

Symmonds' Soundbites

News from Papua New Guinea



Greetings once again from Wewak, Papua New Guinea.

As we all continue to adjust to living with the changes to our lives, great or small, brought about by Covid-19, we pray you continue to know God's peace and sustaining.

Thank you so much for all the letters, emails and messages we've received over recent months, letting us know we are thought of and prayed for. It means a lot!

27th June this year marked one year since our arrival in PNG. In many ways it feels like the year has flown by, but in others it feels a long time ago. Many challenges and highlights have been experienced, events have occurred and situations have changed beyond imagination 12 months ago. Rejoice that nothing surprises God, and his purposes will not be thwarted.

Coronavirus Update

The number of cases in PNG have been steadily increasing over the past few weeks, from a handful last time we wrote, into the low hundreds now. It has also spread out from the capital to other major towns. The numbers are still low compared to many places and we are praying for God's continued protection over this country. If the numbers do increase dramatically, the healthcare system will be woefully inadequate to cope. With the experience gained during the previous 'lockdown' the government are trying to limit the number and severity of restrictions as far as possible, since a large number of people rely on things like bringing produce to market to survive. It's a difficult balance. There are some rules and regulations around transport and travel, particularly air travel, which does impact MAF slightly and makes things more complicated, but for now we are still able to operate and serve the communities.



Ludmer and Jacob loading P2-MAH with medical supplies for Oksapmin and building materials for the high school at Tekin. After a thundery early morning, the clouds and rain are clearing nicely!

Please pray for wisdom and guidance for the PNG government as they try to lead the country through this time, and for MAF leadership as we seek to operate safely and effectively.

Airstrip Survey Project

As mentioned last time, the next big project for Andy is airstrip surveys. After the series of incidents which lead to concerns over the condition of some of the airstrips, all the bush strips were closed to MAF operations, pending a survey, risk assessment and review. This new task has got well underway, with every operational MAF base in the country being involved.

Andy and Wilfred received training in May on how to carry out surveys, and four weeks of surveys have been done from Wewak so far.

Wilfred plans which strips we will visit in each survey week, and permission is granted for the flight into each of the 'closed' airstrips. We can not carry passengers on these flights, but we have been able to take small amounts of important supplies into airstrip communities who have been without their lifeline for months now.

We can survey two strips in one day. Each strip is measured for length, width and slope; photographed; surface strength tested; and the clearway and Obstacle Free Gradient assessed for obstacles which may be infringing. The OFG is an imaginary slope which can not have any trees, bushes, huts etc. poking through it, ensuring aircraft have a clear path for approach and climb out.

We go as a small team consisting of Andy, Wilfred and two or three others from the Rural Airstrips Agency and Christian Radio Missionary Fellowship. The RAA carry out the surface tests and community liaison, while CRMF perform HF radio repairs and maintenance on the communities' equipment. Wilfred is the pilot and Andy is Lead Surveyor (a grand title which means he carries the equipment!) We also enlist the help of volunteers from the communities to assist with the survey measurements. It's very hot work, walking up and down the airstrip in the sun, and the locals are very amused as we liberally apply 'marasin bilong waitman', a.k.a sunscreen!

After each week of surveys, Andy has been producing risk assessments using the data gathered. This process can actually take longer than the survey itself! The risk assessments are then reviewed by the chief pilot and other senior team members and a decision made about whether the strip can be reopened, or what remedial work will need to be done before it can be reopened.

So far, across all the bases, we have surveyed around half of the rural airstrips that MAF serves in PNG. Many have been opened, but a large number still require work. We are finding that very few strips need no work at all. Many need minor attention,

such as one or two trees removing or drains clearing, but some need major work involving significant numbers of trees felling, repair of landslide damage or extensive surface strengthening. Please pray about this. We need to be able to operate safely, and some communities are in real danger of not being to receive MAF services for the foreseeable future. Pray that God will provide the means and ability for communities to restore their strips, or, where strips remain closed for the time being, that this might be God's way of redirecting MAF resources into areas where the needs and ministry are greater.

Some pictures of highlights from our survey trips:



Top left: Wilfred making Bible sales at Nugwaia

Top right: The delicious food we were given at Moropote, including sago grubs (actually quite tasty!)

Middle left: Sako from RAA addressing the community at Moropote

Bottom right: Gathering data on the 'clearway' at Samban

Bottom left: Think this grass at Yukilau needs a trim?

Maritime Search and Rescue

In July, MAF PNG received an usual request for help. A small boat had gone missing off the coast of Wewak and the MP for the people group concerned asked if MAF could assist in the search and rescue.

During the 'calm' season, small, open boats with large outboard motors regularly make the 5-6 hour crossing of the open sea, between Wewak and a small group of tiny islands 100 nautical miles from the mainland. The largest of these islands is Wuvulu, which has an airstrip, and MAF fly there a few times a year for charters and medevacs. Andy and Wilfred went there on a charter one Monday morning in July, and the next day, Tuesday, we heard that a boat had left the island just after us, headed for Wewak, but it never arrived. There were six people on board.

