

Lester Rohrlach - Eulogy

Lester John Rohrlach was born at Kakakog Mission Hospital in Finschhafen in the Territory of New Guinea on the 23rd October 1939, the first child to Valentine David Rohrlach of Burumbuttock, NSW and Clara Elizabeth Rohrlach (nee Pech) of Appila S.A. He was baptised on 19th November 1939 by Rev Wilhelm Flierl.

When Lester was 2 years old and sister Eleanor 4 months old, his father Dave transported mother Clara and the 2 children to Lae on the mission schooner Bavaria at 1am on Christmas day 1941, ahead of evacuation to Australia following the approach of WW2. It would seem Lesters association with New Guinea might be short – but God – who has all thing in hand – had other plans. His father Dave stayed on at the Finschhafen mission and was caught up in the rapidly unfolding wartime events in New Guinea, while mother Clara, Lester and Eleanor waited out part of the war time years with the Pech family at Appila, together with the Holzknecht missionary family. After his father's wartime rescue mission and escape from New Guinea, Lester reunited with his father at the Albury railway station in April 1943.

Lesters father was one of the first missionaries to return to New Guinea after the war to rebuild the Finschhafen mission from surplus war supplies. In January 1947 at age 7, Lester returned to join his family, and two new baby sisters in Finschhafen Judith and Carolyn. Through this tumultuous period - we see the hand of God protecting and bringing the family back together.

The next years from age 7 to 10 at Finschhafen were halcyon days for Lester, as he experienced the tropical paradise of Malaoba, Salankaua plantation, Maneba harbour, Buangi, Nugidu and surrounds, exploring the lush undergrowth, the insects, the wildlife, and the streams and coastline of Finschhafen.

In one of Dad's many writings, in his own words he recalls

“As a pre-teen humbug in New Guinea, one of my premier pursuits was investigating the life of insects, and I became especially besotted with butterflies. I well recall being profoundly overcome one day in 1947 when Dad laid a pair of birdwing butterflies on the table that he had caught on hibiscus flowers in the afternoon with his hat. These huge insects, the shimmering gold/greens, velvety jet black, the red bodies, their peculiar sickly sweet odour..... my 7-year young heart just thumped as I sat there staring at them”

It is during this period that I feel God may have been laying the groundwork for Dad's love of New Guinea and its people.

With Clara busy with the Buangi Baby Clinic and nurse duties, and Dave consumed with rebuilding of the Finschhafen mission, Lester and his sisters spent much time with the local people.

In 1951 at age 11 Lester was sent to boarding school at Wau in the highlands of Morobe Province, being part of the first student intake at Katherine Lehmann School. Those two years (1951 and '52) were also days of adventure with other missionary children, for whom KLS was the only local boarding school.

After 7 years of continuous service, Dave and Clara were given 1 year leave back to Australia, during which Lester (at 13 years of age) and sister Eleanor started school at St Pauls in Walla Walla. During those days away from family in New Guinea, both Lester and Eleanor no doubt yearned for their island home. While growing up, Dad had only spent 8 years living with both his parents over 3 separate short periods (the sacrifice remote missionaries sometimes had to make). But with loving extended family, and God's care, Lester thrived through adolescence, though not without hardships. Though these too may have been God's molding of Lester's character ahead of his lifetime work in New Guinea.

In the years 1958-'66 Lester lived in Sydney and when he undertook his apprenticeship in carpentry with A.W.Edwards where he excelled, developed strong friendships, enjoyed the outdoor life in NSW, and learnt to play the guitar from the Italian flamenco guitarist Johny Lepone - and with his soul mate John Klasen, formed a group called "The Highlights" that played in clubs around Revesby.

Lester was introduced to his dear Elaine by her sister Barbara, and Lester and Elaine were married in February 1965. They lived at Leichardt where their first son Bruce was born.

Dad recounted that during those years in Sydney he was prayerfully asking where his life would lead, and by late 1962 his heart had been led to work with the Lutheran Mission New Guinea, where he returned in December '66 with Elaine and Bruce.

