



# THE CHALLENGE

January 2022

## Friends In Action’s 30th Anniversary! Celebrating with “God Stories”

Celebrate With Us Through This Special 30th-Anniversary Issue Of *The Challenge!*

Throughout 2022, we will share with you our favorite “God Stories,” tales of faithfulness, kindness, miracles, and provision only our God could ever orchestrate. We hope they result in praise to the One who is at work in our midst and inspire all of us to even greater victories in Jesus.

### The Hewa Airstrip: God’s Miraculous Provision (2002)

#### MIKE BUTLER, FIA PAPUA NEW GUINEA FIELD LEADER

This story is dear to my heart because it speaks of God’s faithfulness and the power of prayer. We were asked to build an airstrip in the mountain highlands. To help you understand how remote these tribes are, the only way to get there is by boat the first 320 miles, then by road another 900+ miles to a little town with an existing airstrip, and then by helicopter into the tribal region. This new airstrip would be “out there,”

but that is precisely why it was needed—for the Gospel to reach where it had never been heard before.

The airstrip would be a massive undertaking requiring two 20-foot containers packed full of equipment like saws, 2 skid steers, a tractor, a backhoe, tools, and a mower. The massive weight would require a large helicopter to navigate



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FIA skid steer and a shipping container



Mike hooking a line to smaller helicopter



Chinook helicopter



Chinook carrying container

to an elevation of 7,000 feet. The only helicopter in the area was a small one owned by New Tribes Mission for small supply drops and medical trips.

## Prayers for Chinook Chopper

We had heard that there was a helicopter company that serviced a gold mine in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and also served Shell Oil. They had a huge twin-rotor military-grade Chinook helicopter, but it was \$12,000 a day for use, \$4,500 an hour to operate, and then fuel costs. Although Shell ok'ed the pilot to transport our containers more than a year in advance of the project start date, every time we tried to schedule, Shell wouldn't release the pilot to help. We had a team of volunteers from all across America slated to construct this airstrip and time was running out before they arrived—3 days to be exact! Everyone was praying. We just didn't know what to do.

Things got even worse when the Chinook pilot called to say that even if he was sanctioned to come, there was another issue. "I can't land at the local commercial airport to refuel. If I try, I'll blow the roof off the terminal. I need a footprint of 100 feet long and 75 feet wide to set down. On top of that, it takes 45 minutes to shut down and 45 minutes to start up, in addition to refueling time. Think of the expense," he told us by phone. We kept praying.

The pilot informed us that the gold mine had a refueling pad where he could plug in and refuel without shutting down. I told him the lady that managed the pad refused access to many other requests. He advised me to call the gold mine manager directly. If he was willing, she would support his decision to allow access. It was a long shot, but we kept praying.

I called the gold mine manager, but he wasn't there. I had to leave for Hewa to get things prepared for the soon-arriving team. I had only a satellite phone and the NTM helicopter on standby waiting until the mine manager returned. We waited for 3 days not having a clue how any of this was supposed to happen. But people kept praying.

## God's Favor Makes a Way

The morning before the day the team was arriving, I received a call from the helicopter pilot asking if I had called the mine manager. I told them I had not as he was due back that day. He said, "She heard we were doing operations in the area and volunteered the helipad for your refueling!" I ran to my computer to email (through the Sat phone) the incredible news to a slew of FIA prayer warriors that I knew were praying. When I got on, I discovered an email from the gold mine manager saying, "We heard what you are



doing, and we want to be a part of that. We are scheduling the pilot and paying for the fuel!" What a kind God we serve and how He abundantly answered our prayers!

But we weren't done crying out for help. Far from it because that night it began to rain. When it rains out here, there will be impassable fog. The whole mission might be shut down. We kept praying.

**But we weren't done crying out for help... We kept praying!**

The pilot called the next morning (the team was arriving that afternoon) and said it was a go! An NTM pilot picked me up in his small helicopter, and we set off to meet the Chinook at the mine helipad. I was told that each container could weigh no more than 17,000 pounds, but with no scale to weigh anything, I used my best guess. The Chinook pilot dropped a 350-foot cable and pulled the containers up about 4 feet and then dropped down again. Assuming the weight was too much, I thought I had messed up the entire mission. Seeing the concern on my face, the loadmaster told me the pilot was checking for weight. Then just like that, the Chinook took off like the load was light as a feather carrying both containers and a skid steer at a 45-degree angle through the sky in 3 trips! It was an amazing sight to see!

We were rejoicing but the next thing I knew, the Chinook pilot was radioing back that the fog was too thick to drop the supplies. He requested the NTM helicopter come to guide him in. We kept praying! As the NTM helicopter led the way, the fog was immense. Then all of a sudden, God parted the fog and there was a huge circle of blue right over the drop site! It took less than 2 hours to have everything in place!

