

In the Face of Tragedy

Ex-Missionary Wife Builds New Life

By Lois Tenke

A soft-spoken Centerport housewife has quietly picked up the threads of a broken life after taking part in one of the most dramatic missionary ventures of the century.

She is Mrs. Walter Liefeld, former missionary and widow of Peter Fleming, one of five missionaries slain by Indians in the jungles of Ecuador in 1956. The young missionaries were speared to death and their plane stripped by the Auca Indians, with whom they had hoped to make a friendly contact. Had the mission not ended in tragedy, they would have been the first white men to venture successfully into an Auca settlement. (Another widow, Mrs. Elisabeth Elliot, her baby brother Valerie, and the slain missionary pilot's sister, Rachel Saint, returned several years later, accomplishing what the young men had set out to do.)

"So much has happened in those seven years since I was in Ecuador," Mrs. Leifeld said, recalling the stunning experience. "Forgive me if I sound confusing."

Cradling her 4-month old daughter, Beverly, in her arms (she also has a son, David, 3), the petite blonde recalled what her life has been since the incident, commenting on the surviving widows as well.

"I went back once, a year later, just to settle my affairs and distribute my possessions among the other missionaries. But I didn't stay on to work. I just couldn't at the time," she said. Mrs. Liefeld was 23 when the incident occurred, the youngest of the wives.

"My husband was in Ecuador two and a half years before me. When he came home for a brief stay, we were married and I went back with him. We had grown up together in Seattle. We both attended the University of Washington in Seattle, in fact."

Aware of Dangers

She said she was fully aware of he [sic] dangers facing her husband and the others who planned to go on the ill-fated mission. "I knew about his plans to go there. I also knew of the possibility of his getting killed."

Mrs. Liefeld had worked with her husband in Ecuador only a year and a half before he died. They had no children. "We were settled in a very small out-station within friendly Indian

territory. Here, my husband taught the Quichua Indians the Bible. He spoke Spanish and the Quichua language. I did medical work among the Indians.” The other missionaries and their wives were kept busy in similar stations of their own.

“Thinking back, the whole experience was a very humbling one. We had nothing that resembled a modern convenience. Our little house was made of palms. I can’t really complain about anything now,” she said, casting a warm glance around her modest, comfortable living room. “In this country, we have so much that we’re not very grateful for.”

When she returned home from Ecuador for good, she eased her personal loss in a number of ways. “I worked as a receptionist in a doctor’s office on the West Coast and at the same time, worked among teenagers in summer camps and churches. I also accepted speaking engagements in behalf of the Plymouth Brethren, our...

[Image: Mrs. Walter Fleming and two children, Beverly and David. Caption: LOOKS BACK WITHOUT ANGER. Mrs. Walter Liefeld, widow of Peter Fleming, a missionary who was killed by the Auca Indians in Ecuador in 1956, holds her two children of her second marriage, Beverly, 4 months, and David, 3.]

... religious group.” The speaking engagements took her cross-country to the East Coast where she eventually returned to work at Shelton College in Ringwood, N. J.

It was at Shelton College that she met her present husband. “He was president of the school’s alumni association,” she said with a serene smile. “He knew all about me I guess, because his mother had heard me speak.”

Mr. Liefeld, also a member of the Plymouth Brethren is a Bible teacher who does pastoral work for the Gospel Chapel in Sea Cliff. (The Liefelds were Glen Cove residents for several years before moving to Centerport a little more than a year ago.) Mr. Liefeld, she added proudly, is also working towards a doctorate in Hellenistic literature at Columbia University in Manhattan.

The other widows (none of whom have remarried), Mrs. Liefeld said, have all returned to missionary posts in Ecuador. Mrs. Marjorie Saint and Mrs. Marylou McCully are currently on furloughs in New Jersey, from posts in Quito, Ecuador. “I saw Mrs. McCully recently and I’ll be visiting with her again soon as well as Mrs. Saint.” Mrs. Barbara Youdorian, who came from Michigan originally, has also continued mission work with the Jivato Indians, a tribal people once known for their head-hunting prowess. Mrs. Elliot has written three books on her experiences.

Mrs. Liefeld understands only too well the meaning of the continuing crusade among the primitives.

“We were sent there to tell the Indians about life through Jesus Christ, our Lord... how they could receive forgiveness for their sins. I believe this with all my heart. That’s why I went.”

The tragedy, she said, gave her her first real opportunity to depend on God. “When this thing happened, I was truly dependent on Him. I didn’t have any strength left myself. I fully realized the peace and joy in knowing God as a father. He has not failed me.”