



Village House, Mussau Island, Papua New Guinea, 1980.  
Photo courtesy of Barry Oliver.

## Mussau, Emirau, and Tench Islands, Papua New Guinea

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Mussau, Emirau, and Tench islands were similar to Pitcairn Island, both had a heritage of murder and mayhem. The Seventh-day Adventist missionaries were excited by the prospect of converting the entire populations of these islands, albeit that the total population of the St. Matthias group was forty times more than that of Pitcairn Island.

The islands of Mussau and Emirau lie approximately 85 miles (140 kilometers) northwest of Kavieng, the provincial capital of the New Ireland province of Papua New Guinea. Tench is forty miles (64 kilometers) east of Emirau. Mussau has an area of a little more than 270 miles (435 square kilometers), Emirau is about 14 square miles (36 square kilometers) and Tench is less than one half square mile (one square kilometer). Several other smaller islands make up the St. Mathias group.

## Introduction

Mussau Island was named St. Matthias Island by explorer William Dampier when he encountered it on St. Matthew's Day, September 21, 1690.<sup>1</sup> He also sighted Emirau Island and named it Squally Island. It is also known as Kerué Island. In 1790 Lieutenant King came upon the tiny dot he named Tench Island after the commander of his marines, Watkin Tench. Its local name is Nusi Island. These islands are the most northerly parts of Papua New Guinea, lying only one degree from the equator and known collectively as the St. Matthias group. Prior to the 1930s no Christian missionaries were able to establish themselves among the inhabitants. The islanders fiercely resisted Europeans, being content with their isolation and cultural superstitions. Murderous raids, polygamy, betel nut chewing, and nakedness were the norms.<sup>2</sup>

## Coming of Seventh-day Adventists

At a meeting of missionaries at Batuna in the Solomon Islands, May 1929, it was voted to send Robert Salau and Oti Maekera to assist with mission expansion from Matupit station near Rabaul, New Guinea.<sup>3</sup> The mission ketch *Veilomani* was transferred from Fiji to Matupit in September 1930, and Gilbert McLaren used it to explore northeast among the St. Matthias group.<sup>4</sup> He brought back three young lads from Mussau to become familiar with worship and schooling at Matupit conducted by Arthur and Nancy Atkins.<sup>5</sup>

In 1931 Salau was appointed to pioneer Emirau Island together with a young assistant from Matupi. At the same time Oti and three Matupi boys were placed on Mussau Island. The response from the locals was breathtaking, virtually the entire population turning from their former habits and adhering to Christian values. Within a short time Salau had formed two groups totaling 170 adherents on Emirau, and a mission home and church of native materials were constructed.<sup>6</sup>

On the larger island, Mussau, Oti experienced an equally remarkable response. McLaren hastily sailed south in search of more Solomon Island youth to swell his workforce. He enlisted eight who would care for scattered villages throughout Mussau. Salau was moved to Mussau also, and a Fijian couple, Nafitalai Navara and his wife, Vasiti, were transferred from the Papuan field to replace Salau on Emirau.<sup>7</sup> Nafitalai formed a baptismal class of 145 individuals, and in mid-1932 a widow and twenty married couples, the more mature of the group, were the first in the St. Matthias islands to be baptized.<sup>8</sup> A short time later 103 were baptized on Mussau.<sup>9</sup> They had gathered up all their artifacts relating to spirit worship, items of stone and magic spells of woven sticks and leaves, and thrown them into the sea.<sup>10</sup>

Late in 1932 a government district officer and a medical doctor made a visit to Emirau and Mussau islands. They saw fully clad islanders singing hymns and reciting Bible verses, and there was no longer any need to post armed police guards while they slept at night during patrol. The officer wrote in his report, "I am astonished at what I have seen . . . I marvel and say it is a miracle."<sup>11</sup> The medic, however, expressed some reservations. He found some islanders were suffering pyorrhea of the gums and believed that betel nut chewing would be beneficial. He also believed abstinence from pork would cause a protein deficiency in the diet. Church officials regarded the allegations as serious enough to dispatch Gordon Turner, president of the Australasian Union Conference, and Dr. Thomas Sherwin, medical department secretary, to personally counter the charges. Sherwin provided medical papers describing betel nut juice as a cause of pyorrhea rather than a remedy. Turner assured the officials that the mission taboo on pork did not extend to "clean fish, fowls, goats, etc."<sup>12</sup>

Entry into Tench (or Nusi) Island was a slower process because government officials regarded the Nusians as less hospitable, and food resources to sustain a mission were limited. A special permit was necessary for European settlement. McLaren's first passing visit in late 1930 was a strange introduction. The Nusians and McLaren could not understand each other's language. The Nusians were an excitable people, everyone talking, shouting, shrieking and rushing up and down the beach in their nudity, so unruly that McLaren could do little more than promise himself he would call again later.<sup>13</sup> He made a second visit in 1932.<sup>14</sup> On McLaren's third visit, in 1933, he took with him a young convert from Emirau Island named Peter, who understood the language. Peter returned to continue his training on Emirau, and on January 2, 1934, he and McLaren set out for Tench Island again. Peter was to pioneer the island. They landed amid the usual wild jabbering and gesticulating, Peter appealing for quietness while a brief dedication worship was held before McLaren sailed away.<sup>15</sup> Three months later McLaren returned to find Peter in good spirits. He had made a good start by teaching the Nusians some hymns and how to repeat the Lord's Prayer.<sup>16</sup>