## The Gospel Spreads

My "God Story" doesn't end with the successful completion of the supply drop or airstrip. What God is truly accomplishing through any of FIA's projects is reaching people with the Gospel. Through the work on the airstrip, I met two villagers from the highlands who I'll never forget. The men, named Sebin and Wass, seemed to take to me right away. Sebin had come from a village 7-days hike away, and he was from a different language group from the other villagers. Sebin lived right there in that area, where they both were practicing witchdoctors.

Over the course of the airstrip build, we had many chances to talk and interact. Sebin and Wass became the first believers from the Hewa airstrip area, and they both were baptized in 2011! Sebin decided to return to his home village to take the Gospel to his language group and people...my "God Story" continues still. ■



Mike with Sebin and Wass



Hewa Airstrip Site



Baptism

### Continue Celebrating With Us!

The March issue of *The Challenge* and [facebook.com/FriendsInAction](https://www.facebook.com/FriendsInAction) has even more "God Stories" to inspire you!

And mark your calendar to join us in person during our **30th Anniversary Community Day Party on May 14, 2022** (FIA's Middletown, PA headquarters), or rejoice with us at one of FIA's Annual Mission Banquets (October 28-Lebanon Valley Bible Church, or October 29 The Sheraton Harrisburg-Hershey Hotel).

# Through The Years:

## A SCRAPBOOK OF FAVORITE FIA PHOTOS

Flip through the FIA photo album as we remember the people and places that touch our hearts and inspire our work. Here are a handful of “keepers” our staff count as favorites!



### Oldie But Goodie!

An all-time anniversary favorite looks back to where it all began. In 1991 in his California living room, Jerry Smyth and five other men associated with New Tribes Mission saw an ever-increasing need for construction projects to assist missionaries in areas lacking infrastructure. With NTM’s input, FRIENDS of NTM was created as a separate corporation and subsidiary of NTM in 1992. The name changed to Friends in Action International in April of 2000.



### An African Sunset

In Africa, this beautiful sunset developed over the desert plain at the end of a day spent welding at FIA’s base camp in an area where less than .02% have heard the Gospel. All of a sudden a donkey pulling a cart came into view when the colors were most vivid. God spoke to my heart saying He was there to show me how simple and beautiful our lives can be when we just trust Him and follow His leading in our lives.

– ANDY BACHERT, FIA’S CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER



### All Kinds of People

I love this picture of the volunteer team who helped build The Amanda Brandt Memorial Playground for the Rama children in Nicaragua in 2019. It reminds me that God uses people from all walks of life, all ages, and all ability levels to accomplish His work. These men continued a legacy of service by bringing great joy to many children learning about Jesus for the first time.

– TIM JOHNSTON, FIA DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT



### Raising Up Leaders

Anna was one of the first students I taught at the University of Divine Grace in Moldova when I was asked to speak on church leadership. Currently, Anna and her husband serve with Operation Mobilization, encouraging church leaders and supplying support to pastors in difficult and discouraging situations. What a blessing to see students now actively using their education in ministry!

– PAUL BROSEY, FIA WORK TEAM COORDINATOR





## More Than Just Talk

We are thankful to have a part in the Big Bay Water Project to help bring water and a chance to hear about Jesus to the NiVan villagers. This picture is a favorite because it shows how this project is relational, bringing physical, but most importantly spiritual, help. We are grateful for the opportunity to be a blessing to the people of Vanuatu and to share the salvation message of Jesus Christ.

—LEVI & JENN PITMAN, FIA FIELD LEADERS TO VANUATU



## It Takes a Team

I love this picture taken more than a decade ago in Bolivia. It shows that it takes a team to get the job done. No one can do it by themselves. Dozens of volunteers partnered with national pastors to build The Indigenous Training center which is still used today to equip hundreds of national leaders to reach countless more villagers with the Gospel.

— GARY FERCH, FIA BOLIVIA FIELD LEADER



## Blasted From Behind!

When working with teams overseas, the Lord brings the most unlikely characters together to unite in a common goal. Through the process of drilling wells and working to provide water in those communities, a bond is forged that only comes from spending time together in the trenches. All those who came to drill realized that God had so much more He intended for us to experience than to just provide water. God continually blew us all away with what He did through the work He let us be part of.

— MATT DURKEE, FIA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



## That's What It's All About

I love this picture of a villager in Papua New Guinea stopping to ponder scenes from the chronological teaching of the Bible. After learning about original sin and sacrifice, she came forward to take a closer look. Even though I can't see her face, I imagine her grappling with understanding her need for a Savior and the perfect sacrifice offered through Christ. This opportunity to hear and learn is what every prayer, project, and purpose of FIA is truly about.

