

Story of Flying Doctor in Gulf Country Cites Diane

"It was good to read that recently at a school in New South Wales the pupils of the 4th and 5th grades, numbering about 150, elected an Aboriginal girl, Diane Cook, as their vice-captain. The head master remarked: 'The whole school is delighted. There is no more popular girl in the school and it is an honour which Diane thoroughly deserves'."

The item above is an extract from a magazine story by Douglas Galbraith, written while serving with the Royal Flying Doctor Service in the Gulf of Carpentaria region of North Queensland.

[Diane Cook has since left Raymond Terrace High School and is training as a nurse at the Mater Hospital, Newcastle.]

We are sure you will be interested in the rest of the story which first appeared in the Literary Supplement of "The Age" newspaper, Melbourne. Here it is:

If you come to Arukun Presbyterian Mission, as I did, by aircraft from the Mitchell River Mission some sixty miles to the south, you will fly along the eastern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria. These yellowish, shallow waters lapping the low mangrove swamps are not attractive. The contrast between the flat sameness of this coast-line and the green foothills and rain forests of the east side of the Cape York Peninsula is striking; just as the muddy-looking waters of the Gulf contrast with the sparkling, blue-green waters of the Coral Sea.

The rivers, too, are so different, because those flowing westwards to the Gulf twist and turn over the brown, yellow and ochre flats, doubling back in tormented contortions, in their frustrated efforts to reach the sea.

For most of the year many of them are rivers only on the map, in reality they are parched and gapping ravines, with only an occasional pool. Still, the "big fellows"—the Mitchell, the Archer and the Embley—are usually fairly well filled, even during the "dry", as they flow through the interminable forests of scrubby ironbarks. These big rivers often marked the aboriginal tribal boundaries.

The pilot pointed over to starboard as the Flying Doctor Service De Havilland Drover began to lose height. We were, he said, coming in over Wutan, the holiday camp at the mouth of the Archer River of the Arukun Mission Station.

Certainly it looked romantically tropical, with sandy beach, coconut palms, pawpaw and banana trees and great, vivid splashes of red hibiscus. But the wonderful thing was to see numbers of aboriginal children running excitedly along the beach and giving an obvious welcome to the aircraft.

Neil, the pilot, flipped his wings in acknowledgment as we turned along the river to Arukun itself, where he made a perfect landing on the airstrip right in front of the mission house.

As we stepped out, the children engulfed us, shouting happily and bearing off our luggage and parcels. They all wore the attractive dark blue lap-laps of the mission, boys and girls of all ages being bare dark skin from the waist up. With his hand outstretched in welcome came Rev. W. MacKenzie, known through the Gulf as "Bill", a sturdy, broad-shouldered man with a short, stubborn nose, a determined chin and a very merry twinkle in his eye. At his side, with her cheerful smile was Mrs. Mac, known on the mission as "Mother", while Bill is "Peipa". Truly these two are mother and father to the 500 aborigines in this mission.

Bill MacKenzie was born some 60 years ago in the New Hebrides, where his father had been a missionary for 40 years. On his father's death Bill said he also would give 40 years' service as a missionary. He has completed 38 years of this dedicated work. Most of this time has been spent at Arukun, where his wife has worked with him.

Arukun was founded by the Presbyterian Church, which asked the Moravian Order, because of their previous experience in missionary work, to initiate the mission. So in 1904 the present mission house was built. The builder, a Samoan known as Peter, died on this verandah from a native-flung spear.

Bill MacKenzie told us more about the mission. Today this is a complete settlement, with a population of about 500 aborigines, including 120 children, a school, store, timber mill, cattle station, meat killing and cold storage, and, of course, a church. So that the needs of the mission are now full community needs—social, medical, education and employment, as well as religious.

At present medical care comes from the monthly visit of the doctor of the Flying Doctor Service. There is radio-telephone communication with doctors at Thursday Island and at Cairns, and the Cairns Aerial Ambulance has taken out many ill and injured people. But the day-by-day responsibility rests on the shoulders of Sister Alison Cameron. This can indeed be a heavy responsibility. For example, Sister Cameron, under medical radio-telephone direction from Thursday Island, has had single-handed to carry out obstetrical procedures which would be worrying even to an experienced doctor. These sisters serve three years without leave and then have three months' furlough.

On educational matters there are many shortcomings. Arukun is fortunate in having Miss Mary Gillon, a great-granddaughter of that famous missionary Dr. John G. Paton, of the New Hebrides.

Miss Gillon is apparently the only kindergartner on the mission station. It was a joy, later, to see and hear Miss Gillon's class of pre-school aboriginal children. Surely this kind of teaching should be available to every mission.