## Consolidation

Early in 1933 Arthur and Nancy Atkins removed from Matupi to Mussau Island, where they worked to erect a number of European-style buildings, replacing those used by Oti and Salau. Stanley and Greta Gander arrived to assist them, especially to begin a training school at Boliu.<sup>17</sup> The first three lads from the school to enter the workforce as missionaries left with Oti and Salau to pioneer the highlands of New Guinea in 1934.<sup>18</sup> The institution became the engine room that produced numerous missionaries for Papua New Guinea, making it unnecessary to import personnel from the Fijian, Solomon Islands, and Mona Mona missions.<sup>19</sup> Harry and Viola Steed, assisted by Deni Mark, succeeded the Ganders in 1935,<sup>20</sup> followed by Raglan and Alice Marks late in 1936.<sup>21</sup>

A large church of local bush materials to seat one thousand people was built and dedicated at Boliu headquarters in

1934.<sup>22</sup> Late in the same year another major step was taken with the provision of a launch, the *Malalagi*, meaning “light,” for exclusive use in the St. Matthias group. The safe harbor of Boliu became its home.<sup>23</sup> Atkins was pleased to report in 1936 that Trevor and Olga Collett, together with William and Edna Baines, were working on Mussau as self-supporting missionaries.<sup>24</sup> The Colletts later transferred to Emirau Island to continue their ministry by engaging in a lumber industry.<sup>25</sup>

## World War II Years

The war burst in on the St. Matthias group suddenly. Disguised German ships patrolled the Pacific intent on sinking Allied ships. The captains were chivalrous enough to rescue many passengers and crew from the ships they sunk. On Friday, December 20, 1940, one of the German raiders tentatively approached Emirau Island. The following morning two raiders and a supply vessel sailed close and landed a contingent of German soldiers. Collett and a plantation owner made contact, learning that the Germans wished to off-load many of their prisoners because they had neither the food nor the cabins to cater for them. The plan was agreed to, and almost five hundred men, women, and children were transferred to the island. The Germans slipped away quickly, leaving Collett to use the *Malalagi* to go to nearby Kavieng and inform British authorities of the incident. In the meantime the islanders gave the unfortunate people temporary accommodation and depleted their gardens to feed them. Within a few days government officials arranged for all to be taken to safety in Australia and New Zealand. The grateful survivors sang the praises of the way the Emirau locals had sacrificed to make them comfortable.<sup>26</sup>

The brush with German raiders was merely the start of more serious enemy encounters. When Japan entered the war and swept into the Western Pacific, the little islands were easily overcome. As a precaution the European women and children had been evacuated in December 1941. The Japanese capture of Rabaul in January 1942 effectively trapped Atkins and Collett behind enemy lines. They made a dash in the dark, sailing the *Malalagi* past Rabaul, and began to make their way down the southern coast of New Britain when they were overtaken by enemy aircraft that sunk their boat. They swam to shore, but Atkins was suffering with asthma and desperately needed medication. Collett gallantly lingered with Atkins, and then both men made the fateful decision to go back to Rabaul, where a Roman Catholic hospital was still functioning.<sup>27</sup> Atkins was admitted to the hospital, but died soon after.<sup>28</sup> Collett was made a prisoner of war, and did not survive the internment.<sup>29</sup>

During the war Salau had transferred from the Admiralty Islands to Emirau Island, but mission activities were reduced to a minimum during the Japanese occupation. By May 1944 the occupation was lifted by Allied forces, and Salau asked an American naval officer to send a message to Australian church headquarters via the General Conference. Salau reported that “the schools have been closed and the money to pay teachers is all gone.”<sup>30</sup> When the Japanese troops retreated from Mussau and Emirau islands, they abandoned their Korean and Chinese sex slaves. Seventh-day Adventist members provided the abandoned women with food and medicines until American troops repatriated them.<sup>31</sup>

## After the Hostilities

Recovery of mission activities in the St. Matthias group was led by Thomas Judd, who used Boliu as his home station.<sup>32</sup> In 1948 he was provided with a replacement vessel named *Malalagi II*, which had a brass plate attached in commemoration of Atkins.<sup>33</sup> In the same year John Rongapitu arrived to assist Judd.<sup>34</sup> John Martin replaced Judd in 1949.<sup>35</sup> Recovery on Emirau Island was limited because the Allies had constructed large airstrips that destroyed its arable potential and reduced food supplies.<sup>36</sup>

