

The Tale of the Shirt

Day one: Wednesday

I am feeling pretty excited: it's day one, and we are getting dressed. I had a bath a few days ago, and am clean, and even if I do say so myself, looking pretty good. I am looking forward to what is going to happen. Flying here in PNG with MAF is just about always exciting and rewarding.



Me and MP

But I am getting a little ahead of myself. Firstly, I should introduce myself. I am a standard issue MAF pilot shirt - size XL, made from the second best (meaning the cheapest) cotton that one can buy. I'm a nice blue colour with the MAF logo on the front. I go out every other day with MP (my Pilot), and we work hard together. We are a team. I must confide in you, that MP isn't normally much to look at, but when he puts me on, we look pretty good.

Today we are going out to fly the caravan - a great little aeroplane that can fly 9 passengers and lots of cargo. We are planning to fly from Mt. Hagen to Kiunga with Isaac (the new base manager at Kiunga); the rest we fill up with all sorts of cargo for Rumginai, where the Pioneers hospital is.

While MP is planning his flight, a call comes in from a remote airstrip right near Mt. Bosavi, in the Southern Highlands. There is a sick child there that needs to go urgently to the hospital. That means replanning, changing the fuel load and the cargo. But that's OK. MP can manage that. We get all that done whilst we wait for the low cloud over Hagen to clear.

Then there's a break in the cloud. It's time to launch! We roar off around the low cloud, and into the beautiful blue sky above. The mountain tops are poking through the cloud below like islands on a sea of white. MP seems pretty relaxed - and so he should be, with good weather nearby, and me working with him.

The 25 minute flight to Bosavi is comfortable and smooth. MP makes sure the caravan is working perfectly, and carries out a little paperwork. I can sense MP getting ready for the tricky landing at Bosavi.

I'd been to Bosavi before with MP. We knew that it was pretty boggy, but today was going to prove worse than usual. Turning onto final; all was looking good - right speed, right angle, flaps set. Nice touchdown too, but then, as we try to slow down the left wheel gets into the soft mud. I'm thinking 'come on MP, put some right rudder in! Keep on the centreline!' But it does no good we get further and further into the mud and as we stop, the nose wheel and left main wheel sink securely into the sticky mud. The Caravan can't move. I'm OK, but MP is not feeling happy, so he shuts down the engine and gets out to survey the damage.

Fortunately there is none, except the damage to MP's pride. OK, so now we have to work hard to get the plane out of the mud. Scores of locals from Bosavi had gathered

around to watch the fun. MP asks some of them to go and find a shovel, while he attaches the long cargo straps to the aircraft's main wheels.

Then, after digging trenches behind the wheels to allow them to roll free and back onto the firm ground the hard work begins. Thirty Bosavi men are straining with all their might to free the plane, and MP is working pretty hard too. I can feel the sweat pouring out soaking me. I can handle that. It's all in a day's work.

The plane starts to move; it resists bravely but then has no option but to start sliding backward and sideways onto the firm ground.

I'm soaked, and looking a bit different now. MP packs up the straps, and puts the sick child and his father on the plane. The little boy is unconscious with viral meningitis, and is carried by his father in a bilum (a string bag).

The take-off goes well (avoiding the mud patches) and, after 30 minutes, and dodging some low cloud around Rumginai MP puts the plane down safely at Rumginai. The little boy is put into the care of God, and the doctors at Rumginai hospital.

The afternoon is more of the same. Loading passengers and cargo at Kiunga to deliver to Mougulu and Debepari. Working in the tropical heat all day. Finish work at about five. I must admit, I'm looking forward to going off duty and having that bath in my favourite machine. Tomorrow my compatriots can help MP.

But then: do you know what MP tells me? He has left his bag with all his spare clothes and his food for the next four days back in Mt. Hagen! Oh boy! Sometimes I wonder about him. He thinks he's pretty smart, but I don't know. Now he tells me that I have to be on duty for the next four days, without a break! I try and tell him that I am not sure about this - it is probably against the rules. He says we have no option.

So we are fortunate enough to be able to dine with Marcus and his family that night. It's a beautiful meal which I think MP enjoyed. I just sat there smelling like I'd done a hard days work.

Day two: Thursday

So MP slips me on, without even asking if I'm alright. At least he hung me up overnight to 'air' me a little. I don't think that really helped.

Another day of flying in the lowlands of the Western Province. Lots of passengers to



Kawito and Daru. We heard that there were dozens of people waiting at Daru to fly to Kiunga, but it turns out only one came with us. At least on the long flight to Kiunga we could go up high to enjoy the cool air at 12000 ft.

Then full up again with passengers to go to Kawito, via Kamusi and Sasareme, both in the lowlands. On the ground there, instead of dropping off passengers and getting away as

quick as possible, MP spend about 40 minutes sorting out passenger's travel problems, writing tickets and collecting payment. I thought he could have just ignored them! And it was hot! I thought I'd soaked up a lot of sweat yesterday, but today topped that. Not only that, but I am turning black on the front where MP keeps putting his pen into his pocket. I suppose I shouldn't complain, because my co-worker, long trousers, is already covered in mud. I don't hear him complain.

We spend an overnight in Kawito. MP thinks about putting me into the washing machine, but says I won't dry overnight. What would he know? So I get to 'hang out' again, trying to dry out. MP sat around all evening wearing a towel around his waist. (I am a little envious of my co-worker, underpants, because at least he had a bath each evening!)

