

We've been watching and we are watching still

During his peacekeeping service in the Solomon Islands, Federal Agent and Order of Australia Medal recipient Anthony Stafford led investigations into horrific crimes committed in the country and also established the 'Solkick' Australian Rules Football initiative for its young people. Below, he tells of his experiences.

In 1998 an uprising by the indigenous people of Guadalcanal Island against Malaitan settlers in the Solomon Islands started a bloody conflict that raged unabated until the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) in October 2000. Even then, murder and other serious crimes driven by ethnic tension continued.

The influence of the Guadalcanal Liberation Front and the power brokers of the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) also remained.

By mid 2002 the AFP were closing down operations on Guadalcanal and Malaita as part of our involvement with the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT), born of the TPA.

The thousands of guns collected by IPMT members had been destroyed, either burned or taken to the deep sea waters so they could never be retrieved. The final stages of the 'drawdown' also involved gifting what we could and clearing out the rest.

My team leader and I drove out to the Tetera plains to give children toys and tennis balls to empty the stocks. Arriving at Tetera Health Clinic an emergency was well under way. A small child

was unconscious and suffering convulsions from advanced cerebral Malaria, the family holding her under a running tap to bring her core temperature down.

Soon after, a woman approached us, and in conversation we explained that the IPMT was leaving. There was no hiding her concern – it was etched on her face and in her voice.

"You cannot go," she said.

"Why?" I asked her.

"Because if you leave, no one is watching."

In late July 2003, I returned to the Solomons as part of an international team of investigators under the National Investigations Team structure of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Our first task was to assess the magnitude of the mission and then prioritise the investigation of crimes committed during the tension period. We harvested what files we could from the different Royal Solomon Island Police Force (RSIPF) investigations teams – files that had been dormant during the ethnic tensions.

We sat in a bungalow at our base at the Guadalcanal Beach Resort and sorted the files into piles: 'Murder and Serious Assault'; 'Arson'; 'Rape and Sexual Assault'. It was clear that rape and sexual assault were not reported. Arson contained some files. Murder and serious assault towered above the others – we were stunned by the magnitude. Now the decision had to be made on where to start.

The village woman on the Tetera plains had foretold all of this. When we were gone, no-one was watching.

There was no capacity for the RSIPF officers who had remained at their posts to investigate during



01: 'Solkick' players.
02: Agent Anthony Stafford with a young child in the Solomon Islands. **03:** RAMSI 1 Investigators with former Prime Minister John Howard. Federal Agent Anthony Stafford circled.
04: Relatives mourning over exhumed victims at Pite Beach on the Weather Coast.



our absence. They had been threatened, intimidated and some had been killed. Most had not been paid, but still they turned up to work and collected information. Some of the more sensitive files — information about the leaders of the MEF and politicians — had been hidden so that the evidence could not be destroyed.

After deciding which cases would form the major investigations, I looked at the many files from early to mid 2003. The murder of Solomon Islands Government Minister 'Father Geve' and seven Melanesian Anglican Brothers, and the abduction of 400 villagers at Marasa village. There were so many files, so many dates correlating with the sunset clause of the Townsville Peace Agreement that saw the peace monitoring end.

HONOUR ACCEPTED, BUT I DIDN'T DO IT ALONE

It is important to note the citation of my award. It gives personal credit to me as the case officer for the investigations into the deaths of the seven Melanesian Brothers.

It is indeed true that I coordinated the trial process and gave evidence, eventually five High Court trials, but this was done with great assistance from many AFP, New Zealand Police and Royal Solomon Islands Police Force members.

Many of the AFP investigators had been seconded from AFP national operations and had little or no experience investigating violent crime. Under extreme conditions they were required to locate and exhume the remains of victims, assist with the detailed examination of those remains and return them with every respect to custom to grieving families. They were often being involved in the funeral process and were responsible for preparing the case for trial.

Being able to live and work with police from other nations, who often better understand the local police and people, customs and tribalism, was one of the highlights for me over my periods of deployment.

Individual honours are rarely individually earned and this is very much the case with this award. It is not only our colleagues who contribute to our success, but our families who make significant sacrifices while we are on mission.

With the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement in 2000, the AFP has been involved in peace monitoring, establishing law and order, rebuilding the RSIPF and nation building in the Solomon Islands.

Since the 24th of July 2003, we have been watching — and we are watching still.

