



Betty Pyatt

Mission Service in Melanesia

Getting ready for overseas mission

Betty and her brother decided as teenagers that they would serve together as missionaries: Betty as a nurse, and Allan as a priest. But Betty was not yet old enough to enter nurse training, so in the meantime took a course in commercial skills. Little did she know these skills would be required for running a hospital, which she would soon be required to do...



When she was old enough, Betty studied nursing at Auckland Hospital, then became the Plunket Nurse for Balclutha in South Otago. She would cycle around the town visiting mothers and their babies, or get a ride with the butcher or bank clerks to neighbouring areas. When visiting families in Tahakopa in the Catlins area, she would take that at each the train, so station along the line she could see mothers and babies in the waiting rooms while the train waited for her! She eventually got an unreliable car, and once buried her exhaust pipe in a clay bank. All of this hardship developed in her a 'can-do' attitude that would be essential for her success in the mission field of a developing country.

Time to answer the call

In 1949, Betty's brother Allan was the Vicar of Brooklyn, and Betty (in her own words) "finally gave into the feeling that I was to work in Melanesia". So she joined the Melanesian Mission and sailed north from Auckland to the Melanesian Islands in the 250-ton ship *Southern Cross*. (In comparison, the ferry between Wellington and Picton at the time was 13,600 ton!)

She headed for New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) on the remote northern island of Aoba (now Ambae), where she was to be responsible for running the Godden Memorial hospital in Lolowai. The hospital had about 45 beds and old, dated equipment from an American army hospital that had been there during World War 2. A tele-radio enabled Betty to discuss emergency treatments with a doctor in the country's capital city, Vila; but the remoteness

meant that she was responsible for many decisions and practices for which she had not been trained. She has said that subsequently that she looked back in horror at some of the decisions she had been faced with. She regularly visited outlying islands such as Maewo and Pentecost to check the work of the local nurses who had no wireless or regular shipping. There were some nice things that happened though – one day the Queen of England cruised up on the royal yacht *Britannia* and gave her an MBE medal.

Helping the Lepers

When Betty first arrived there were five lepers living in leaf huts not far from the hospital. At that stage she had not encountered any lepers on her visits to other islands because the local people kept them hidden in the bush. When new drugs became available and she sent former patients home cured, those in the bush came out - and one day the Bishop of Melanesia turned up with a boat-load of 25 new patients for the leper colony. Initially they were housed in hastily erected leaf huts until Betty was able to order materials from Australia (which took six months to arrive) to build a proper leprosarium. Those efforts were not helped when the lepers noticed a coconut tree hanging over one of the houses, decided that it would fall on that house in the next hurricane, and so cut it down – but it smashed the house as it was falling down!

If a leper woman gave birth to a child, Betty would take the babe to the hospital and care for it until she had established whether it had leprosy. One of Betty's brothers remembers keeping the head leper, Alfred, supplied with hooks for his fishing expeditions.



*Betty at Lolawai
Hospital with Dr
Makereth [Photo
credit: Daily Post
Vanuatu](#)*

An unenviable task as Coroner

Betty was also given the task of Coroner for the island. Unfortunately, she knew that many of the younger men were resentful of the older men who could buy the prettiest brides with their bigger dowries. Sometimes a newly-wed older man mysteriously died when ‘a coconut fell on his head’, and Betty would have to gaze up at the tree to try and assess whether that had indeed been an accident or not. She never held a young man to be guilty.

Coming back home

Every three years Betty came home for three months, and would spend much of it traveling around New Zealand, speaking in churches about her work at Lolowai. Once when she was standing in the pulpit back in Balclutha’s Anglican church and the old mission hymn “Let there be light” was being sung, the power failed and those present stood there in pitch darkness, rolling with laughter while singing “Let there be light”. Betty took it all in her stride.

In 1974, after her father died, Betty returned to New Zealand permanently to look after her mother at Selwyn Village in Auckland. Betty soon became Matron of the Selwyn Village hospital. After she retired from the role she continued to live and serve in the Village until she died in 2017, aged 97. Selwyn Village named their new building extension after her, Betty Pyatt Apartments.



Betty with Kay Hawk, Chair of The Selwyn Foundation’s Trust Board, and Garry Smith, CEO.

[Photo Credit](#): The Selwyn Foundation



The Betty Pyatt Apartments. [Photo credit](#): The Selwyn Foundation

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A huge thank you to Betty's brother Ralph Pyatt for sending the information for this story. Other members of Ralph's family have been involved in mission work: brother Allan was a Bishop of Christchurch; Ralph's daughter Jenny through Anglican Missions taught at St Andrews College in Nukualofa; Ralph's son Simon is with the big American New Tribes Mission in training local missionaries in Indonesia. Ralph himself has been financial advisor to the Anglican Missions board, and Ralph's sister Dorothy worked in the Anglican Missions office in the 1950s.

