

# Daniel Bula of Vella Lavella



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In 1907 Reginald Nicholson left Australia to be a missionary in the Solomon Islands. Reginald studied the local language so that he could teach the people about our loving of God who wants us to live in peace, not war.

Reginald was also able to use his medical knowledge to help the people of the Solomons. This is how Reginald was able to help 12-year old Bula, on the island of Vella Lavella.

Bula was sitting in the dark in his leaf-thatched house. He covered his eyes with his hands. Reginald entered the house and took a close look at Bula. His eyes were very swollen and he was in great pain. Bula tried to peep at the new comer, Reginald, who had only been on the island for four days. But the light hurt Bula's his eyes, so he covered them again with his hands.

Reginald went straight back to his thatched hut which was close by and mixed up some soothing medicine for the eyes. He brought it back in a bowl to the boy and began bathing his eyes with it. The missionary continued this for over an hour, after which the eyes felt much better.

Reginald returned to his hut again, and opened up his suitcase. He finally found what he was looking for - a dark green eye-shade. He brought it back to the boy and put it on his head, pulling it well down to shelter his eyes from bright light. Then he left him.

The next morning Reginald returned to see Bula. Reginald could not speak the local language, so used sign language to ask Bula to come to his thatched house so that he could treat his eyes there. But Bula did not understand what Reginald was saying. Finally Reginald took him gently by the arm and led him across to his hut where he again bathed his eyes.

After that, Bula came to Reginald's hut every morning and evening for treatment, and by the end of a fortnight his eyes were completely better.

During this time, Bula and Reginald became strong friends. As a twelve year old, Bula had been trained in all the dark practices of his people. His father was a well-known head-hunter. Bula's ambition was to be a head-hunter like his father. On one occasion his father, in a fit of anger, tied Bula into a basket and hid him in a tree. Then he went off on a fishing expedition for several days. Fortunately his mother searched for him and rescued him. Bula's mother had a great influence over the local women. She possessed hypnotic powers and practiced witchcraft.

By the age of ten Bula could look after himself very well. The men of the villages were often away, fighting other tribes and head-hunting, so the boys very quickly grew up. They learned the fighting skills of their fathers and became independent at an early age.

Kindness and care, love and respect for people were not often shown in Bula's village, and Bula responded to the love and care shown towards him by Reginald. Bula became Reginald's cook-boy, although to begin with his main duty was to light the fire in the morning.

Bula also learned to prepare Reginald's food and did it well.

"If you break a plate or cup, or anything, you must report it to me. So long as you tell me that you broke it I won't be angry," said Reginald.

Bula called Reginald Nicholson "Nicolo".

One day Bula came along with a broken saucer. "I'm sorry, I broke your saucer, Nicolo" he confessed."

"That's alright, Bula," replied the missionary, "I'm pleased that you owned up. That's more important to me than a broken saucer."

Some time later Reginald discovered that it was someone else, not Bula, who broke the saucer. "Why did you say you broke it, Bula?" Reginald asked.

"You told me that whenever anything was broken I must say I did it," he replied.

Reginald realised that Bula had not understood, so explained.

One day Reginald found Bula very carefully rolling two eggs in an old pair of his trousers. "What have you got there, Bula?" he asked.

"I found a nest of alligator eggs in the bush. There were many eggs so I took two of them and I'm going to keep them warm till they hatch." replied Bula. "It will only be two more days before they come out."

"I'm not too sure I want baby alligators around the place, Bula," said Reginald, "but let me know when they hatch and we'll see what happens."

Sure enough, on the second day both eggs opened up and out crawled two baby alligators. They kept them for five or six weeks, but finally Reginald made his decision:

"Those creatures are growing quickly, Bula. I don't like them around the house. One day they might do some harm to someone. You'll have to put them back where they belong, in the river."

Reginald and Bula became dependent on each other. Bula helped Reginald to learn the local language and helped with cooking and cleaning up. Bula was learning about the wider world beyond his island. Most important of all he was beginning to know the Creator God and Jesus, His Son. As Reginald learned the language he was able to teach the Christian message to Bula along with others who came to hear.

But it wasn't easy for Bula. "You're foolish to put your trust in a white man, Bula," the village people told him. "Think of all the terrible things the slave traders did to our men in the past when they came in big ships and took our young men away. They played nasty tricks on our people. Don't trust a white man."

