

## MISSION PLANE CRASH JANUARY 19, 1990

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On his timetable for January 19, 1990 our pilot Fr. Butch has flight he needs to make to a small village named Membok situated Fly River, thirty-five kilometres south of Kiunga. He is to pick up Fr Gilles Côté, SMM, parish priest of Kiunga, on pastoral patrol in the region and Sr. Pierrette Carignan, DW, giving sewing lessons to the women of **the village**.

The plane lands in Membok, in the afternoon. The two missionaries plus two mothers with their sick babies board the Cessna 182 for the return to Kiunga. The usual January winds have begun. Fr. Butch decides to take off from the habitual direction and taxis to the other end of the runway facing tall coconut trees at the opposite

end of the airstrip. Our seasoned **pilot** this runway very well for having made multiple landings and take offs there, during his ten thousand hours of flying extending over a period twenty-five years. The next day, he is flying to Wewak, over the mountains, for the major maintenance of the Cessna and therefore, needs to reach Kiunga today.

He accelerates the engine and when reaching the end of the short runway he lifts up the plane for a perfect take-off. Suddenly, a tail-wind hits the Cessna considerably slowing down the lift-off. Fr. Butch realizes that the plane cannot clear the high coconut trees and he shouts over the microphone, "We won't make it!" Then it's the impact.

A tree smashes the plane door hitting Fr. Gilles on the forehead and knocking out. Sr. Pierrette calls out his name as she notices blood covering his face. All the while, Fr. Butch tries to control the crashing plane through the trees towards the swamp below. Fr. Gilles regains consciousness as the plane hits the water on its right wing. Instinctively, the two women jump into the swamp, through the missing door. One woman drops her baby who drowns.

As Fr. Butch pushes back his pilot seat to jump out, a terrible explosion engulfs the entire plane with Fr. Butch and Sr. Pierrette still inside. Under water, Gilles is struggling with the bels buckle trapping him in his seat. He frees himself. Being under water, he is protected from the formidable blast. His left arm and hand, suffer third degree burns. His face is also slightly burnt when he surfaces to breathe. He sees the huge red ball inside the plane in

which his two companions were trapped this terrifying sight gives him nightmares for a long time.

With the help of women fishing in the swamps, he reaches the runway and runs, in shock, all the way back to the village. The Mission sked is on and Fr. Gilles finds the strength to announce the shocking news of this terrible tragedy to every Mission station listening-in. The nurse from Membok then attends to Fr. Gilles bandaging the gash on his forehead and putting balm on his severe burns.

As soon as the news that there are survivors reaches Tabubil Hospital, a plane the mine company, with a doctor and nurse on board, come to the rescue.

The survivors are all taken to Tabubil Hospital. In Kiunga, everything is set in motion to retrieve the bodies early the next day. Bishop Deschamps, attending a meeting in Port Moresby, is informed of the plane crash. He reaches Kiunga the next morning.

In Membok, the people wait patiently for the fire to die out to approach the wreckage and get the bodies out. The sun is about to set when they succeed to do so. They cover the two corpses in the new material Sr. Pierrette had brought for the women's sewing and carry the bodies to the women's formation building. All night, they keep vigil praying for their two devoted missionaries.

The next morning, a helicopter arrives in Kiunga with the two bodies in two plastic bags. All the missionaries, with a crowd of mourners, are at the airport to receive them. An ambulance immediately takes the bodies to the where they need to be identified and some papers signed by the Bishop. The whole group of missionaries, present in Kiunga, enters the morgue to view the bodies. As Sr. Monique unzips the bags, everybody holds hands in prayer. We stare at the bodies wrapped in the shroud of the poor as we pray for the repose of the soul of our two dear companions. In the evening, the missionaries gather to pray and share memories of Fr. Butch and Sr. Pierrette. We all appreciate the fact that journalists are not in Kiunga to bother us in this time of grief: I find it so ghoulish when reporters prey on people's lives and emotions in a tragedy.

The funeral is set for January 23 to enable the village people from villages to come. Some villages request to have the body of Fr. Butch in their village because he has been their parish priest and helped them many ways. Bishop Deschamps explains that Father has expressed his desire be buried behind the cathedral in Kiunga. Both missionaries are buried close to the grotto of the Blessed Virgin Mary. From that day forward, this place becomes the missionaries' cemetery.

On the day of the funeral, people start gathering in front of the cathedral early in the morning. By noon, the yard is crowded with mourners whole town is at a stand still while thousands of sympathizers, regardless of their denomination, join the Catholic mourners. At one o'clock, there approximately three thousand people lined up from the Mission health to the cathedral, for the procession of the two coffins. All are silent, sad meditative

as they proceed towards the cathedral. Overhead in the clear sky, a plane from Talair Airline, flies waving its wings in a gesture of farewell to a great pilot and friend.

