

DEAREST FOLKS

Letters home from a
missionary wife and mother



MARGARET WATTS
WITH ROBYN PRIESTLEY

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

The heart of this book is almost 100 letters written from Redcliffe Mission Station in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) in the 1950s, and from Inus Mission Station on Bougainville (now part of Papua New Guinea) in the 1960s. The letters were hastily written, often by a very tired author, who wrote what she thought would be interesting to family and friends. They certainly were not intended for publication, and they clearly reflect the attitudes, language and usages of that time. While the letters have been edited and adapted, and explanations added where this has been considered necessary or helpful, we have maintained their authenticity and they continue to reflect their original time, place and format in various ways, as would be expected. The pidgin English and place names also reflect the usage of that time.

To assist the reader, some editorial comments and identifications are made within the text in square brackets or footnotes. People and places that appear on several occasions throughout the letters have also been placed in a glossary at the back of the book, along with a map of Bougainville in the 1960s, for easy reference.

Robyn Priestley

PROLOGUE

There was no hospital for the people of the small village of Rarea in the mountains of Bougainville, Territory of New Guinea, administered at the time by Australia. Each family had constructed houses about three feet off the ground out of bush timbers with a leaf roof and bamboo plaited walls. Behind each house was a small hut that served as a kitchen with an oven made of stones. Varitevi had settled on a mat on the dirt floor of her smoky cookhouse—amid the firewood and the baskets of food—to await the arrival of her babe.

As the first faint rays of light heralded another day, a new life began. Varitevi sighed contentedly at the realisation that the long night of anxiety and pain had ended. A wave of happiness surged through her as she pressed her newborn son to herself. Then she lay back on the mat of the cookhouse.

Her feelings of contentment and happiness were short lived for it soon became evident that all was not well. The women of the village gathered around. They could not understand what was happening, but they knew something was not right. Helplessly, they watched the mother struggle for life. In the early hours of the next morning, Varitevi's life ebbed away.

Grief enshrouded the village. Relatives and friends banded together, demonstrating their love for the mother by doing their best for the motherless child. When Rarea had been a heathen village, the babe would have been buried with his mother, but now it was a Christian village, a seven-dei [Seventh-day Adventist] village. The heathen customs had been replaced with love and compassion. They would do their best for this little one.

But how could they keep him alive?

He was passed from one nursing mother to another in an effort to satisfy the hunger pains that racked his little body. This continued for several weeks until it became evident that he would also die. He was continually crying and simply wasting away. The people of the village gathered and

held counsel. It was decided to take him to the coast and the mission headquarters where they knew help would be available: “Maram Dokta [as the missionary’s wife had become known] biem i lukautim em [will look after him].”

Gathering the little one in their arms, they began the long trek down the mountainside. The trail passed through dense jungle, and 13 times they had to wade through a fast-flowing river as it also wound its way down the mountain. Sometimes he had to be held high above the head of the one carrying him to prevent the rushing stream snatching him away.

Ruth, the national nurse assistant, saw them first. She rushed up the steps of the mission home calling, “Maram, Maram, yu kam kwik.”

As the soiled calico covering was gently pulled back to reveal the emaciated and near-lifeless form of this tiny, dark-skinned babe, a prayer went heavenward, “Dear God, can we save this one? Please help me!”

This prayer, uttered that day in 1963 on behalf of Thomas, was all too frequently the sincere and urgent cry of Margaret Watts—missionary wife and nurse in this remote outpost.

DEAR READER,

In 1956, when my husband, Horrie, and I were settling into our appointment to pastor the Hamilton Seventh-day Adventist Church, Victoria, we received a call to mission service. We were asked to go to Aoba (now called Ambae) in the New Hebrides group (now Vanuatu).

We had had several years of hoping and overcoming serious medical difficulties before we had been blessed with our darling daughter, Judith Anne (as a teenager she chose to be called Judi). My initial reaction to the “call” was, How can I take my precious baby to a remote mission station that looks like a small pin-point on a map of the vast Pacific Ocean? For Horrie, it spelled adventure!

We had promised to go where God called, so we would go. We were encouraged and supported by a dear family friend, Alma Wiles, a pioneer missionary with vast experience; and by former classmates, Pastor Barry and Norma Crabtree, whose place we would be taking at the Redcliffe mission station in Aoba.

Horrie’s years in ministerial training, his experience growing up on a family farm, his work on Avondale College building projects as a student and his practical abilities gave him an excellent background for what would be required of him. My nursing training at the Sydney San (the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital, now Sydney Adventist Hospital) would also prove very valuable.

Being so far from home—and from loved ones—I made it my practice to send duplicated letters to our parents, family members and two close friends, so they could feel part of our mission service and not miss the children’s early years, even if they could not interact with them. Posting them often proved difficult, so I numbered the envelopes when completed. Sometimes it could be weeks and, in the early years, months before they could be posted.

