

17. Transport and Communications

Traditionally, Solomon Islanders had two means of transport: they either walked or used canoes on navigable rivers and the surrounding lagoons and ocean. Some of the ocean-going canoes were large vessels, capable of carrying 30 men. They were either paddled or used sails and outriggers. Canoes were built from single 'dug out' logs, or had their sides built up from planks. Once Europeans and Chinese arrived, many types of sailing and motorised vessels were introduced. The government, plantations and Christian missions had their own fleets of coastal vessels. Overseas shipping, mainly out of Australia, brought supplies, the mail and passengers, and took away primary produce. Today's coastal shipping is largely locally-owned and binds the nation of islands together. Overseas shipping is usually large container vessels.

The first wheeled transport was trucks and tractors. The introduction of four-wheel drive vehicles onwards from the Second World War has made rural transport easier, although in many places vehicle roads are basic or non-existent. In the 1950s, few Solomon Islanders could afford their own transport, however, urban people began to purchase bicycles, autobikes, motorbikes, scooters, and then small cars. Today, in urban areas busses operate between suburbs, carrying large numbers of passengers. Honiara now suffers from traffic jams because of the large number of cheap second-hand Japanese cars imported.

The arrival of aircraft has also made a large difference to transport. Solomon Airlines is the national carrier, both domestically and for international flights linking to neighbouring countries. Helicopters are also used by some commercial companies. However, for many Solomon Islanders, the main means of daily travel is still walking, to work, to school, to market, to church, or to visit family.

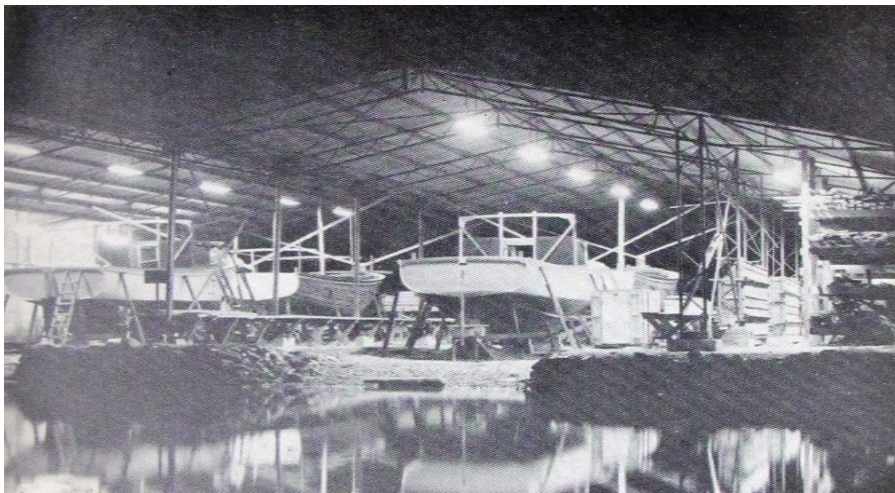
Communications have also changed with the arrival of the mobile phone and the spread of the network throughout the islands, even in remote areas.



17.1. A Choiseul canoe ready of the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, 1959. (Lynne McDonald Collection)



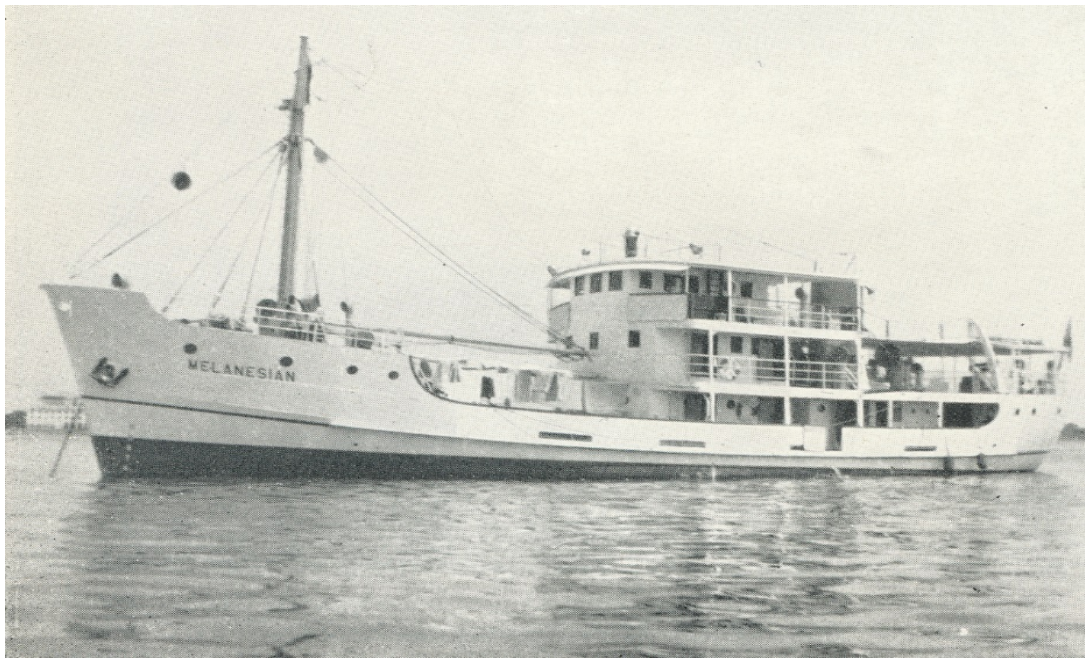
17.2. The Protectorate had its own small fleet of coastal ships for administrative use. The *Margery* was one the ships used in the 1950s and 1960s. (John Hearth Collection)