Day three: Friday

Still wet from the day before, MP ignores that and puts me on again. I'm thinking "but what about all the people that have to sit next to you today?" MP says they'll just have to put up with it.

The weather in the Kawito area today is terrible. Low cloud, rain, terrible visibility. MP launches into the sky anyway. I'm already starting to dream about that wonderful bath in my favourite machine.

MP carefully navigates the little plane to Suki, about 30 minutes away, underneath the low cloud, dodging and weaving to find a pathway through. I'm thinking 'should we really be flying this low over the jungle?'. MP says it is quite safe, even though it does take longer than planned to get there.

At Suki, there are 3 mission workers to pick up and fly to Daru, where there are commercial flights the the rest of the world. They have been in Suki helping the local translators use computers to translate the Bible into their local language. Graham (who is now in his 70s), is a long term missionary who now lives in Australia and still comes back regularly to help with the work there.

The weather didn't improve. A whole day of low flight over the jungle, dodging, weaving, trying to find a way through. I can praise God that he has allowed others to build, and us to fly such a reliable plane as we have here.

By the way, I can praise God. If the the *'mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands'*, (Is. 55:12) then I think I can at least praise him as well. I can't clap my hands, because I don't have any.

Still more low flying to Kawito with some passengers that have been waiting a week or more for a flight. Kondobal is next on the way back to Daru to pick up a sick elderly woman who needs to go to hospital. It seems like the whole village is there to see her and her 'wasmeri' off. MP keeps on flying low above the treetops. I think surely there must be an easier way, but he thinks otherwise.

We find Upiara, an airstrip that is not overly long, but the locals a very friendly. They don't seem to mind how ragged and dirty I look now. Six young American women have been at Upiara for a month doing University research. They have been waiting all day so that we could take them to Daru for a connecting flight at 2PM to Port Moresby, then America. Unfortunately for them it is already 2-30 and they will be forced to stay in Daru and try and catch the next available flight on Saturday or Sunday. That's flying in PNG.

All the way for the next 25 minutes, MP pilots the plane low over the jungle trying to find a way through. I am thinking 'why doesn't he just climb and get away from the ground', but MP says it is the safest, and the only way to get through. It looks like about 100 feet above the treetops. MP says it is quite safe. Finally we find the long runway beckoning in front of us, and we can put down safely in the strong cross-wind. Most of the young women were thrilled with the experience. The sick Meri from Kondobal is very close to good treatment now at the Daru hospital.

Day four: Saturday

Surely this endurance test is about to end! Four days now without a wash! Saturday breaks with rain like you have never seen it streaming down from a seemingly endless reservoir onto the waterlogged ground around Kawito.

MP decided to get the little plane ready despite the rain. He tried using an umbrella; I thought it would be pretty useless, and it was. We all got soaked, but at least it was a refreshing change.

Waiting, waiting, waiting. The rain pours down. Finally, at about 9-30, MP decides it is time to load up and head off again to Daru. Nine pastors from the Evangelical Brotherhood Church (EBC) are our passengers, who have been waiting for two days. They are on their way to Port Moresby for the annual EBC conference.

The rain and cloud still surround us, but this time MP tries a different approach. Instead of staying low, he climbs around the cloud, back and forth to try and get over the top. I am thinking 'is this right - it seems like all we can see is the inside of huge white clouds'. MP says that it is always hard to determine when we have 5000m visibility. I have to defer to his judgement. After all, I am only a shirt.

A lot more circling and descending sees us back at Daru, but the rain and low cloud don't seem to let up. All we have to do is fly to Wipim and then Kawito. All we have to do - Ha! MP says that Wipim is one of the most difficult strips that we land at. It is short, and slippery, and we can't land at maximum weight. He calculated that if we had even 2 knots of tail-wind, then we couldn't land.

Somehow, he managed to find Wipim amidst all the low cloud and rain. It seemed to me like we were very close and low as we approached. MP looked at the wind-sock to see what the tailwind was. Fortunately it was showing nil wind, so we turned and approached the tiny strip.

MP knew he had to touchdown at 70 knots, so why he attempted a landing at 76 knots, I will never know. It was a smooth touchdown but as soon as MP touched the brakes he realised they were not going to be much use. Revving the engine into maximum reverse thrust made a lot of noise, but only slowed the plane a little. It was as if we were on ice. I can tell when MP is getting stressed. The runway end was coming up at quite a rate, and we didn't seem to be slowing. Finally, with about 15 metres to go, MP put in full rudder, applied max braking on one side, and forced the plane into a ground loop. That seemed to do the trick, and we slid to a stop sideways, just short of the ditch on the end.

I may have already mentioned how smelly and sweaty I was after four days, but I was a bit worse after that landing! So that is what we have to endure flying here in PNG. Being a MAF uniform is not all about looking good and getting praise from our happy customers.

Me? I was just hanging out for that glorious spin around the washing machine on Saturday night. And that is just what happened, followed by a lazy day basking in the sunshine on Sunday. MP is not all bad. He does look after me a little.

Should I be telling you these kinds of stories? I think so.

MP isn't too sure, but he quoted the other Pilate, Pontius who stated: "What I have written I have written. (Jn. 19:21-22)

See you later. I hope you and your shirt can get on well too.



Here I am just hangin' in the Sunday sunshine!