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SOLOMONS DUTY FOR LOCAL CITIZEN SOLDIER

From training with the Army Cadets when he was at school to patrolling the streets of Honiara in the Solomon Islands has been an interesting journey for Millmerran schoolteacher Luke Barrett.

Luke is now part of Operation Anode. It's the name for the Australian Defence Forces' part in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Australian soldiers - along with soldiers from three other Pacific nations - are supporting police from a total of 16 Pacific nations (including Australian Federal Police) as they back up the Solomon Islands Police Force in its task of restoring law and order. RAMSI began in 2003 at the request of the Solomon Islands Government.

"I joined the Cadets at St Mary's Kingaroy, where my parents still live. Then I went to uni and thought I'd try my hand at the Reserves - the extra cash was very useful when I was a student! Now I'm a full time teacher at Millmerran, but I'm still a Reserve soldier - I enjoy the different life experiences that come with it.

"Here in Honiara the overall mission is to back up the police as they try to restore law and order. We go out on patrols to assist the Solomon Islands police and the police from the other 16 participating nations - it's a multi-national operation.

"It's my first overseas operation as a Reserve soldier. From week to week our tasks change - we can be patrolling in Honiara one week, then another week we can be supporting police in outlying villages. It's been very good - the people have been great to talk to and we walk through the villages and buy stuff. It's been fantastic.

"When I get home there'll be no big holiday for me - I'm straight back to school-teaching at Millmerran. But I'm getting married in December so the pay and allowances will certainly help with that!"

But there's one important date for Luke and his fellow soldiers even before he gets married. On 25th April - ANZAC Day - he'll be marching with the rest of his Battalion. The drums will be beating and the flags flying, and they will be wearing their new Australian Service Medal on their chest. It will be a proud day for all of them, and they have worked hard for it.

Luke is one of Australia's 41,500 Reservists, who make up about 42 per cent of the ADF strength. They bring their own civilian skills and experience and in return get the opportunity to gain new skills as part of their Reserve training.

Although Reservists may be “called out” by the Governor-General for serious security threats, all Reservists currently serving on operations, or elsewhere in the Defence Force, are volunteers. In recent years Australian Reservists have provided humanitarian relief to tsunami and earthquake victims in our region, and operations in the Solomon Islands, the Middle East and elsewhere. They have served alongside their full-time counterparts in peace missions to Timor Leste and Bougainville and a Reserve rifle company is regularly deployed to Malaysia as part of Australia's commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangement.

Reservists have assisted civilian police in roles such as venue search and vehicle checkpoints at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and the 2003 Rugby World Cup. They also provide much-needed assistance in times of natural disasters such as floods, droughts and fires and in emergency rescue operations.

***Caption:** Pittsworth’s Reserve soldier Private Luke Barrett takes a break from patrolling in the Solomons*

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