This piece of history was true, the 'blackbirders' did come during the 1870s and take men unwillingly to be sold as slaves to the sugar cane planters of Fiji and Queensland. But somehow Bula knew that this white man was different; he could be trusted. He had done nothing but good since he arrived on Vella Lavella. Although Bula was quite small for his age, he stood firm and remained loyal to his friend Reginald.

The sorcerers made threats against Bula. "We'll call down sickness on you. You know our word can bring you death. You should leave that missionary and come back to stay with your own people."

Bula remained unmoved by the threats, and showed no signs of the sickness or death the enemy had spoken over him, even though loyalty to his friend meant loneliness and unpopularity among his own people.

For the first year that Reginald was at Vella Lavella he lived in a thatched hut down near the shore. Bula came to live with him when he became cook-boy. Later on, Reginald got permission from the men in the villages nearby to build a house on a hill.

“The place where we will build our house is through the jungle a little way, Bula,” Reginald said one day. “We’ll have to clear a path first to get all the building materials to the building site.”

“I’ll help you, Nikolo. We can work together to get the house built,” promised Bula.

It was a year of hard work but at last the house was completed. But the village people still kept trying to make Bula leave the missionary.

“You know there is a specially evil spirit living on that hill,” the people jeered. “If you go and live with Nikolo, that spirit will kill you. You know you shouldn’t go near the spirit’s place.”

“I know Nikolo is a good man,” replied Bula. “I know his God protects him and He will protect me too. I’m not afraid of the evil spirits because Nikolo’s God is greater.”

Many years passed before Bula told Reginald of the evil spirits reported to be on the hill where his house stood, and the struggle Bula had with his people over moving in to live with the missionary. Bula remained strong and trusted in God.

Late one night Bula woke Reginald.

“Nikolo! Nikolo! Wake up! I can hear people coming up the hill. I think they might be coming to take me away, like they said they would.”

Together Reginald and Bula went out on to the verandah and were surprised to find a number of men carrying a small canoe in which a badly wounded man lay.

“This is the result of the fight they had this morning,” thought Nikolo.

Two tribes had been in a fight that morning and Reginald had gone down to the village to try and stop them. It took some very loud yelling to get them to stop and listen to him but eventually the fighting stopped. When he saw the wounded man in the canoe he knew they had started again.

“Bring him up on the verandah,” Reginald told the men carrying the injured man. “Let me have a look at his injuries.”

The man had a badly shattered knee.

“I can’t attend to this at night,” he said, “There isn’t enough light to see by. This kerosene lantern flickers too much. I’ll make him as comfortable as I can and work on the knee in the morning.”

He placed some ointment and a bandage over the sore knee and left him to rest until morning. By daylight he was able to remove several fragments of bone from the shattered knee, then he made nine stitches in the muscle and eleven in the skin. He had just completed the task when a messenger arrived with the news that fighting had broken out again. Reginald left Bula in charge of the wounded man and went down to the village yet again. This time he had to yell until he nearly lost his voice. Finally the fighters stopped to listen to him.

This was the first surgical case Bula had seen and it made a deep impression on him, giving him a great desire to learn more of the medical work. Bula was given greater responsibility for the house and everything in it, and he grew in Christian character as he took that task seriously. Reginald was learning more and more of the language, filling notebook after notebook with vocabulary and notes.

As the missionary learned the vocabulary and was able to translate parts of the scripture and hymns, Bula was learning more and more about the Creator God and Jesus His Son.

One day, soon after they had moved in to the new house Reginald heard Bula call urgently, "Nikolo, come quickly! There is a messenger here from your friend the trader who lives near the lagoon around the coast."

The missionary came out on to the verandah to speak to the messenger who looked and sounded very distressed.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Please come quickly, Nikolo," gasped the young man, "your friend the trader, who lives near the lagoon wants you to come straight away to help him. Something terrible has happened to his neighbour, the other trader."

"What has happened?" asked Reginald.

"The trader went off early this morning on a trading trip and left his wife and children in their house. That chief, Sito, who is wanted by the government authorities, brought his men and killed the trader's wife and children. Sito and his men also killed all the people who worked for him. The other trader, your friend, came to help but he was too late. He wants you to come, Nikolo and help him. He's afraid the raiding party will come back and ransack the village houses and trade store," the messenger explained, very disturbed and fearful of what might happen next.

Reginald called for some men to prepare their large canoe, gave Bula instructions to look after the mission, and set off along the coast. The twenty-mile trip in the large canoe on a choppy sea took four hours. When they finally arrived in the calm waters of the lagoon the scene that confronted them was horrifying. But it was just the beginning of two weeks of horror.

