



Betikama School, Honiara, 1965.

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

Betikama Adventist College, Solomon Islands

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Betikama Adventist College is a day school and boarding college located on the outskirts of the city of Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. The commercial center of Honiara, the capital city of the

Solomon Islands, is approximately 11 kilometers (7 miles) from Betikama. The city has a population of 68,000, and the country, 477,000. The topography of the island is mountainous. The Betikama estate itself, however, is located close to the coast and is very suitable for the operation of the school with some forest and much arable farmland. The weather in the region is monsoonal. There are occasional earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones to contend with.¹

Founding of the School

Early development of the school at Betikama began in 1947, soon after the Second World War, under the leadership of Lyndon and Grace Thrift. It had been decided that a school property was needed that was close to Honiara and that included sufficient fertile soil to allow the school to sustain itself. Batuna in the Western Solomon Islands had been the site of the headquarters of the Adventist Mission, but Batuna is a long way from Honiara by boat, on another island, and does not have adequate fertile land to support a large school. The superintendent of the Adventist mission, Pastor Herbert White, assisted by Pastor Norman Ferris and his brother Pastor David Ferris, had considered a number of possible locations and settled on Kukum as the site for the new Adventist mission headquarters and Betikama as the site for the new school. Both were very close to Honiara. Land for the school was purchased from the Lever brothers—1,650 acres at the cost of 10 shillings an acre. The name *Betikama* means “big water” in the local dialect and refers to the Lunga River, which borders the east side of the estate.² The site contained a variety of geographical features, from the flat alluvial soil by the river to open grassland, tropical forest, and some gravel ridges.³

The site of Betikama was adjacent to Henderson Field, an important base of operations for both the Japanese and later the Allied forces during World War II. After the cessation of hostilities, the fields of Betikama remained scattered with unexploded ordnance, and old weapons and vehicles from the war lay abandoned on the land.

A residence was constructed from the remains of army huts, and the Thrifts moved in and began work to establish the school in 1948. No bathing facilities came with the house, so the Thrifts had to soap up and dive into the nearby Lunga River, taking care to look out for resident crocodiles. Thirteen male students were in the first team of workers, and they lived in an old army hut in the bush while they planned and established gardens. Problems with the local government requisitioning crops meant that the students had to scavenge discarded American army supplies to survive until they could grow and harvest a second round of crops. Thrift reported that it was not uncommon to find students dining on boxed cereals with powdered milk and bread rolls made from dried fruit and flour. These were gifts from the American armed forces.⁴ Gardening was dangerous because the threat of explosion was ever present. Every log destined for sawmilling had to be carefully inspected for embedded shrapnel. Pastor Thrift observed that “we saw so many miracles take place in that first year. The danger was very real—we had an abundance of unexploded 75mm shells and hand grenades scattered around the property. But nobody got killed.”⁵

The school opened its doors in 1948. The founding staff and students of Betikama College 1948 included Vavepitu, Isaac Moveni, Solomon, Jioni Poa, Nathaneel, Jacob Makato, Jacob Maeke, Kituru Ghomu, Savakana, Ben Miti, Lasi, Elisha Gorapava, Thugea, Wilfred Bili, Nathan Rore, Saronga, Thomas Green.⁶ Classes were phased in slowly during the evenings, then partial days, and finally half of the day. The curriculum had a special emphasis on the Bible and English. By May 1948, there were 65 students enrolled at Betikama. Due to the diversity of the ethnic groups within the school, the headmaster developed a legislative assembly with representatives from each island group to work together to create the laws of the school. After the laws were voted in, they also elected an executive council that would oversee school and work life as well as punishment when necessary.⁷

Lyndon and Grace Thrift left Betikama in January 1949. The new principal, Ray Richter, arrived in May of that year with his wife, Coralie, and their infant son. During the interim, Pastor Lester Lock took charge, in addition to his role as education director for the mission. By the time Richter arrived, much building had taken place, and the gardens were producing well. The enrollment had increased to 70 (all male) in the third through fifth grades. Under Richter, the school program, instituted by Thrift, continued and expanded, and he put some of the best fifth grade Betikama students in teacher training classes. School days (Sunday–Thursday) began with worship at six o'clock in the morning, followed by grass cutting before classes. Students also spent time in a school work program.⁸ The mission appointed a “boss boy” to supervise the work, a position held by Sifoni for many years. Pastor Liligeto, who taught at the school, was in charge of the “spiritual health” of staff and students. In 1951, four classrooms, offices, storerooms, and a school chapel were constructed under the supervision of Doug Gillis, who had studied building construction at Avondale.

