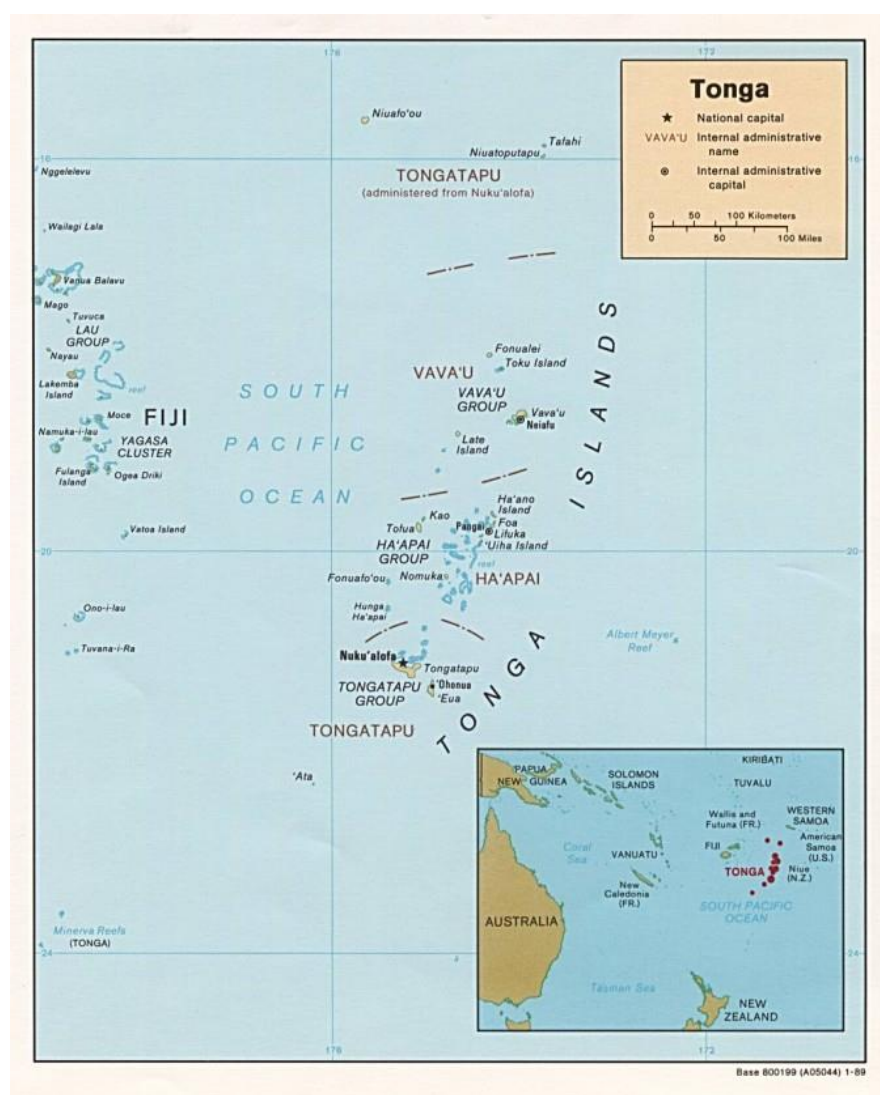


Tawa Historical Project: How I remember Tawa now

This record is a contribution to a THS project for gathering recollections from Tawa people.

Tawa Rotarians in Tonga 1976: Russell Smith, John Barber, Graeme Sutton, Ray Harriss.

Written by Russell Smith some years ago, Russell died in 2025. Edited by Steve Avery. 18 2 26, updated 10 3 26.



