

Missionary Flight as a Child

Gene Arnold Writes:

I really don't mind riding in the baggage compartment. You see, no one exactly told me it was the baggage compartment. So I think the little door in the back of the airplane is there especially for me, and the makeshift jump seat is just the right size for my five-year-old frame. The real deception, of course, is that they never put baggage in the baggage compartment with me. That goes in the pod under the airplane that makes it look distinctly pregnant.

We wing our way over endless miles of rain forest, looking like an endless patch of broccoli, broken only by the occasional writhing river. The din of the 300 horsepower engine makes conversation impossible. So I wrap myself in my own heroic thoughts, imagining that I am flying the airplane myself, and off to save the day.

Suddenly we are in the mountains—their jagged teeth gnawing at the sky above us. Imagination lapses into awestruck wonder as the earth passes near my window in all its horrible beauty. Then a village comes briefly into view—a few small round huts with their thatch roofs stained black by the smoke filtering through from the cooking fires below.

How did these people get here? How do they live? Now I can see their gardens terraced into the steep mountain. I remember my father laughing that you could fall out of your garden and be killed in a place like that. It doesn't look like a joke now. Just last season, heavy rains had loosed the soil in another valley and the whole mountainside, gardens and all, had slid into the angry river at the bottom of the valley. The people facing starvation had received food brought in by little planes like this one.

Now we descend into a valley. I wonder how the pilot knows which one to pick—they all look alike to me. I wonder where we will land, and then I see the little scab of green grass runway carved out of the dense forest on the slope ahead. For a moment I'm confused because it appears like we're looking straight down on the runway, but I then realize that the steep slope of it and the surrounding mountains only create the illusion that we are approaching at a wild angle.

I savor the luxury of flying into this place, because I know that the missionaries who established this station years ago hiked for weeks to arrive here, and then worked for months to create the place where we are about to land.

We touch down and the pilot actually adds power to keep our heavily loaded craft bounding up the slope to the parking area flattened out at the top. The engine shudders to a halt as a crowd of excited villagers runs to greet us. I work my jaw to clear the pressure out of my ears and wait for the pilot to remember that I can't open my special door by myself from the inside.

At last I am released and step out into a world that assaults my nostrils with the smells of damp earth, unwashed bodies, and a hot engine. The missionary greets us warmly. He hasn't had another English-speaking visitor at his house in some time. Tonight we'll celebrate over a meal prepared on his wood cook stove.

The kids in the crowd stare at me and giggle. They want to know why my hair is the color of straw, and just as straight.

Fifty years ago neighboring tribes were slaughtering each other on this very spot. Each one feeling they owed the other a blood debt. Life was full of darkness and fear. Now I see smiles everywhere. Many of the people here are now Christians. The missionary is introducing my parents to the pastor of the church. His native dress gives me little clue to his calling, but I can see he is a man who loves the Lord, and serves his people faithfully.

He speaks to the pilot while the missionary interprets. The pilot can speak Indonesian, of course, but the pastor speaks only his own language, one of hundreds on the island. The pastor wants to know if the pilot has brought the paper and other supplies they will need to produce the curriculum they need for the Bible school on the station. Later we will tour the school and see the books that are being prepared in the village's own language. We have the supplies on board, of course. The missionary had ordered them by radio.

We need to hurry now. Unload the plane and prepare it to go again before the afternoon winds make it too risky to fly. A woman with a complication in her pregnancy will be riding out to the mission hospital 100 miles away. The pilot helps her in and shows her how to put on her seat belt. She has never been in an airplane before, in fact, she's never been out of this valley. She is nervous but remembers how her uncle got help the same way after a tree fell on him and crushed his leg.

We stand clear of the airplane while the pilot starts the engine. I maneuver my way with the other kids to a spot directly behind the airplane. We want to feel the blast from the propeller as it starts its takeoff roll. As usual, we get a face full of sand for our efforts—I don't know why we always have to do this.

The plane climbs away, the sound of its propeller echoing off the mountain. I am sure that sound will be in heaven.