As a result of the encouragement and assistance of Coralie Richter, six girls were enrolled in 1954. In the mid-1950s, the Solomon Islands government introduced guidelines for primary education, and a seven-year syllabus was introduced.

The Richters left Betikama in 1958, having served 10 years. The next principal was Kevin Silva. At the end of the 1950s, the enrollment stood at 220 students; one-quarter of these were girls.⁹

Progress Between 1962 and 1999

Max Miller became principal in 1962. A rebuilding program began at Betikama in 1965 under the supervision of carpenters Ray Elliot and Mervan Polley.¹⁰ This rebuilding was necessary because the World War II huts that were being used as dormitories were overcrowded and deteriorating—rusted and filled with dry rot. A block of three cement brick dormitories with a separate bathroom was built for the female students. The cookhouse, which had been made from rusted matting salvaged from Henderson Field, was replaced by a large cement kitchen and dining room to cater to 110 girls.¹¹ After these facilities for the women were completed, the boys' dormitories were renovated: five blocks housing 45 male students in each, along with their own kitchen and

dining room and separate bathrooms.¹²

In 1967 Martin and Olga Ward, together with their family, arrived at Betikama to care for the school. Martin's specific task was to upgrade Betikama to a high school. He built on the work of Miller, who had previously started seventh-grade classes. New cement brick classrooms were built for these classes. By the time the Wards left at the end of 1969, students were enrolled in grades seven, eight, and nine.

In 1967, a violent cyclone hit the Solomon Islands, devastating Malaita and heralding a six-month wet season. At times the sun was obscured for days. The creeks, rivers, and streams on the Betikama property flooded, swamping the land and destroying the year's crops. It was too wet to plow for the next year's crops, and the classrooms were too wet or flooded for classes. In late March another cyclone passed through, this time hitting Honiara. Wild seas and winds of up to 120 kilometers an hour (75 miles per hour) washed away houses on the waterfront of the city, uprooted trees, and caused even more flooding. One of the old boys' dormitory at Betikama was badly damaged by a falling tree, but no one was hurt. Acres of school and staff gardens at Betikama were under water.¹³ Food shortages became a problem immediately, and Principal Ward estimated the loss to be the equivalent of A\$3,500 worth of food. The Australasian Division office provided funds to keep both the students and local staff fed over the clean-up and recovery period.¹⁴

In 1970 a new principal, Ray Smith, arrived with his wife and young daughters. A new house had been constructed for their use. During the 1970s, the school progressed to the fifth form (year 10), with students sitting for the Cambridge Examination.

Government aid had allowed for the further development of the school. New classrooms and staff houses were constructed, and when food supplies were destroyed by cyclones and long, dry periods prevented growth, this aid "saved" Betikama. But in 1975, this government aid, which previously had no strings attached, would come with changed conditions that were not acceptable in the Adventist philosophy of education. The school administration and staff had earlier decided to work toward making the college self-supporting by setting up a number of small industries. Students worked in industries such as dairy, poultry, and fishing to supply food and dollars. Donated irrigation equipment fixed watering problems and allowed for self-sufficiency.¹⁵ Owen Fox was a dynamic force in the running of the school farm. Graeme Hawke became principal in 1976. An earthquake in 1977 damaged much of Honiara, and two houses at Betikama had to be evacuated and rebuilt.¹⁶ Neville Tozen became principal in 1978. This year saw independence in the Solomon Islands, and Betikama's 60-strong male choir was chosen to sing the national anthems that were written and broadcast as part of a competition to choose a new national anthem.¹⁷

Russell Woolley led Betikama into the 1980s. Enrollment stood at 350 students, and the gardens were flourishing, providing A\$50,000 annually toward the school's operating costs as well as feeding the students.¹⁸ During this time, the dairy was revived. Betikama's 30 dairy cows were producing the only fresh milk available in the Solomon Islands. Milk and fresh cream, together with fresh vegetables from the school farm, were sold in

supermarkets in Honiara, and townfolk traveled to Betikama to buy fresh produce from the farm.¹⁹ The carving industry was thriving, and tourists would arrive daily to buy carvings. At times, particularly during school holiday breaks, the need for carvings was so great that the carving manager and teacher, Peter Kilgour, would travel by boat out to the island villages to buy more to be resold to the tourists. The shop also sold copper art, which the students learned to craft and completed during their compulsory work hours.

