

**A JOURNEY OF REMEMBRANCE**  
**THE NORTH WEST AERIAL PATROL**  
**NOW THE McKAY PATROL**  
**1974-1988**

The Presbytery of NQ has taken the decision to de-commission the flying function of the McKay Patrol (former NW Aerial Patrol). This is happening 50 years after its establishment.

This paper will just address the beginnings of the Aerial Patrol and its firm establishment through the 1980s during Rev Bob Heathwood's tenure. From 1988 onwards several flying padres were called to this ministry. They may like to add to this annal with their life experiences and stories.

Only a few weeks ago we said goodbye to a good friend, Rev Dr Dennis Robinson, who passed from us too soon.

Dennis was the great initiator who left an indelible mark on the life of the Methodist then the Uniting Church in Qld. His daughter Amanda Thomas has written an account of the beginnings which is attached.

We were together in NW Qld early in our ministries, Dennis and family in Cloncurry and Bob and family in Mt Isa. This was from 1974. Dennis was the patrol padre who was ably assisted by Brian Smith (who was later to become the National Director of Frontier Services).

During his time there Dennis was to be the initiator of the Aerial Patrol. He learnt to fly and was equipped with an aircraft leased to the church for \$1 a month by a grazier from Tara, Len Borchardt, who saw this as his dedication to the vocation and vision of Dennis. The aircraft: a Beechcraft Musketeer VH-DYA. (Still flying today!)

Later in the 1970's, Dennis was flying to cattle stations, mining and indigenous communities and remote townships over the vast NW of Qld. What would have taken weeks, was now happening in days as Dennis made regular contact with people all over the area. In this way Dennis was

able to touch people's lives with the ministry of Jesus, which always was his singular goal and purpose in life.

We shared that goal and purpose with Dennis and in 1980, we sensed the call to follow Dennis and the Synod of the Uniting Church of Qld agreed with that call: Rhonda to be the minister in Cloncurry and Bob to the Aerial Patrol. The church paid for Bob's flight training. He obtained a Private Pilot's Licence in January 1981. Rhonda preceded Bob, arriving with the children earlier that month and began settling in.

(Bob's son Warwick at the tender age of 7, loving the place where they lived at Amamoor in the beautiful Mary Valley, didn't sense that call when he said, "And don't tell me that God told you to go to Cloncurry, because you can say No to God". He was later to see Cloncurry as the place of his inspiration and the way to understanding indigenous culture).

The Aerial Patrol developed. Dennis became the Presbytery Minister in North Queensland and he said to Bob one day, that he now saw the patrol developed into what he dreamed it would be. Energetic, engaging and advancing because, where he had to split his work between congregation ministry and patrol ministry, time in patrol ministry was now fulsome. And Rhonda's ministry in the Cloncurry congregation was also fulsome as there was no more splitting of work.

Aerial Patrol ministry became even more intentional because of the concentrated effort that could now be given.

The aircraft sacrificially leased to the church, a 1965 Beechcraft Musketeer was a 4 seater, low wing, which really was not the right aircraft for the bush. Bob flew it until July 1985 amassing 1273 hours.

The right aircraft was a Cessna 182, high wing and great load carrier. The guidance to use this type of aircraft was provided by the Anglican Bishop of Carpentaria Rev Tony Hall-Matthews, who also operated a flying patrol ministry in NW Qld. The Cessna 182 was recognised as the best bush aircraft because of its STOL characteristics – short takeoff and landing.

The Home Mission Department of the church under the leadership of Rev Ron Elvery and ably assisted by Miss Brenda Burnett, his deputy, oversaw the funding to buy the latest aircraft, the Cessna 182Q VH-MJZ. Local graziers, the Brassingtons, were selling their Cessna and we were able to

secure it for \$68,000. The Beechcraft, eventually owned by the church, was bought by a syndicate in Mt Isa for \$15,000.

Uniting Church Frontier Services, the national body of the Church also participated in the support and caring oversight of the Patrol, promoting it to the people of Australia through their vast network.

