

Collecting Memories

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(This is dedicated to Emma Kruse-Vaai for encouraging me to write my story).

*Fai mai o lalo lava o le talie
I talane o le falemai e
Na punonou ai o Alii o le komisi
Ua taua o le papa o misi*

*Pepese ia i le pese
Faafetai i le lagi
Ua aofia mai le ekalesia
I le vaa o le tusi paia*

*Gasolosolo mai o isi lotu
Faaali o le mau taofi
A ua mautu le faavae o le upu moni
Ua toilalo ai seoli*

Song composed by my grandfather Rev Tuuu Kenape Faletoese on the arrival of Christianity to Samoa. He was a translator in the courts before becoming a church minister and was one of the lead translators of the Samoan Bible. He spoke both German and English.

On December 7, 1959 a young woman Olivia Faletoese Latai at the age of twenty left Samoa with her husband Fekusone Latai on the steamer *Tofua*, on their way to Papua New Guinea to work as missionaries. She grew up at Malua Seminary where her father taught and where her family lived. She had been teaching for several years at Papauta Girls College, a boarding school established by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1892 to groom young Samoan women to become wives of pastors at the Malua Seminary. It was here that she heard tales of missionaries returning from Papua New Guinea that inspired her to become a missionary. Upon meeting a young graduate of Malua Theological College who had the same aspirations they married and left Samoa the following day both excited to embark on their first missionary venture. The young couple were my parents. This was their story and the beginning of mine.



Figure 1: Rev Fekusone Latai and Olivia Latai Dec 7, 1959 two days after their wedding Photo taken in Fiji on their way to Papua New Guinea

Photographer unknown



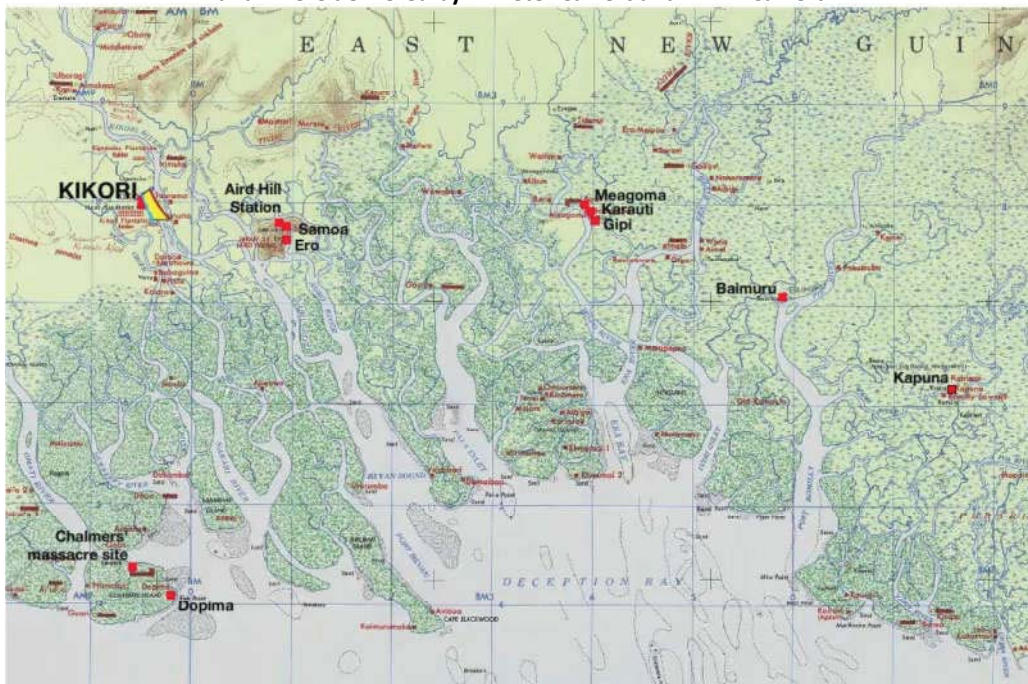
Figure 2: My mother Olivia Faletoese with her parents Rev Tuuu Kenape Faletoese & Faapiomalo Asi Vatau

Author's private collection c. 1950–1958

My early childhood memories consist of vivid recollections of growing up on the winding river banks of the Kikori River, and the rolling hills of Aird Hill and Dopima in the Delta and Gulf of Papua New Guinea, together with my mother's stories of us growing up reiterated over time especially during our birthday's. These accounts consisted of specific people, time of our births, the doctor who delivered us, how much we weighed, who the nurses were, the local women who tended to us and my mother, our nannies and our father. The people she encountered were significant to her as they played an important role in her life and particularly ours. Acknowledgement of their generosity and kindness in being part of our lives was important to her. The way mother told the same story was always special and she made sure that we knew how much we meant the world to her. She stopped telling these stories when she became ill but still made certain that she would wish and sing happy birthday wherever we happened to be at the time.