Unbeknown to me, my sister, Elva Manners-Fietz, had saved many of the letters and it was a surprise when she gave me a carton containing

them. It was a special thrill for Judi because she loved those early years on Vanuatu and then Bougainville. It had been her dream to write a book about that time. Now, with these letters, she would have much of the material needed to help bring those years to life. Sadly, it was not to be. An accident claimed her life and shattered our family.

The letters and the dream were forgotten until one day as I searched through a trunk, I came upon the carton and thought there was now no reason to keep the letters. I spoke to Loren, our son, about burning them and he said, “No, Mum, don’t destroy them.”

The carton was once again stored and forgotten until recently.

While talking to my dear friend, Robyn Priestley, I told her of the letters and how sad it was that Judi’s dream had died with her. She suggested we read them together.

Dr Priestley is a historian who knows about examining, documenting and compiling letters and making them into a story. She has spent years researching and deciphering letters of long-dead, 17th-century men and women in an attempt to understand how they lived and related to each other in their families. She thought it would be exciting to be able to read the letters, mostly typed, with me, the writer, sitting next to her, ready to answer any questions and provide more detail about people and places.

This was all new to me, so I watched with great interest as the letters were gathered together in an orderly way and we set about reading them. Those years of long ago came to life vividly for me as we read, and we both felt that not only our children, Loren and Debbie, would enjoy reliving them, but also our grandchildren—and, perhaps, even a wider audience would appreciate them. My sister, Elva, saved few letters before the middle of 1964, but after that it is possible to trace the development of some stories through several letters. If I had tried to tell the story of our mission experience by relying on memory, so much would have been lost.

I may have written the letters, but they are published in this form because of a daughter who had a heart for the story they tell, a sister with the desire to keep alive the memories they contain, and a friend with the passion and skill to bring that story to life.

Robyn and I hope that, in publishing these letters, we have also been able to honour the hundreds of mission wives who worked to keep their

families functioning successfully and happily in often-difficult circumstances. We want to also honour the children who grew up in lands and cultures different from their own. These letters portray ordinary family life in places that were very much out of the ordinary.

Come and journey with me through the following pages for snapshots into the life of a missionary wife and her family on remote mission stations in the 1950s and 60s.

Margaret Watts

March, 2016

THE NEW HEBRIDES

Aore via Santo, New Hebrides
August, 1956

Dearest Folks,

This is our first letter from the New Hebrides and there is much to tell. It's hard to believe that we are so far from home and about to enter a completely new and untried life and, as promised, I will do my best to keep the letters coming when we learn how the mail system works out here.

Thank you so much to family and friends who could come to Sydney to farewell us. We felt rather special travelling First Class on a French liner and could not help but think how different it was for the pioneer missionaries. An extra surprise was the pipe band on the wharf piping a farewell to passengers. We were pleased to have streamers to throw out to those on the wharf. It was exciting until the MV Tahitien began pulling away from the wharf and the streamers broke. That's when we realised we were actually leaving our homeland and heading off into the unknown. We had the strong feeling that we may never see our families and homeland again.

When those on the wharf had faded from view, we made our way up to our cabin. We had difficulty finding it, but when we did there was a big surprise. Our first mailbag was awaiting us. Dear Mrs Wiles, who knew how much we would be looking for letters from home and how infrequently they would be arriving, had gathered cards and messages from you and so many other friends.

We settled little Judith and sat and opened the bag. The messages were

wonderful, but overwhelming. It wasn't long before the tears began to flow and, as we hugged each other, the feeling returned that we might never see you again.

Our cabin was quite spacious and I felt we had been extra blessed because there was a small baby bath beside the toilet. I didn't know until later that it was not a bath at all, but a bidet. The education of this couple from the Australian "bush" was being broadened.

Our first meal in the dining room was quite an experience. Being First Class passengers, we were served at the late sitting. When we explained that we were vegetarians, the French waiters looked surprised, but provided excellent meals. We felt some of the other passengers were rather envious of our dishes.

The waiter came to our table with a bottle of wine to pour for us and we explained that we didn't drink wine. The look of surprise on his face amused us, as he asked, "No wine?"

He pronounced it "vine." "No vine? No vine? Never?"

We had no seasickness and gave up on the tablets we'd been given for it, and by the time we reached Noumea we had our "sea legs." Actually, as we went ashore, we felt we had to find our "land legs." Knowing there were French missionaries in Noumea, Horrie suggested we find the police station and locate Pastor Paul and Jeanne Nouan.¹ We spent a happy time with them and their children before having to board again for the rest of the trip to Port Vila, New Hebrides, and then on to Santo.