It was too late on Tuesday to begin a search, so Tuesday evening Wilfred and Andy spent some time researching ocean currents and assessing the winds in order to plan a search area and pattern. It was in the planning that Andy's experience of similar operations whilst flying on behalf of the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency was very valuable. Praise God that he wastes nothing and equips us for what he calls us to!

It was concluded that the boat would have drifted to the west, so that was where we began, but not knowing where en route the boat got into difficulty, or how quickly it was drifting, the potential search area was massive. Wednesday morning we prayed for the occupants of the boat, and our flight, set out early and flew for almost 6 hours, searching between Wuvulu and Wewak, but found nothing.

Thursday morning we were to search again, and had a plan to search an area further west, between Wuvulu and Vanimo on the mainland. However, we received information from locals who said that in their experience missing boats often go to the east, toward the tiny Arwen Island, and it was strongly felt by them that we ought to look there. We re-planned accordingly, again prayed for the safety of the boat occupants, and ourselves, and departed for another 6 hour search. Having again found nothing we returned to base, feeling rather burdened, and the search was called off that evening. However, everyone in MAF PNG continued to pray for the lives of these six missing people.



Screenshots from the V2 Track system software, used by MAF for flight following and communication. Top: Search pattern flown on day one, with Wewak and Wuvulu highlighted
Bottom: Search pattern flown on day two, with Wuvulu, Arwen Island and Jayapura highlighted

The following Sunday evening we received news that the six people had all been found, safe and well! After six days adrift, they had come ashore at Jayapura, on the Indonesian side of the mainland. Give thanks to God for this wonderful answer to prayer!

Although we didn't actually find the boat, the experience was very valuable and demonstrated that MAF is willing and able to be involved in this kind of operation. Please pray that the contacts made with MP's and officials would prove fruitful, and that some of the simple suggestions we made to improve the safety of these little boats might be able to be put into practice.

Ladies' Retreat

This past weekend, Helen, Harriette and ladies from some of the other mission organisations in Wewak had a few days away for a time of Bible study, fellowship and relaxation. They went to a small island around 45 minutes boat journey out from Wewak harbour and enjoyed swimming and snorkelling, reading, and of course, chat! The accommodation was very nice but extremely basic, with no electricity or running water. A great time was had by all, and the men and kids left behind did survive!



L-R Deb (SIL), Loraine (Samaritan Aviation), Jen (SIL), Carol (CBM), Helen and Harriette (MAF)



View from the accommodation window.

The Short Term Future

There is still no firm plan in place for Andy to resume flying training. Covid restrictions have made travel very difficult and unpredictable and there is a severe shortage of instructor pilots in PNG at the moment. There are tentative plans involving the utilisation of MAFI instructor pilots from Mareeba, Australia, and some measures have been put in place to relieve senior pilots here of

some of their non-flying work load so that they can dedicate more time to training. At present, the very loose plan is that Andy's training may resume in November.

In the mean time, the airstrip survey project will be progressing and Andy will also be continuing in his newly appointed role of Base Liaison Pilot. Apparently, BLP's existed previously at out station bases, and the role has been revived in the pursuit of increased efficiency and accountability.

Aviation is a very expensive business and we always want to make best use of the resources God has given us in order that we can reach and help as many people as possible. BLP's have responsibility for overseeing operations at the base and acting as a first point of contact regarding general matters raised by HQ in Mt Hagen. For example, Andy is sent updates for incorporation into manuals, is currently implementing a checklist system for equipment inspections specified in the Ground Operations Manual, and generally tidying and organising the base a bit. It's good that Andy has this spare capacity to take on such things at present, as when flying full time pilot's have very little time for anything else.

Home School and Guinea Pigs

Give thanks that our home school materials finally arrived with us at the end of May and Helen and the boys have really appreciated the quality and variety in the material and resources. They are just completing the first term, and have, on the whole, enjoyed it! (the kids and Helen are happy to be done by 1.30pm each day!)

It transpired that the materials had reached Port Moresby about 10 days after leaving the UK, but mix ups and delays with customs, and then travel problems within country due to Covid measures, meant they took *far* longer than that to get from Moresby to Wewak!

(On a side note, post is not reaching us at present. We received one package a couple of weeks ago which was posted in England over four months previously, and we know there are other things which haven't arrived at all as yet. If you've sent us something and we haven't acknowledged it, we are sorry, but we haven't received any post (bar this one parcel) for months. Please don't send anything our way for the foreseeable!)

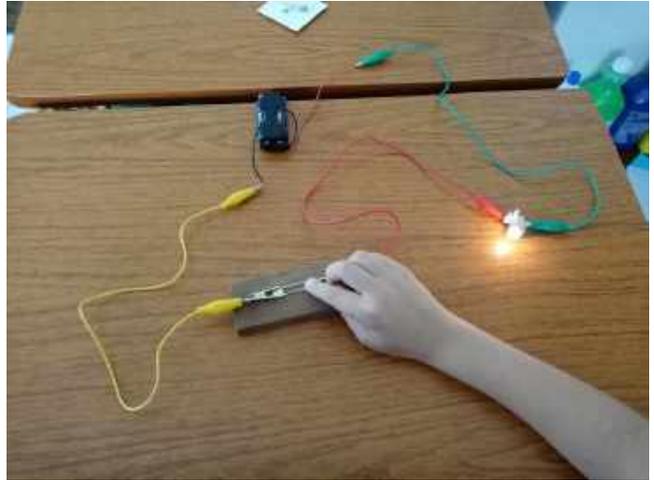
Before we left the UK Joel and Daniel were very keen to get a pet. We said we couldn't get one then as we were moving shortly, but we could look at the possibilities once we were settled in PNG. So, when we became aware of the availability of two baby guinea pigs we said we would like them. The guinea pigs were in Hagen, so they flew down to Wewak on a MAF flight.