Our family lived and moved around, from what I remember we lived in Karaulti, Kikori, Samoa(a village named after the Samoan missionaries who worked in these areas) and Dopima where Charles Chalmers a London Missionary was killed and eaten including his shoes in 1901. Dopima was where my parents were first stationed and began their work and finally Aird Hill, our last home before we moved to Samoa in 1973 never to return to Papua New Guinea.

Figure 3: Detailed map of the areas where we lived in the Gulf of Papua New Guinea, the villages include Aird Hill, Samoa, Ero, Dopima, Karaulti and Kapuna Hospital where my brothers and I were delivered by Dr Peter Calvert and Dr Lin Calvert



Aird Hill is where my memories as a child are most memorable and vivid till today. The two storey wooden home we lived in at Aird Hill was built by an English missionary Benjamin T. Butcher in the early 1920's. It nestled on top of a hill aligned with mountains overlooking the winding river of Kikori. The river is located in southern Papua New Guinea. It is about 320 kilometers (200 miles) long and flows southeast into the Gulf of Papua, with its delta at the head of the gulf. The settlement of Kikori lies on the delta.

Three rivers make up the large Delta of the Gulf of Papua New Guinea, the Purari, Era and Kikori rivers. These rivers wind in and out of bush clad mud sediment islands too many to count, let alone name. Finding your way through the labyrinth is a nightmare, even for the Papuans themselves, especially because the rivers keep changing shape. Growing up in these rivers was an adventure in itself as they were beautiful, untamed and wild but also abundant with mosquitoes, snakes and crocodile infested. In Karaulti one of my playmates was eaten by a crocodile, I remember the villagers sending out search parties and my parents assisting in the search. She was found a few days later on the riverbank inside the jaws of a crocodile.

Figure 4: The Kikori River aerial view my memory of my early years of growing up in Papua New Guinea, my father would travel up and down these rivers on his way to Kapuna Hospital where we were delivered as babies by the two Calvert mission doctor's. Photographer and source unknown



Dancing was an obsession with the Karaulti people and recall the entire village immersed in these strange activities. In preparation they would paint themselves with red clay and soot from the ambers of the fire, caking their bodies in mud their faces and hair plastered with sludge, all you were able to see were the whites of their eyes and teeth. The sight was quite comical and enthralling as they moved swaying rhythmically in a trance to the beat of chanting and the thumping of bare feet on the ground. The dancing would carry on into the wee hours of the morning until a high pitched shrieking would thrust everyone clamoring into the river to be cleansed at the first light of dawn. The next day the village would be quiet as everyone would be sleeping exhausted from the night's commotion.

During springtime the whole hillside of Aird Hill would turn violet blue spotted with white blooming Forget-me-nots'. Lined adjacent to our house were rows of the flaming golden cassia fistula tree that led down to the jetty where boats of all sizes would anchor alongside buildings used as boarding schools. In the still of the night it would release a beautiful pungent fragrance that would envelop the entire hillside. In full bloom the trees would droop drenched and filled with bunches of yellow pom pom shaped flowers that I would pick and play with. To a child of four the river a live snakelike form was the only link to the outside world, teeming full of life as every now and then visitors would turn up at our doorstep full of stories from beyond the flow of the river. Airplanes would fly in several times through the years when there was an emergency and cargo ships would appear bringing news that excited everyone especially my parents. We would receive letters from our grandparents and relatives from Samoa and packages with strange contents that tickled my curiosity.

Bedtime stories were of a faraway place, of an island surrounded by an ocean with palm trees that grew from a legend of a beautiful girl and a pet eel were told longingly yet all unfamiliar to a child who grew up with the river as her front yard and backyard.

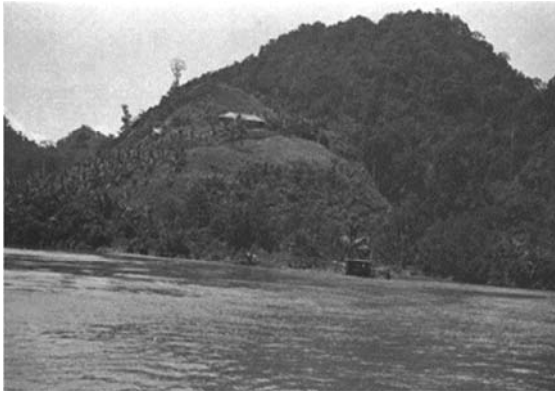


Figure 5: Aird Hill Mission Station where we lived before we moved to Samoa Photograph by Lambert, Sylvester Maxwell c. 1921 - 1947

Sylvester Lambert Papers, Special Collections & Archives. IIC San Diego



Figure 6: Cargo ship on the Kikori River. In the left hand corner (foreground) a Papuan dugout canoe with an outboard motor similar to what we travelled in with my father. Ours was much smaller.

