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God's Invasion

One Tuesday morning, many years ago, I sat in the cockpit of a small British-made seaplane and looked out on a world that few had ever seen. Several thousand feet below were twisting white-water streams draining the high mountains that rose, dark and cloud-covered, on either side.

Behind me, in the distance, flowed the Idenburg River, where these streams eventually emptied. The Idenburg, as slow and sinuous and muddy brown as a lazy snake, wound its ancient way north to the Pacific Ocean. Looking to the west, I could see row upon row of high mountain ranges, virtually unexplored, a physical and psychological barrier to what was commonly known as the civilized world, a barrier that had kept out almost all outside influences for thousands of years.

These were the central ranges of the island of New Guinea, the largest tropical island in the world. On a map, it stretches like a 1,500-mile-long bird in the south Pacific Ocean just north of Australia. At that time, the eastern half of the island was administered by Australia and would someday become independent Papua New Guinea.

The western half, over which the seaplane now flew, was Netherlands New Guinea (now Irian Jaya), the last vestige of what had once been an enormous colonial empire stretching over 3,500 miles from the tip of Sumatra to the southeastern corner of west New Guinea, commanding the sea routes near the Spice Islands. In the twentieth century, early in the ministry of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, those islands of Indonesia had already become a significant mission field.

To my left in the plane was Al Lewis, veteran of missionary flying on another island, Kalimantan, then known as Borneo. We were the two pilots assigned to the Aviation Section of the Netherlands New Guinea field of The Christian and Missionary Alliance. Together with Al, a few months earlier, I had flown this plane 12,000 miles from the Short Brothers and Harland factory in Belfast, Northern Ireland. It had been a journey of twenty-two days including mechanical delays, eighty-six hours of flying, difficult navigational problems and bad weather—a long journey with stops in seventeen countries.

But in many ways, today's journey, only 150 miles, was longer and more monumental still. Today's flight was the culmination of a vision that God had given Alliance statesman Robert A. Jaffray seventeen years before as he worked and prayed and planned at the Mission's Bible school in Makassar, a city on the island of Sulawesi, then known as Celebes. Dr. Jaffray had seen a vision of a vast host of people in the mountains of Dutch New Guinea crying out for the gospel. He had heard of a pilot's discovery of the Wissel Lakes in 1936, but some aspects of his vision were far more encompassing than just that area of New Guinea.

In the Mission's field publication, *The Pioneer*, in July 1938, he wrote:

How do we reach them? We do not know, but we are sure that we will never find out by sitting here in Makassar. We feel an urge to go and see what can be done. These people are included in the "every creature" of my commission. If men after gold and oil may go, why not the missionary seeking precious souls, even though he may have to fly to them?

A year after Jaffray's vision, and even as the issue of *The Pioneer* was going to press, an American millionaire explorer/biologist, flying his expedition's seaplane from his base on the north coast of New Guinea, looked out of his cockpit window to find grass-thatched villages in a broad valley far below. Until then, the highland

populations of this part of New Guinea had been unknown to most of the outside world, except to visionaries like Robert Jaffray. The valley that the explorer Richard Archbold saw was the Grand Valley of the Baliem River. Even then Archbold was aware of the significance of finding a large population in interior New Guinea and wrote in a *National Geographic* article:

We made our first reconnaissance flight on June 21, but clouds lying over the lowlands prevented us from getting a clear picture of what lay below. The next two flights, however, brought astonishing discoveries. Between the Idenburg and Lake Habbema we flew over an unmapped valley of the Baliem River perhaps 10 miles wide by 40 miles long.

From the number of gardens and stockaded villages composed of groups of round houses roofed with domes of grass thatch, we estimated the population to be at least 60,000. Subsequent meetings with many of the people convinced us that we were the first white men ever to penetrate their isolated domain.

From then on, missionaries and members of The Christian and Missionary Alliance gazed at Archbold's pictures of the Dani, of garden fences and of the tree-lined Baliem in that *National Geographic* article and prayed that the gospel would come soon to the Baliem Valley.

