1975-03

Sky Pilot News March 1975

Marella Mission Farm
Sky Pilot Fellowship Ltd., Marella Mission Farm

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Marella calling: Don’t forget to come to our Sale of Work on Saturday, 3rd May 1975.

JUST ANIMALS: From the Sky Pilot’s Log, 2CH Broadcast

This story, written many years ago, refers to the time when Arnhem Land was a place of isolation; the few white men, living on the outskirts, did much as they liked. Most of these men were fine, tough pioneers who paved the way for the civilization they hated; and almost without exception they were kind and generous to the Aborigines. Some people might not have agreed with their morals, but otherwise they were law abiding, reasonable and kindly disposed to the Aborigines. There were very few exceptions; today’s story is about such a one.
Arnhem Land lay sweltering under a fierce noonday sun. No breath of wind stirred the drooping eucalyptus and mangrove leaves; no cat's paw ruffled the languid blue waters of the Arafura Sea that slid softly along dazzling white beaches and lapped the black ooze of the mangrove swamps. On mud flats at the river side lay crocodiles, too sleepy and well fed to take a professional interest in the bream and barramundi which nosed the driftwood a few inches away. A thin, barely visible, whisper of smoke rose from an Aborigines' camp half a mile from the beach and spread out to form a shapeless haze in an otherwise cloudless sky.

As the mission aeroplane Sky Pilot side-slipped over the timber at the edge of the billabong and skidded to a standstill, clouds of white cockatoos rose screeching from the branches of the melaleucas, and circling round joined the riot of frightened birds already on the wing. Ducks, pigmy geese, ibises, cranes, brolgas, jabiru roos and pelicans all protested loudly at the intrusion of the aeroplane. It was a wonderful sight; but my business was with the white man who lived in a paperbark hut fifty yards to the west.

As I climbed out of the cockpit and stripped off my flying suit he came to meet me, dressed in a soiled suit of pyjamas. I knew that he was a buffalo shooter, even before I caught sight and smell of the stinking hides spread out to dry. I had been told that his name was Tom; surnames were superfluous in Arnhem Land in those days. Tom's reputation was not good even amongst the rough and ready bushmen, and he was classed as unnecessarily cruel and heartless. I wondered what kind of a reception I would get.

Tom spelled out the name of the aeroplane and the words "Church Missionary Society"; then he spat on the sandy wheel and chuckled: "Ha, ha, so you're a blanky Sky Pilot eh? You're a bit off your beat. Did you get lost or something?"

"No, I'm on my way to the mission now. But they told me in Darwin that you were living somewhere about here; and seeing your hut I thought I would call and have a yarn. I don't suppose you have many visitors?"

"Visitors? Now let me see . . . yes, it was just before the wet season a fellow passed through here. Not the last wet, the one before it. That would make it about 18 months ago; the place is gettin' overrun. I came here to get away from people but it strikes me I'd better move further out now the place is crawlin' with visitors. Of course old Mick — he was the bloke that called — old Mick was a MAN — not a blanky Sky Pilot. Pity you blokes didn't stick to the cities in the south instead of comin' up here upsettin' the natives and turnin' 'em again the white man."

"Have you ever visited a mission station?" I asked.

"No, and I don't want to neither. What would I want with a mission station?"

"If you have never visited a mission don't you think it is a little arbitrary to condemn what they are doing, or trying to do?"

"I don't need to visit a mission to find out the harm that missionaries do to the natives. I wouldn't have a mission native in my camp, not if you paid me. They're all the same; cheeky, conceited beggars with their heads full of education and a notion they're equal to a white man. Missionaries are at the bottom of half the trouble with natives."

"How," I asked, "would you treat the natives yourself? I mean, what should the white man's attitude be towards them?"

"Treat 'em rough. They're just animals and you've got to keep 'em in their place. Once you give 'em a bit of encouragement they'll get the upper hand. There's hundreds of blacks to every white man in Arnhem Land and you can't afford to take chances."

"Don't you think," I queried, "they have some right to live? I mean, they have thoughts and feelings much the same as white men. They have laws and customs and beliefs that they respect; they have hopes and fears."

