

On the road to transition

Setbacks and challenges have not halted the upward climb of success for the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003-2004 was applauded internationally as an unqualified success. The United Nations, no less, has recognised

the mission as a benchmark of a successful peacekeeping model.

By July 2004, Solomon Islands was considered stable. Militia groups had been disarmed and key militia



Tragedy: Protective Service Officer Adam Dunning and Private Jamie Clark were the first tragic casualties of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.



leaders had been arrested, including Jimmy ‘Rasta’ Lusibaea, Ronnie Cawa and Harold Keke. RAMSI and the Solomon Islands could now focus on the final phase of the mission – the sustainable transition of law enforcement to a self-sustained national police force.

It was this goal that the second commander Participating Police Force (PPF), Sandi Peisley, turned her attention to when she arrived in mission in July 2004. Now retired from law enforcement, Ms Peisley says it was felt that the initial role to establish a safe and secure environment had been completed.

“It was now a safe place, albeit there were still people they wanted to arrest and firearms they wanted to take off people,” Ms Peisley says. “But the general feeling was that security had been established.”

“My tasking,” she says “was to move the PPF mission from being a strictly operational mission to capacity developing”.

The operational investigations from the tensions also had been hugely successful. By July 2004, 3316 people had been arrested on 4788 charges. This success was made possible through evidence collected and secreted by Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) who remained loyal during the tensions. Similarly, the security situation in Solomon Islands had stabilised to such a degree that military personnel were drawn down in the second half of 2004.

Ms Peisley was impressed by the solidarity of the mission. She says the “development of the wider police family” from across the Pacific Islands was a definite highlight of the mission. So too was the PPF’s first steps to transition from operational policing to mentoring and developing the RSIP.