The *Malalagi II* continued to be used for supplying and communicating between the three islands and the main port of Kavieng on New Britain Island. A 1953 report spoke of a visit to Tench Island, where Peter had been replaced by another teacher, John, to nurture the thirty adult believers and their children. Everyone had remained faithful to the church, paying their tithe in the form of woven mats that were sold by the mission.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin Stafford replaced Martin at Boliu in June 1954. He visited all the villages on Mussau Island to urge the parents to send their children, and youth to the Boliu Training School. By the end of the year the enrollment rose from 65 to 110, including 15 young women. The best students, after completion of their studies at Boliu, continued at Kambubu Training School, New Britain.<sup>38</sup>

During Stafford's tenure the mission president, Rongapitu, worked hard to establish new administrative headquarters at Kavieng, the business center in the area. He and his helpers brought canoe loads of building materials from New Hanover Island to establish the base. The little hospital and training school continued to function at Boliu.<sup>39</sup> Church buildings of native materials throughout the St. Matthias group were gradually replaced with milled timber and iron roofs. On Mussau the village church at Tasitel received such a renewal in 1957,<sup>40</sup> and in 1962 Pakane and Nae villages on Emirau Island were given similar treatment. At the time there were 15 churches on Mussau Island.<sup>41</sup>

In 1956 the offerings totaling £1,700 from the youth in the Australasian Division were used to erect a steel-framed training school at Boliu. West Australian builder Ronald Pahl began the project, and it was completed by nurse Colin Winch of the Boliu Hospital.<sup>42</sup> The school continued to flourish. A government inspector wrote a splendid report of the school in 1963.<sup>43</sup> The principal in 1966, Milton McFarlane, reported an enrollment of 130 boarding students made up of 75 boys and 55 girls, with the youngest grades being confined to the village schools. Graduates entered many different roles throughout Papua New Guinea and further afield. For example, in 1990 Henry and Louise Tanimia of Mussau were accountant and director of nursing, respectively, at Sopas Hospital in the Western Highlands of Papua

New Guinea.<sup>44</sup> Jennifer Litau, lecturer at Pacific Adventist University, is an alumnus of Boliu Training School.<sup>45</sup> Lalen Simeon, deputy vice chancellor of Pacific Adventist University, is also an alumnus of Boliu Training School.

On the Boliu campus the large church of local materials was replaced in 1966 with conventional materials and enlarged to seat 1,500 members at special gatherings, such as camp meetings.<sup>46</sup> The capacity was tested in 1967 when a grand pageant of Pathfinders was held at Boliu. John Hancock, an associate secretary from the General Conference Youth Department, attended and was impressed with the high level of proficiency demonstrated by the students. McFarlane, together with such national teachers as Noah and Panda Kana Rago and his wife, Jeanette, excelled in their organizational skills. Jeanette, wife of Kata Rangoso's son, was the daughter of Pastor Salau, pioneer missionary to Mussau. She was the music teacher at Boliu and director of the combined choirs during the gathering.<sup>47</sup>

Profound sadness came over the Mussau community in 1973 when one of their medical missionaries, Matthew Singoi, and two of his children, Arvey and Resmah, lost their lives in a mission plane crash at Goroka. The pilot, Lawrence Shields, was also killed. Matthew's wife, Rabai Singoi, and their two other children survived and returned to Mussau after a period of hospitalization.<sup>48</sup>

The Mussau church members themselves were poorly serviced with air transport. An inferior airstrip existed on the eastern side of the island, three hours by canoe from Boliu. To improve their situation the small population of Eloaua Island, situated across the lagoon from Boliu, rallied in 1973 to build a top-class airstrip on their island. They excavated a hill of coral aggregate and spread it on the leveled ground to provide what was judged to be one of the best runways in Papua New Guinea.<sup>49</sup> The first arrival was the mission Aztec VH-SRP on December 6, 1973, flying Robert Pierson and others from the General Conference for a specially called meeting with the islanders. They, like Hancock earlier, were impressed with the choirs and the work being directed by principal Tommy Toata and his wife, Narelle.<sup>50</sup>

The Boliu Training School was essentially an elementary school, but was selected by the government to be upgraded in 1993 to academy level, beginning first with the lower levels. Teachers Elsward Berak and Richard Gelly made an appeal in the church periodical for such library books as encyclopedias and *National Geographic* magazines so that students could do research for class assignments. Suitable material was promptly dispatched from Australasia.<sup>51</sup> The institution suffered a major setback in 2017 when the classroom block, built sixty years earlier, was destroyed by fire. The library, dormitories, and school chapel were spared. Seven elementary schools, six on Mussau Island and one on Tench Island, acted as feeders for the academy levels, so it was vital to rebuild quickly.<sup>52</sup> As of now, 2019, funds have not been found to redress the loss.<sup>53</sup>

Latest statistics, 2019, report that the Mussau district has 18 organized churches and four companies. Emirau district, including Tench Island, consists of seven organized churches.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

Mussau, Emirau, and Tench islands carried similarities to Pitcairn Island. Even though their cultures were diverse, they both had a heritage of murder and mayhem. The Seventh-day Adventist missionaries were excited by the prospect of converting the entire populations of these islands. Indeed, those who did not become mission adherents were extremely rare. Major differences, however, were that the total population of the St. Matthias group was forty times more than that of Pitcairn Island and was therefore able to supply a greater number of national missionaries.

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