"There you go, talkin' a lot of silly nonsense like all missionaries! We've got to break their tribal business and make 'em respect the white man's laws, and the sooner the better. If I had my way I'd soon knock the silly tribal laws out of their heads; I've done it with this lot here; I'm their law now. What I say goes."

"Don't they resent interference with tribal laws?"

"Some of 'em do — at first. Ha, ha, but they soon knock down. I'm the boss, see; and what I says goes. Now come along to the hut and I'll explain what I mean."

I walked across to the hut with Tom. On the way we passed an Aborigines' camp and I noticed that the few Aborigines crouching over the fires were miserable-looking and cowed. They were mostly women and I noticed half-caste children amongst them. On the south side of the hut,
towering above it, was a huge tor of rock pointing like a finger at the sky. The hut itself was dirty and untidy and after a brief inspection I preferred to sit in the shade of a giant tamarind that grew near the hut and partly sheltered it. Tom continued his discourse:

“Yes, as I was sayin’, the only way to treat these blacks is to break them from their old laws and customs and make ‘em obey the white man. Sometimes it takes time; they are stubborn critters, but they knuckle down in the end; they’re just animals, you know. I had a bit of trouble this mornin’. There’s a young blackfellow in my camp who helps me with the skinnin’ when I go buffalo shootin’. He’s a useful boy, too. He don’t belong to this tribe, I brought him with me from Darwin last trip I made. Well, he wanted a wife and I promised him as soon as we got our tally of hides I’d give him the pick of the young lubras in the camp. We finished shootin’ yesterday and this mornin’ I took him down to the camp to get his reward.”

“And what was the result?”
“Well, he picked on a young girl and I said he could have her. She was a good-lookin’ little piece, for a lubra.”

“Was she pleased about it herself?”
“Not at first, but she’ll get used to it. He might have to give her a beltin’ to quieten her down but she’ll get used to it. They all do.”

“How did the tribe take it?” I asked. “It was probably against their laws. Didn’t the old men make a fuss?”

“They kicked up a bit of a shindy, but I sent them bush with a few .303 bullets over their heads. Then the girl cleared out with the boy on her tracks. He’ll catch up with her any minute now. She bolted just about the time your aeroplane came over, I think…”

Tom paused as a wild scream rang out. It came from the top of the tor of rock and we swung round. There on the edge of a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more stood the naked figure of a young girl. Behind her and creeping towards her was a leering, half civilized Aboriginal dressed in shirt and trousers. Tom laughed. “I guess she’s trapped now. She put up a good bluff. It appears she was goin’ to marry someone else accordin’ to their silly tribal law. He’s got her now. She’ll fight for a bit but she’ll soon get used to it. They all do. Now we’ll see some fun. I guess… ’struth… look out!”

The young girl faced the man who was creeping towards her; defiance was in every line of her slim young body. Then she lifted her head proudly and with one wild scream turned and plunged over the cliff. There was a sickening crash as her body hit the bottom, quivered and lay still. Tom cursed loudly.

“The silly young fool, fancy doin’ that! Now I’ll have to pick another one for Billy. They’re just animals, but some of ’em is mighty stubborn.”

And the final entry in today’s Log is taken from the 49th chapter of Isaiah: “Thus saith the Lord; even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered; for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children.”

MISSIONARY AVIATION: In their publication celebrating the 30th year of Missionary Aviation, the Missionary Aviation Fellowship (M.A.F.) tells how the MAF began in 1945 and speaks of the first aeroplane placed in service in Mexico the following year. But before the MAF there were isolated cases of missionaries using aeroplanes for mission work in Australia. Back in 1933 the Rev. Harold Shepherdson built his own aeroplane and taught himself to fly it. It was used to link up missionary work in Arnhem Land. But the article goes on to say: “Was Mr. Shepherdson the first to fly in missionary endeavour? Almost! His colleague Keith Langford-Smith started it all back in 1931. The plane: a de Haviland DH-60 Gipsy Moth.” This plane was, of course, the “SKY PILOT”, and, as far as we know it was the first aeroplane in the world to be used in missionary aviation. It is remembered that Mr. Keith Langford-Smith, after he had retired from active flying, inaugurated the New South Wales Branch of the Missionary Aviation Fellowship by calling a Public Meeting in the Assembly Hall, Sydney, in 1948. He was the first Secretary for N.S.W.