In July 1985, at the Cloncurry airport, the Moderator, Rev Eric Moore led a service of dedication of the new aircraft, VH-MJZ. It is curious that his son Rev Bruce Moore, now our Moderator, should be in office at the time of the de-commissioning of the Aerial Patrol. This will take place at the Cloncurry airport on 12 December 2025, some 50 years since its inception by Rev Dr Dennis Robinson.

At the end of 1988, Bob left the Aerial Patrol, having flown the Cessna for 926 hours. It certainly was the right aircraft for the job and later padres added improvements to it such as bigger wheels, a re-paint, a larger engine, a 3 bladed prop and upgraded instruments.

The aerial patrol ministry arose out of prophetic inspiration. It captured the imagination of the Qld church which gave sacrificially to it functioning. One notable expression of its development was through the vision of the late Jim Smallbone who with other inspiring leaders, led the Uniting Church Safari movement. He asked Bob at a Synod meeting if he could bring a coachload of our people into the patrol area. This brought city people to the outback. Of course, this was encouraged. Out of this came many safaris into the area and a sharing of the vision and much financial support that helped us buy VH-MJZ.

Cloncurry is the place of many beginnings such as QANTAS and the RFDS. Revs John Flynn and Fred McKay are 'giants of the faith' who led the church and inspired many of us who followed in their footsteps.

It is sad that it will be the place where a ministry of vision like the Aerial Patrol sees its de-commissioning. But let us praise the Lord that for 50 years we were able reach out in mission this way.

Mrs Rosemary Robinson, and  
Revs Bob and Rhonda Heathwood  
08 December 2025

# **SOME RECOLLECTIONS FROM AMANDA THOMAS (DAUGHTER OF DENNIS ROBINSON) WRITTEN ON 6 DECEMBER 2025**

Mum (Rosemary) mentioned that the Northwest Patrol is closing and they have asked you to speak. It's sad to hear this legacy has come to an end, but Dad talked about this during the recording of his life stories and I thought you might like to have what he said:.

## **Excerpt from Cloncurry Days**

So basically, I operated the circuit from Julia Creek, Mary Kathleen and Cloncurry and once a month I would be at Julia Creek and every 2<sup>nd</sup> week at Mary Kathleen, this was during the time of month balling and the Anglicans had given up but we were providing services there.

Ron Smith was the superintendent of the district and he was really excellent, Rev. Ron Smith and Barbara. It was about 1975/76 that a guy who was a wheat farmer on the Darling Downs, Len Borchart, had bought a plane to fly between South Australia and his property "Lentara" on the Darling Downs. He then decided he was going to stay and live on the Darling Downs so he realised he didn't need his plane anymore. So, he said to Ron, "Look, you know, do you want to try an Aerial Patrol? You can have my plane for a \$1 a month for the first year and then you can buy it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year if it works."

So, the aerial patrol was born. I learned how to fly and Roy and Beryl Werner trained me in Mt Isa, I learned the theory and passed the exams and the medicals. Harvey Sutton was the medical Doctor, so it wasn't too difficult to pass the medicals and the theory and probably beyond 1977 I was able to fly. And so the patrol was both a vehicle and a plane patrol. Around about that time, this young guy Brian Smith, presented himself to the Queensland conference and asked if he could become a lay pastor. The only place they thought they could send him was to be a mate for me in Cloncurry. So that's the way it worked.

In 1977 the Uniting Church came into being. The Synod meeting was in Cloncurry and we had it around desks in the church and one portion of it in Mt Isa. That was the last synod of the Methodist conference.

Ron Smith was inducting Brian in Julia Creek during the wet season and so I headed off to Julia Creek in the land cruiser I had bought. The road was pretty badly cut up and I ended up getting so hopelessly bogged that the only way I could stop the mosquitoes eating me was to cover myself with mud. The trouble with that is that when it dries it tears all your hair out but at least it does stop the snouts of the mosquitoes from getting through to you. I had tried things like oil and a lot of other things I'd had in the cabin of the truck but the mud was the only thing that worked.

