**Ambon Pilgrimage report - September 2013**

The Gull Force annual pilgrimage did not get off to a very good start.

As arranged we met at 6am at Tullamarine airport, checked in awaited for our 9.00am flight. We waited and waited and eventually at 4pm our flight was cancelled due to technical difficulties. The passengers were then transported to various hotels in the area. We all had to be back at the airport at 4am for the flight to Bali the next morning. Unfortunately due to an injury sustained boarding the hotel transit bus, 2 travellers had to leave the tour.

We arrived in Bali on Wed 4th September and were met by Andre and Nyoman.

Because of the delayed flight we had an extra day in Bali so we took the opportunity to shop, sight-see and relax. We left Bali at 9.30pm Thursday night and travelled via Jakarta, Makassar and finally arrived in Ambon in the early morning of Friday 6th.  We were warmly greeted by May, Michael and Agus where each member of the group was presented with a clove lei and lots of hugs. A short bus trip took us to Laha village where an Australian War memorial stands. A short service, accompanied by the brass band was very well received. After the ceremony, morning tea was provided by the local villagers and there was plenty of time to mingle with the children ready and waiting to interact with us. Then a short stroll to Tawiri village where another monument is situated in the back yard of one of the homes. Another short service was followed by the laying of a wreath and poppies were reverently placed. We were then pleased to finally get the Mutiara hotel and have a rest.

 Saturday 7th was Ambon day and we had been invited to join in the celebrations. Lots of pomp and ceremony, and unfortunately lots of rain also. However that did not spoil the occasion for the Ambonese. A local TV station interviewed Des, Rob and Sue and that was later shown on the news. A free afternoon was enjoyed by everyone – it is certainly an advantage having May as our guide as she knows all the shops to go to!!!

The Ambon day festivities continued that evening at the Deputy Mayors residence, where we were invited for dinner. There we were entertained by musicians and bamboo pole dancing. After all the speeches it was time to dance, and dance we did…. We even taught the locals how to do the Nutbush. May had organized for us to sing Waltzing Matilda and Gandong, which we all performed quite admirably. We all had a really good time and Andre said the Deputy Mayor enjoyed having us there.

Our first stop on Sunday was at Tantui War Cemetery. Time was spent on quiet personal reflection and exploring the beautifully maintained grounds. A huge thank you to the small group of gardeners who do a magnificent job keeping this sacred place looking so beautiful. First timers of the tour commented on how serene and peaceful the area is. It was then back to the hotel to change into cars for the next adventure. Due to recent flooding and landslides, some of the roads are in a bad state and not suitable for buses. Our first stop was at Amahusu village where we saw sago being baked and we were also entertained by a small group of children playing musical instruments. After that we went to see cloves being made into many different objects that were eagerly purchased. Then it was off to Kilang village to assist Ambonesia foundation. There we helped serve food to the villagers and gave out bags filled with gifts to the children. Once again lots of happy smiling people and plenty of dancing…..even Nutbush again.

On Monday 9th we went to Passo to distribute food and gifts to 60 families who were displaced during the conflict and now live in the camp. The food parcels included rice, noodles, oil and other essential items. Ten boxes of clothing and other toiletries were left to be distributed by the camp organizers. It was heartwarming to see such joy on the faces of the people living there, and to know that we have helped in a small way. Thanks to all the people who donated goods for us to take. A whopping 250Kgs approx of donated goods were distributed to the needy in Ambon.

Our next stop was at Primary school 2 & 4 where we had planned to assist making garden beds and plant some vegetables. Due to the constant heavy rain we had to cancel that part of the project, but we were able to spend more time with the children and teachers.

 The 10th of September is a very special day as it is the date when the Corveteers landed on Ambon in 1945 to liberate the surviving POWs. We returned to the war cemetery at Tantui for a commemorative service which was very moving. The readings were delivered by various relations of POW’s. Wreaths and poppies were also laid. The Pattimura University choir sang beautifully and a lone bugler played the Last Post. After some personal reflection it was off to Kudamati for a service at the Australian monument. It was then time to unveil the new monument that has the names of all the soldiers who served on Ambon and were fortunate enough to return home to Australia. This was the culmination of much hard work by the committee to bring this to fruition and is a fitting memorial where future generations can pay their respects.

 The next day our first stop was the Martha Christina monument where we greeted by 8 local school children singing Waltzing Matilda. We then joined them in some Ambonese folk dancing and gave out small gifts. Next we made our way up the mountain to Leihari Primary School which we have supported for many years. Once again we were warmly greeted by the smiling, happy villagers. We had traditional Ambonese food for lunch and then spent time with the children. We presented the school with a Projector, screen and 2 printers which the entire school will benefit from.

We were invited to attend a performance by the Bamboowind Orchestra in the Ambon square as part of the Ambon day celebrations. The singing was lovely and the orchestra was fantastic. It was amazing to see what can be done with Bamboo.

Our last on Ambon was set aside for relaxation after a hectic few days. We traveled to Hunimua and then went by speedboat to the lovely Pombo Island for a BBQ and a swim. The food was amazing, beautiful fish, prawns and skewers of meat, potatoes and salad. After yet another heavy downpour the sun came out and we enjoyed swimming and some beach ball games. On the way back to the Mutiara we stopped at the natural hot springs for a quick dip. Back at the Mutiara we prepared for our last night celebration with the hotel staff who had looked after us so well during our stay. After a sumptuous feast and presentation of gifts the dancing started and we danced the night away. The next morning it was time to say goodbye to everyone. Lots of photos were taken, goodbyes were said and many people promised to return when possible. A short flight to Makassar where we had a few hours stopover – perfect for some shopping before another short flight to Bali. A day of relaxation and shopping was had in Bali before we flew out late on Saturday 14th back to Melbourne. Many old friendships were rekindled during this pilgrimage and new friendships were forged.

A big thank you to Sue and Rob for all their hard work and extra organizing of our itinerary due to the delays at the start, and thanks to all the travelers for their patience in some trying times.