Those prayers continued through the years of World War II, when sightseeing military personnel flying over the valley gave it the name Shangri-la. Those prayers continued during the difficult postwar years of Indonesia's independence movement which distracted the attention of the Netherlands government for a time from further pursuits in New Guinea. Those prayers continued during years of preparation and planning by Alliance missionaries.

Today's flight was an answer to those prayers. Al Lewis and I, Ed Ulrich, missionaries with The Christian and Missionary Alliance, and two of our missionary colleagues, were about to land in Shangri-la for the very first time.

Months before, at a dedication service at the Belfast factory, our Sealand airplane had been christened *The Gospel Messenger*. Now I looked over my shoulder and through the little passageway to the cabin. Somewhat incongruously, the bulkhead was made of polished wood paneling, more suitable for the private air yacht of a wealthy industrialist than a tool of the kingdom of God.

For years, perhaps out of habit from the war years or perhaps out of respect for the Bible's spiritual warfare metaphors, we had talked and prayed about the Baliem entry in terms of "invasion," of "establishing a beachhead," of being "God's invasion force." In the cabin were the members of our invasion force: four adults and a baby—Einar Mickelson, Lloyd Van Stone and Elisa and Ruth Gobai and their baby daughter,

Dorcas, a Christian family from the Kapauku group 200 miles to the west of the Baliem.

Members of our Mission team had some knowledge of social behavior from years of living and working with people in other parts of New Guinea's highlands. We knew that the presence of women in the company of warriors often indicated to others their peaceful intentions, enabling them to move about through dangerous territory. It was for this reason that we had invited the Gobai family to accompany us on this flight. We sincerely hoped that the people of the Baliem would respect this custom.

Packed into the cabin around and behind and in the aisle were 500 pounds of cargo: two tents, two sleeping bags, lanterns, a radio, batteries, an ax, eighty-nine pounds of food supplies, and pressurized camping stoves. Other equipment included four cameras (two of them 16mm movie cameras), fourteen pounds of medical supplies, two twelve-gauge shotguns with cartridges for hunting small game, seventy-three pounds of personal effects including clothing, papers, books, Bibles and writing supplies, and a supply of cowrie shells, beads and knives to be used for trading with the Dani people the team hoped to befriend.

Mr. Mickelson had planned the supplies so that the party could survive in the Baliem for a month in the event that we could not get back to pick them up before then. We would leave them in the valley this morning, and then, if the

weather was good, return with another load of cargo later that day.

It was a typical rainy-season morning with low clouds and moderate precipitation. Our flight to the Baliem from our Sentani base (officially known as Hollandia by the airport control tower, named for the nearby capital city of Netherlands New Guinea) was over 150 miles of unexplored jungle usually hidden under layers of cloud and lines of thunderstorms. When we could see the trees, they were vague smudges of dark green.

Imagine a million square miles of broccoli tops partly hidden by the cottony fluff of clouds—that is what the New Guinea jungles looked like from our cockpit. Here and there, especially in the more swampy areas around Sentani Lake, lighter green asterisks punctuated the dark carpet. These were sago palms, a tree whose inner starch is used for food by many of the lowland peoples of New Guinea and other areas of the Pacific.

With today's cloudy weather, the jungle appeared below us only in small patches, not the breathtaking expanse we would see on clearer days. Where the lower jungles ended, the mountains rose to 14,000 feet and completely surrounded our destination.

We had planned to take off from Sentani at 7:30 a.m. so that we could reach the mountains early and slip through the narrow pass at 9,000 feet before cumulus buildups covered the ranges. But because of the poor weather at

Sentani, we'd delayed our departure almost two hours. Accurate weather reporting was still far in New Guinea's future.

With the Sentani weather improving, we pulled out onto the runway and departed for what we hoped would be our first landing in the Baliem. The twin-engine Short Sealand amphibian easily topped the cloud layers at 11,500 feet. It was still raining up there from a higher overcast, but for the six aboard, it was a bright day of which some of us had dreamed for fifteen years.

It had often seemed that it might never come, especially while we were raising the \$130,000 for the plane plus thousands more for spare parts. The 1990s equivalent of that amount in 1950 dollars is now over \$2 million.

