

*The sudden death of Fiji police Assistant Superintendent Asaeli Tamanitoakula at Wee Jasper on 18 May set a unique and historic chain of events in motion that had far-reaching repercussions for the AFP.*



# Death of a brother



*Assistant Superintendent Tamanitoakula*

## Story and photos by Brian Hartigan

Assistant Superintendent Tamanitoakula was a Fijian police contingent commander in pre-deployment training for the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, when he collapsed and died on a night-time training exercise.

His sudden death was a shock to those who knew and worked with him over the preceding weeks.

With the memory of Protective Service Officer Adam Dunning still fresh, and almost without needing to say it out loud, immediate preparations were begun to take Asaeli, a fellow police officer, a Special Member of the AFP and a police brother, home to his family.

On Friday 20 May, while a large congregation of colleagues, friends old and new and members of Canberra's Fijian

community gathered for an Ecumenical Service, two members of the AFP's Recognition and Ceremonial Team were already in Fiji to make arrangements.

The Ecumenical Service, at the Church of the Holy Rosary, Watson was both beautiful and emotional. Respect for Asaeli as a man, a police officer and as a friend was obvious. Recent course cohorts and instructors, some of whom had been directly involved in attempts to revive Asaeli in the field, sung hymns, shed tears and remembered.

Planning for the repatriation of Assistant Superintendent Tamanitoakula to Fiji was planned in two phases with a ceremonial repatriation planned, rehearsed and carried out in Canberra.

Federal Agents Vince Pannell and James Cheshire deployed to Suva, putting in place arrangements for an operation that would ultimately strengthen bonds between the AFP and the Fiji Police.

"Obviously there were many cultural and ceremonial issues we had to understand," Federal Agent Pannell said.

"This was a contingency we had not previously encountered.

"We had prepared for the possibility of Australian officers dying overseas and the requirement to bring them home, but this was different. Once it had happened there was no question that we had to do what was right for a brother officer.

"Initially we had planned on bringing Asaeli's remains home to Suva for an official ceremony and handover of the casket, then return home on the same plane.

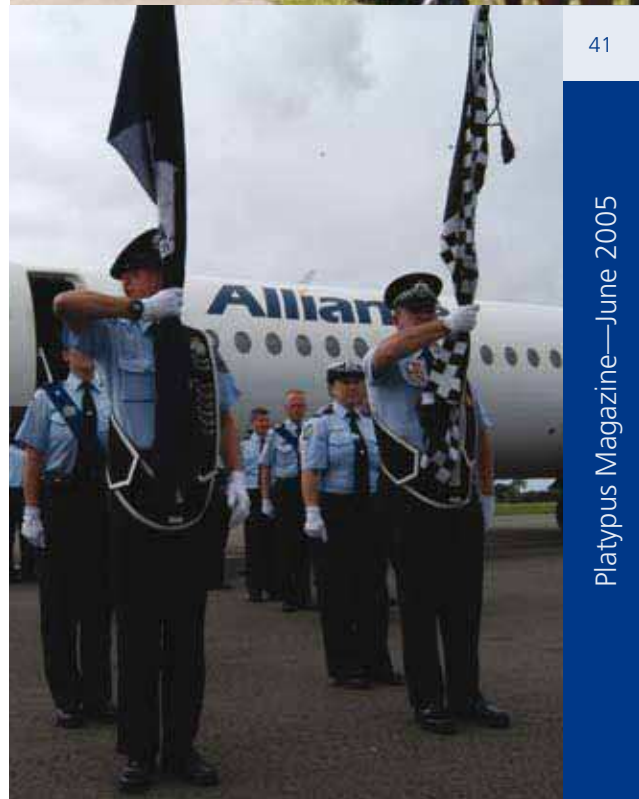
"Instead we were requested by the Fijian police and then by Asaeli's family to stay a little longer and actually take part in the ceremonial and traditional burial rites.

"This was an honour we couldn't possibly refuse, and a life experience neither I, nor any of my colleagues fortunate enough to take part in will ever forget.

"I also believe that it shows another side to the myriad benefits of the AFP International Network and the use of tried and tested relationships, in particular Brett Jackson and his team in Fiji, without whose efforts much of this would not have been possible."

Fiji Police Commissioner Andy Hughes said the significance of the impact the AFP's participation in the repatriation and funeral should not be underestimated.

"I think this means a great deal and will leave a lasting impression on the Fiji Police and on the family of Assistant Superintendent Asaeli Tamanitoakula," he said.



"It was a wonderful gesture and an act of real friendship by the AFP and I thank the Commissioner and, of course, the members involved.

"The flow-on effect of this is immeasurable. Just watching the AFP mingling and shaking hands now with the Fiji Police says it all. Everyone is very touched by the gesture of having these officers come all the way from Australia to farewell a colleague. It's wonderful."

For Federal Agent Paul McEwan, a member of the Directing Staff at the IDG School of Peace Operations, and one of those involved in attempting to resuscitate Assistant Superintendent Tamanitoakula attending the funeral was closure on a traumatic experience.

"I can now go back and let the others who were there know that the family and the Fijian people were happy with what we did for Asaeli," Federal Agent McEwan said.

"The main reason I wanted to come was so that if the family had any questions about what happened, I could hopefully answer



them. I gave them that opportunity and assured them that every effort was made to save him; four ambulance officers, a doctor, a helicopter all attended and we didn't stop CPR activities for more than an hour and a half.

"I now know that his family knows that we did our best."

Senior officer on the repatriation team Superintendent Greg Ranse said the operation was significant in that it demonstrated to the Fijian community and to other police services who work with the AFP in the region, that the organisation honours its alliances with its.

"I think this clearly showed that we honour and respect our colleagues, wherever they are from, with equal respect and regard them as we would one of our own people," Superintendent Ranse said.

"This was highlighted by the respect and hospitality we received at Asaeli's family home and in the place of honour reserved for us in the church and at the grave side.

"From a personal point of view, meeting his family and his wife and sitting with his wife at the family home, as each of us did, really brought home the fact that this was the husband, the father, the loved one of a family as well as a police officer."

As token of gratitude and a measure of the esteem accorded to the Ceremonial Guard and IDG contingent, the traditional hand-woven ceremonial burial mats which were used to adorn the casket upon arrival at Suva were given as a gift to the Australians and will be displayed in the offices of the IDG and Recognition and Ceremonial team.