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In 1976 the Rotary Club of Levin organised a project in Tonga and invited clubs within the district to provide the labour. This was to build a large dining and assembly hall at Tupou Methodist College, the biggest boys' secondary school in Tonga, where there were 750 boarders. It is located on Tongatapu near the village of Malapo. The school is owned by the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Established in 1866 it claims to be the oldest secondary school in the Pacific Islands. Enrolment is now around some 1,000 pupils. Tupou College was first established at Nuku'alofa at the location on which Queen Salote College stands today. In 1948, the school last moved to Toloa in the Eastern District of Tongatapu where it still stands today. [Tupou College - Wikipedia](#)

The Rotary Club of Waikanae purchased and shipped a block making machine to Tonga. This was used by the boys of the college who dug and crushed coral for the aggregate and made the thousands of concrete blocks for the job. Gordon Decke, a retired builder was stationed in Tonga for the duration of the project which was six months. 70 Rotarians from our district put in two weeks' work each working six days a week from 7.30am until 5.30pm each day. There were four members from Tawa Rotary in the workforce. John Barber, a builder and former member of this club, later transferred to the Plimmerton Club. The late Graeme Sutton, a builder, Ray Harriss, a plumber and me Russell Smith, a handyman. Ray was a non-Rotarian at the time but we managed to persuade him to become a member on the condition that he did not have to wear a tie to Rotary meetings!

We set off by train on the Silver Star from Wellington to catch our flight from Auckland. The *Silver Star* was a luxury passenger train that ran overnight on the main trunk between Wellington and Auckland overnight from Monday 6 September 1971 until Sunday 8 June 1979. We had a party of people to see us off at Wellington Station and we were presented with a parcel for the four of us as we boarded the train. After we were on our way, we decided to open our parcel. It was about the size of a biscuit tin. Inside was a pig's head still dripping blood. Thanks to Ian Pocock, a local butcher and member of our club at the time! When we arrived in Tonga all of the block work was finished and the portals were up. Our job was to clad the building with fiberboard, put on the roof and spouting and prepare for the installation of the windows. With two builders and a plumber we had the right people for the job. I did things like drilling hundreds of holes in the steel purlins to fix the roof on and putting in fixtures for the window frames. Each week a new team of four arrived so that teams overlapped. We worked with Rotarians from Pahiataua when we arrived and when they left a week later, we were joined by a team from Stratford and Upper Hutt. Our living quarters were on site and local women provided all of our meals. At that time Tonga was celebrating 150 years of Christianity. Paula Vavili (Paul) was the Police Superintendent as well as President of the Tongan Rugby Union and many other organisations such as Red Cross, Corso, Handicap Children's Society and of course Rotary. Paul as everyone called him, had a fantastic

personality. He was also a marriage guidance counsellor and ordained minister. He met us at the airport and looked after our welfare while we were in Tonga.

On our second Sunday there, Paul took us to a remote village called Nukuleka to show us the problems faced by the people there. The population was about 400. Some of the conditions were appalling filthy water, no doors on many of the houses, inadequate clothing, no electricity, no schools and children with sores and disease. The main source of clean water had long since failed. There was a huge water tank which was filled from the church roof. The spouting and down pipes had rusted through years before and there was no money to repair them. Paul hoped that Rotary may be able to help in restoring the water supply. Ray Harriss reckoned that we could fix it in about two hours if we had the materials. A couple of days later we borrowed a truck and drove to Nuku'alofa during our lunch hour and purchased the materials and the 4 of us shared the cost. That evening after work we drove to Nukuleka and restored their water supply. I believe it was this work at Nukuleka that made Ray realise how much he could help these people. That was the start of his 29 years of yearly trips to Tonga to help people and organisations in need. Our club gave him financial assistance on some of his projects but many we didn't know about.

One Wednesday we had just started lunch and a police van arrived and the policeman asked for Russell Smith. He said he had been sent by the Police Superintendent, Paul, to get Russell because he had heard that I was a representative tennis player. He wanted him at the police headquarters for their sports day to practice against their police tennis team who were to tour New Zealand shortly. He also wanted Graeme Sutton, who he heard also played tennis. I said I had come here to work, not play tennis and anyway we didn't have any tennis gear. He said that was not a problem, they would provide it all. It was the closest I had ever been to being arrested. The two of us had to go and they really turned it on with umpires and ball boys etc.

Well, we finished our assigned work on the project after two weeks and we were all very satisfied with what we had achieved.



Images from Wikipedia March 2026