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SOLOMONS TOUR FOR LOCAL CITIZEN SOLDIER

John O'Keefe was the school captain of Aquinas College in 2003, but now he's facing big responsibilities of a different kind. He's swapped his Nerang Soccer jersey for Army uniform and he's patrolling the streets of Honiara in the Solomon Islands.

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

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 Army Reserve in 2005," said John. "So from basic training at Kapooka to this deployment took about a year.

"This operation is all about hearts and minds – building rapport with the locals, especially teenagers and kids so the next generation know we're here to help and appreciate what RAMSI is all about.

"It's pretty diverse and no day is identical – we're always ready to go. Essentially there's no down-time, we are always on stand-to. The police are working on establishing law and order – making people feel safe - but if something still needs to be sorted out then that's our job.

"My only other overseas trip has been a cruise to New Caledonia – so this is very different. There's no comparison between traveling and being on an operation – we're here to work!

"It's been a great experience. Partly it's a feeling of duty – doing something for Australia. It's also been the chance to experience another culture – and also to realize what Australia has.

"And it means that at the end of this tour we'll be awarded the Australian Service Medal. So ANZAC Day will be pretty special for us – we'll all be marching that day for sure and wearing the medal too."

John 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:** Ashmore Reserve soldier Private John O’Keefe is patrolling the streets of Honiara in the Solomons*

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