



Matt & Becki Dillingham in Tanzania

Pioneering Surgery for Neema

In December, we heard through our church, the terrible story of a 3 year old girl who was attacked by a hyena while sheltering from the rain near her house. She fell asleep in a hut and villagers discovered the attack happening after being alerted by dogs barking outside. The vicious attack left Neema with one side of her face destroyed and she lost one eye. Michael Hynds, who lives in Arusha and has recently taken up a position with MAF International, put the wheels in motion to secure funding to bring an experienced reconstructive surgeon, Dr Anous Maher to the hospital in Dodoma to operate on Neema. It was the first time he had done facial reconstruction on a child and before arriving he went to Cairo to buy the specialist equipment that he needed to perform the surgery.

The flight took place on 24th February, with Dr Maher joining the scheduled flight from Arusha to Dodoma from which the monthly MAF Kilimitindi medical safari operates from. His wife (who is a nurse) Candi accompanied him, along with Becki who was still waiting for her license to be validated but joined the flight as part of her country orientation.

Neema's injuries required Dr Maher's expertise in microsurgery as she required skin grafts and reattachment of blood vessels. Despite the severity of her injuries, Dr Maher was confident that he could rebuild her face. He explained that the type of surgery she needs "was not common in Tanzania" and admitted that this case was "one of the worst I've seen" in his long career.

The first stage of the reconstruction surgery, which Dr Maher successfully completed during this visit, was to implant soft tissue expanders under the skin in Neema's back. They will gradually expand during the following weeks, and the skin on her back will grow to compensate for this. In April, when he returns, she will have enough loose skin to be able to transfer some to her face.

During that visit, he will carry out the major facial reconstruction surgery (taking between 12-15 hours) which will involve using one of her ribs to replace the facial bones. He will use a special "bone poly-filler" to fill in the gaps where there should be bone, which expands over time so as she gets older her face will continue to grow on both sides. Dr Maher is also considering a pioneering technique to prevent her eye becoming sunken as she grows up, which may have implications for other people in future.

Neema's mother is only 22 and is struggling being away from her home in Lalaji where her other two children are. Dr Maher hopes that this surgery will give Neema a chance to lead a normal life and ease the burden on her family who may otherwise struggle to take care of her.

After a week spent in Dodoma, pilot Mark Liprini flew Dr Maher back to Arusha. The 1 hour 40 minute flights saved him from a 7 hour road trip or having to take commercial flights that would involve an overnight stay in Dar es Salaam. Program manager Stewart Ayling was glad that the positional flight for the medical safari could be used productively and that MAF were able to support Dr Maher with his work. "Its part of our role as MAF that we provide connections between people. If we all work together we can make a better outcome" he explained.



Top left: Neema with her mother. Top right: Dr Maher treating Neema in Dodoma. Bottom: with pilot Mark Liprini before departing Arusha.

Finally Flying Solo in Tanzania

In December, Becki successfully passed her Instrument flying exam, which was a requirement of the Tanzanian Civil Aviation Authority even though our aircraft in Tanzania do not have that capability! She finally received her Tanzanian pilot's licence at the end of January and then sat a theory exam to get the Cessna 206 added to her license. Before starting the practical flight training, she made use of having a Caravan rating on her license and went to Dar es Salaam to put MAF Tanzania's recently acquired Cessna Caravan through its paces, completing an airworthiness check flight with an approved engineer.

With this successfully obtained, she could begin her training on the 'C206', instructed by MAF pilot Mark Liprini. This was done by accompanying Mark on all the regular safari flights in February so she was away from home a lot last month. She successfully passed the check flight and after one final delay of 3 weeks, waiting for the new aircraft to be added to her license, she was officially allowed to fly passengers in Tanzania.

Last week, she flew to Haydom and then out from there with staff from the hospital, to different villages in the region. On the way down she completed her 'route check', a MAF regulation where she is assessed on every aspect of a flight with passengers and then on Tuesday 11th March, she flew her first solo flight with passengers as a pilot for MAF Tanzania. She took a team of nurses and trainee doctors to the village of Gorimba, where they vaccinated 213 children and

saw 29 pregnant women. Late in the afternoon, they returned to Haydom, ready for their trip to another village the following day.

The next step for Becki is to do some training on C-strips, which are the most challenging class of airstrips that MAF fly into. Chad doesn't have any C-strips so Becki has limited experience of landing on them. She will complete 20 hours flying the Cessna 206 and will then be able to fly both aircraft as the Caravan should be ready to begin operational flying in the next few weeks.



(Top left) Becki with the team of doctors visiting Gorimba, (top right) Route check en-route to Haydom, (bottom left) One of the team from Haydom hospital vaccinating a child, (bottom right) the airstrip at Gorimba.

Home Assignment 2025

We will be returning to the UK for 4 weeks this summer. We normally add an additional 2 weeks of holiday but with operational challenges in the program we will reduce the time we are out of Tanzania this year. We will be back from mid-July to mid-August 2025.

We will be visiting some of our supporting churches as usual, with dates still to be arranged. This year we will also spend some time in the Leeds and Newcastle areas so we would be glad to visit any supporters in the north of England who we wouldn't usually be able to visit.

Please get in touch if you would like to arrange a visit this summer.

Praise

- * Becki has completed all the requirements of the Tanzanian authorities and is now flying passengers on the Cessna 206.
- * We had a very productive time learning Swahili at the University of Zanzibar in December. The children also made great progress over the 2 weeks
- * MAF Tanzania will soon have a Cessna Caravan added to their fleet to increase the amount and type of flying that MAF Tanzania has the capability to offer.
- * All our family are settled well in Tanzania and enjoying living and working here.

Prayer

- * After Neema's surgery, Dr Maher left a detailed plan for the doctors and nurses to follow. Sadly they have not carried out his instructions and some of her medical equipment has been damaged. Dr Maher is also experiencing difficulties in trying to get a Tanzanian work permit, which he needs to be able to continue with Neema's surgery. Please pray over these challenges, for Neema's next surgery to go well and for Neema and her family.
- * We are waiting for our residence permits to be issued to allow us to live in Tanzania and receive our belongings.
- * Becki's C-strip training will give her the confidence and skills to be able to land on the more challenging airstrips.

Bethan's Blog

Last month I went away to Nairobi to perform in our school play, "The Big Life". We were there for 1 week and had very long days rehearsing and performing 4 shows. Then we came back to Arusha and performed at our school. Mum, Dad and Luke loved it and some of my friends from church came to watch me too. The hours spent rehearsing counted towards my Dragon award, which I am trying to achieve this year. I need to do a certain number of hours in different areas like sports and community service so I volunteered at a Tanzanian School during February half term, teaching the children in year 1 & 2. Later this month it is my birthday and I am inviting my friends over for a party and swimming. I am very excited about it.



A Letter from Luke

Since my last letter we have got 2 puppies and a rabbit. The puppies are called Cookie and Crumble. We got them from a shelter even though Mum and Dad had only planned on getting one. They are really friendly and love playing with us and each other. We also got a rabbit, which we called Shida because that means "problem" in Swahili. She spends a lot of time and effort trying (and succeeding) to escape so we had to make her run more secure. We have made a football pitch in our garden and I love playing in the evening until it gets dark. Usually our night guard, Michael joins in too.

