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SOLOMONS TOUR FOR LOCAL CITIZEN SOLDIER

Wynnum's Luke Amies is winning hearts and minds in the Solomon Islands – but he's wearing Army uniform in order to do it.

The former Iona College student and recent law graduate 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.

It is the second time the former amateur boxer has been deployed to the Solomon Islands since joining the Army reserve in 2004. His fluency in Pijin, the universal language of the islands, is making a major contribution as he and his fellow Diggers move around the villages.

“While I was there the first time I worked really hard to learn Pijin and by the end of that I got to a stage where I could communicate well,” Luke said.

Following his first tour of duty, Luke travelled around Europe before finishing his degree in criminal justice just before this deployment.

“I was living with my girlfriend and a whole group of Solomon Islanders, so my Pijin was getting pretty good. Then I did the Pijin test with the Army and got classed as a qualified Pijin speaker. When the company deployed here, they put me in the civilian-military liaison role.”

“Over here I liaise with the civilian community and see what they're impressions of RAMSI are, especially Army.

“We try to get out to the villages and communities. We get in contact with the chiefs and talk to them to see when the last time patrols came through, and what the soldiers did that was good and just generally talk to them.”

Luke said the Army arranged meetings with villagers to talk to them about their mission. “Then we'll ask for any comments from the people so they can say what they think of RAMSI, any comments or questions, things they have heard.”

Without modern media, Luke said the villagers were susceptible to the “coconut wire” rumour mill, and his liaison work helps to set the record straight.

“These meetings make me like my job even more, makes me want to work harder, because when you talk to the locals they’ll tell us how much their life has changed in the short four years since RAMSI came here. They tell us how much better everything has got, and how much they really do want to see us here, and see us stay here until our work is complete.”

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:** Wynnum’s Reserve soldier Private Luke Aimes gets the latest news from a village headman in the Solomon Islands*

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