The guinea pigs were duly named Bob and Percy by Joel and Daniel respectively. The guinea pigs were very popular with all the children on the compound and they were well cared for in their temporary cage, whilst dad set about making a new one.

Tragically, one morning about five weeks after their arrival, Percy was found to have become very ill suddenly. We nursed him as best we could, but sadly he died within a few hours. Daniel and Joel were very upset by the loss of Percy and we had a guinea pig burial in the garden. Daniel had been growing

some orange tree seedlings in a pot, so we transplanted some of these into the garden to mark the spot. The experience provoked some interesting conversations about life, death and the consequences of the fall!

Since guinea pigs are very social, and Bob was clearly missing his friend, we made enquiries about a replacement. Jen, our friend in Hagen, said she was able to send another the next day, much sooner than we anticipated. With the arrival of Percy 2, Bob seemed much happier again, and Joel and Daniel continue to care for them well. Daniel still talks about Percy 1 and keeps a close eye on the orange tree seedlings!



Top: Joel, Daniel, Bob and Percy 2

Middle left: The guinea pigs' new house

Bottom: At Passam Falls, a beautiful and very fun place

Middle right: Joel's home made 'switch' from his 'Electricity and Circuits' school science topic

Let's hear it for the Boys!

Joel and Daniel are enjoying their home school course and their friendships are growing and deepening. Joel's friendship with Micha, particularly, has grown over the last couple of months. Unfortunately the international school is not doing PE at the moment due to needing to catch up after lockdown, so it's a shame they are missing that social opportunity. Joel has started doing weekly guitar lessons though, with Levi, nephew of Ludmer, who lives on the MAF compound. He enjoys it, but does have to be pestered to practice!

Quotes of the Quarter:

Daniel was doing the 'x' sound in school. He had read some words such as fox and box....

Helen: "Can you think of another 'x' word Daniel?"

Daniel: "Waxing gibbous."

(Daniel had overheard Joel's work on phases of the moon a couple of weeks previous! At least *one* was listening!)

Andy and Wilfred spent a few nights away in Telefomin during one of the survey weeks. At dinner the first night, Daniel asked Helen, "When is the daddy that owns us coming back?" (Helen was NOT impressed at the thought of being owned!)

Adam at MAF UK sends a regular update bulletin to all MAF UK overseas staff. This includes links to prayer letters, photos and cartoons, and links to articles that Adam thinks might be interesting or useful (and they often are!). In a recent edition Adam included a link to an article which contained this statement:

'God's grand narrative is more powerful and compelling than anything we could conceive on our own, and ultimately our calling is not to go and do a hard thing in a hard place, but first and foremost to a relationship with God and sanctification by him. The story about our vocation, our stewardship of the gifts God has given us, should only be secondary to that calling.' (1)

As we find ourselves not serving MAF in the capacity we expected, but in others instead, and with a little uncertainty about the future, this article spoke to and reassured us. It was a timely reminder that God has purposes, and sees a picture, much bigger and greater than our own!

(1) From the article 'When Your Story Gets In The Way', by Rebecca, on the website 'A Life Overseas'

We want to thank you again for your continued support, for reading our letters, keeping in touch and praying for us. We know we are well prayed for from all the messages we receive!

We really enjoy hearing from folks, so please do drop us an email or text with some news from your end if you're able.

God bless

Love from Andy, Helen, Joel and Daniel

Please Pray:

Give Thanks

- That the impact of Covid-19 is still not too severe in PNG as yet.
- That the airstrip survey project has got well underway.
- For the safety of the six people who ended up adrift at sea.
- For Helen and the ladies' weekend away.
- For friendships growing.
- That the boys home school material finally arrived and they continue to enjoy home school.
- That MAF operations have really begun to pick up again and are able to continue for the time being.

Pray For

- Protection of PNG and its people from a major outbreak of Covid-19.
- Wisdom for the leaders and authorities of both PNG and MAF worldwide.
- Our continued health and well being.
- The continuation of the survey project, for safety in flying and wisdom as the strips are reviewed and serviceability determined.
- Communities whose airstrips need major work, that they may be able to carry it out.
- MAF resources to always be deployed in areas of greatest ministry value, in accordance with God's purposes.
- Steps to be taken to improve safety of small boats operating across open sea.
- Continued sense of purpose and calling whilst we are not serving in exactly the way we anticipated. We want God to use each of us in his service, whatever form that may take.

Mommy, when I grow up
I want to be a pilot!

I'm sorry son, you
can't do both...

