

Waiting for the 'Balus'

Story and Photos by Satish Moka

It has been just over two hours. The downpour has ceased and I am waiting. The red mud offers a welcome contrast to the unbroken sea of green on all sides. The dark grey and white clouds seem to be competing as to which camp will dominate the sky. No sight of any hole or sunshine, the bright blue gap amidst the overcast skies, which means hope for one waiting for the 'balus' (aircraft). Would my plane be able to return to take me back home to Mount Hagen or would I have to endure the weekend in the bush?

This is Hesalibi. Sandwiched between the mountainous Highlands and the unending plains of the Western Province, under the gaze of Mount Bosavi to the South and Mount Sisa and the ranges to the East – a small pocket of humanity. Hesalibi, this is. A classic example of remoteness, here in Papua New Guinea.



The airstrip at Hesalibi



Reception at the airstrip

And then we heard the sound. Smiles sprang up, as half of the village was standing by me, in my wait. The sound of a plane, the sound of hope. It seemed to draw nearer, and nearer. I am amazed at how sharp the villagers' sense of hearing is to the sound of an overflying plane – much better than mine. And now, it was right on top. Looking up, I was waiting to see the emergence of the 'balus' from the layers of white. Or for it to orbit overhead, as the pilot looked for a hole. But something was amiss. And just like that, the plane droned on, away and away. Was it my plane going back, without me, or was it just some other plane? I have no way to know. I am here on the ground, waiting once again – not knowing whether to wait on or try and make arrangements for my weekend in the bush.

We had landed in Hesalibi a few hours before, to pick up a health patrol team who had spent two days attending to the needs of the community. The mission was to ferry them back to Balimo, where the team was based, and head back to Mount Hagen. Due to a gap in communication, we found ourselves a seat short. This being a training mission, we had two pilots onboard. We decided that it was better for me to stay two hours in the bush than for a health team member possibly to be stuck here for two more days or even longer. And so, I was on the ground, with nothing but a half empty water bottle and a bunch of eager faces willing to host and help, watching my plane leave into the looming grey clouds. It is not common for a pilot to be left on ground. This was a moment of excitement for the village, something different in an otherwise routine life.



House on stilts



Stores in 'bilums' (string bags) under the house

The MAF agent and the 'local council member' took it upon themselves to be my host for the duration of my stay. I was chaperoned from the airstrip to the village which is right next door. There was the inevitable procession of kids in tow, as I was led towards the health centre. The hangout. The local school and the health centre and the quarters for the staff are the important locations in a remote bush village, also the 'guest house' for visiting people, especially in the absence of an old 'mission house'. I was taken on a 'wokabaut' (walk around) in the village, which stands on a ledge between the airstrip and the river which winds its way around the airstrip.



Fenced in crocodile farm



Dugout canoe – way down in the river

The biggest attraction was the 'pukpuk' farm, the venture of an enterprising businessman, farming crocodiles for their skins. The only source of cash, I was made to understand, in this region – which has no gold that can be panned from the rivers, no compensation of cash being paid by the big gold or gas companies and no fertile land for growing cash crops like cabbage or 'kaukau' (sweet potato). As I was being shown from the ledge, the drop to the river, the only other link to civilisation, the skies started to rumble. As we scrambled up to a shelter, I was trying to visualise the three or more days journey on this narrow dugout canoe to the nearest trade-post for selling 'pukpuk' skin, with torrential downpours like the one I was just witnessing. My nautical roots were drawn towards the efforts involved in 'pumping out bilges' (removing water from the canoe) whilst getting drenched and keeping the boat on course as the river snaked its way into the lowlands.

The downpour also meant that we could hang around together. It was time to share stories. Time to tell them what a 'man India' (an Indian) was doing with MAF, a not so common sight – probably a first, in terms of pilots. Time to hear stories, of life in the bush, of men going into the bush hunting for 'pukpuks' and tree kangaroos. The tropical forests of the island of New Guinea are surprisingly scarce when it comes to biodiversity in mammals. The species are more related to the continent 'down under' than to the Asian counterparts of the Indonesian Archipelago to the West.



A happy gathering



Cooking under the stilts

As we waited, I was offered a share of 'sago bread' called 'saksak' with grated coconut. I was a bit apprehensive I must confess, being not one of those enthusiastic experimenters when it comes to food. Whether it was my hunger or the environment, I seemed to actually like it and did eat it with zest, much to the amusement and joy of my hosts. As the rain finally cleared up we were back at the airstrip, waiting for the 'balus'.



A Tree Kangaroo



Sago cake with grated coconut

And the waiting resulted in the false alarm. As we looked at each other's face, wondering how to deal with this new situation, the agent suggested we could try the HF radio. It brought in a fresh breath of energy and we tried pouring life into the old radio. HF radios used to be the lifeline for 'bush pilots' in Papua New Guinea but with the moving out of 'expat missionaries' and the arrival of

'mobile communications' the radio is being relegated. The unreliability of the modern 'network' poses greater communication problems today than it did a couple of decades ago. And so I was tuning into all the company channels, hoping to extract some information on what was to be my immediate future. Crackle, crackle and more static. It was continuous calls on the three channels, waiting patiently, waiting hopefully, for something from the other end. And through that static, finally, I could hear the voice of our base – assuring me that my plane was on its way. There had been an unscheduled 'medevac' that had needed to be addressed but the plane was heading for Hesalibi then going on its way to Mount Hagen. This was not an assurance of getting back home, as the weather still needed to be negotiated for the pilot to land at Hesalibi and later at Mount Hagen, but we shut the radio room and walked back to the airstrip. The note of two Kina (PNG currency) for a radio call didn't fail to miss my eyes – the only voice link with the outside world, for medical emergencies, for weather reports, for booking planes and waiting for planes. Waiting for planes.



HF Radio - the lifeline, literally



Battery - the only power source over here

I was here at the airstrip, waiting for the 'balus' and as I waited, memories started to flood my mind.
 ... Of me negotiating weather and finally flying into Wawoi Falls, and getting frustrated not to find my passengers – who had commenced their road journey to Kamusi having waited for about two weeks for a plane.
 ... Of desperate requests from passengers in the bush with international flight connections, as we battled scheduling problems and weather to get them out.
 ... Of patients discharged at Kompiam hospital, waiting for a month or even more for a plane to take them back home.
 ... And of course, of me chuckling in my heart at the NGO worker at Suki - who was reminding me for the umpteenth time, to please come back to pick them up.
 ... Not to mention memories of medical evacuations. Where families are waiting desperately for the sound of the 'balus' – the first step towards saving a life. When we have to redirect flights to meet this high priority, leaving people stranded elsewhere.
 ... Of people waiting for the 'balus'.

It is not often that a pilot has to wait for a plane stranded in a bush but I am glad that I could. With limited or no communications, with the vagaries of weather in the tropics and being at the mercy of the constraints of scheduling (with limited resources, it takes at least a week before we can attempt a second flight for the same route), it helped me appreciate the perspective of a person on the other side.

Waiting for the 'balus' teaches more than just patience.