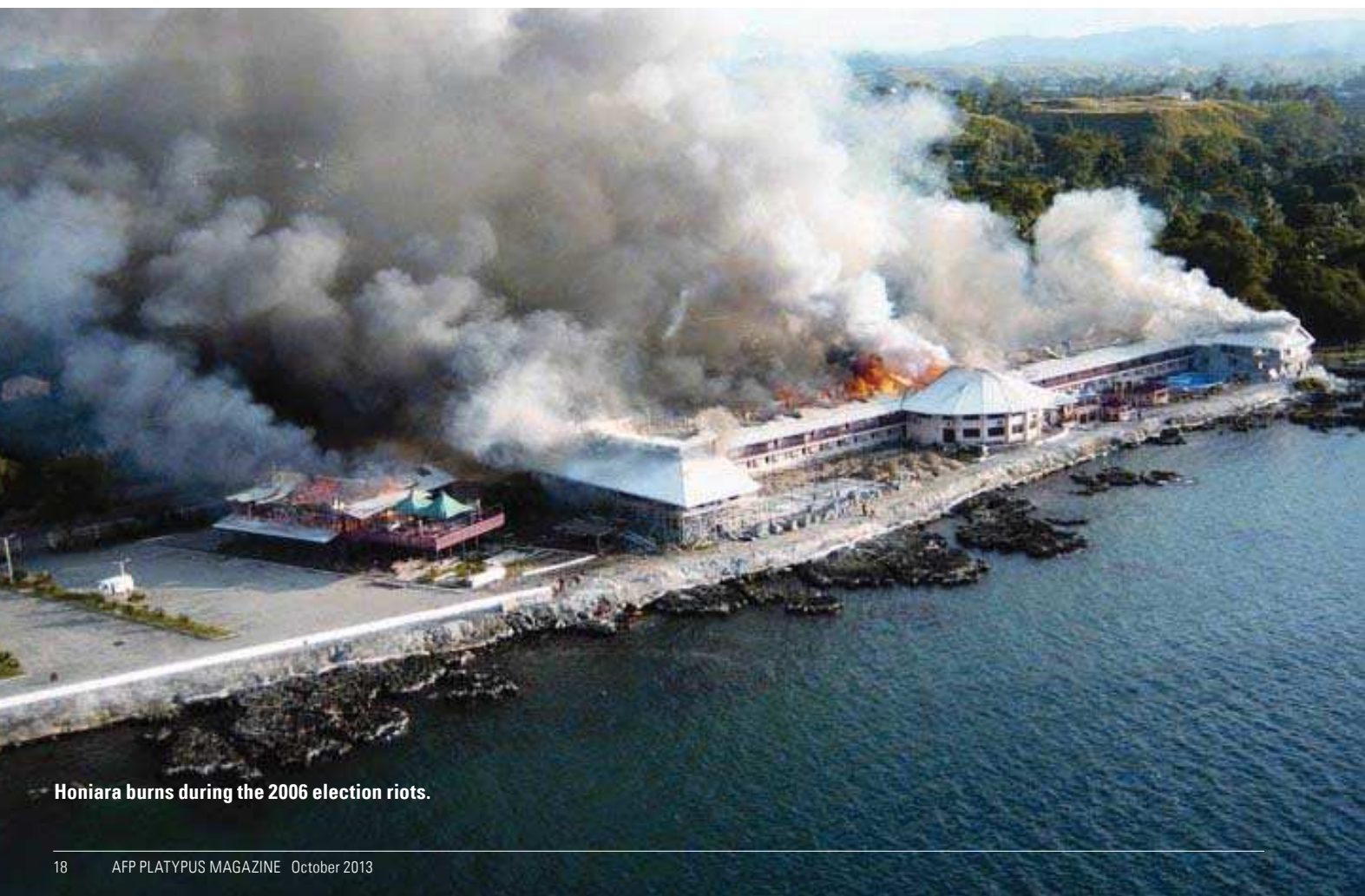
Tragedy

But it was on 22 December in 2004 that the RAMSI mission suffered its first tragedy. Protective Service Officer (PSO) Adam Dunning was on a routine night-time patrol in Honiara when the vehicle he and a colleague were travelling in was ambushed on the East Kola Ridge Road in Honiara. PSO Dunning was fatally wounded by an assailant with a high-powered rifle.

“It was a very big dark cloud on the mission,” says Ms Peisley. The attack was the second such incident in two months. A patrol by Tongan and Nauruan police officers was ambushed in October 2004. PPF and RSIP members considered the incidents linked and arrests of four men quickly ensued in January 2005. Even so, the two former militants charged with murder were later acquitted.

Ms Peisley says the murder was considered an isolated incident by rogue elements. It was never considered an attack on the RAMSI mission as such. “This was more a one-off, senseless murder than a targeting of PPF officers”. Regrettably, PSO Dunning’s murderer was never brought to justice.

No less tragic was the accidental death of Private Jamie Clark, a member of the Australian military contingent. Private Clark deployed to Solomon Islands in January 2005 as the arrests were being made in the PSO Dunning case. Just two months later, Private Clark died from injuries when he fell into an obscured sinkhole while on patrol searching for possible weapon caches on 10 March 2005.



Honiara burns during the 2006 election riots.

2006 election riots

An event that did have the potential to impact on RAMSI was the 2006 post-election riots. The transition process was developing under new Participating Police Force (PPF) Commander, Will Jamieson, who deployed to the mission in July 2005. He was also the first to assume the role under a two-year appointment.

In April 2005, the former National Manager of the AFP's International Deployment Group Shane Castles had been appointed as Commissioner Royal Solomon Islands Police. Now retired, the then Assistant Commissioner Castles had taken up the position vacated by British policeman Bill Morrell. It was a bonus in that having an AFP member as RSIP Commissioner could provide synergy with the RAMSI mission.

In sync with the PPF goal, Mr Castles says his aim was to assist with establishing the RSIP as the police force of the country. "It was time to start moving the PPF to the back seat of the bus as key advisors and to put the RSIP back in charge of their police force." He says with a two-year tenure until April 2007, his intent was to have a Solomon Islands' police officer replace him as commissioner.

"That all changed with the elections of 2006," Mr Castles says.

When the Solomon Islands independent Commission of Inquiry into the riots was released in June 2009, the then Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua said the document contained "certain contentious and sensitive materials". Consequently, the report has never been released in its full form. But the riots had the potential to set back much of what the RAMSI mission had achieved.

The elections were held on 5 April and were conducted peacefully. The riots erupted on 18 April 2006 when Snyder Rini was appointed Prime Minister by the newly elected parliament. Three days of unrest unfolded amid claims of political involvement in planning the riots and criticism of the RSIP and the PPF. Chinatown in Honiara, particularly, was targeted during the riots, with up to 90 per cent of businesses burnt down. Many Chinese evacuated the country in fear of their safety.