Even the decision to spend that money on this plane rather than on some other aircraft had been a long and difficult one. Some missionaries had suggested that we buy a costly but powerful Catalina seaplane similar to the one so successfully used by Archbold. His was powered by two radial engines producing 900 horsepower each, and weighed over 25,000 pounds when fully loaded with 7,000 pounds of cargo, fuel and personnel. But even military surplus models of the Catalinas were three or four times more expensive than a new Sealand.

Other airplanes we considered were smaller. One of these was the Grumman Goose, an American seaplane similar in size to the Short Sealand Al had flown in Borneo. For the kinds of tasks we expected of the airplane, it finally

seemed that the Sealand would be the least expensive choice. It was categorized as a light plane (gross weight of 10,500 pounds or less). Its wing-span was sixty-one feet (compared to the 104 feet of Archbold's plane), forty-two feet from nose to tail. It could carry eight passengers.

After the Mission decided on the aircraft, the order was made and the company began building the plane. Unlike mass-produced cars and other items, most aircraft are built for a specific customer, even though they are constructed on assembly lines in factories. (The per-unit cost of building them is too high for a manufacturer to absorb without having a paid customer signed up.) So the wait was long even after the order had been placed.

This day had looked closer only when we took delivery of the plane in Belfast and started for New Guinea, half a world away.

Now having flown for an hour, it was not safe to continue any longer at 11,500 feet because we still could not see the mountains we knew were almost upon us. Would we have to turn back, or would the curtain lift so we could enter the pass?

We tried a few circles. After all, the weather changes rapidly in New Guinea, and a circle or two could buy us a little time and perhaps a chance at finding a break in the clouds. Finally, we spotted a faint line of crags. Then, after a few more circles, Al straightened up the plane and

aimed it for the valley. We slipped across the ridge.

Just one hour and five minutes after takeoff we entered the Baliem Valley. It was a bright day there. Heavy clouds had built up on the outer sides of the mountains, leaving the ten-by-forty-mile valley quite clear. We made a shallow turn to the left. Since we were still flying at 11,000 feet, and the Baliem Valley and its river were just over 5,000 feet above sea level, we needed to lose some altitude before setting up our landing.

As we cleared the mountains, Al raised his right hand to the throttle array on the ceiling and pulled back on the two ivory-colored plastic knobs that controlled our engines. As he reduced the power, the roar of the engines diminished. Our ears felt "pinched" as they reacted to the loss in altitude. Al adjusted the flaps, the large panels in the trailing edge of the wings that would reduce our speed and help us land more slowly.

Following our landing checklist, we changed the propeller and fuel mixture settings. Al checked the small panel near his right knee. Three small red lights glowed there, telling us that all three wheels were up, tucked in their positions inside the hull. We would not need those wheels until our return to Sentani.

We all leaned toward the windows, eyes wide to see the vast Grand Valley of the Baliem River. As the plane slowed down, we began to feel more of the bumps in the airstream, mild

bounces caused by air rising from some features on the ground and sinking over others.

Deep green forests covered the mountains and high hills surrounding the valley, but the floor of the valley was predominantly light green. Sunlight winked at us from carefully laid-out garden drainage ditches full of muddy water. Sweet potato plants sprawled their green leafy vines over the rich brown earth of the gardens. Here and there in the valley were tall stands of evergreen trees, some of them sheltering villages.

Dani villages consist of groups of light brown thatched-roofed round houses joined together by wooden fences topped with more brown-grass thatching. From the air, the round houses looked like mushrooms. Along one side of a village were several longer houses used by women for cooking and for shelter from sun and rain. We could see bluish-gray smoke oozing through the thatch. It was just past breakfast time in the Baliem Valley.

As we lost more altitude, we could see people working in gardens drained by an elaborate system of ditches. We flew over the gently winding Baliem River, its light-brown water flowing between dark gray mud banks covered by a thick growth of evergreen trees. These were casuarina trees, named long ago by scientists because of the resemblance of the tree's needles to the feathers of the cassowary, New Guinea's large flightless bird, similar to an ostrich. The Baliem,

bordered by casuarinas, meanders near the center of the long valley.