— SHANNON MEDICH, FIA COMMUNICATION  
MANAGER ■



# Humble Beginnings:

## AN INTERVIEW WITH FIA'S FIRST STAFF MEMBERS

An interview with Friends In Action's first-ever staff members, Dick and Linda Thomas, caused us to laugh, shed some tears, and gave us a glimpse into our humble beginnings. Dick and Linda have been with us for all 30 years, serving in our Shipping Department today. Through their efforts, FIA has assisted 140+ ministries and 900 missionaries around the globe! Pour yourself a cup of coffee, pull a chair up to the family table, and listen in as the Thomases tell us how and why it all began...

### Tell Us How You Got Started With Friends In Action.

**DICK:** Well, back in 1988, I was serving on the missions committee at our church—Central Christian Church (CCC), and the chairman Rusty Walters retired from New Tribes Mission (NTM). He asked if we would go on a mission trip to Papua New Guinea to be better equipped to convince other people to travel in the future. At the end of that trip, while I was waiting for the plane to come home from PNG, I was hooked.

**LINDA:** Ken Johnston from NTM had the vision to support NTM ministries by assisting missionaries in the field through building projects. Ken met with Beth and Jerry Smyth, representatives at NTM, who collaborated with Paul & Roz Wyton, missionaries home on furlough. The board wrote the bylaws and formed a board that met in the Smyths' California home.

### What Was Your First Assignment Or Job Description When You Started?

**DICK:** We were willing to do anything to be a part of the vision of FIA. They were looking for help and we wanted to be a help. We began working out of a renovated warehouse owned by Harry Keslovitch, a Russian atheist who owned the Colorforms company. Harry couldn't understand how volunteers worked harder than his paid workers! He eventually became a Christian as he watched us work and interact together!

**LINDA:** One of the first assignments we worked on was a mailing. Three NTM missionaries were taken hostage in Panama. NTM asked us to put out a letter for more than 35,000 people to pray.

That work led to developing a Prayer Hotline. Then we branched into fundraising and awareness banquets. We were asked by NTM if we wanted to take their Hospitality Network as one of our ministries and use it to host missionaries traveling or on furlough.





## Tell Us About The Working Conditions During Your Early Years In Comparison To Now.



**LINDA:** (laughing) Oh my, things are a lot different. When we did that first mailing, we had to use actual ink and a printing press! There were no copiers, computers, or internet. We had a dot matrix printer that had to run 3 days straight to get the labels done! If one label stuck, you had to start over.

## Is There An Assignment That Was Especially Meaningful To You?

**LINDA:** Yes! I'll never forget how God used one of the families through our Hospitality Network. When a missionary family was serving in Brazil, their son came home to the US to check out colleges. While traveling, he was in an accident. His parents called to see if we could help. The Lord beautifully provided a host family near the accident! They came to the hospital and stayed with their son until his parents could arrive. They even housed the family while they tended to their son. It touched my heart to see how impactful the ministry was and how God used the host family in a powerful way.



**DICK:** So after we did that initial newsletter, a supporter of NTM from Nebraska gave NTM one square mile of land in McNeal, Arizona. When the weeds were cleared away, there were triangulated runways on the land. NT Aviation uses these today to train missionary bush pilots. In December 1993, a team from CCC went down to McNeal, AZ, dug footers, and built the first hangar. A man from Tucson donated two more hangars but they had to be erected. Turtle Trout, missionary with NTM, and his son brought down 24 kids from Philly to help with the construction. During that work, a young man named Luke Dye was helping to install sheets of steel on a roof. I remember realizing he was the son of a pilot captured in Columbia. When I mentioned what a great man his dad was, Luke said "God is at the controls. My dad is just part of God's story." That project always sticks out in my mind—how God provided, the involvement of the kids, and Luke's comments—not to mention the completion of the hangars which are still in use for Gospel work today.



## What Are You Most Proud Of When You Think About Your Years At FIA?

**LINDA:** How the Lord put volunteers together to build His Kingdom all over the world. It was so nice to understand their gifts and trust the Lord to give them the ability to grow and be useful as a team member and a special part of the Great Commission.

**DICK:** How FIA co-served with so many different missions. These organizations were so touched by the work of FIA and His people in coming together for soul purposes and winning hearts to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

## As You Reflect On The Last 30 Years, What Do You Want To Tell FIA Supporters?

**DICK:** There was never a day that went by that we did anything on our own! We are grateful for you— those who became a critical part of our team through volunteering and praying.

