

On patrol in Honiara

It may be a tropical paradise but the daily work in the Solomon Islands is simply a different kind of policing.

As part of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), Federal Agent Heath Cockram works in the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) maritime section as the Participating Police Force (PPF) Advisor to the Honiara Harbour Patrol.

Working from Aola Maritime Base, Heath's daily duties take him out and about on the sea off the coast of Guadalcanal. His main mode of transport is a rigid hull inflatable boat (RHIB), a small, efficient, petrol-powered vessel designed to carry six passengers.

The boat is also used to take other PPF members, military members and RSIPF members to and from the islands near Guadalcanal so they can hear from the communities there. Issues such as law enforcement, domestic violence and substance abuse are all on the agenda and the visits give the villagers a chance to voice their concerns and to ask questions.

Heath's daily tasks vary from community relations visits to coastal and island communities, to participating in joint patrols with other government agencies. He works regularly with Solomon Islands Customs Officers targeting foreign fishing vessels and has been involved in a number of successful operations where substantial amounts of contraband alcohol and cigarettes have been seized.

Foreign fishing vessels are targeted as they tend to attract crime. At

night, prostitutes sometimes make their way out to these vessels in banana boats to engage in sexual activities with the crew, which is an offence in the Solomon Islands. No person is allowed on, or within 30 metres of, a foreign fishing vessel without a permit from Customs. Local people sometimes approach the vessels to try to exchange fruit and vegetables for frozen fish as fish prices at the local markets are very high.

"The foreign fishing vessels themselves are very dangerous and when we board them we have to be particular careful of our own safety, as there are huge loads of frozen fish being transhipped from one vessel to another while we are on board and the fish holds are 15 metres below the main deck," Federal Agent Cockram said.

"One of my RSIPF counterparts actually fell 15 metres into the water on one occasion when he

was attempting to climb down the ladder into the RHIB."

But the job is not always plain sailing for this 29-year-old police officer from Perth. The seas can become rough in a very short time and Heath has had to negotiate two-metre swells in high winds and very heavy rain.

"A colleague and I had to battle a two-metre swell one afternoon to retrieve a banana boat that had been seized after the owner had been seen throwing explosives into the water to catch fish," he said.

"This is an ongoing problem here as there is a lot of unexploded ordnance from WWII lying all over the islands. Locals find them and open them and use the explosive powder to create fish bombs which they drop in the water to kill the fish.





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01: Contraband goods seized from a foreign fishing vessel 02: Federal Agent Heath Cockram 03: A banana boat 04: Federal Agent Heath Cockram with RSIPF member Eddie Kalokul

"We located the banana boat and towed it back to the Maritime base, but as the seas were so big the tow-point on the banana boat snapped and I ended up driving the banana boat back while it was taking on a lot of water. It's a good thing we always wear life jackets."

His community visits often take him to the naturally beautiful islands of Savo and Tulaghi in the Florida Islands where it is common to spot pods of playful dolphins. Heath has also seen turtles, whales, marlin, small flying fish, manta rays, and large sea snakes.

"I was amazed recently to come across a small school of kingfish which were jumping vertically in the air," Federal Agent Cockram said.

In his six years as a police officer, Heath has had two deployments in the Northern Territory of Australia. As part of Operation Pleach he spent six months at Arlparra in the Central Desert, and six months at Ramingining in Arnhem Land.

"The living conditions and environment at Arlparra are very harsh, but the desert has some beautiful scenery," he said.

"I really enjoyed my time at Ramingining. Arnhem Land is beautiful, and the fishing is fantastic. I also saw some very large salt-water crocodiles."

Heath loves the sea, and dives recreationally most weekends. He spends other leisure time playing golf, and enjoying a game of tennis. But he considers himself lucky to have a job which enables him to work in his favourite kind of environment while contributing to the local community.



04