

Keeping the peace in the Solomons

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BENEATH the fluttering palm trees the soldiers stood at attention to mark the 90th anniversary of the moment the guns fell silent at the end of World War I.

As the Last Post was solemnly played by a bugler the men and woman serving as part of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) saluted to honour those who had served and died in past conflicts.

For the Australian Army Reserves from 5th and 8th Brigade, who were about three-months into their four-month deployment, Armistice Day was a sobering reminder of the reality of their occupation. While their operation in the Solomon Islands is not marked by the insurgency of Iraq and Afghanistan - they are there primarily as peacekeepers - they are no less serving their country.

Few in Australia are familiar with the circumstances that drew Australia to the Solomon Islands in 2003, and even fewer are aware of the important role the army reserve now plays in the region.

With the Australian Defence Force committed to other theatres throughout the world the reserves have taken over the rotations to the capital Honiara, on the main island of Guadalcanal, serving under the ADF's banner of Operation ANODE.

The reserves are currently on their 16th four-month rotation and Australia has contributed about 140 of RAMSI's 240 military personnel on the islands at the moment. The others come from New Zealand, Tonga and Papua New Guinea.

The reasons the reserves are there are surprisingly little known in their own country.

In the late 1990s what is commonly referred to on the islands as "the tensions" began. This was essentially a period of civil unrest and lawlessness, characterised by fighting between the Isatabu Freedom Movement (also known as the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army) and the Malaita Eagle Force.

Malaita is another island of the Solomon Islands. The US military brought many Malaitans - who they found to be more receptive to the idea of working than Guadalcanal locals - to Guadalcanal during World War II to help build their military bases and infrastructure during their fierce and bloody battle with the Japanese.

After the war ended many of the Malaitans stayed in the new capital Honiara. As is all too often the case the two groups have had trouble co-existing for some time and the tension finally erupted a decade ago.

In 1998 militants started a protracted period of violence, intimidation and extortion toward the Malaitans. Many Malaitans fled the violence on Guadalcanal.

Over the next few years fighting between the two groups, murders, corruption and the fact large portions of the Solomon Islands police force joined in the violence led, predictably, to a total collapse of local confidence in the government's ability to ensure law and order.

Today, the Solomon Islands police are prohibited by law from being armed because of their role in the unrest.

The Solomon Islands Government eventually asked for help and the Australian Government responded in 2003 by leading the RAMSI initiative.

A period of relative calm was restored, but in 2006, Honiara descended into turmoil again following allegations recently elected Prime Minister Snyder Rini had used bribes from Chinese businessmen to buy the votes of members of parliament.

Rioting in the city, which caught the security forces off-guard, led to the Chinatown district being all but destroyed.

“Back in the day there was one well known bloke who used to walk through the streets of Honiara with an M60 machine gun and a bullet-belt across his chest demanding compensation from people,” Lance Corporal Garth O’Connell, one of the reservists currently in Honiara, said as we drove in a convoy through the city on Monday. He paused to smile and wave at a group of children who had come out to cheer and wave at the Australians.

“We do a lot of waving. It seems to make the kids’ day when we wave to them,” he said.

The Australians certainly do wave a lot. Everywhere they go the locals stop to wave, cheer and smile as the soldiers drive past. Every Australian soldier diligently reciprocates. Today Honiara is relatively calm again, but after travelling with the reservists for four days, one is left with the feeling that if they pulled out any time soon the country would likely be in strife again very quickly. There is no credible government or police service. The country has almost no modern infrastructure, unemployment is about 50 per cent, there is no industry to speak of and the country relies almost totally on foreign aid.

Last Saturday the ADF flew 16 civilian employers of deployed reservists, and several members of the media, to Honiara as part of their Operation Bosslift program.

The program enables employers, who have released their employees for active service, to see first-hand what the soldiers are doing. What is readily apparent is that although the army’s main base just outside of Honiara is named Guadalcanal Beach Resort, the soldiers are certainly not on holiday.

Not only are they flat out doing patrols, guarding the infamous Rove prison which has the highest number of murderers per capita of any prison in the world and other tasks there is the constant threat of malaria, vast amounts of unexploded World War II ordnance (almost 6000 found this year alone), food and water-borne poisoning, occasionally hostile locals, heat-stroke, snake bites and crocodiles.

In the week before the civilian employers landed a 10-year-old child was killed in a crocodile attack.

“Whenever we go for a swim we have to have a soldier stand guard on the beach with a full magazine in their weapon to watch for crocs,” Lance-Cpl O’Connell said.

The soldiers all chose to come on the deployment, and in most cases the selection process was competitive, and all seem proud of the work they are doing.

Their days are long, regimented and they have little leave. Unlike the Australian Federal Police, who also have personnel there, the reserves are not allowed to drink alcohol during their four-month deployment. Most had not been out to Honiara for a meal since they had been in-country. A typical day for an infantry soldier is a patrol for several hours in the morning, then return to base and complete other duties such as cleaning the latrines or picking up meals, guard duty and then another patrol at night. The reaction of the locals upon seeing the troops is evidence enough their presence and attitudes are well regarded. Indeed, the troops say they are diplomats as much as they are soldiers.

“It’s good to know that we’ll leave the place better than when we got here,” Captain Scott Kirkwood said.

Corporal Ross Duckitt from 8th signals brigade is on his second rotation to the Solomon Islands and he has deployed to East Timor previously too. “It’s an enormous commitment from the reserves to do this, but

you won't find one bloke that doesn't want to be here," he said.

`` At the end of the day we're here to assist with the maintenance of law and order, the locals see us and they're happy with that, we give them a nice big wave and they are very receptive to us."

The highest ranking military officer on deployment, Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Weir, who is the commander of coalition task force 635, said reservists were more suited to peacekeeping tasks than regular forces.

When asked why it was that so few in Australia had heard of the RAMSI operation Lt-Col Weir was quick to answer. `` Because it's been a success."

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