

# Traumatic Trip to Tami Island



## News from Ruth Zimmerman

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Photo courtesy of Clement Mesa

I wrote this three weeks ago without intending to share it beyond a very small number of friends. It was my way of working through an experience that left each of us involved traumatized to some degree, but so much more filled with praise and thanksgiving. Art has asked that I share it with each of you.

A week ago I saw the hand of God at work clearer than at any other time. I am left with no other option than to write this, not to cause anxiety for anyone reading it, but in praise of God's protection and providence. Have you ever been so awed by something that you just don't know what to do with it mentally? I'm there right now. I have no doubt that every aspect of the following story – both good and bad – are the result of prayer and God's plan to bring each of us closer to Him.

In retrospect, God's hand was in the events leading up to last Friday. On July 23rd our third team for 2024 arrived, this one from Highland Church of Christ in Tennessee.

There were supposed to be four members, however the debacle with CrowdStrike on July 19th eliminated one who had booked separately from the group. The other three arrived without incident and were here to witness the last day of classes at M.B.C. on the 24th and enjoy a meal with the students and teachers on the 25th. We were so sorry that brother Jay didn't make it, but - in retrospect - we are also very grateful that he didn't and rather amazed to be able to see God's plan so clearly. Having witnessed Jay's fear of the water on his 2019 trip, we can only see his not making it to P.N.G. as divine intervention.

At about 7:00am on Friday, July 26th, eleven of us – Jab & Becky Mesa, Jab's brother, Labisa, granddaughters Jasmine, Chanelle, and Jaslyn, Miring and I, and the Highland members, Jimmy & Kim and Randy – set off for Tami Island, where Jab is from. We were each looking forward to the trip and time with the Christians at Tami.

Like Jay, this was a return trip for Jimmy, Kim & Randy, who had visited Tami in 2019 when they were last here. It took around four hours, on calm seas, to get to Malasiga (on the mainland, towards Finschhafen), where we dropped off a twelfth passenger and used the pit toilet, before heading out for the island. The trip across takes about thirty minutes. When we left the mainland we could see the island, but it didn't take long for that to change. We later learned that the islanders realized a gale was coming up from behind the island, but were late contacting someone on the mainland who would have told us to wait.

As the duration of the trip approached and passed the thirty-minute mark, Jab and Labi were anxiously searching for the group of small islands that make up Tami. It was raining heavily, and visibility had got to the point that we couldn't see the mainland either and the sea was getting higher and higher. And then we swamped.

I remember looking down as the water rushed in and saying to Miring, “Are we sinking?” Seems like a stupid question now. It was just so unbelievable the time. I will never forget the look on Jab’s face as the dinghy went under and all of our possessions started to float out. Among them was the large blue cooler that I had so carefully packed with our lunch – tuna salad sandwiches, chips, a small fortune in apples, cookies, juice boxes, bottled water, and an ice-cream tub of ice.

Jab just kept saying, “Stay in the boat, don’t leave the boat.” Staying in however wasn’t an option as it soon flipped. God had been at work in advance however. Jab only recently received this dinghy as a present from Becky’s niece. It is one of the latest available and has a built-in flotation devise, meaning it wouldn’t sink. Jab’s old dinghy– much larger than this one – didn’t have that flotation devise. If we hadn’t had it, it would have been a different story.

For a while we congregated around the submerged dinghy, many of us with life-jackets in a half-worn state and some without. Those without had been late in grabbing them and we watched the waves carry the brightly coloured vests away. Obedience to the laws of the land here is lacking at times.

At times I miss the less complicated times before cell phones. Not that day. Between them, Jab and Kim were able to reach Jab’s son Abraham before Jab’s phone sunk.

At the time we were uncertain that the message had gotten through. I had been wearing my bilum (string-bag) around my neck and under one arm since Malasiga (I just forgot to take it off!) and Miring was able to reach in and retrieve my phone, but by then it had succumbed, even though it was in a sealed zip lock bag. We just had to wait and pray.

The large strip of plywood that usually sits in the bottom of the dinghy soon floated to the surface and Channele was able to use it as a flotation devise. As the outboard motor filled with water, it dragged the dinghy into a vertical position, with the bow standing about three feet above the water level (and yes, I did think of the movie Titanic, but not the violins). Becky spent part of the time standing on the propellor while several of us clung to the buoys at the front and the rope that the anchor was attached to. After it was all over, Becky realized that her trousers were torn up and that she had a scratch down one leg. Thankfully she hadn’t started bleeding heavily.

Those of us at the front of the boat remained unscathed, however the large blue and grey tarpaulin that had been covering our cargo just wouldn't leave us alone. Each of us spent time getting untangled from it as it drifted around under the dinghy.