Photograph courtesy of Latu Latai taken August 2013

The ocean to me at the time was foreign, unfathomable and would pester my parents to tell me more. I grew up fantasizing about the ocean. Later in the late sixties at the age of five we returned home on holiday and I fell in love with Samoa. My parents took us around the entire island of Upolu and I remember being mesmerized by the waves, thrusting my head out of the taxi window feeling the sea breeze on my face breathing in gulps of fresh salty air as we were whisked around the island. Both my parents loved telling this story of me enthralled with the white capped waves as they crashed on the rocks and sandy beaches spewing out sprays of hazy mist.

I was born at Kapuna Hospital and was delivered by Dr Peter Calvert and his wife Dr Lin Calvert who were missionary doctors from New Zealand. Kapuna Hospital is a mission hospital built around the same time my parents arrived during the late 1950's by the London Missionary Society LMS (*the mission branch of the Congregational Christian Church of England*). It is located halfway on neutral ground between two villages; the Kairimai which is up-river and Ara'ava located down river. It is the only hospital in the dense jungle of the Wame River. Kapuna Hospital, together with Kikori serves over 30,000 people in the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea. It is a faith-based ministry that encompasses medical care, training, leadership and community development.

**Figure 7: The Calvert's
Dr Peter Calvert and his wife Dr Lin
Calvert**



**Figure 8: Dr Lin Calvert survived her
husband Peter who passed away in 1983
she is semi-retired and continues to work
when she can**



The Calverts ran the Kapuna Hospital where my mother delivered my three brothers and me. I weighed seven pounds and was the lightest of my mother's children at birth. My father at the time was travelling up the Kikori River in a dugout canoe powered by an outboard motor with my eldest brother. She had gone ahead when her time was near. According to her, my birth was the easiest of all her children and the local nurses at the hospital were in awe of my straight black soft silky hair. The staff at the time included an English ward sister, a handful of local girls and two Samoan sisters known as Pamata and Olioli. We were asleep when my father arrived exhausted; they had travelled up from Kikori to Kapuna for days stopping on the way to rest at nightfall.

The same story was retold when my younger brother was born. I was added to the equation as we travelled up the Kikori River with my father stopping to rest under the protection of old mangled trees that hung over the swampy river banks. He had to prepare our mosquito net and our old kerosene lantern to ward off unwanted friends as we settled in for the night whilst the river became over run and swarming with mosquitoes. It is one of my fondest memories spent with my father sitting in a tiny dugout canoe on the wild untamed Kikori River, surrounded by dense tropical forest with inland swamps, watching the sun slowly fade away behind the mangrove trees and the dark shadows creeping in listening to the jungle come alive with strange sounds un imaginable to the ears. The three of us huddled together cocooned, safe with only a thin layer of fabric between the bustling untamed wild world outside and the warmth of our mosquito net gazing at the stars slowly waking up as sleep finally took over us.

My brothers and I were home schooled by my mother who also ran her own boarding school for the local people of Papua and assisted with some of the Australian and New Zealand missionary children who happened to be working with my parents in the area. She had been trained as a teacher at the Samoa Teachers Training College at Malifa in the early 1950's and was known as a strict teacher and disciplinarian.

Figure 9: My mother and her sister Sooletaua Oka Fauolo on their graduation, Teachers Training College, Malifa,



Figure 10: Remnants of Olivia Latai's boarding school for girls at Karaulti



Figure 11: Remnants of Olivia Latai's boarding school for girls



Figure 12: Gas cylinder once and still used for school and church services. Photographed



Our daily lessons consisted of quiet mornings reading for an hour, writing, studying mathematics, science, social science, playing in our tree house and at times sneaking off to my secret spot. Usually our lessons were interrupted by my mother's baking. She had an old wood fire stove that she took pride in and between our lessons she would disappear followed by her mouth-watering baking wafting through our kitchen door. This would interrupt our lessons and we would all end up sitting on our kitchen table licking the remnants of a chocolate cake sauce off the bowls. Later we would have chocolate cake and homemade ice cream her specialty which she served when we had guests stop by.

