failure".

New Guinea is a land where you can greet someone across a narrow valley, and then spend four or five hours walking down your side and up the other to shake hands! A pioneer missionary tells of crossing the same river 94 times in one day to reach his destination. Oh to be a bird! Ever a far sighted man, Senior Flierl presented a paper on the importance of a plane for their mission work, to one of the last Staff Conferences he attended. Sceptical co-workers felt it was a fine idea for gold-mining companies working in New Guinea at the time, but not for a poor Mission in the depression years. Several years later, when confronted by the missionary challenge of the densely populated Highlands, the need for a plane was all too obvious. To supply the Highlands stations from the coast in 1933 would have required a march of 14-20 days one way, at enormous cost in labour and food.

Amazingly enough, a mere 12 months after launching the project in Germany, the necessary finance was available to purchase a plane. Some have called it a miracle. Lutherans in Germany were poor in 1934 and those in New Guinea poorer still. Even so, one New Guinea congregation collected 500 shillings for the plane – a mighty effort for then at the time. Evangelists in another area donated their whole annual salary, small as it was. Great was everyone's delight when the Junke's plane was dedicated at the Heldsbach airstrip, Finschhafen, in 1935 and named the *Papua*. It was capable of carrying five passengers or half a ton of freight. **As far as we know, Lutheran Mission New Guinea was the first Mission in the world to own a plane.** German pilot Loose flew 300,000 kilometres in three years of operation, carrying 2400 passengers and 280 tons of cargo. During that time, 12 airstrips were constructed by the Mission, and that figure reached 45 after World War 2. To calculate the value of these strips to the Church, and to the development of New Guinea and its economy, is quite impossible.

We may come to a small appreciation of the work involved in building these 45 airstrips by taking one example. It took 7 years to build the 540 metre strip at Tarabo in the Highlands. People dug at a sloping hill with bare hands, sticks and shovels. Earth was carried away in cane baskets. No wonder that more than 3000 people were on hand when the pilot put down his plane for the first time! Other strips were constructed more quickly than this one, but all without modern earth-moving equipment.

Flying without aerial maps, radio or air traffic control is unthinkable today. Yet that is how Fritz Loose flew in 1935, At least there was one helpful development in that year. Prior to 1935 the mission stations at Finschhafen had neither telephone nor radio connection with the outside world. For almost 50 years, urgent messages simply had to be carried overland for hours or days to the nearest Government station when a ship was not available. What a joy it was for the Mission that it received a licence to operate radio and transmission sets at Finschhafen and Lae in the year of the plane's arrival. So began a vast radion network within the Mission. By 1967 Lutheran Mission New Guinea had 73 radio outlets and what a blessing for everyone! Many anxious missionary parents on

isolated stations were helped and reassured by the Mission doctors and nurses on the daily medical skeds. Without a doubt many New Guinean lives were saved through this radio network. And without that network Lutheran Aviation would have found it almost impossible to function. (There was no national telephone system.)

From 1935-39 the Mission operated only one plane and, at the outbreak of the war, it was flown to what is now West Irian, abandoned, and left to rust away. For the first five years after the war, missionaries had again to rely on the unsatisfactory service of commercial planes. Then, in May 1951, Edwin Hartwig became the first Australian pilot flying for the Mission. Tragically, the four-seater Auster Autocar crashed in the mountains four months later. Some now felt that the Mission should leave aviation to others and, for a time, the Mission Aviation Fellowship provided a service. Ray Jaensch's arrival in 1953 changed all that.

Due largely to Ray's efforts, **Lutheran Mission took over management of its own fleet of planes and Lutheran Aviation was born.** After 12 years of flying, a crash claimed his life, too. Nevertheless, Lutheran Aviation carried on. In 1967 it carried as many as 7000 passengers, and cargo was moved to 68 different airstrips. During the next years, Lutheran Aviation operated four or five planes at a time with six pilots and flight engineer. So as not to burden the young Church with an aviation program, the whole enterprise was sold to the Missionary Aviation Fellowship in 1977. A 30-year flying program in which 10 Australian pilots had served as aviation missionaries came to an end.