Jaslyn, who is in grade four and who is very buoyant without a life vest, was floating off to my right and I had to keep grabbing her and pulling her back to the dinghy so she wouldn't drift off. She was tired and just didn't have it in her to hold on to the rope. I felt the same and put my right hand through the rope loop attached to the buoys. Time will tell whether the rope burn leaves a scar. Older sister Jasmine (grade 9) had been seasick before we reached Malasiga and was soon exhausted. We truly feared for her life and Miring and I spent time holding her against the dinghy before Becky was able to swim to us and take her to the plywood. Apart from Jasmine's plight, we have all admitted to having a great sense of peace throughout the ordeal.

Eventually all of the Mesa family, along with Jimmy & Kim, were congregated around the plywood, while Miring, Randy and I remained with the dinghy. It really was surreal floating there and very timeless. It seems like I had three things that kept me continuously occupied: pulling Randy back to the dinghy each time he started drifting, getting the water out of my nose and throat again each time the bow was hit by a large wave, and keeping my trousers on! Miring had visited a second hand shop the day before we travelled and came home with a comfortable pair of trousers for me for the trip. They proved to be slightly too big once we were in the water and I wondered if I was going to end up without them. Every few minutes I had to reach down and retrieve them again from around my ankles.

I remember looking up while we were floating and seeing a tern fly overhead, looking down at us. We actually made eye contact. I didn't think much of it at the time but it is also something that I will always remember. Miring had the same experience. It turns out that that tern, along with a few of its friends, led help to us. They don't usually fly around humans, but they did that day. An answer to our prayers. About three hours after we had gone in, I heard a motor. Randy heard it at the same time. I couldn't stop yelling "boat, boat, boat". By then, Jab and the rest were quite a distance from us, but I was determined that I'd make them hear above the noise of the waves. Our rescuers were a group of young fishermen who had simply followed the terns to what they thought was a school of fish. They were very shocked when they spotted the bow of our dinghy sticking up and saw the three of us holding on.

We were soon lugged over the side by some very panicked young men, and we still have the bruises to prove it! (Even now, a month on, I can still see one of the fingerprints of my rescuer when the light is right!). Two more dinghies soon followed. They were sent out to look for us. Jab & Kim had actually succeeded in getting the message across to Abraham, who had called Jab's cousin, Willie – the village councillor and a fellow believer—who was on the mainland, at Gagidu, with the disaster response team at the time! Another of God's fingerprints.

The plywood group were picked up and taken straight to Tami while we remained with the fishermen and collected floating cargo. One of my flipflops floated by and I bid it farewell. I didn't have it in me to make the effort to retrieve it and try to find the other. After a few minutes, we went back and towed Jab's dingy back upright. Two of our rescuers bailed it out as we pulled it behind. The 2nd disaster boat then arrived and the three of us were transferred to it and taken to the island.

All eleven of us came out of the ordeal relatively unscathed. We were all very sore the next day and none of us – with the exception of Chanelle and Jaslyn – had any interest in going anywhere near the water. Most of the food we had packed either sunk or was stolen by our young fishermen. Some we got back but it was too damaged to use. Nevertheless, we lacked for nothing. We were met by the villagers, as soon as we got to Tami, with dry clothes and lit fires to warm ourselves around. Our sense of deep gratitude has grown even more in the past couple of days upon learning that another dinghy also sunk near us at the same time and that one of its passengers didn't make it.

Remember the terns? God used them to lead help to us, but He also used dolphins. As the boats approached, they realized that there were several dolphins swimming around us continuously. None of us had seen them. We sank in a location that is notorious for sharks. Dolphins are natural enemies of sharks and will chase them away. God used them for our protection. Even when we weren't thinking of that danger at the time, He was taking care of us.

We had a quiet Saturday at the guest house on Tami and a fellowship meal that evening with the church. After worship on Sunday morning, the Water Police arrived from Lae in a large boat (thanks to Willie’s connections, and the Highland congregation’s assistance) to pick us up. A mechanic had managed to get Jab’s flooded outboard motor working again and Jab and a few of the villagers followed us back to Lae at a much slower pace. We were all worried about Jab, and at one point, during our journey back, I quietly prayed again for his safety. As I said, “amen”, Jasmine turned towards the back of the boat and said, “Wow, look at that!” There was a very large rainbow starting where Malasiga is and ending at Tami Island. We were all awestruck and humbled by His love and care for us.

With love in HIM,  
Ruth

**Sponsors:**

Fenwick church of Christ, P.O. Box 416, Fenwick, ON L0S 1C0 Canada  
([cofcfenwick@gmail.com](mailto:cofcfenwick@gmail.com))

Malaga church of Christ, P.O. Box 105. Ballajura, WA 6019 Australia  
([malaga@perthchurch.net](mailto:malaga@perthchurch.net))



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