So I'm walking back towards Cloncurry when this grater driver comes towards me and I said to him "Do you reckon you can pull out my truck?" I had put the rifle down and my arial patrol license as I thought if they found my body they ought to know who it belongs to. So he pulled me out and I drove back to Cloncurry. Ron Smith arrived by train having inducted Brian in Julia Creek to the eastern section of the northwest patrol. So I spent an hour in the shower loosening this mud and getting it off.

What I'm doing now is telling stories, because Bernie, George, Wayne (George's son) and I used to go fishing every 6 months or so in Normington catching Barramundi. I remember we were camping on the other side of the bridge on the way to Kurumba and it was a lot rougher then and you could basically camp anywhere. We caught all these fish and filleted them and put them in the fridge and blow me down if they didn't all go off so we lost the lot.

These guys, when we started the Blue Nursing service, went up to the Gulf and caught a groper bought it back down and Boots cooked it in his ovens and we sold groper as part of the meal we put on to launch the blue nursing service.

If you wanted to go on holidays you had to get out before Christmas because the rain would come almost on dot and the locals knew when the rain was going to come and they would say to me 'if you want to go you've gotta go now', so we sorted out our money - it wasn't as easy as it is today, you had to take it all with you -so we sorted out our money and headed for the coast. We finally got through to the coast, all the road was dirt road all

the way to Hughenden, from there is was 'well made' dirt road. On the way back we got to almost Charters Towers and Katische had dirtied her disposable nappy so I'm taking it away to put under a rock, I bent down to put it under the rock and blow me down, I looked down and I'd stood on a snake. It sort of whipped up and bit me through my thong and foot. So I went back up and I said to Rose "what do you do for a snake bite?" and she said "oh get in the car, I don't know what you do for a snake bite" and I said "well I've just been bitten", so I got a bit of rope and tied it around my leg and created a tourniquet, and we're driving toward Charters Towers and Rosemary is driving and we hit bump and the bonnet flies up. The car had hit a kangaroo in it's earlier life, and so I get out and tie the thing down with the other end of the clothes line and we are getting along a bit further and a policeman comes along and says "what are you doing?" and we told him and he said "get in my car and I'll take you to the hospital" and I said I can't I'm tied to this one (being the clothes line), so anyhow he said I'll give you an escort to the hospital. So here we are, siren blaring, I'm following this police car, hot in pursuit. So I spent about 6-8hrs in hospital while they monitored my progress cause I didn't know what sort of snake it was, anti venom wasn't really a thing back then. Rose had caught the train back and it was one of these trains with a guard van on the back so that's where the passengers sat. She had my tucker box, \$5 to get from the railway station to the Manse. Anyhow, she finally got home just before I did, I caught the next train with the car on it, to get through the mud water. They are all part of our stories of trying to survive in the scrub out at Cloncurry.

Now I will give you a couple of stories on the plane.

After I got this plane going and I became a bit confident in it, we had an engineer in Mt Isa by the name of Bill and we'd had a bit of trouble with the fuel cock and so he replaced the fuel cock. And we are getting out, I had Katische in the back and the local minister and we were heading to Mornington Island with a couple of missionary people on board, we get over gunpowder at 8,000 feet and blow me down if I didn't change the fuel from the left tank to right which you do every half hour and the engine stops so I pushed the gnome down and got it started again. I looked around for an airfield to land on if I needed to, anyhow I did that a 2<sup>nd</sup> time and it stopped a 2<sup>nd</sup> time so I thought I'm not going to get to Mornington island on one tank of fuel so we headed back to Mt Isa airport and we landed back at the airport and I said to Bill "there's something wrong" and he said "there's

nothing wrong with it” and I said “well you come for a fly and check it”, and what he’d done is he jammed an O-Ring up the pipe so that when I turned the fuel cock onto the tank it didn’t flow and of course in the checks you don’t leave it on long enough to have the engine cut out, so that was the deal and one of the missionary guys said “I was so proud of my bowel control”, I hadn’t thought about it at all but it was obviously a bit of a dangerous deal.