Prime Minister Rini was in office just eight days before resigning on 26 April ahead of a no-confidence



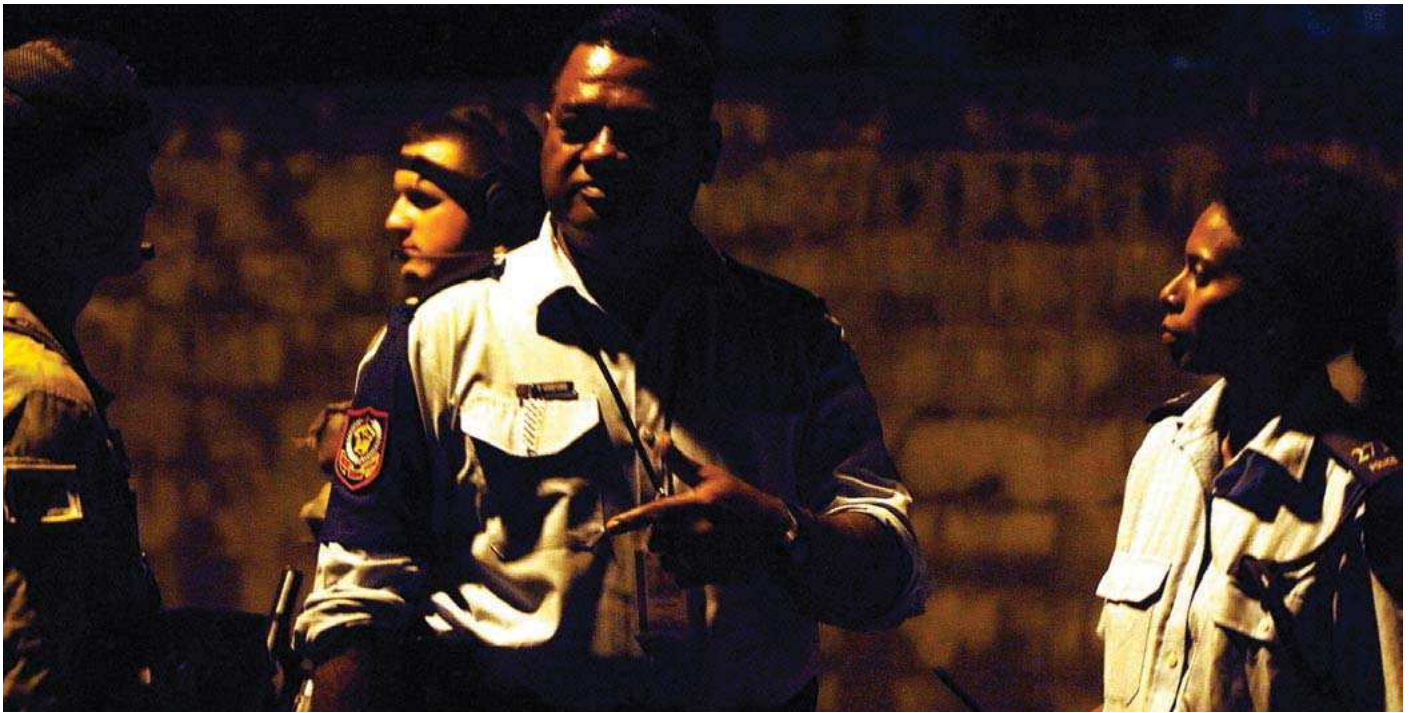
Handover: Sandi Peisley, left, hands over command of the Participating Police Force to its third commander, Will Jamieson, in July 2005.



Assistant Commissioner Shane Castles was appointed Commissioner of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force in 2005.

vote. Manasseh Sogavare was then elected by the parliamentary incumbents for a second term as Prime Minister, having led the country in 2000-2001. What followed was a turbulent relationship between RAMSI and the Sogavare Government for the next 18 months. The relationship between the Sogavare and Australian governments also was strained. Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole was expelled in September 2006. The appointment of Mr Castles as RSIP Commissioner also was effectively terminated in 2006. Mr Castles left Solomon Islands for holidays in December of that year and was refused reentry to the country.

Even so, RAMSI would endure. The underlying strength of its multi-national and multiagency mission was equally matched by community support in Solomon Islands. This support was ultimately reflected by Solomon Islands' parliamentary members. On 13 December 2007, Prime Minister Sogavare was defeated in a no-confidence motion on the floor of the Solomon Islands' parliament – prompted largely by the deteriorating relations with Australia.



Participating Police Force officer Sergeant Tuineau 'One 'One and Royal Solomon Islands Police Force officer Agnes Aihunu patrol with the military at the Honiara Ports Authority.

On to the future

Shane Castle's legacy also endured. In his 20 months as RSIP commissioner he embarked on a determined program of administrative and structural reform. Many of the reforms he helped champion are now the foundations of the extraordinary success of RAMSI, the PPF and the RSIP following the hurdles of the 2006 elections.

