

Photos by Tony Vitulli and Barry Norman, M.M.
Background by Joseph Vail, M.M., and Joseph Honerkamp

The incredible journey of a boat named Mercy

To reach the Beni jungles of Bolivia, the floating hospital had to be carried by train and pushed by hand

For most of his ten years in the jungles of Bolivia, Joe Honerkamp has been dreaming of a hospital boat. In his mind he could see it saving countless lives among the thousands of isolated families living along the Beni River.

Nearly four years ago his dream began to come true, when a group in Pittsburgh got behind the idea. It took about three years to build the boat and deliver it to Bolivia. The last few months were so difficult and frustrating that Joe said afterwards, "Had I known the price I was to pay, I would no doubt have stopped the bus to Porto Velho, Brazil, and walked back to Riberalta, Bolivia, to Carol and my son Peter."

Joe has worked with Maryknollers in the Beni jungles since 1962. In his native Germany he earned a degree as a registered nurse and a certificate as a technician in engineering. The work

of Dr. Albert Schweitzer and Dr. Tom Dooley inspired him to become a lay missionary.

"I believe, as Dr. Schweitzer said, that the world is filled in a mystical way with evil, suffering and pain," Joe explains. "For everyone who goes out to hate, another one has to go out to bring love."

Joe set up a clinic at Blanca Flor in the heart of the Beni region. From there he traveled up the river carrying simple medicines to isolated communities and down the river to Riberalta, where Maryknoll Sisters run the only hospital in the area. Some patients had to travel as long as a week in dugout canoe to reach Riberalta.

In his travels Joe met Carol Castelli, who was serving in the Peace Corps. A sociologist from Pittsburgh, she was working in community development in the Chipari area near Cochabamba, Bolivia. They became engaged at Christmas of 1967 and were married the following May.

After a honeymoon in Germany, Joe and Carol visited her family in



Father Donald Steed, who works in Bolivia, accepts the boat in the name of Maryknoll from William Hopwood.

Pittsburgh. Joe made a deep impression on her father, Dr. Peter Castelli, a general practitioner.

"Joe is a man who can do just about everything that comes along," says Dr. Castelli. "The Maryknoll Fathers had him take a course in dentistry. He built a clinic. Whatever he didn't have he improvised from scrap metal and lumber. He fixed generators when they broke down. There is no doubt that he's happy in his work."

Joe and Carol talked of their dream of a floating clinic with hospital facilities, including laboratory and X-ray equipment, to serve some 30,000 people along the jungle rivers. They also saw how it might be used as a training center for volunteers.

"The hospital boat was their idea," recalls Mrs. Castelli. "I and my husband decided to try and raise the money, and we asked others if they would be interested."

Thus the "Hospital Boat Foundation—Pittsburgh" was organized. William Hopwood, a retired businessman and close friend of the family, became the biggest contributor of both time and money. In all, some 100 people and groups helped the project.

Bill Hopwood proved to be the directing force behind it. He opened a special office to handle all business connected with the boat. He took care of all the details of construction and equipment. It was hard, tedious, sometimes frustrating work, but it also had its lighter side.

"We have a letter from Joe that we laugh over," says Mrs. Castelli. "He wanted the boat and extra parts in case something should break. He wanted two boats—one put together and one for replacements."

At the end, Mrs. Castelli admitted she was glad to see the boat completed. "It was fun up until the last

A boat named Mercy

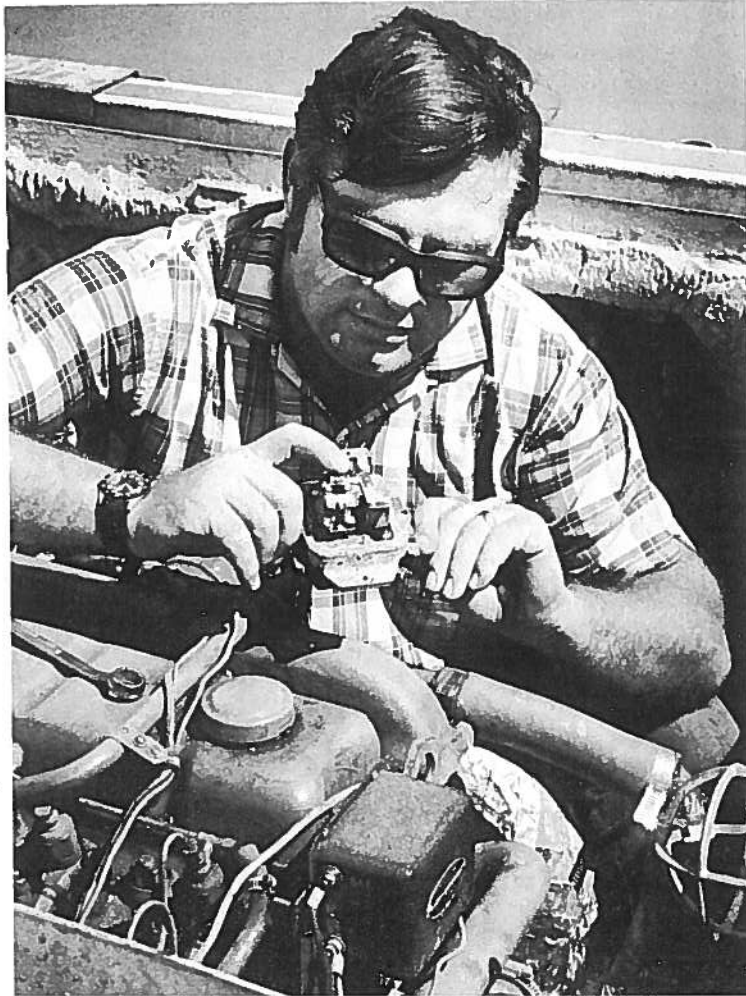
four or five months. Then we had trouble in Bolivia.”

