

A Petone Rotary Club project supplying an Ambulance to the Solomon Islands saw two paramedics from Wellington Free Ambulance fly up to the Solomon's to train staff in the use of the vehicle and medical training.

They were Extensive Care Paramedic, Vanessa Simpson and Emergency Medical Technician, Michael Bolton. Michael is also a Petone Rotarian.

Here is Vanessa's story:

Walking off the plane into Honiara airport there was little doubt we were in another country. At just 5 degrees off the equator, hot and humid was an understatement. The capital, Honiara, has a population of about 65K and it felt like they were all on the one road in and out of the city when we arrived. It was commonplace to see utes overloaded with people on the back, and other unsecured loads. I was struck by the poverty, mounds of rubbish and the grim living conditions. However, these people seem really happy and reasonably healthy. They are well presented and well dressed. I did not see any evidence of civil unrest. The RAMSI influence has served the country well.

We tracked down the HMNZS Canterbury and were lucky enough to be given a tour of the ship and then met and thanked Captain Dave Turner as the ambulance was being shipped at no cost by the N.Z. Armed Forces. We inspected the ambulance which stood proudly in the hold of the ship.

Walking back through town, I slowly realised that we had not seen any other Europeans and definitely no blond females. Honiara is certainly not a tourist destination. I was impressed, however, that New Zealanders have a fantastic reputation there. Walking through the streets with our uniforms on, people would stop and shake our hands or just smile in appreciation. I felt so proud.



In town, I spotted a child's clinic called the Pikinini clinic. I'm not one for sitting around reading, so I told Michael that we should spend the afternoon working in there. Michael and I made a great team. I would come up with the ideas and he would make sure they happened. We assessed and treated lots of children that afternoon. There was a variety of complaints with chest infections, bronchiolitis, headaches and fevers the most common.

Malaria is prevalent at about 46% and considering their living conditions, it is not surprising. The malaria testing procedure is quite viscous and involves a scalpel. WFA carry lancets which would make this process a lot less invasive for these children. Most children seem to be treated successfully in this clinic but more serious illnesses are sent through to Honiara hospital.

That evening we attended the Honiara Rotary Club meeting. They are a very proactive group who have undertaken some complex projects such as drilling for a well for fresh water. They made us very welcome and were impressed with the efforts of Petone Rotary and WFA. The American consulate, also a Rotarian, had seen the ambulance on the Canterbury the day before and she was very impressed with the generosity of the project.

We then flew to Munda and took a small boat through the islands to Gizo. The scenery was magnificent with turquoise water and tranquil reefs. I did not see any salt water crocodiles but the locals assured me they are common. I was sure to keep

my hands inside the boat. Normally the journey from Munda to Gizo is about an hour's flight but the airport at Gizo is being re-surfaced so the only access for 3 months is by boat.

Gizo is a relatively small island with most of the activity happening along the waterfront. Fishing is their main income along with markets selling fresh fruit and vegetables. There is one main dirt road through the island which is about 25km long. It provides a route to many remote houses and little villages so the ambulance will be very useful. The Ambulance drivers have previously transported patients on the back of a ute. The new ambulance will provide privacy and dignity to these patients.



We spent the following day training the ambulance drivers and also security guards who often accompany them for more serious jobs. Reasonably common call outs seem to be domestic violence, births and the occasional crocodile incident. Motor vehicle accidents seem relatively uncommon. This is mostly due to poor quality roads so high speeds aren't possible.

A meeting with the Medical Director of the Western provinces, Dr Gregory Jilini was arranged by myself and Michael instructed to “make it happen”. As it happened this was not required as Dr Jilini was extremely proactive and in complete support of our training and is passionate about our ongoing programme over the next 5 years.

There is no license required to drive and it seems there are not many rules either. The training went extremely well and we formed some great relationships with the Ambulance Drivers. We celebrated their learning with certificates which stated they were now First Responder Paramedics. They were incredibly keen to learn and very passionate about their new ambulance service.

The US navy had quite a presence on the island. They were involved with vaccinations and Red Cross training. They were organising a simulated MCI for later on in the week which involved Police, Fire, hospital and ambulance. The new vehicle would be instrumental in treating and transporting “pretend” patients. We met with the Medical Director from the Naval ship USS Pearl Harbour who was very complimentary of our efforts and most impressed that an ambulance has been donated from New Zealand.

The Solomon's do have a problem with rabid looking stray dogs. The US navy vets spent a day euthanizing many of these unwanted dogs. I'm not sure I made the right choice at dinner that night as I chewed my “beef curry”. Mike swears he tasted a bit of collar!!!

I would like to thank Petone Rotary for mighty efforts in making this project happen. I was incredibly honoured to be a small part in it and very proud to be a New Zealander who are so highly valued over there. I do think it is essential to provide yearly training to these paramedics to ensure their skills are maintained and helping to improve the healthcare of Gizo.

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