Chief among these initiatives was the formation of the RSIP executive management team. In conjunction with leadership development, the intent of the management team was to devolve strategic and policy planning across the senior management of the RSIP.

Formerly, executive control of the RSIP rested largely with the RSIP commissioner, with direction from the national police minister and prime minister. This new reform would vastly increase accountability in the senior ranks of the police by spreading executive responsibility across its senior members.

Mr Castles also was instrumental in raising the Police Capability Plan. This would address many of the day-to-day planning issues from logistics, training and equipment management to recruiting and starting the RSIP's first media unit.

Importantly, he would also lobby key stakeholders for improvements in police housing. He says housing conditions for police were "the greatest bane of my life" during his time in-country. Raised in the Police Capability Plan, he argued that providing adequate housing facilities would underpin the progress of the RSIP in becoming an effective police force.

The project to upgrade and refurbish police housing and infrastructure would commence with the fourth Commander PPF Denis McDermott and a priority for

successive PPF commanders. To date there are new provincial police headquarters in seven of the nine Solomon Islands' provinces.

Mr McDermott (who now works for AFP Professional Standards in a civilian capacity) recognises the contribution of Shane Castles. He says he was 16 months into his tenure as PPF commander and "picking up some of the good work that Shane had done" was still instrumental in taking the mission forward.

Another key goal during Mr McDermott's tenure as PPF commander was to refocus RAMSI and the PPF on rebuilding its relationships. The mission had weathered its most rocky challenges since the 2006 elections. But Mr McDermott says the PPF could not allow a similar operational oversight to happen again. "That was my motto for two years," he says. Along with "bedding down" the transition of the PPF into a mentoring role – a key operational focus was ensuring the renamed RSIPF and the PPF were ready to effectively meet any further unrest.

Mr McDermott acknowledges the work done across the RAMSI and the RSIPF in moving forward from 2007. "I was lucky. I had a really good team of people. That's crucial." In building and strengthening relationships, he says many outcomes directly improved the life of Solomon Islanders.

Domestic violence programs are now being implemented across Solomon Islands by the RSIPF. The Pink Ribbon Women Charity was established in 2008 by Lady Alice Waena, the wife of Solomon Islands' then Governor General Sir Nathaniel Waena. The charity was a first of a kind to be established in the country to raise awareness of breast and cervical cancer in the country.

A gathering of international police and military celebrates the 100th International Women's Day at the RAMSI Women's Breakfast in 2011 at the Mendana Hotel in Honiara. Long standing community initiatives have been hugely successful in building relationships in Solomon Islands.



Carols in the Park at Lawson Tama Stadium in Honiara drew 10,000 people to the event in 2007 and 2008. AU\$40 million would also be approved in administrative funding.

AU\$20 million would be allocated to begin the upgrade project of police housing and infrastructure. New Zealand would contribute AU\$3.5 million toward this goal as well.

Mr McDermott highlights one project in particular. He clearly wears his heart on his sleeve when he reflects on the lives of the average Solomon Islanders. "We have it all, they have very little," he says. But he doesn't disguise his admiration for kindergarten teacher Beverly Komasi and principal of Mercy School.

Mrs Komasi was the inaugural recipient of the RAMSI Special Coordinator's Award for Women in 2009. Soon after RAMSI deployed, Mrs Komasi decided to voluntarily start Mercy School. She was moved by the plight of children who spent their days picking through rubbish at Ranadi dump on the outskirts of Honiara. The school was under way by 2005.

Then RAMSI Special Coordinator Graeme Wilson acknowledged Mrs Komasi and the significant role of women in reimagining their country. "From the time women stood up and demanded their sons and husbands lay down their weapons, the door for development was reopened," Mr Wilson said at the time.

Mrs Komasi received her award in 2009 at a special breakfast for International Women's Day. By then, Mercy School had 320 students. "She now has two schools with over 600 kids," Mr McDermott finishes the story.

Certainly, much had been achieved during Mr McDermott's two-year tenure. Transition of the RSIPF was established and well down the path of sustainability and self-reliance. The RAMSI mission, the RSIPF and Solomon Islands now looked to a new election in 2010. As new Commander PPF Wayne Buchhorn started his tenure in Solomon Islands the mission was also looking toward a new developing partnership. Solomon Islands ended the first decade of the 21st century worlds apart from where it had started.

Taking the lead: Royal Solomon Islands Police Force officer Agnes Aihunu, centre, listens to a complaint from a local man during a military supported 'x-ray' patrol in Honiara.



The fourth Commander Participating Police Force Denis McDermott visits local child Flinson and his mother after a medical evacuation.