It was exciting as the Tahitien came into Santo port because the mission ship Nakalagi tied up along side with our mission president, Pastor Freeman McCutcheon,² aboard to greet us. We were made to feel very welcome. We gathered up our baby, the baby paraphernalia and our suitcases, and boarded the Nakalagi to be taken to the mission headquarters at Aore where four European mission families are located.

We were to stay in the McCutcheon home and, I must say, I was a little overawed about staying with our boss and hoped Judith would not disrupt the home too much. We had no need to be concerned as Mrs McCutcheon is the perfect hostess and she invited us to call her Dulcie.

We are to remain in Aore for two weeks until our goods arrive and it will be valuable time for both of us. Horrie is being briefed on his role and

Dulcie is proving to be a wonderful mentor for me. They have also served as missionaries in Fiji and Tonga, and are able to share from their experiences. I hardly know what questions to ask, but I know this time will prove valuable as we settle into our mission station.

We have been on board the 45-foot MV Leleo, the mission ship connected to the district Horrie will be directing. It will be our only means of transport and our only connection to the outside world. We were introduced to the ship's captain, Sam, known as "Sam Captain". He is from Baiaip in South Ambrym and we have been told that he is skilled in skippering our little ship. After the 18,000-ton Tahitien, it looks so small and the thought of crossing the open ocean frightens me.

Sam and his crew boys, Joseph and Nathan, assure me we will be safe—even if I wasn't exactly sure of what they were saying. Will we ever get to understand pidgin English?

Horrie was interested in going down to the engine room and pleased to have had his experience with engines on the farm. I was interested in trying out the narrow bunks and wondered how we would ever stay on them in rough seas.

A couple of days ago, we went by ship into Santo and Dulcie came to help me make the purchases we would need. There are no shops in or near Redcliffe where we will be based. We had to buy supplies to last until the Leleo returns to headquarters, which could be months away.

Santo is quite a town, with a trade store called Burns Philp, a French store and quite a few Chinese shops. Lopo's Chinese shop is stacked so you can barely walk in. I've never seen so many bolts of material and other articles packed in such a small space.

Our goods are due to arrive and then we will be leaving for Redcliffe, so this will be the last letter you will receive until the ship returns. It will be hard to leave our new friends. Dulcie suggests that whenever the Leleo comes across, Judith and I should come also and we can stay with them. That means a lot.

Thank you again for your messages. We know you will be praying for us, and those prayers mean so much.

Fondest love,
Margaret

1. Pastor Nouan was president of the New Caledonia Mission from 1953. Previously he had been the president of the Tahiti Mission, but had requested a transfer to establish the Adventist mission work in New Caledonia.
2. Pastor Freeman McCutcheon was president of the New Hebrides Mission from 1953 to 1958; president of the Central Pacific Union Mission (CPUM) from 1959 to 1962; and president of the Coral Sea Union Mission (CSUM) from 1963 to 1971.

Redcliffe via Santo, New Hebrides
August, 1956

Dearest Folks,

I am not sure when this letter will be on its way to Australia, but I have lots to tell you. I don't have a typewriter, but I have carbon paper and hope it will be able to duplicate my handwriting through the copies.

Thinking back to leaving Aore, as the Leleo pulled away from the wharf we had mixed feelings. There was excitement that we were now actually going to be missionaries, but there was also fear of what the future may hold.

We had been warned that it would take six-and-a-half hours to reach "home." We were also warned that the seas could be rough and they didn't disappoint. The little ship ploughed and, at times, danced its way through. I was clinging to Judith, wondering if she was feeling as sick as I was, but she seemed to handle it well.

What a relief to arrive at Redcliffe Bay! There on the wharf were students from the school to welcome us. They were singing, and with such beautiful harmony. They sang, "Sunset is coming, but the sunrise I see." The welcome and that song will be etched in our memories forever. It confirmed for us that we are where God wants us, and He will be with us in the days and years ahead.

Also anchored in our bay was the Nakalagi with Pastors McCutcheon

and Bert Cozens¹ on board. We thought it a nice gesture that they were there to welcome us. We discovered, however, that they were there for a church dedication the next day around the other side of the island and Horrie and the Leleo were to be there also. I was assured that I could go, but the thought of getting back on the boat so soon did not excite me.

We watched as our goods came ashore and were particularly nervous as the piano crate was being off loaded—it's such a narrow wharf. While Pastors McCutcheon and Cozens slept on the Nakalagi that night, we slept on a mattress on the floor and rigged up the cot for Judith.

The next morning I decided I would go with Horrie and sent the baby out to the boat, but when I saw it rocking as the waves came in, I thought about our trip the day before and told them, "Bring the baby back. I will stay."