**LINDA:** Jesus is coming soon! There are many families, friends, and lost souls who need to know the Lord. Get involved in Great Commission work! ■



# Going With FIA:

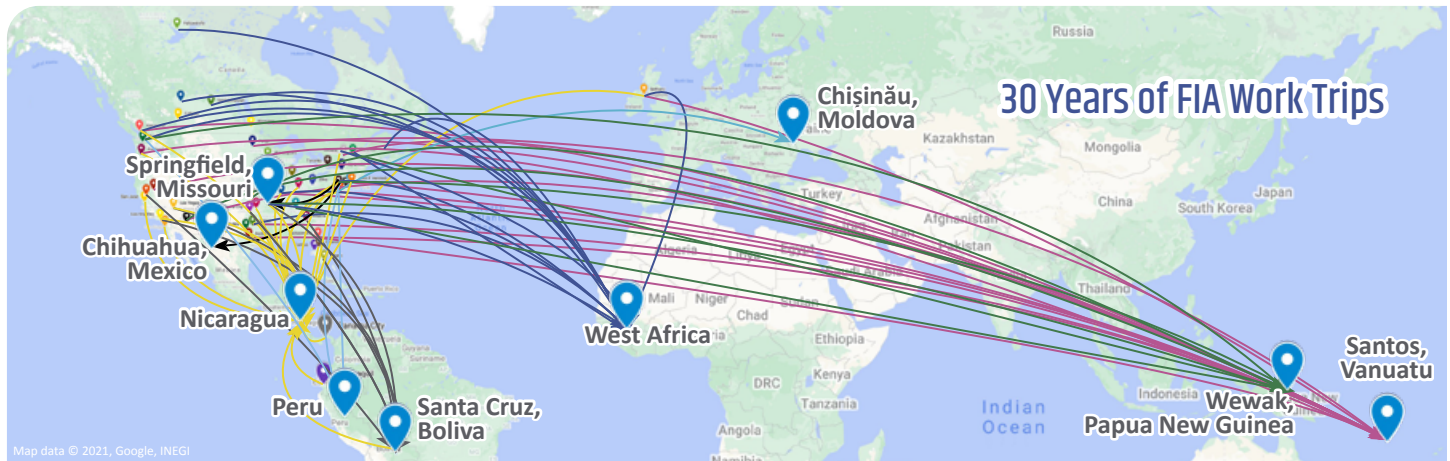
## 30 YEARS OF LIFE-CHANGING TRAVEL

The first word in the Great Commission is the foundation of FIA's mission as an organization. We GO. Over the past 30 years, more than 1,000 volunteers have GONE to serve in the US, Canada, and beyond. FIA has sent over 170 teams to partner with ministries in 12-15 countries around the world, accelerating and strengthening Gospel work in "unreachable" places to make a greater impact for the Kingdom!

When we GO, life transformation is not limited to our partner missionaries or the indigenous villagers they serve. The church in North America is strengthened and built as believers step out of their comfort zone to stretch their faith. When volunteers GO, they experience spiritual transformation through an increased worldview, sharing life skills and testimonies, and a greater understanding of different cultures.

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

—Matthew 28:19



Join us this year on a life-transforming trip of your own! Learn more about these upcoming 2022 opportunities on FIA's site [FIAintl.org/get-involved/trips](https://fiaintl.org/get-involved/trips) or email us at [FIA-USA@fiaintl.org](mailto:FIA-USA@fiaintl.org) with questions or to express interest.

### West Africa:

**February 12–26** | Welding (fabrication of trusses/columns for hangar construction).

**March 12–26** | Complete welding, concrete work (civil construction/building hangar structure).

**November 5–19** | Complete well-drilling to benefit hundreds of villagers.

**July/August** | Potential trip for tiling, plumbing, carpentry, and interior finishing of missionary homes.

### Nicaragua:

**March 4–19** | Welding (wash house, bridge guard), plumbing.

**March 19–April 2** | Kitchen/dining foundations, house renovations, welding trusses.

**August 2022** | Potential bible teaching conference; VBS with Rama children.

### Moldova:

**Spring 2022 (March/April)** | Survey trip to explore renovating unused buildings to host new pastors during conference training sessions.

### Missouri:

**One Summer & One Fall Team** | Complete repairs and upgrade apartments to benefit missionaries-in-training (60+ windows replaced).

### Wisconsin:

**Summer 2022** | Construction projects at a Bible College to prepare for the students' return in the fall.

### Vanuatu:

**August 2022** | Potential survey/maintenance trip dependent upon border openings.



**FRIENDS  
IN ACTION  
INTERNATIONAL**



PO Box 323, Elizabethtown, PA 17022  
3950 E Harrisburg Pike, Middletown, PA 17057  
Phone: 717.546.0208 • Fax: 717.546.0214 • USA Email: [FIA-USA@fiaintl.org](mailto:FIA-USA@fiaintl.org)  
501(c)3 Non-profit Organization



PO Box 26057, Guelph, ON, N1E 6W1  
Phone: 905.642.9531 • CA Email: [office.fiac@gmail.com](mailto:office.fiac@gmail.com)  
Charity Number: 818791212RR0001

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