School days began at 6:30 a.m. for a study period, and then students attended classes. The work time started at 2:30 p.m., and the students worked in assigned areas until 5:30 p.m., when they would finish up in time for dinner in the dining halls. In 1982 a new dining hall was opened. It featured wood-fired steamers for cooking and was large enough for the full student body to eat together. It could also accommodate community events such as weddings, combined lunches, and end-of-year functions.²⁰ In 1983 the sixth form (years 11 and 12) was introduced, and the population of the school increased again.

In January 1986, Titus Rore became principal. He was the first Solomon Islander to hold this position. In the same year, ADRA's Rod Fulwood set up a mango plantation of 1,000 trees and 100 avocado trees to add to the school's growing capabilities. Sadly, this venture was short-lived. On May 19, 1986, Cyclone Namu, a category 2 (Australian scale), came through and wiped out everything. It was the worst cyclone ever to hit the Solomon Islands and resulted in 22 percent of the houses in Honiara being damaged and 75 percent of the Guadalcanal plains being flooded. The river came within six inches of the school dormitories and washed away the plantation. However, Betikama's buildings had only minor damage, and the floodwaters stayed clear of most of the fields.²¹

In the 1980s, several incidents related to old World War II paraphernalia occurred. On one occasion, while students were cooking over a fire, some bombs that had been buried in the soil exploded, sending shrapnel across the campus, all the way to the school chapel. Not long afterward, a military visitor discovered that many objects on display in the museum were actually live and extremely dangerous. As Sir Ninian Stephen, the Australian governor-general and his wife were planning to visit, their security informed the school of the need to blow up the entire museum before the visit. Unwilling to do this, the school asked some British bomb disposal experts who were visiting the country to defuse the bombs around Henderson Field and to collect the live ordnance and dispose of it in a nearby dam. School students were evacuated, and the explosion could be heard across the entire island. The visit of the Australian governor-general proceeded without further incident.²²

During the 1980s, students from both Vanuatu and Kiribati came to Betikama to complete their final years of secondary education. Several new buildings were completed during this decade—a manual arts teaching building, several new staff houses, and a “Lamb Shelter” to hold Sabbath School meetings and classes for younger students. Toward the end of the 1980s, an administration block was constructed on the school campus.

In the 1990s Betikama formed a sister-school relationship with Tweed Valley College (previously known as Murwillumbah Adventist High School) in the North New South Wales Conference, and a series of fly-and-build school visits began under the guidance of Peter and Glenda Roberts (a Betikama teacher from 1970). Building projects, including a pottery work shed, a clinic, fencing for the carving industry, and a basketball court, were completed. Metley Katovai and Charles Viva were the Betikama principals who welcomed and supervised these groups of Australian volunteers. The connection between the school and the church community of Murwillumbah continued with a further building visit in 2013.²³

Betikama During the Period of Ethnic Violence 1999–2003

Kenny Elisha was principal of the school from 1995 to 1998, followed by Sam Panda in 1999 and Dedily Masaea in 2004. The school was managed during this time by Bruce Potter, whose wife, Pauline, was one of the teaching staff. During this time, the school faced its greatest challenge because of civil unrest between the Guadalcanal revolutionary army, known as the Isataba Freedom Movement (IFM), and the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). This unrest was, among other things, an ethnic and geographic conflict that arose after a campaign of violence against Malaitan settlers on Guadalcanal by the local Guales. The MEF was established in response to this intimidation. A four-month state of emergency was declared by the government leader, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, in late 1999 just before he was kidnapped by the MEF. The conflict continued until the end of 2000 when the Townsville Peace Agreement was signed by the MEF, the Solomon Islands government, and the IFM. One Guale leader, Harold Keke, refused to sign the agreement, and elements of the conflict continued over the next three years until he was arrested.²⁴

As soon as the tension erupted, the MEF built a bunker at the powerhouse right next to Betikama. They set up a machine gun and would fire on anything that moved during the night. This made it extremely dangerous for Betikama students and workers to be in the fields or to travel at night. While the school was meeting to decide a course of action, the MEF arrived, and there was a shooting across the river. Most of the staff went back to their villages or left for Australia, leaving a skeleton staff behind. The Australian High Commission advised all Australians to leave and take the boat home. Australian women and children on staff at Betikama left on the Australian boat—they had two hours notice—while some of the Australian men stayed behind. Later, as the violence escalated, the Australian Airforce sent a Hercules helicopter for the Australian staff. Bruce Potter stayed to protect Betikama's property, particularly the farming equipment, which was valuable and very difficult to replace. All Guale staff and students left the school in fear for their lives, though the MEF would target only men, not women. Ladies from both racial groups met at the Honiara post office during this time to march through town declaring that they would have nothing more to do with their husbands and male relatives until they stopped fighting. Ultimately their demands were successful.²⁵