That night proved to be one I will never forget. I was alone in a strange house with no blinds among people I didn't know, and feeling sorry for myself. I had my baby and boxes and crates, but for the first night in my married life I had no Horrie. When daylight came, all I wanted to do was watch for the return of the boat, but I didn't know how many days they would be away.

I pulled myself together and got busy unpacking. The national folk standing around only needed that look of "come help me" and they were right there. So, with awkward sign language and much laughter, we unpacked and set up our home together.

What a wonderful sight it was on the morning the mission ship rounded the point to enter Redcliffe Bay. We were a family again. Horrie was overjoyed to see what had been accomplished while he was away. Our house is a home. There is still a lot to be done, but this little family is ready to settle into being missionaries. We knelt together and asked for God's help as we pledged to fulfil whatever duties or demands were expected of us.

Growing up, I had a horror of bulls and you had told me, Dad, never to trust a bull. I even had nightmares about them. On arriving at Redcliffe and beginning the trek from the jetty up to the house, I was horrified to find two huge bulls roaming free on the mission compound. I thought, How am I ever going to live with these animals roaming unrestricted? It

terrified me.

The bulls are called Sydney and Melbourne, but the Aussie names didn't make them any more welcome. We had been warned about malaria-carrying mosquitoes, geckoes and centipedes, but not bulls! I treat them with great respect and I'm getting used to them being here. Fortunately, they do not appear much interested in the arrival of the new residents.

There are also quite a few cows roaming about and they are a welcome sight for it means there will be fresh milk available. I am now pleased that I had to milk cows before school as one of my farm chores. I know I will be able to manage that when Horrie is away.

The mission home has been empty for quite a few months and that isn't good in the tropics. I've been making plans on how to make it more liveable and wish you were here, Mum, to help. The kitchen has a wood stove and we brought a kerosene refrigerator—luxuries compared to what earlier missionaries had.

We have a small bathroom with a wood heater over the bath, but we depend on rainwater tanks and the supply has to be closely watched. Horrie has rigged up a bucket shower in the outside laundry. We discovered the shower was not long enough with a bucket full of water, so Horrie now has a five-gallon drum attached to a pulley that we fill. This provides enough water for the family to enjoy a shower.

Another everyday necessity we have to get used to is the pit toilet. It's a distance from the house and not ideal, but necessary.

The dispensary on the mission is a small, two-roomed structure just a short distance from the house. Norma had described it to me and while I'm quite nervous about being responsible for the medical needs on the station, I was anxious to see what equipment and what medications are available. The first room serves as clinic and there's a bed in the second room.

Having just come from hospital nursing and the asepsis and cleanliness required there, I realise I need to view nursing differently here. I am fearful of my first baby delivery and ever so grateful that my last nursing back in Australia was in the maternity ward of the Hamilton Hospital. I feel the Lord knew I needed that experience. Here, there will be no doctor to call on. It will all be my responsibility, and I ask myself if I will be enough.

Medications have to be purchased and must be within budget limitations. The mission station also operates on a budget, which is something new for Horrie. There is a verandah at the front of the house with a small, enclosed office at one end. This is where we will do battle with bookkeeping and budgets. I assume there will always be more needs than money available.

The verandah offers million-dollar views over the bay, particularly at night when the moon shines and makes a ribbon of light stretch over the tranquil sea. This is where the anxieties of the day can be offloaded and peace and serenity descend.

While we were still settling into our home, a man arrived at our door holding the side of his face and in obvious pain. We could not understand his request but could interpret his pain—he needed a tooth removed.

Oh no, not so soon, was our immediate reaction.

The Crabtrees had said there were dental instruments in the dispensary, but I hadn't checked what was there yet. The thought of having to put into practice Horrie's one-hour dental "training" frightened us both. We had decided that because Horrie has a horror of needles, I would give the injection and he would pull the tooth.

So we took our first patient to the dispensary, along with the instruction book Horrie's tutor had given him. We located the instruments, but they were rusty. We cleaned them with steel wool and then placed them in a saucepan of water on the primus to boil them sterile. The instruments were ready when a fly landed on them, so we boiled them again. The poor patient was kept waiting.

Unfortunately, there were only ordinary syringes and no dental syringe with side lugs to help exert the pressure necessary to get the needle into the gum. We, the "dentist and nurse," retreated to the back room with the book to study the diagram of where to make the local anaesthetic entry.

Try as I might, I just could not get the needle to enter the spot we thought was right. Back to the book and another try, but to no avail. Horrie had to take over and his strength prevailed.

Then, trying to ask the patient if the area was deadened was a task. With sign language and tapping the area, we finally felt it was time to attack the tooth. Horrie fastened the now-sterile forceps on the tooth and began

End of product sample

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