However, when we mentioned this matter to Mr. Langford-Smith, though he agreed with our statements, he said: “Though the “Sky Pilot” may have been the first aeroplane to be used in missionary service it is an interesting fact that the Rev. L. Daniels, of the Bush Church Aid Society, used an aeroplane for his parish work in Wilcannia, N.S.W. I had the pleasure of flying with him to White Cliffs in 1930, a year before I flew to Arnhem Land in the “Sky Pilot”. The Bush Church Aid Society used aeroplanes be-
fore and after the days of the “Sky Pilot”, even though they may not have been engaged in "Missionary aviation".

A great deal is due to these early pioneer pilots who demonstrated that aeroplanes could be used effectively in missionary work long before air-strips were available, or modern instruments. Flying "by the seat of their pants", these pilots became one with their machines and they operated under conditions that no modern pilot is asked to experience. We commend the work of the Missionary Aviation Fellowship to your prayer and financial support.

BRUCE LANGFORD-SMITH: Bruce Langford-Smith has been appointed manager of a sheep and cattle station named Talyealye which is north-west of Bourke. He was there as a jackaroo a good many years ago so he is on familiar ground. At the time of writing he is already at the station, but he expects to return home for a few weeks before taking up his permanent appointment there. His wife, Margaret, will finish teaching this term and then join Bruce on the station. It is a very responsible position and we pray that Bruce and Margaret will be very happy there and make a success of this work which is very dear to him. He has been yearning for the out-back ever since he left the Northern Territory over four years ago. He has had a wide and varied experience since he first went to the country as a jackaroo 15 years ago.

VOLUNTARY WORKERS: We have a wonderful band of Voluntary Workers, led by Mrs. Onslow and Mrs. Hampson of the Women’s Auxiliary. The Street Stalls and Sales of Work are conducted by these Voluntary Workers and they are the backbone of this work for the Aboriginal children. At the Sales of Work we have men to help the women on the various stalls. In most Church or Mission activities it is the women who do so much of the work associated with fund raising or catering, but we would like to pay tribute to those men of our Voluntary Workers who also play a big part in our activities.

Amongst our Voluntary Workers is Mr. V. Pfeiffer of Glenhaven. For some time past this kindly friend has picked up all the groceries for our store and Home at the wholesale merchants at Parramatta and brought them out to Marella. This saves us a lot of time and effort which used to be such a drain on our limited staff resources. We are most grateful for this valuable assistance.

CHILDREN’S HOLIDAYS: For many years past kindly friends amongst our supporters have taken all of our children for a little over three weeks from Boxing Day; each child has thus had a holiday in a friendly home where the Aboriginal boy or girl is given the individual attention that is not possible in our larger Home. They enjoy being honoured guests and they look forward to this each year. While the children are away the Marella Mission Farm closes down and all the staff are able to have their annual holidays.

By Government regulations all staff workers are now to have four weeks’ holiday instead of three. The only way we can arrange for this is to ask our friends if they would be willing to keep the child they take for the holidays for a few days longer, making the period four weeks instead of a little over three weeks, as before. In the past some of our holiday hosts have asked to be allowed to keep the child in their care for longer than the three week period and in many cases this has been done the last year or two. We hope that it is not asking too much to request that each child should remain with its host for not less than a full four weeks. This will enable the staff to have the regulation period for annual holidays. The Mission Farm would close down for this period with only a caretaker in charge, as before. We realise that the staff are on call from early morning till late at night and are not limited to a 40 hour week; as most employees are. They certainly deserve a break at least once a year.

Each prospective host will be contacted by letter when the children’s placements are being arranged about September or October, but in the meantime, if you have friends who usually take an Aboriginal child for the holidays, will you please prepare them in advance for the change.

We are deeply grateful to those friends who take one of our children for the holidays. It does not only mean that the Mission Farm can be closed down for this period, it means a great deal to the individual children. For this period they are mixing with children other than Aborigines in a normal home environment; this helps them to learn to assimilate, and friendships are often formed that extend into life after the children have left Marella.

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