

NEWS

REV. LEO ARKFELD, 'THE FLYING BISHOP'



By CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Rev. Leo Arkfeld, 87, who spent 10 years of religious study at the Divine Word Missionaries in Northbrook before becoming the “Flying Bishop of Papua New Guinea,” died Saturday in the town of Wewak in Papua New Guinea.

Not long after his ordination as a Roman Catholic priest 51 years ago, Archbishop Arkfeld faced a challenge even the hardest of missionaries would find daunting. After a short stint in Australia near the end of World War II, he was assigned to the remote coastal villages of Papua New Guinea, a region that had been destroyed during the war.

Archbishop Arkfeld’s new responsibilities covered tough terrain, with its people spread across jungles and mountains, many of them reachable only by days on foot.

But Archbishop Arkfeld was undaunted. An energetic and resourceful man, he adjusted to the challenge by becoming a pilot.



“He was a very practical missionary,” said his friend, Bishop Raymond Kalisz, who now oversees the Diocese of Wewak. “He was from Iowa originally, and he was very down to earth.”

From the moment he began his flying missions in Papua New Guinea, the people took notice. Unaccustomed to planes, they were impressed by this new priest’s devotion to his work. Before long, they began calling him the “Flying Priest,” and, later, the “Flying Bishop.”

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Earning his pilot’s license was actually just one of many feats for Archbishop Arkfeld, a tall, thin man who friends said resembled legendary pilot Charles Lindbergh. Three years after he arrived in Papua New Guinea, when he was just 36, he was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Wewak. At the time, he was the youngest Roman Catholic bishop in the world, missionary officials said.

The young bishop quickly went to work to help rebuild the war-torn coastal region. With the help of fellow missionaries, he built houses using palm leaves for walls and palm bark for flooring. In the early days of rebuilding, they didn’t have the luxury of nails—they simply tied things together with vines.

Archbishop Arkfeld also led the construction of schools and clinics while setting up mission stations. He founded two religious orders in Papua New Guinea—the Rosary Sisters and the Sacred Heart Brothers. In 1952, he set up St. John’s Seminary on Kairiru Island to help build up a local clergy.

In the early 1960s, he founded the region’s first girls’ high school, opening up the opportunity for hundreds of girls to go on to higher education.

Archbishop Arkfeld also started a mission air service, which used shortwave radio to dispatch small planes to remote areas during health emergencies.

In 1975, Archbishop Arkfeld oversaw the ordination of the first native priest, one of his proudest moments in missionary work because it signified that the church was beginning to take root, Kalisz said.

A year later, the flying bishop was named archbishop of the Madang Archdiocese, a post he held until his retirement in 1987.

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Thousands of people were expected to attend a funeral service for the archbishop in Papua New Guinea, Kalisz said.

“They loved him because he was always a very kind person,” he said. “People in general looked upon the bishop as being their pape, their father.”

Archbishop Arkfeld was born in Butte, Neb., and grew up in Iowa. He studied at the Divine Word Missionaries from 1933 through 1943.

He is survived by three brothers, Clem, Vince and George Jr.; and four sisters, Sylvia Bissen, Rita Kelley, Sally Kohles and Florence Ohlinger.

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