

Report on the Construction of the Ngari Nurses' Aid Station, Solomon Islands

On Monday 22nd March, 2010, the first team of eight Rotary volunteers left Australia for Gizo to begin construction of a Nurses' Aid Station in a remote area, known as Ngari.

The first team was led by District 9600 RAWCS Chair, Trevor Taylor, from the Glasshouse Mountains Club. Trevor had arrived several days earlier hoping to ensure that everything was prepared for the venture. Trevor has done an amazing amount of preparation for this project and it is difficult to imagine how it would have proceeded without his energy and love for the Solomon Islanders.

The project was unusual (and something of an experiment) drawing Rotarians together from clubs in two districts to finance and undertake a fairly large project in the space of four weeks.

The clubs represented in districts 9600 and 9750 were Glasshouse Mountains, Sydney Cove, , Ashgrove/The Gap, Maleny, Kings Cross, Mooloolaba, Sydney and Caloundra.



As an "outstation" of the Gizo Hospital, this new "clinic" will be equipped and staffed by the hospital.

In the first week, the team comprising Trevor Taylor, Phillip Biggs, Cliff and Shirley Weder, Wally Bretton, David Blakemore, Bruce and Anne Christie, Andy and Mia Schouteten excavated the site, concreted-in the metal "stumps", constructed the deck and began manufacturing the roof trusses.

While all this was happening, some of the team (with the help of local people) "marked out" for the nearby ablution block and began digging the large hole which was to become the core of our drainage system.

Wally was our builder in the first team and much is owed to him for moving the project forward quickly and professionally.



Most of the team were camped in an unfinished building belonging to the nearby primary school. Others endured a daily truck ride to and from their more comfortable “digs” in Gizo. Being a nurse, Anne soon became involved in the work of the hospital and became a valuable volunteer there.

The second week saw Mike Austin arrive, together with John and Di Rawson. Di is a physiotherapist and, like Anne, soon became involved in the local medical scene. Andy and Mia returned to Australia, followed mid-week by Phillip Biggs.

That week also saw some dramatic progress to the project, with framework going up, followed by the roof trusses. The ablution block was “boxed up” ready for the slab and the framework to go in. This took us to the midway point when the first team returned home and our second team arrived. Mike Austin was the team leader and was on hand to welcome Tom and Meg Gervay, Rick Vickers, Denis Smith, Ted McKeown, Ian Johnson (builder) and Leo Smith at the tiny island landing strip located just off the coast of Ghizo Island. Travelling independently, we were also to be joined by Paul Hartigan and Julianna Neil with her two lively young daughters. So, there was a strong team to take us forward in the third week.

From day one, we had also been greatly helped by the local people, particularly by a young local man, Solomon Sopa, who had undertaken some training in building and was very keen to gain experience with us on the project. With the roof now being our priority, Solomon’s enthusiasm and agility gave us a head start in covering the main building before the weather could threaten the schedule. With Wally having gone home, his place was taken by Ian Johnson who made things happen at a cracking pace in week three. As we came to the end of that week and were looking forward to some time off in Gizo, we realised that a few more hours would be needed if we were to finish on schedule, so we all came back from the comfort of Gizo for an overtime shift on Saturday. With Ian, John, Di, Paul and Julianna all going home that weekend, the final week was going to be a challenge!

The last Monday saw Rick and Leo completing the external cladding and Mike arranging for the water tank to be transported from town. Together with a consignment of tools shipped from Australia for the project, our tank had been delayed by Solomon Islands Customs. Ted took on the completion of the ablution block, whilst Solomon and friends laboured on lining the internal walls. Denis excelled in conjuring up some cold beers from time to time between installing some wiring, in the hope that electricity will eventually find its way to Ngari! With the help of another couple of helpful local tradies, John and Dominic, plus an increasing number of helpers, we achieved “lock-up” on Wednesday. By this time, Rick, Ted and Mike were now sleeping on camp beds in the clinic at night and enjoying their evening dinners on the veranda. Leo and Denis slept in Gizo and were responsible for obtaining our supplies daily. Ladies from the local communities would bring us lunch and dinner. Fish, rice, noodles, cabbage, green beans, coconut, bananas, pawpaw and lots of laughter were all regular ingredients to these occasions.

Finally, the tank was in place and some basic plumbing had been installed, but no rain to test it all! Leo worked on handrails for the ramp and veranda and made a couple of bench seats for future patients’ use when waiting for the doctor or nurse. Rick became a “willing horse”, busily taking down scaffolding and making some last-minute security grills above the entrance area.

At lunchtime on Friday, the local ladies decorated the entrance with flowers, officials from Gizo Hospital appeared, along with the Rt Hon Danny Kennedy, representatives from local churches, Ngari School and the community. The Rotarians were bestowed with leis and given lunch.



There were speeches and expressions of gratitude to Rotary for providing the facility. Mike replied on behalf of the teams, thanking the local community for their help in carrying a large amount of materials and equipment to the site on foot (there is no vehicular access) and the ladies for tirelessly and generously feeding us.

Children, delightfully sang and danced for us and a group played some traditional pipe instruments. To close, our "dinner ladies" all sang a song of farewell – quite moving!

Whilst we have created a building that is ready for use, there are a number of things that need completing and it would have been great to have another week in Ngari, putting architraves around the doorways, fitting skirting boards, painting the rooms, finishing and commissioning the plumbing and electrics, etc. However we console ourselves that we have done our best in the time available and have left Ngari with a building that they (and Rotary) can be proud of.

We returned to Australia on Tuesday 20th. April, 2010.

Michael Austin