17.3. In the 1960s, the South Pacific Commission established a boat-building school at Auki, Malaita. (Solomon Islands Government)



17.4. Local boat building, Langalanga Lagoon, Malaita, 2005. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.5. The *Melanesian*, which disappeared in 1958. (Clive Moore Collection)

One of the best remembered ships in the Solomons fleet was the *Melanesian* which disappeared mysteriously in 1958. The new government vessel was built in Hong Kong in 1956, arriving in the Protectorate in December that year. The ship was 36 m long, had a 7.9 m beam and a maximum speed of 9.5 knots. She had space for seven first-class passengers, 75 deck passengers and a crew of 18. With its 241 gross tons, the *Melanesian* could also carry 100 tons of deadweight cargo, or 600 drums of fuel, or 70 tons of copra.

The ship left Sulufou in Malaita's Lau Lagoon on 9 July 1958 and was last heard from on the next day, after which she disappeared with 64 people aboard. The *Melanesian* is thought to have sunk near Sikaiana in 1,200 fathoms (2.19 km) of water, since its last message was at 9.00 a.m. on 10 July, 40 km west of Sikaiana. An extensive sea and air search failed to locate any survivors. Limited wreckage began washing up on the east Malaita coast on 18 July, but only one partial body was ever found, washed ashore at Maanawai, Malaita. The other 63 passengers are all presumed to have been lost with the ship. A subsequent enquiry suggested the ship sank quickly, but an extensive investigation never released a conclusive report. There were many theories. Some thought the ship had been attacked by or hit a submarine. A loud noise out at sea was heard in South Malaita at 4 p.m. on 12 July which some thought related to the *Melanesian*. There were also earthquakes recorded on 13 July, precursors of which might have affected the ship. Although no explanation for the tragedy was ever established, the Commission of Inquiry ruled out sinking by attack from or collision with a submarine, a mine, another ship, or an explosion. The most likely reason was a badly manufactured hull which split in two when hit by rogue waves, causing the ship to sink immediately with total loss of life.



17.6. Small coastal ships are the lifeblood of the Solomon Islands. They carry cargo and passengers throughout the islands. This is the *Fianne* at Tovanipupu, Guadalcanal, in 2012. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.7. A fleet of small ships is used for coastal and inter-island transport. This is the *Renbel* in 2005, which mainly traveled between Rennell and Bellona Islands and Honiara. (Clive Moore Collection)

17.8. The *Baruku*, another of the main coastal ships, about to leave Honiara on a round trip to Malaita in 2005. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.9. The *Nutoli* passing through the Gela on its way to Honiara from Auki, 2014. (Annie McCoy Collection)

17.20. The *Kaona*, off Makira, 2010. (Christopher Chevalier Collection)



17.21. The *Pelican Express*, a fast passenger ship on its way from Honiara to Western Province, 2010.

(Christopher Chevalier Collection)



17.22. Fibreglass canoes are the usual means of village coastal transport, but small dugout canoes are still used in many areas, just as they have been for centuries. Both photographs are from Malaita, 2005. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.23. Landing cargo at Lavagu, Rennell Island, 2016. Wharves are rare around the islands, and coastal trading ships usually have to ferry passengers and cargo ashore. The ships anchor as close to the shore as possible, then everything is transshipped to small boats. Local communities help get everything ashore.



17.24. The local community forms a human chain to transfer the cargo from the boat to the beach, Lavagu, Rennell Island, 2016.

17.25. The cargo has arrived on the beach, Lavagu, Rennell Island, 2016. (17.23–25, Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka Collection)



17.26. Light planes provide the air transport for many islands in the Solomons. This Solomon Airlines Twin Otter plane is flying into Munda, 2010s . (Joe Hamby and Tri Marine Collection)



17.27. Solomon Airlines provides essential rural links, landing on grass airstrips throughout the country. This flight landed at Ato`ifi SDA Hospital on Malaita, 2004. A tractor and trailer provided the on-ground transport, typical of rural areas. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.28. Small dugout canoes still abound, used around the coast and on rivers. This photograph is from 2005. (Clive Moore Collection)

17.29. Going to work at the cannery at Munda by canoe. (Joe Hamby, Tri Marine Collection)



17.30. Children learn to use canoes at very young ages. This child was collecting aluminium cans for recycling, from rubbish on the Matanikau River, Honiara, 2011. (Christopher Chevalier Collection)



17.31. Much of the urban transport system is by privately-operated small buses. This scene is from Honiara in 2010. The routes vary, the buses providing an excellent way to get around Honiara and the other smaller towns. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.32. For most Solomon Islanders, particularly those in rural areas, the main method of getting about is walking. They do not require urban reminders such as this sign in Honiara in 2011. (Martin Hadlow Collection)



17.33. Telecom building and public phone, Tulagi, 2007. (Clive Moore Collection)



17.35. Betel nut seller in Honiara, 2014, with mobile phone. (Christopher Chevalier Collection)