Our lessons were organized through the Australian International Correspondence School (AICS). Reading was a favorite past time in our family growing up in Aird Hill and Samoa maybe because we didn't have a television in the remote areas where we lived. Leisure times were spent reading or playing in the woods and watching my parents play ping pong and tennis in our backyard. I grew up mostly gifted with books for Christmas and birthdays as special treats from my parents in my early years. One of my prized possessions growing up was my Hans Christian Andersen Poetry and Fairytale Book. My favorite books of all time included the *Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis's *Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe* and Carroll Lewis's *Alice in Wonderland*. In the seventies when we moved back to Samoa I would patiently wait till my parents were asleep and would sneak off with our old radio in the middle of the night. Hiding it under my pillow and I would lie very still listening to the Mystery Theatre program that would come on at midnight broadcasted by the American Samoa Radio Station, the WVUV.

Both my parents managed a small shop at Aird Hill that traded goods with the villagers. There was no cash exchanged but the people would trade and barter in return for goods such as sugar and salt. My parents received sago and sometimes firewood. Father taught the men how to plant manioc, bananas and taro in exchange for assisting him in cutting our lawn or fixing the roof and helping with odd jobs around the house. In the evenings I would accompany him downhill to where our old generator stood and watched while he would wind the old jenny up till you would hear it

sputtering to life and fully roar into action. I would then turn to see the lights of our home light up one by one until it was fully lit, then walk uphill with him to see what my mother had in store for supper.

Figure 13: Aird Hill Mission station over the other side of the hill.

Photograph taken by Latu Latai August 2013 He was the only sibling to return to



Figure 14: (right) Front view from our home at Aird Hill overlooking the Kikori River
Photographed c. 1972 by Bill Gammage



On Sundays my parents, my older brother and I would walk downhill towards the valley where the people of Aird Hill lived, dressed in our Sunday best. The villager's huts were built on wooden stilts as the surrounding area would flood when it rained. We didn't have a normal church our church building was eight to twelve feet long open with a thatch roof that stood on skinny wooden legs. There were no windows or chairs and the services were led by my father in *motu* the generic local tongue with my mother leading in the singing of hymns. The congregation included my family, which totaled four and at times joined by a handful of three to six Papuans who were brave enough and cared to join us sitting cross legged on the floor. The rest about a dozen or so would stand outside surrounding the hut leaning in, curious as to what we were doing, their bodily odor potently hard to stomach at times. Till today I still find the whole scene quite amusing and remember my mother one Sunday bursting into giggles and laughter as she found the whole situation quite humorous and was readily joined by my father who couldn't keep a straight face. The Papuans joined in the laughter thinking that it was part of my father's sermon. Our Sunday service finished early that day.

During the week in between lessons and chores I would sneak off, I had a secret place where I would spend quiet moments playing in a brook adjacent to our house. I would lie there for hours on the cool smooth boulders mesmerized with the water trickling downwards feeding the Kikori River abundant with all kinds of creatures. I recall those quiet moments playing by myself lying flat on the huge dark round boulders, still like lizard soaking up the sun embracing its warmth and smell on my skin. Now and then I would breathe in a lungful of air drenched in the heady scent of the surrounding natural flora and fauna of Aird Hill, then roll over and dip my toes in the freezing cold water making its way down hill. I would lie there for hours dozing, drifting off immersing myself with my surroundings. It was a wild, mysterious, peaceful and vibrant world full of colors and sounds, scents and feelings of abandoned freedom which as a child I was allowed to venture into and

explore, that encouraged a sense of adventure at a very young age. This also had a major impact on my creative self together with my parent's love of the natural world and sense of conviction to be of use to people and the simplest things in life that have made me part of who I am.

Perceptions of Papua New Guinea at the time and even today are often associated with that of the dark and the unknown, uncharted waters within and people not yet in tune with western civilization. My parent's mission was to preach the word of God and present a new life with new beliefs. Yet from what we remember as a family there was much peace and goodwill already there within the people of Papua. Being born into this place and being part of the life of both my parents and their work as missionaries I have been blessed as I have inherited their love of adventure, sense of conviction and passion in the hope of living a meaningful existence and offering service to people of all walks of life in some way or another. In the words of my mother in her memoirs of her life in Papua New Guinea she wrote;

"As we were about to leave and in seeing the people standing there waving goodbye, I was truly humbled and thought to myself whether I had been useful to them. But I also felt that there was nothing more I could do. I told myself, "You have done your best, and offered yourself completely. Then I thought to myself that my work was done there are other people who can carry it on and continue the work of the Lord." Olivia Latai, 1971 (date)

In hind sight I have come away reliving these rare memories and people who have touched my life and I am truly humbled, enriched, and proud of where I was born and lived for a short time in one of most beautiful places in the world.

Figure 15: Aird Hill Mission Station our last home in Papua New Guinea before leaving for Samoa in 1973 never to return. View from the cargo ship leaving our home in 1972 Family