Another plane story, I fly to Mary Kathleen and the runway there you have to run up a hill (the runway way runs up a hill and jumps off the top of a hill). Anyhow I’d fly to Mary Kathleen and do the service there and I’ve gotta race back to Ernestina Downs which is halfway to Julia Creek to do a baptism. So, I’m flying back to Cloncurry when the engine starts to run really rough (makes engine noises), I’m thinking I’m only at 5,000 feet so I haven’t got much to play with. So I head over to the road, thinking if I’m going to have to land this thing I’m going to land it on a road even if the road has got trucks and cars on it. Anyhow I go through the checks, CMPFISCH and when I got to the switches and I switched them on, one of the magnetars had thrown a cog, so I when I switched that maggie off the thing picked up so I thought I won’t trust my luck, I’ll get back to Cloncurry. So then I picked up Brian’s 4WD because it had more petrol in it than my car did. So I’m getting out within 5kms within Ernestina Downs when the damn thing stops. So out on the road I am with a jerry can in my hand and a brief case in one hand with a clergy collar on and I get picked up and this guy takes me to Ernestina Downs and he waited until I’d baptised the child, and then we got some fuel and went back to the car. Brian said to me, “well I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the gauge didn’t work” and so that was an exciting bit for that day.

I need to tell you a couple of more stories, when we came back from America, (I haven’t told you we went to America yet), we went to America prior to 1977, we left Katische and Amanda with Richard and Muriel Bardon at Curlulu Station and we went to Schulers Pastors Conference. I’d met Schuler in Sydney, Rose and I had gone down there and met him and he said ‘why don’t you come over to my pastors conference’, and it was while I was there that I really discovered something about operating a church. The minister doesn’t do everything, he that he equips other people to do the

ministry. And so I learned of Bethel and that ministry is for everyone. I picked these courses up and I bought them back and I also bought other ideas back. One of them was a bus ministry. So we organised enough buses from the patrol and from what we'd bought to have one go from the north, south, east and west with a bus driver and a bus captain and they brought kids in for Sunday school. We had about 70 to 80 kids in Sunday school and we sought to involve the parents in everything. So that was when the bus ministry got off the ground.

One of my projects was to build churches in Burketown and Kurumba and so with Allan Shurvou who was the Shire Clark of Burketown we managed to build a church in Burketown where I put a fence around the church and a cross, and Dad bought the material for the cross. I took the cross to Burketown on a couple of trailer wheels. I got permission from the police station to take this box trailer and I had a matchbox stuck on the cross. I had a tow bar on the long end of it and I towed the thing from Cloncurry to Burketown.

We built a church in Kurumba, it was built along the lines of the shop next door. So we managed to get the plans of the shop next door and then we organised out of cans to have the shed built and then we organised to have it built on land in Kurumba that had been flood invaded during the 74 floods. So they gave it to the church. That was the first church in Kurumba and I understand it's still operating there today even though the Catholics don't want to worship there the rest of them seem to handle it well.

My best contribution to Cloncurry was helping develop the friendly heart of the Great North West. I painted the water tower 'the Friendly Heart of the Great Northwest' with the symbol. I had the symbol developed and probably for the last 30yrs they've been using various parts of that phrase 'the friendly heart of the great north west', I still think they use 'Friendly heart of the northwest' they've dropped off a bit of it.

In 1979, I went patrolling full time and we lived in the mission house. We bought the mission house up near Jesse Bridson's with money that was left over from the sale of John Flynn's manse when he established the Flying Doctors service from Cloncurry to Julia Creek and he was a minister in Cloncurry for a time. So when he sold up this money became available and I bought the house for \$11,000 and it had 2 blocks and it was a really neat little house and we lived there while the new minister came to down and

took over the parish. He found it really quite difficult, I wasn't involved in the town but I was sort of involved in the station. So that's sort of the story of our Cloncurry deal.