The government authorities were called in. Without knowing the full facts, and being unwilling at first to listen to Reginald, they blamed the massacre on the whole population of Vella Lavella. Government police were told to kill anyone they found. The police urged the missionary to leave the island as Sito had vowed to have his head.

Reginald pleaded with the government authorities to allow the local people to conduct the search for Sito and his gang because they knew the land best. For two weeks they refused the missionary's request, claiming all the islanders were responsible, but eventually, after indescribable acts of horror, the Resident Commissioner agreed to the local men joining the search for the guilty parties.

While all the violence continued the people of Vella Lavella began to move to the land around the mission house. They saw safety in the presence of the missionary who trusted his God to protect him. Here was a man who possessed no gun, had no locks on his doors, in fact he had no doors, just open doorways, yet he lay down to sleep every night without fear. For the first time, the people, who had for three years been unresponsive, now began to show some faith and trust in the missionary. For three years the missionary had stitched up ugly gashes on arms and legs, set broken bones and treated deep-seated ulcers without any expression of gratitude from the people. Suddenly, in the midst of terrifying events on their island, the people were responding to his care of them by recognising him as their protector.

"I'm very pleased that the people have turned to you in their trouble, Nikolo. They can see that your God is protecting you."

For the first time in three years Mr Nicholson could see a response to the Christian message. The numbers of people attending Sunday worship and day school increased steadily. Many people built permanent homes for themselves near the mission station. The missionary rejoiced as he watched the word of God begin to take hold in the hearts of the Vella Lavellans.

Bula grew rapidly and deeply in knowing God his Father and Jesus His Son. The time came for him to be baptised.

"When you are baptised, what Christian name would you like to have, Bula?" the missionary asked.

"I'd like to be Daniel, please Nikolo," he responded instantly.

"Is there any reason why you choose Daniel?"

"Yes," came the reply, "when I first came to you and my people were all against me I felt lonely and afraid. Then I heard the story of Daniel and how he stood alone. God looked after him in the hard times and I knew He would look after me in just the same way."

So he became Daniel Bula.

But Mr Nicholson had known him as Bula for so long that he found it difficult to change to Daniel and continued to call him Bula. One day Daniel came to him looking very troubled.

“Nikolo, why do you still call me Bula? God has given me a new heart. I know this. So why don’t you call me by my new name? I want to be called Daniel. This is my Christ name. You tell me that when Saul of Tarsus became a Christian his name was changed to Paul. So now that I am a Christian, let my name be Daniel.”

From that time he became Daniel. He continued to learn about the Christian way, always choosing to please God.

There were new Christians from nearby villages now living at the mission station. Daniel took encouraged them to walk in the way of Jesus, taking every opportunity to help them know God the Father.

Daniel also enjoyed accompanying the Reginald on trips around the island, visiting villages along the coast, helping with any medical needs they found. He understood that the purpose of these trips was to gain the confidence of the people by healing their sick and relieving their pain.

Daniel took a great interest also in the treatment of the injured and sick. Ever since the first time he witnessed surgery on that damaged knee he was most enthusiastic about learning how to treat such injuries himself. He was a fast learner. Once, when Reginald was away from the mission a man was brought in from a nearby village.

“What happened to him?” asked Daniel.

“He was getting coconuts from a very tall tree when he fell,” they explained. “His leg is damaged.”

Daniel examined the leg, found where the bone was broken, and proceeded to set it back in place. The man fully recovered.

On another occasion a man who had been in a fight was brought in with a severe gash across the side of the head, the ear and cheek bone. Reginald was there, but Daniel begged to be allowed to deal with the patient. The gash was cleaned up thoroughly and then Daniel proceeded to put in the stitches, which he did very well. The man was placed entirely in Daniel’s care and he recovered completely. Daniel was learning very quickly and managed these minor surgical cases very well.

A boy of twelve was brought in one day in a serious condition. He had been playing in the water with his friends when a shark attacked him, tearing a huge lump of flesh from his thigh. His friends dragged him from the water, bound the torn flesh roughly back in place, and brought him to the mission station. Daniel at once took charge, cleaned up the wound, and sutured the lump of torn flesh back in place. The boy made a full recovery, eventually getting back the full use of his leg.

The most outstanding work Daniel achieved was seen in his orphanage. He had, over the years, collected orphans and unwanted children from all around Vella Lavella and adjacent islands. They were brought to the home that had been specially built for him. It was larger than the usual village house. Two-thirds of it was partitioned off for the boys and Daniel lived in the remainder. There were times when he had as many as sixteen boys with him. The boys learned from Daniel's example what living as a Christian really meant. As a result they learned quickly and many of them became Christians because of Daniel's influence.