When the violence was de-escalating, many staff returned, and Australia put RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) police in place to keep the peace. Betikama recommenced classes in time for the state exams, though most Guale students didn't return until it was completely safe to do so the next year. Classes had been abandoned for almost six months during the conflict, but the staff who remained at Betikama cultivated the farmlands. Bruce Potter confronted army personnel on several occasions during this time in order to prevent theft and violence on Betikama property. Much of Betikama's communication infrastructure was destroyed during the conflict because the MEF had cut power to radio, telephone, and internet. Weapons were fired repeatedly both on and over Betikama land, but no student or staff lives were lost.²⁶

After the conflict, Solomon Islands trade and tourism were decimated. This meant difficult times for the industry at Betikama, and building developments were few. Bruce Potter managed to get the road to the carving shop sealed in a deal with a local road building company by selling them gravel from the river, something Betikama did from time to time when cash was needed. At the end of the fighting, the Japanese High Commission provided funds to help rebuild some of the school property—a science building that had been started before the conflict and abandoned when the builder joined the MEF.²⁷ The school was back in full swing by the end of 2000, and every attempt was made to reconcile the racial groups.

Every year at Betikama the students would put on a cultural display, and in 2000 the students asked the staff to perform as well. Bruce Potter, of Scottish heritage, bought a set of bagpipes in Australia, figured out how to play them, and marched into the dining hall playing the bagpipes, terrifying and amusing the students. Bruce then discovered that the RAMSI forces had a bagpipe band of their own and invited them to put on a concert. The students loved it so much that the army band donated a set of bagpipes to the school and provided free lessons. The school was invited to play at the Solomon Islands trade show, and the Betikama Bagpipe Band led the parade. Potter also made kilts and Scottish outfits for the entire band supported financially by the Sanitarium Health Food Company. They played several events between 2000 and 2001.²⁸

Industry at Betikama

Two teachers, Ken Meyers and Dennis Steley, set up Betikama Carving and Betikama Copper in 1971.²⁹ Through these industries, students developed new skills. Clients were mainly tourists. On one occasion, members of the Royal Family, who were on tour in the Solomon Islands, purchased carvings crafted at Betikama.³⁰ Carvings and copper work were displayed in a special pavilion built on campus. Occasionally World War II Marines would visit the campus to see the museum.³¹ The carving store and workroom not only sold carvings but offered tourists a special program where students explained the art while giving a demonstration. This was followed by singing and a bamboo band performance. To add to the tourist attraction, Dennis Steley collected various World War II relics from around the island and set up a small museum outside the carving work shed.³² At times they had up to four hundred people visiting. The carving industry began with 12 students and rapidly grew to about 40.

Betikama Carvings also became a place for local people to sell their wares as well as providing them with money for buildings, food, and school fees. Thousands of tourist visitors came to the Carving Pavilion during the 1970s, and the industry was extremely profitable for the school. Betikama Carving was so well known by the late 1970s that one of their carvers, Dalingi Pivu, was invited to represent the Solomon Islands at the Pacific Fair in Brisbane in 1978.³³

Another industry important to the school development that also began in the 1970s was the sewing industry organized and run by Freda Fox. It was aided by a gift of 10 industrial machines and benches. The sewing industry also helped raise money for the school. A number of female students working in the sewing industry made quilts and dresses out of fabric scraps donated by a clothing factory in Australia. The girls also made the school uniforms worn by the Betikama students.³⁴

In 1975, under the leadership and tutelage of Dennis Steley, students began a copper industry at Betikama.³⁵ Students learned how to beat copper to create realistic and abstract artworks, coffee tables, candlesticks, signs, portraits, and name plaques. The school sold the works out of the Betikama Carving store and also in booths in the Honiara port when tourist ships arrived. In the first year, they made \$1,000 in profit, and this tripled by the second year.³⁶ Students were paid to perform aboard several of the tourist ships, taking their bamboo pipes with them and singing local songs.³⁷ The money was used to support the school. Students were also paid for their work. The carving and copper industries were still profitable into the late 1990s, but after the civil conflict, tourism died out, and the arts industries slowly downscaled.³⁸ They were still in place in 2018 in a much-reduced capacity.