What I learned was that a minister's task is not to do all the ministry, you need to be around but you don't need to do everything. You need to equip the people. So I taught the people 'Bethel' and I also taught the people that ministry is for everyone and on one occasion we managed to equip the people to visit the hospital and they visited everybody in the hospital and then they actioned requests like feeding dogs or checking houses or things like that to serve the people and that's really the name and game of the Uniting Church in Cloncurry that actually morphed from a Methodist church to a Uniting Church in 1977. So that's the story. The next part of our story is our time at Logan.

*I typed the above directly from voice recordings we had Dad do a few years ago, so it's very rough and it's literally 'word for word'.*

Blessings

# **SOME AERIAL PATROL STORIES**

## **ONE OR TWO TOLD AT THE DE-COMMISSIONING**

### **12 DECEMBER 2025**

#### **Some of Bob's stories**

##### *Landing on the racecourse*

VH-DYA had a rough running engine a few times. With 3 on board I was heading from Cloncurry north and over Quamby racecourse it happened. I switched on the electric back up fuel pump and the engine picked up revs but I took no risk of it failing too. So I landed on the main straight at the racecourse. We were picked up later. The problem: a faulty mechanical fuel pump.

##### *Aborted landing*

Another rough running engine occurred as I left Stanbroke station near Dajarra with Rhonda and the station cook on board. I switched magnetos from 1 to 2 and realised one was failing. I didn't want to panic them. Just said I'd forgotten something and was landing. Again, a magneto cog had sheered off and the engineer from Mt Isa came and fixed it.

##### *Lost airstrip*

The Secretary of Frontier Services and the nurse from The Monument were on board as we flew to Julia Creek for a conference. I planned to be on the ground after the flight back 10 minutes before last light. I noticed a smoke haze and did not realise this would reduce the light. Couldn't find the strip in fading

light so decided to land on a station road. Passengers advised and worried, took precautions and landed safely. Spent hours in the dark waiting to be found. Had to report to CASA.

### *That darn motorbike*

I visited Urandangi just before Christmas and was asked to be Santa Claus when it got dark. Go out of town on the motor bike and ride it in. Got dressed, it wouldn't start. +40\* temperature and dressed in a Santa suit. Couldn't kick start it. A truck load of indigenous people drove passed laughing because I had taken the suit off and was dressing in a hurry. Finally got the d.... thing started. Rode into town and the kids yelled we know who you are!!

### *Any water in the dams*

I buzzed the homestead to let them know I was landing. The Nardoo boys picked me up but couldn't stay. They needed to check bore dams. How long would it take to drive around. Most of the day. I offered to fly them round. We were back on the ground 40 minutes later. Edge later asked me to do his wedding.

### *The Bush Christening?*

Planned a baptism at a station north of Boulia and asked they invite their neighbours. Instead of doing just one baptism, the neighbours rolled up with their kids. While I was talking to and preparing each family in turn the kids got very dirty playing in the paddock. When I came to the baptisms the kids were very dishevelled.

### *He slipped through my arms*

I'd do monthly services in the church at Karumba. Baptism at Karumba. Had married the couple very pregnant a month before. Had planned a baptism over time of Moderator Doug Brandon's visit. He sat in front seat. Baby boy very plump. Passed him to me. Dressed in satin. Hot and slippery. Lost him. Grabbed him by the neck. Parents pushed him back up my arms. Baptised OK. Doug just smiled.

### *Seafood riches*

Visited the staff at Raptis Seafood Company at Karumba. They donated slabs of frozen prawns and barramundi. I'd arrive home and we'd provide travellers who called with amazing meals. How come in dry Cloncurry we get these luxuries?

### *Will it fly?*

Mt Isa minister and wife, Graham and Annette Whybird wanted to take provisions to Mornington Is. Loaded plane to gunnels. Hot day. Thin air. Took the longest runway. Rolling, rolling....when is this old plane going to lift off? Finally, at the very end. We were sweating!