Joe Honerkamp undoubtedly would consider that an understatement. The boat was sent by freighter from New York to Belem, at the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil. A barge pushed it down the Amazon and Madeira rivers to Porto Velho, near the Bolivian border, where Joe had his first view of the floating hospital he had long dreamed about.

“Over the door was her name, Merced,” he recalls. “All looked in good shape and I gave a prayer of thanks. I tried opening the doors. The locks had corroded shut from the salt water. With the aid of a syringe I forced oil into the locks. It wasn’t until that afternoon that they opened.

“The floor was a buckled, sickening sight. The motors, generators and electrical equipment below deck had been submerged in salt water for

Joe Honerkamp readies the boat.





After its engine and entire electrical system were repaired, the Mercy passed a test run on the Beni River.

months. While on the freighter, ocean waves had entered the hull."

That was only the first of a series of troubles. Because of rapids in the river beyond Porto Velho, the boat had to be transported by railroad for nearly 200 miles. This meant building a platform with skids under it and hoisting the 18 tons onto a waiting flatcar with an ancient crane.

The heavy, difficult work took several days. Then, when the train finally was underway, it went about five miles before it stopped with a bang. The impact pushed the boat back more than three feet.

"Because the clinic was loose on the flatcar, little damage was done," Joe recalls. "A ledge of solid rock projected from one wall of the narrow gorge. We had no dynamite to remove this 4-inch slab about 3 feet high and running 12 feet along a stone wall. I released much of my tension smash-

ing a hammer against the rock. More than four hours later we scraped through this narrow pass."

After that Joe rode on top of the wood-burning engine to avoid another accident. He saw every inch of the 70 miles covered the first day and counted 16 bridges with "only thumb clearance on each side."

The train passed the 125-mile mark the next afternoon and stopped at a newly constructed station. It was too narrow for the protruding boat.

"We studied the situation," Joe remembers. "It looked as if by tilting the clinic and removing tiles from the station's roof, we could almost pass. Locking the car's spring down on one side and cutting off a little of the platform under the clinic gave us about 15 inches of clearance."

That evening the train reached Vila Murтинho, its final stop in Brazil. The following day Joe launched the



Joe and Carol try out the Mercy's equipment, which includes audio-visual teaching aids and shortwave radio.

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clinic in the water. A barge pushed him to the falls of Cauchuella Esperanza, Bolivia, where the hospital boat would have to be hauled by hand around the last obstacle on the way to Riberalta.

Carol met her husband near the falls. She saw men unloading ropes, pulleys and jacks, and asked, "Are they going to move that big clinic with only that equipment?" Joe said they would add a little manpower.

"After a week they had scarcely moved," Carol recalls. "They actually built bridges over large rocks. They continued this back-breaking work moving 40 to 50 yards a day, inches at a time."

Over one ravine Joe and the others used logs from the jungle to build a bridge in the record time of two and

one-half days. It took them three days to push the boat across. In the end, the mile around the falls made the 200-mile railroad trip seem short.

Brazil nut oil greased the slide built to launch the hospital boat in the Beni River below the falls. Ten days later it arrived in Riberalta to the cheers of people along the banks. Their joy and enthusiasm made the whole long, frustrating and sometimes discouraging effort worthwhile.

"The clinic's name is Merced, meaning mercy," says Carol. "It will bring a message of hope to isolated families along the 2,500 miles of navigable rivers in the Beni. Joe plans to do preventive medical work and teach basic hygiene at various centers along the rivers.

"Our long-range plans are to turn the clinic over to the people. And after that—I guess we should leave some decisions to God." □