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SOLOMONS TOUR FOR LOCAL CITIZEN SOLDIER

Logan's Andrew Morris has already spent time in Canada where he worked as a ski lift operator. But now he's wearing his Army Reserve uniform in the heat and humidity of the Solomon Islands.

The former Springwood State High School student is now in Army uniform and he's part of Operation Anode. It's the name for the Australian Defence Forces' part in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Over 100 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.

Andrew's a member of the 9th Battalion, Royal Queensland Regiment. It was the first battalion ashore at ANZAC Cove, but has not served overseas since it returned from PNG at the end of the Second World War. When this contingent returns home in April, every member will be awarded the Australian Service medal for their peace-keeping duties.

Andrew is a section commander with the rank of Corporal. It means he is responsible for eight other soldiers, and he recently led them on an extended patrol to the outer island of Malaita.

"The role of the section has been to conduct section strength presence patrols, predominantly around the harbour and CBD of Auki, the island's capital.

"From what we've all found, maintaining a good rapport with the people is 90 per cent of our job, rather than just the security support to the police. Wherever we go, we are greeted warmly by the locals, and we carry our weapons slung behind our backs to emphasis we are here peacefully."

Andrew and his mates recently had an experience they will never forget, when they travelled by boat to the village of Bina. "Bina was great. We had the opportunity to stay with one of the community leaders there, Phillip, and he put us up at his house for three nights.

"We organised a community event where every Digger got up in front of about 200 people and introduced themselves. We had an open forum where we discussed RAMSI and some of the community leaders and adults asked questions.

"We ended up having a sing along with the kids, where the kids sang songs for us and we attempted to sing Waltzing Matilda for them. It was a really good experience. We also played a game of soccer with the kids and with the champion soccer team of the village.

“Overall it was a great experience for the fellas as it basically brought it right down to the individual soldier who got a chance to make a difference and get involved with the community.

“The military experience and the financial allowances were only some of the benefits of going on operations. To be put outside your comfort zone, to deal with people, learn to speak their language and to learn to identify with their cultures, are probably the most positive aspects for me.”

Andrew 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:** Logan’s Reserve soldier Corporal Andrew Morris causes a stir in a local school room while on patrol in the Solomon Islands*

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