The two coffins are placed on a stand in front of the cathedral. After Bishop has said some prayers, the Yongum women execute a funeral rite of cries wails by circling the deceased. They end with a litany sung in plaintive voice. In silence, the coffins are then carried by representatives of different tribes the cathedra! Where people can circle the coffins to touch them in a sign sorrow and prayer.

The huge crowd cannot fit inside the cathedral; therefore, the funeral Mass celebrated outside by Bishop Deschamps with all the priests present 'as celebrants. In his homily, Bishop reminds us that: "Fr. Butch and Sr. Pierrette expressed their love for their neighbor not only in words but mostly with their even onto death. The sorrow we carry in our heart today is accompanied by a deep Christian hope which keeps us strong in such distressing circumstances."

At the offertory, three members of the Awin group perform a traditional dance for the dead. Then in the offertory procession, a pair of scissors and a pilot's badge is brought as a symbol offering of the work our two missionaries accomplished in Daru-Kiunga Diocese. At Communion, a French song, Pierrette favorite one, is sung by the Daughters of Wisdom. The coffins are placed in the graves, and then everyone has a chance to throw a handful of soil them, as a sign of adieu.

While two cement monuments are being made, two white wooden crosses mark the gravesites resting under the lofty trees surrounding the cathedral.

If you fly over the cathedral which is in a form of a star when seen from the sky, you can see the angelic wings of the coconut trees and in its shadow rests the painful scar of the two gravesites. With the years, other graves appear and the little plot behind the cathedral, now called a church because of the new cathedral, becomes a bit crowded.

After Fr. Jean Marc Cartier, SMM, Fr. Arnold Afaneng Melanesian Diocesan Priest, Fr. Joachim Narok Melanesian Diocesan Priest and Fr. Jose T.C. Indian Diocesan Priest are buried there, the small cemetery is expanded under the direction of Fr. Jose Jacob, SMM, our diocesan treasurer; the land situated immediately behind it is purchased and flowers are planted.

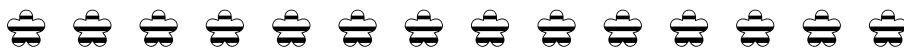
The missionaries, as well as the people, remain with the memories of their loved ones, which they share spontaneously among themselves. The days of mourning slowly pass. Fr. Butch had spoken often of plane crashes the months before he died. It's as if he had a premonition of his death. On the day he died, he had called the man helping him for the loading of the plane to shake hands with him, thank him and say goodbye, a gesture he had never done before. In a letter written not long before the crash, he explained how he had helped his sister prepare for her death and that had also been a powerful preparation for his own death.

No, the lives of Fr. Butch and Sr. Pierrette are not lost. As Montfortians, have consecrated themselves and everything they possessed, including their w Jesus through Mary his Mother. Death has not surprised them because before it came they had already embraced it. A deep wound in the hearts of the missionaries slowly begins w heal. Their vitality returns knowing full well the true cost of spreading the Good News w the people who live at the end of the world.

Shortly after this fatal accident, Fr. Gilles travels back to Canada accompanied by Sr. Carmel Leblanc, DW, for a time of healing. He is convinced that survival of the plane crash is a sign that his mission is not finished in the Kiunga Diocese.

In April 1991, almost fifteen months after the burial of our two missionaries the time of mourning ends with a Eucharistic Celebration. In the Melanesian culture, mourning for the dead is essential to release the spirit from this earth. It is believed that after death the spirit of the deceased lingers among those lived with, until a celebration ends the time of mourning. The more important the person is, the longer the time of mourning.

During the celebration, the people express their gratitude to both departed missionaries and those still living. They list some concrete signs they witnessed of their love for the people of the Western Province.



## **Aurore Gagnon, Daughter of Wisdom**



Aurore Gagnon is a religious sister, a Daughter of Wisdom in the Montfortian Family who was successfully involved in Papua New Guinea during 43 years as a teacher and leading promoter of a Renewal Pastoral program. At the time she arrived in the Daru-Kiunga Diocese, many cannibals were still present in the country. In 1999, she became Mistress of Novices for the formation of future Melanesian Daughters of Wisdom. She finally initiated an important farm project in 2007 for young men of the Western Province. The "Emmaus Farm" located on 72 acres near Kiunga is steadily being developed. Since her return to Canada in 2010, Sr. Aurore has actively been pursuing missionary animation in parish and conference centres.