During the thriving tourism years of the 1980s and 1990s, Betikama also had a crocodile exhibit. Two young crocodiles had been caught in the swamp behind the school by local crocodile hunters, and they gave the animals to the school. The male grew to 3 meters (10 feet) in length, and the female, to 2-meters (6.5-feet). A cage was built, and teacher Peter Kilgour was in charge of their care during the 1980s. During tourist visits, the crocodiles would be fed fish and rats. They were a much-loved attraction but required a lot of work, given how fast and dangerous they were. To clean the cage, Kilgour had to remove the plug from their waterhole (the plug was a World War II shell casing) and then creep in behind the crocodiles while two students sprayed water hoses in the animals' faces to distract them.³⁹

There have been other industries at Betikama. The school became well-known for its excellent garden produce, and in the 1980s a special hut was set up to sell produce to the local population, particularly the Honiara expatriate population every Sunday.⁴⁰ Betikama had a thriving cattle industry and a dairy that began in the 1970s and expanded in the 1990s to include the sale of flavored milk in the city and in local schools and markets. While the cattle industry survived the conflict of 2000, after the war ended, ex-soldiers were responsible for the slaughter and theft of so many cattle that the dairy was decimated by 2005.⁴¹ In 1990 a pottery workshop and industry were added at Betikama under the management and tutelage of Bruce Potter.

He received \$30,000 in funding from the Canadian government to purchase a building, 10 pottery wheels, and several kilns. This endeavor was successful for many years, producing high quality pottery for sale and running pottery classes for local residents.⁴²

Principals of Betikama Adventist College⁴³

	DATE	NAME
1	1948	L. Thrift
2	May 3, 1949	R. W. Richter
3	January 25, 1959	K. F. Silva
4	March 6, 1962	L. M. Miller
5	December 7, 1966	M. J. Ward
6	January 2, 1970	R. H. Smith
7	January 26, 1976	G. J. Hawke
8	January 18 1978	N. D. Tozen
9	January 1980	R. Woolley
10	January 1986	T. Rore
11	January 1990	M. Katovai
12	January 3, 1992	C. Viva
13	January 1995	K. Elisha
14	January 1999	S. Panda
15	January 1, 2002	D. Masaea Maealisia
16	January 2009	A. Masa
17	July 2012	F. Leovania
18	January 2017	D. John

Achievements

Today the school is known as Betikama Adventist College in recognition of the importance of senior classes that have been added. Betikama began as a small school and has grown into a full boarding high school that services both the Adventist and the secular Solomon Islands community. The school has always had a focus on Bible study, worship, and service, and the school has become well-known for its quality of education. Kelvin Peuser, a former teacher, wrote that Betikama expatriate teachers “were highly involved in the national curriculum

development in relation to each of the areas they taught.” This included “the preparation and marking of Form 5 exams for their respective subjects, development and writing of resources and the development of curricula.⁴⁴ The curriculum was developed to such a high standard that in the 1980s, the Solomon Islands government asked the Betikama staff to be involved in the creation of the new national curriculum.

The college has had several reunion celebrations over the years. In 1988 they celebrated their 40th anniversary with a march of past and present students, and 1,500 people participated, including students from the initial class of 1948. Betikama later celebrated its 65th anniversary in September 2013, and hundreds more former students and staff celebrated at a special reunion event. Lyndon Thrift was able to attend both anniversary celebrations. He was pleased to see how Betikama has grown since his time. He liked the decent spread and the provision of excellent playing areas. Explosions could still be heard while he was there!⁴⁵ The school has included in its alumni several national leaders, including a general secretary of the South Pacific Division, Pastor Lawrence Tanabose, and prime ministers of the Solomon Islands, Danny Phillip and Manasseh Sogavare. During the anniversary, the Betikama Alumni Association was formally announced and recognized—a group dedicated to raising funds for the upkeep and renovation of the school!⁴⁶

Betikama students have represented the Solomon Islands many times over the years at Pacific cultural events and sporting events and with their musical and creative skills. The graduates are highly regarded as employees in the local area.

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Note: Since few extant written sources exist, this historical record was reconstructed using both oral sources and secondary written sources. Oral sources have been chosen for their personal knowledge of the history of the school and being eyewitnesses to the events described. Oral sources are recorded in the endnotes as interviews.

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46. Chuang, *Bright Future for Betikama*, 11.

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