Our destination was a short stretch of the river at the southern end of the valley. During a survey flight, we had picked out this stretch as the most suitable place for a landing. We had particularly chosen this month of April for our initial invasion of the valley since it was at the middle of the rainy season; the river should be at its highest level and remain so for at least three months.

We circled lower and lower over the river. Al and I made some careful checks of our location, of the appearance of the river, of the operation of the airplane. Everything had to be right. Because of our load, our altitude and the high hills ahead of us, we would not be able to make a "go around." It was land or crash!

At higher altitudes, airplanes' wings and engines cannot do the work they can do at sea level. Once we touched the water, we could not change our minds: we would not be able to fly off the river with our present load once we slowed down in the water. Flying can be an exacting science!

The Baliem River offered few straight stretches. It was in flood and flowing very swiftly. Suddenly, during what we hoped would be our last circle as we lined up for the landing, we saw arrows rising from a village beside us. The Dani were shooting at us! Were they just having some fun with the "big bird," or were they being hostile toward us?

Earlier that morning, before takeoff at Sentani, we had prayed for our safety and that of the plane. We had prayed for the Dani and for a friendly reception. Now they were using us for target practice!

We made another circle.

We prayed again.

It was time to land in the Baliem.

We began letting down over the river. The overhanging branches of trees on the riverbank appeared close, but we thought the wing tips would clear them. Al and I made a final cockpit check: the flaps were at the correct angle, three red lights showing the wheels were up, propellers were adjusted for a landing. Al reached up again and pulled the throttles back a little more.

In these last few seconds of the flight, we broadcast a series of terse reports of the landing to the folks listening so carefully to the radio at the Sentani base:

“Turning onto final approach.”

“A slight turn to the right to follow the river.”

“We are below the tops of the trees.”

“Now below the brush on the banks.”

“We’re on the water!”

“Hallelujah!”

Landing against the eight-to-ten-knot current slowed us down very quickly. The river was even higher than we had expected it to be. Although we had planned to put our party out on the east bank, we were unable to get close enough because the trees on that side were hanging over the river. Those gray-green casuarina trees

which had looked so lacy and graceful from the air were now formidable obstacles with thick, gnarled trunks and wide-spreading branches that seemed to be reaching out to devour the plane.

With propellers in reverse, we eased out into the center of the stream and drifted slowly backward down-current looking for other possibilities. When a likely place caught our eye, Al took the propellers out of reverse mode and used the thrust to hold the plane stationary against the current. We could feel the hull bobbing up and down in the water.

A section of bank on the west side of the river looked promising except for a patch of tall reeds extending some twenty-five feet out into the water. We quickly discussed our options and decided to take the plane into the bank among the reeds.

As Al guided us, there was a terrific chatter against the roof and side of the plane: the propellers were cutting into the cane, and debris was flying back at us. After some skillful maneuvering and more of the unsettling noise, Al floated the plane near the bank and shut down both engines.

The racket was replaced by the sounds of tall grasses scraping against the skin and water slapping against the hull. We cut off the switches, resetting some controls so that we could take off quickly once we unloaded passengers and supplies.

As soon as we were settled in the water, I crawled out through the cockpit's large side window to tie a fifty-foot rope to the nose of the plane. The area just in front of the windshield was painted in a flat black slip-resistant paint. It felt rough on my hands as I positioned myself to slide into the water. Hoping to get a good footing, I was surprised when I could not reach bottom.

I grasped the reeds and pulled myself toward shallower water near the bank. Wet, cold, muddy and breathless, I struggled to grip the slippery mud bank and be the first one of our party actually to set foot in the Baliem Valley. I soon discovered that the rope was not long enough to reach the tree I was heading for. I called to Lloyd. He found another fifty-foot length, and we managed to secure the plane.

Were the Dani nearby? Would we be attacked? Would it be over quickly? Or would they wait and ambush us later? We knew little about these people. No outsider had contacted them for more than fifteen years.