

# Peace Mission To Turkana Desert

By JANE HAMILTON

A THOUSAND miles south of the vast Sahara desert, in the vast continent of Africa there lies yet another desert—the Turkana. Here in a desolate land of sand, of occasional thorn bushes, and of dry river beds bespeaking an ancient scouring by torrential rains, a strange people are coming into the 20th century. Their name, like that of the desert—the Turkanas.

It is to the Turkana that this fully loaded UMATT plane moved supplies and personnel from Nairobi and Kitale to these desert outposts.

The Turkana are a tall people, tempered to suffering by the harshest of existence in the barren and blistering desert. Lack of water and abundance of sand flies lead them to rub their bodies with dust until their shiny black skins become slate grey. Lack of insecticides and screens lead to accustomization to flies and so on babies' faces swarms of them delight to drink moisture from the corners of their closed and sleeping eyes.

No crops grow in the Turkana. Men are trying to start irrigation and to show the people better ways to live. But the people learned how to survive long ago. They keep goats which subsist on leaves of thorn bushes and an occasional clump of grass that sprouts in the sand. The milk from the goats is a major food item. The milk is mixed with blood taken from the necks of their animals . . . goats, cows, camels.

AS WHITE MEN have penetrated the cruel land bringing the message of Christianity and of assistance even surplus food from the USA has been brought in times of famine. Recently this occurred when exceptional dryness reigned and all the goat herds died. People were collapsing and dying also. Then the Kenya government arranged to give them assistance for they are citizens of this country.

But more important in recent years is the success of self-help projects instigated by development organizations from all over the world. These projects excite the imagination because they attempt to prevent the crises instead of the dead-end exercises of carting food endlessly to famine camps.

Despite these primitive conditions, the Turkana people are intelligent and able to learn. Missionaries have set up schools at locations deep in the desert. The continuation of these schools is made possible by the UMATT—Wings for Peace airplanes and the Turkana children have flocked to them.

THE CHILDREN come clothed, half-naked, and completely unclothed and in this scorching climate with its correspondingly cold nights, it is all very normal. It is not expected that little boys will wear any clothes at all. While young girls wear a kind of leather beaded apron. In school these Turkana children are good workers. They learn quickly how to read and how to count. Many things are difficult to learn because not the slightest comparisons can be made . . . such as water wheels, electricity or the oceans. To think that there can be great pools of water is unimaginable for these people.

The women have customs which indicate a culture with roots far in the past—as is the case in the history of every people. They wear mountainous collars of colorful beads, signifying both a married status and the degree of desert wealth they possess.

Bare-chested, the Turkana women wear goatskins that fall to their ankles. The skins are split along one leg for ease of walking. In addition, there is a brief apron adorned with beads which is worn as a gesture of modesty. Mothers will also wear another piece of cloth to hold the baby which is slung on their backs. On the upper half of their bodies, deco-



Jane Hamilton Beside UMATT Plane

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rations are worked into their skins with patterns etched out in small scars. These are the products of initiation rites performed during the transition from childhood to womanhood.

STRONG AND courageous, the men often raid other villages killing the inhabitants to take the life sustaining commodity—goat herds.

The Turkana men wear a goat-skin toga-like with one shoulder bare. Carrying a large stick, heads adorned in coxcomb fashion, the mighty Turkana statuesquely move behind their herds.

Even the children are brave. The girls receive a "special vaccination" from one of the elderly women in the village. With a jagged stone, the skin is broken. This they believe immunizes them from the bite of the scorpions. Fearless also, they will let these fearsome creatures, with their upraised tails brandishing deadly stinging claws, crawl onto their hands and right on up their arms! These are the "Sisters of the Scorpions."

I came into this strange land by a 400 mile flight in a UMATT-Wings for Peace plane which was bringing vital supplies deep into the desert to a medical mission post. Fresh vegetables and meat for the doctor and nurses, vials of injections, bandages, bottles of medicine, mail were cargo in this airplane. How much these supplies were wanted was evidenced by the quick removal from the aircraft and a quick search for the life-giving commodities . . . all this done on the barren sands of this desolate region.

The features of the Turkana are finely formed. In an elegant way, the faces approach a "hatchet" appearance, with high foreheads. Later I learned that my American Negro friends probably came from Bantu ancestors while this remote tribe was of Neolithic stock and completely different in appearance.

THEIR HOUSES are simple . . . just low domes made from branches pulled over in arcs and laced with reeds that must have been found around a water hole. These houses serve to keep the

chill of the desert night away and to protect the family from leopards and hyenas that come out from the distant hills and attack small helpless children or sleeping adults. Sometimes these gruesome animals grab a baby from the hut circle and run away into the desert before anyone can rescue the poor thing.

I was most impressed with the white women dedicating their lives giving medical service to these people. These courageous women have spent years in these primitive regions.

At Kakuma, the Irish Medical Missionaries of Mary brought the first touches of civilization into the Turkana . . . this was only six years ago. Just six years ago, these pioneering nurses and doctors forged their way into remote Turkana because medicine is the proven first step in development and these are people worth helping.

MY FIRST VISIT is going to be too short . . . I wish so much that I could talk Turkana to find out all that these fascinating people could tell me. I am certain that a race which has learned to survive many life-times in these incredibly harsh surroundings must have a vast fund of valuable secrets. They do evidence a belief in a single Supreme Being, practice unusual customs of not eating certain meats, such as wild pig.

Just before darkness, I climbed the small hill on which the Kakuma mission house is built. I stood hypnotized gazing on the incredible miles of waste land where all these people spent their entire lives. Man is truly a remarkable creature . . . so infinitely adaptable and yet so infinitely in need of help to rise to his true dignity which His Maker made possible.

I am glad I have a part in UMATT—Wings for Peace to help these people rise above these obstacles. So these people for generations endlessly will not have to live through a childhood of countless insects crawling about in their eyes or youthful years spent dreading a raid from a neighboring tribe when all would be wiped out.



This Is Runway in the Turkana Desert