The missionary watched Daniel develop into manhood, ever growing in Christian grace. "One day, Lord, "he prayed, "would you have Daniel preach to his own people? They are still living in so much darkness. They come to worship you with spears and axes in their hands, still afraid of each other. They would understand you and your ways more quickly if one of their own people taught them."

Reginald began to prepare Daniel for preaching. He was very enthusiastic about this new venture, for he realized the importance of presenting the Christian message to his fellow islanders so they would clearly understand and believe it. It wasn't long before he was taking part in the Sunday worship services, presenting the gospel with illustrations that related to their every-day life.

Speaking one Sunday on the verse, '*Be still and know that I am God*' he said, "You all know I was out in my small canoe the other day when that big storm came over us. It took us quite by surprise; it hit so suddenly and so hard. I was a long way from land so the first thing I thought was, "I must get back to the shore." But I soon found how useless and dangerous it was to try and battle against the wind and waves. So what did I do? I waited. It was best to be still. That was the safest thing to do. If I had continued struggling, the canoe would have been swamped and I would have been lost. In fact, the storm soon passed and I was able to paddle home safely."

"In our lives we get caught by storms. Waves of fear, anger and jealousy come over us and threaten to swamp us. If we struggle in our own strength we make more trouble for ourselves. The safest thing to do is to *be still and know that God is in control*. If we obey, all is well. So I urge you to listen to God's voice, obey Him, and all will be well for you. Just be still.



For ten years Daniel preached in the worship services with wonderful results.

Another of Daniel's great gifts was his ability with languages. He was fluent in five Solomon Islands languages, and learned quickly to speak simple but correct English. There was no written form of the Vella Lavellan language so an alphabet had to be developed before any translation could be attempted. Daniel worked with Reginald in the task of translation of scriptures and hymns.

In 1916 Reginald brought Daniel and his friend Alex on a speaking trip around Australia and New Zealand. Alex was one of the first people on Vella Lavella to be baptised.

In 1921 Daniel was married to Rini Vailoduri. People from all over the island gathered for this great event

The church was decorated with palm leaves and feathery ferns, brilliant flowers including graceful native orchids. After the happy ceremony some hundreds of people sat down to a lavish feast of pigs, fish, taro, chickens, tapioca, and a variety of delicious fruits.

After the feast many men spoke to the gathering. There was one thought above all others that they expressed. "Before the missionaries came we only met together like this if we wanted to make war on someone. Now we can meet as friends with love and friendship in our hearts towards each other."

17

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So Daniel Bula grew in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, leading and teaching his people, knowing that God had laid His hand on him and called him to this special task of leading his people into the Kingdom of God.

Daniel and Rini had been married only ten months when Daniel complained one day of a pain in his side. He wasn't feeling well but he continued work as usual. After two days he was running a high temperature that the nursing sister was unable to control. The next night he became worse, and a little after midnight he died.

It was all so sudden and unexpected. Rini, who had only been married to Daniel for ten months, was heart-broken. In a letter to Reginald, who had returned to Australia Rini wrote:

*"Today Dani is not here. I listen for the sound of his voice and long to see his face, but all in vain. I cannot understand why God took him. I am amazed. But I know He has gone to be with God, because his face at the time of his going was lit with a wonderful light."*

18

The nursing sister on the mission station wrote:

*“Daniel was both our right and left hand in the work here. Perhaps God knew that we trusted too much in Dan and not enough in Him. He was always ready. He fixed up the squabbles and straightened out the difficulties of both non-Christian and Christian. Yet he always stressed that only God could solve their greatest need.”*

Friends in New Zealand wrote:

*“Daniel Bula was only twenty-eight years of age when he died, yet he lived to see his people become Christian in character. In his life-time he saw the banishment of head-hunting and murder. He saw love-feasts take the place of tribal fights. He saw head-hunters take their sons in their canoes to their preaching appointments. God had brought about dramatic change in Vella Lavella in just one generation, and much of it was through the devotion of one man, Daniel Bula.*

Rini had a baby son whom she named Daniel Bula, with the prayer that he would grow up to follow in his father's footsteps.

*“Through his faith he is still speaking” Hebrews 11: 4*

*Adapted from 'The son of a savage', RC Nicholson, Epworth Press, London, 1924*