### *Baptised in the same creek*

Once I was visiting a family north west of Dajarra. George, the father told me that he was baptised by Padre Les McKay in a dry creek-bed beside Ashover station. The Hacon family were droving cattle to Ashover and Les met George's dad nearby. Les was asked if he would baptise George, the new-born baby. Without hesitation Les said yes. When asked when, Les said "let's do it now"! They went to the creek a short distance away, under an old gum tree and celebrated the sacrament there and then.

George now had a son and it was agreed that we'd baptise him in the same spot in the dry creek bed under the same gum tree. Many family and friends gathered and even the Moderator Ray Hunt shared a wonderful moment.

### *Chicken runs through dinner*

Visits to the very remote stations were made as often as possible. There was this station over the NT border just south of the Gulf of Carpentaria coastline. In Burketown there a Josephite Catholic nun. She was a legend and known and loved by people all over that country. She had been to this station and gave me a 'heads-up'. She was not sure about the hygiene level as the kitchen and the dining-room were corrugated iron sheds with dirt floors.

Armed with this knowledge, I ventured out over the most remote part of north-west Qld, found the station and made my way to the homestead. I was met by the wife and invited to lunch. The men were out mustering.

Sue took me into the shed used for cooking and dining and sat me on a long table with forms for seats. All the warnings by Sister Joan surfaced. I looked into the dingy kitchen blackened by smoke and could see a cauldron over the fire bubbling with what seemed like corned meat and vegies. She brought me out a plate with corned meat, potatoes and cabbage. "The cooking should have killed all germs", I said to myself.

Here I sat on my own with her talking to me from the kitchen. There were chooks in the yard and it must have been a habit to feed them scraps at the table and it was not long before they were around my feet obviously waiting for some tasty morsel. One chook jumped up the form opposite me and spied my plateful.

Just then the wife spotted the chook and rushed out to shoo it away. The chook ran along the form to the other end of the table, she kept shooing it, and it jumped up on the table, perambulated around the table and headed my way. As I watched all this I thought, 'Surely it will run outside now'. But no – it kept coming my way and ran through my plate skidding on the corned meat and scattering the corned meat, potatoes and the cabbage all over the table.

The wife came up and apologised profusely as she picked up the scattered food returning it to my plate for me to continue eating!! And there I sat remembering Sister Joan's advice! To be polite, I did and never suffered any ill-effects. The chook was the topic of conversation for all my future visits. Was it still alive? Had it run through anyone else's dinner? In fact, the chook helped in breaking down barriers. I was made very welcome on every subsequent visit and was able to help people on that station through some difficult times.

### *Opening Hell's Gate*

Another form of support came to me from the RFDS in Mt Isa.

They sought my services as a chaplain and provided me with coverage when I was flying, advising the stations of my flight plans in case there were any wanting to see me. My departure calls always included a call to VJI. My good friend, Frank Sturges, the manager, was most obliging and helpful. He welcomed me into his home and we enjoyed many an evening together recounting stories of funny experiences.

We used to laugh about the time that Father Flynn, Sister Joan and I were invited to open Hell's Gate. Hell's Gate is a road-house near the Qld/NT border and apparently got its name from

the gap in the hills through which early travellers passed. Sometimes they were ambushed by the local aboriginal tribe.

The opening ceremony was a big affair and they came from miles around. The airstrip ran right up to the roadhouse. When we arrived, the locals were well lubricated. We stepped forward to the 44 gallon drum which doubled as our lectern and led the service. The singing was loud and out of tune, and one bloke kept interrupting and had to be removed. Frank and I had many a laugh as we recalled the events of that day.

### *Wedding at Burketown*

Frank had said that he would always try to help me if he could. One day I had to put him to the test. From way up in Burketown I requested a wedding ring.