Lester spent the next 36 and a half years working as a builder, property development manager and church construction advisor for the Lutheran Mission and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea. His first posting was to Madang where he worked on buildings at the Madang Memorial Church, the DCA extension duplexes, the Mission supply house, the Yagaum hospital, the Asuar Leprosy Hospital, the Luther Air aircraft hanger, design of residences and church in Rabaul and the Etep Hansonite Hospital buildings.

A second much-loved son, my brother Alan, joined our family in January 1969.

In July 1969 Lester was called from Madang to Lae to supervise the building of the Martin Luther Seminary. We initially lived at the adjacent Malahang Plantation - but soon moved onto the new seminary building site when the initial residences were completed. This was Dad's largest supervisory project in New Guinea, and over 2 years with Clem Janetzki and over 50 national workers, they built a series of classroom blocks, dormitories, staff houses and kitchen mess before the culmination of the uniquely designed MLS Chapel designed by Sir Eric Von Shramek.

The alter of the MLS chapel was unusual in being centrally located, with the pews facing inward on all 4 sides, signifying God as being truly central to our lives and amongst us.

As Dad wrote *"The diverse internal furnishings of the chapel symbolized that we are all one in the Body of Christ. There were traditional-painted carved panels supplied by Western Highlands people, beautiful wall panels of woven pitpit mats by Eastern Highlands people, and major timber carvings provided by some of Morobe Province's most skilled artisans. The famed carver Davidi Anam of Nasegilatu Village, Finschhafen brought a team of his best carvers to Lae to work on the exotic tropical timbers"*. The 4 legs of the alter were shaped as Kundu drums from tropical Rosewood and so we chose Lesters casket today to be made also from Rosewood, to which I think he would have bashfully smiled.

In 1972 we moved to AMPO, the ELCPNG headquarters in Lae, where Lester managed Ampo Builders, assisted by Ian Pfeiffer, Bert Graham and Geoff Eggins over the next 12 years, with mission building projects in Lae and various out-stations.

From 1985 to 2002 Lester worked under the title ... Church Construction Advisor ... at a time when there was a shift from large circuit churches to more local village-level centres of worship.

During this time he designed, costed and had approved some 58 different church designs that were made available to villages seeking to build their own local churches. He then worked closely with Papua New Guineas in the planning for some 91 churches spread across the areas where the ELCPNG were active.

Whilst there were many other projects that consumed his time, Dad also had a wide range of interests and hobbies that reflected not only his thirst for shared adventure, but especially his love and deep connection with the natural world. He delved deeply into shell-collecting, aquarium fish-breeding, collecting and preserving insects, insect artwork, photography, and in retirement years breeding butterflies - to name a few.

How to capture Lester in a nut-shell is difficult - but he clearly recognised the fingerprints of the divine in the natural world, a wonder that fed his joy and held his fascination, constantly inspired by the deep beauty and infinite variety and form of the world around him. The book of nature nourished his soul just

as keenly as the book of special revelation, and the joy he felt in God's creation played a big part in the person he was.

More active pursuits that he loved included target archery, tennis, fishing, and in latter years golf. His contribution and participation with the Lae Game Fishing Club over the span of 2 decades was an immense passion, where he developed close bonds with new friends who shared his love for fishing and the beauty of the New Guinea coast and islands.

Lester and Elaine retired to Valley View in Adelaide in 2003, and where Lester formed many close friendships in the church and wider community. They enjoyed quieter times, with driving holidays within Australia, cherished the times they could spend with grandchildren, and were especially blessed to have son Alan's family close by. It was during this time too - that we saw a committed side of Dad, sacrificing many freedoms to care for Elaine in her last years.

Deep inside, Lester was a soul who could connect with people at so many levels, no matter their background - and he had special love for the people and the country that he spent his life serving. Over time God had cared, protected and accompanied Dad through his wonderful life.

Having entered his eternal home, and reunited with beloved wife Elaine, at the age of 84 Lester leaves behind his beloved sons Bruce and Alan and their families, Elsa, Jennifer, 6 grand-children and 1 great grandchild.

Tenkyu God-Anutu bilong laif belong Lester – Thankyou God for Lesters Life

Em i yu tasol God, ol gutpela samting i kamap – It is from you God that all good things come