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HOW THE POTATO CHANGED MY LIFE

By Art DeFehr

My mother's garden always included potatoes. I grew up eating them and actually knowing a fair bit about how they grew but never thought the humble potato may have a significant influence on the development of my career.

I came to appreciate potatoes during the early days of my experience as Director of the MCC program in Bangladesh following the 1971 civil war and the trauma of the 1970 tsunami that killed up to a million in the coastal areas. The combined effects of these twin disasters wiped out the usual rice crop that was the only difference between life and death for most rural Bengalis. Independent of our MCC work some relief authorities supported by the Dutch Government had come to the correct conclusion that given the timing and season – the only available famine food outside of imports would be products that could be grown quickly by the people themselves in the cooler winter season. Potatoes were known in Bangladesh but were grown in limited quantities since they required irrigation plus the problem of retaining seed during the hot and humid monsoon season. On the other hand, given good seed, water, the omnipresent sandy silt and winter temperatures – the result would be a bountiful harvest within 3 months.

The Dutch Government had donated a full shipload of quality potato seed and dispatched it on a German freighter. Like too many things organized by Governments – the ship was late and scheduled to arrive just prior to Christmas of 1972 and toward the very end of the possible planting season and the timing that would give the crop a chance. There were discussions to abandon the project and simply distribute the seed as food. By this time MCC had determined that crop diversification (meaning use of the dry and cooler winter season for growing different crops such as oilseeds, vegetables and grains other than rice) would be its primary agricultural activity. CRS (Catholic Relief Services) had funds, experience and logistic resources but not the agricultural expertise that MCC had accumulated by this time. We formed a partnership to salvage the project.

In the absence of phones, faxes, cell phones and virtually any form of electronic communication – we resorted to a Porter Pilatus short takeoff and landing plane owned by CRS as our message service. They would fly around the country landing on soccer fields or whatever and deliver messages. I personally was on one such flight when the 600 HP engine failed to reverse on a soccer field and the amazing pilot aimed for a spot next to the goal posts – there were buildings just beyond – and used his engine to do a high speed power turn around those goal posts and then stopped on the return length of field. There were many other stories and the plane did crash a few months later but all survived.

The UN system offered a fleet of trucks that could reach many destinations but given the limited infrastructure of Bangladesh at the best of times, the 3000 bridges not yet repaired from the recent war and the fact that many destinations could not be reached by road at all – that was a helpful but limited solution. We also gained access to a fleet to 'mini-bulkers' used by the post-war relief system to get supplies up the shallow rivers that dominated the delta that is Bangladesh. These were essentially 100-200 capacity flat-bottomed barges with an engine.

The next challenge was to get the product off the ship and to destinations around the country. The Port was in hopeless condition with no available dock space. We decided to anchor the ship 12 miles offshore in the Bay of Bengal and use our mini-bulkers plus non-motorized barges to move the thousands of sacks of potatoes from the hold of the ship into the smaller carriers that could be sent up the rivers directly or towed to shore where they could be hand-carried to trucks. The goal was to get all of the seed from ship into the ground within a week – in a country with no infrastructure or communications.

The ship radioed that it would arrive around midnight so we decided to meet them in the middle of the Bay of Bengal with a small flotilla of barges and start unloading immediately. As senior managers of MCC and CRS we rode the barges out to meet the ship so we could make decisions on the spot. There were a few glitches. We tied one non-motorized barge to the side of the big ship and then it needed to be relocated to another point further along the side of the ship. Since language was a problem – we used a package of cigarettes to represent the barge and explained with motions how ropes should be released or loosened so that the barges could be shifted simply by using the strength of the tidal current – plus careful handling of the ropes! Something did not translate well and too many ropes were released and the non-motorized barge carrying a crew plus Jeffrey – the local head of CRS - drifted away on the strong Bay of Bengal tidal current into the moonless night. We took the only motorized barge and headed into the darkness in the approximate direction – would turn off the motor periodically and shout “Jeffrey” into the mid-ocean silence and blackness. We did eventually find the barge and towed it back to the well-lit German ship so unloading could begin.

By mid-morning we had developed a loading and distribution pattern and barges were already on their way up the rivers and others arriving to be loaded. The ship offered us a ride back to Port in a motorized life boat and that produced another adventure. We were hailed by a similar approaching life boat containing several Greek sailors who turned out to be captain and senior crew of a ship that had experienced a mutiny during the night. They were a bit of a mess with blood-soaked towels wrapped around their heads and were trying to find help. Their crew had taken over the ship during the night, put the captain and senior staff into a lifeboat and taken off into the darkness of the Indian Ocean. We helped them to Port and never did find out what happened to that ship.

Within days hundreds of truckloads fanned out across the country wherever roads would take them, motorized barges found their way up remote rivers and channels where our omnipresent Porter Pilatus had arranged for labourers to haul it to shore and various partner agencies, cooperatives and other groups were waiting to plant within hours of arrival. We did not achieve 100% planting but estimate that at least 80% of the entire shipload was in the ground within 10 days and produced a substantial crop a few months later.

In later years we switched to promoting the sweet potato over the white potato because of its superior nutritional outcomes and its less demanding requirements for seed retention. The experience also taught us invaluable lessons about logistics, communications, partnerships and also the incredible willingness and ability of the Bengali farmer to respond to challenges if given the chance. The lessons taught by this potato adventure were the foundation for many other programs in logistics, agriculture and refugee work in later years. I owe the humble potato a debt of gratitude.