Here's how it happened. An Aboriginal lady and a skinny old whiteman known as 'the water rat' requested me to marry them. I agreed and on my next visit I came ready to do the job. Except I had forgotten to bring the wedding ring. All she wanted was a plain gold band like my own. I had let her try it on and it was perfect fit. I arrived on the Friday to do the pre-wedding paperwork and realised to my horror that I'd come without the ring. So I got on the RFDS radio and asked for Frank. Would he do me a favour? Depends, what it is, padre! A wedding ring? Leave it with me padre and I'll see what I can do! That afternoon, I flew to Mornington Is for a visit to return on Sat afternoon for the wedding. No one knew my dilemma, no one that is, except all the people with their radios turned on all over the country. Hopefully, no one in Burketown would let the cat out of the bag.

I arrived on time for the wedding and heard that the RFDS QueenAir was arriving in Burketown for the clinic about the time I

was to start the service. I prayed they had the ring and that the couple didn't know the problem I was having. They all gathered at the church, the bride and groom without shoes, and we waited a while. Soon dust stirred around the corner and it was the Police landcruiser. The constable called me over and handed me a package. I unwrapped it and handed the wrapping and the case back to the policeman and told him to tell no one. I walked back into the church, conducted the service, the groom fitted the ring and to this day, no one knows. So, you can see how thankful I am to the RFDS.

### *In the National Geographic*

RFDS Frank called me one day and said he had photographer from National Geographic magazine with him who wanted to know of any interesting characters he talk to. He dubbed me in. Took him in plane to Lawn Hill station where I was to baptise the manager's baby girl.

This guy moved around during the service. A shot here a shot there! Then when the service was over, he got us to pose at the edge of the hill with the plane in the background.

Years went by, then Frank called me and said buy the January 1986 edition of National Geographic. Look at page 32.

### GREEN GINGER NIP (A poem someone handed me)

The heat was oppressive, the blow-flies hummed loud,  
the whirly-winds blew up the dust;  
and the plane that the young outback padre flew  
was the colour of reddish brown dust.

Three Sundays the little church out in the bush  
with earth and the sky slept in union;  
but the fourth Sunday woke with a bustle and stir  
for the once-a-month Holy Communion.

The padre, earnest and solemn of face,  
his sermon rehearsed and amended,  
flew the battered old plane o'er the featureless plain,  
as the morning sun slowly ascended.

He bumpily landed and bounced to a halt,  
on a runway t'was hard to define;  
as he stepped from the plane he was gripped by a thought:  
he'd forgotten the Communion wine.

The people all waited in chattering groups,  
while the children played noisily around,  
as the padre approached and without more ado  
his dilemma began to expound.

A young lad came forward, a freckled-face kid;  
“please sir, my dad’s got some home brew;  
we live just a little way off from the church,  
I could go get a bottle for you.”

“Why, thankyou, young Tom, that is really most kind,”  
off he went at a pretty fast clip,  
and returned very quickly with, clenched in his hand  
a bottle of green ginger nip.

The service proceeded, the wine duly blessed,  
was passed round the small congregation,  
but the potency of that nefarious nip  
was the subject of much speculation.

For ‘twas said of that brew that a thimble or two,  
would lay an oxen out in his stable;  
so proceedings took on a more boisterous note  
as the cup was returned to the table.

The last hymn was warbled with much voice and pep,  
though some reached the 'Amen' far too soon,  
with some of the singers a bit out of step  
and most of them quite out of tune.

The organist's playing, so slow and sedate,  
took on a more rollicking beat;  
as the blessing pronounced, the people arose  
to emerge once again in the heat.

The bottle of Communion 'nip' had been large,  
the number of celebrants small;  
the padre sighed as he picked up the cup -  
"tis my duty to finish it all."

'twas late when the little plane started its run  
and shakily climbed in the blue,  
and that padre cannot recall to this day  
how he sat in the cockpit and flew.

And as he still flies in the heat or the rain,  
there's one thing he'll always opine -  
the very first thing he packs into his bag  
is the Holy Communion wine!

This anonymous poem written by Joy Collis was given to Padre Bob Heathwood during his posting in Cloncurry (1981 - 88) so that he'd know what to do if ever he found himself in a similar situation.

Rev Bob Heathwood  
08 December 2025