



Outgoing Acting RSIPF Commissioner Juanita Matanga passes command to Commissioner Frank Prendergast.

Leadership is the key ingredient to a new confidence within the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force as it prepares for life after RAMSI.



# Leadership and confidence

by Graham McBean

The 2014 Solomon Island elections were something of a turning point for the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) – and for its then newly appointed Commissioner, Frank Prendergast. A former Assistant Commissioner with the AFP, Commissioner Prendergast arrived in Solomon Islands in August 2014 and was sworn in as RSIPF commissioner on 29 August.

He says there were a lot of challenges organisationally, culturally and operationally including many upcoming major events; while at the same time the development of the RSIPF had to continue in preparation for the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) drawdown.

But the first major challenge the police force faced was the looming national election in November 2014. Ensuring the elections were safe and secure was a test the RSIPF had to pass.

The force already was under pressure with allegations that it was unresponsive and lacking in discipline. The community was concerned about whether the RSIPF could manage. There was also criticism, unfair in his view, over its management of the April 2014 floods and subsequent riots. Being ready for the completion of RAMSI in mid-2017 was a national priority and concern.

“Everyone’s minds go back to the [election] troubles in 2005-2006,” Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says. “The police force was under a lot of pressure because of discipline issues and the accusations that they were non-responsive – all these types of factors.”

Not only were the elections successful – but the RSIPF earned international praise for its operational conduct. Importantly, the Solomon Islands community found new confidence in its police force. The RSIPF has been going from strength to strength ever since.

“I believe there is a growing confidence within the police force that ‘yes, we can do this.’”

Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says the missing ingredient was appropriate and accountable leadership, which was leading to discipline issues and a lack of accountability, which in turn resulted in inconsistent and at times sub-standard performance. Developing the appropriate leadership team and restoring standards was the absolute key priority, and while this was an ongoing endeavour over the next two-and-a-half years, it paid almost immediate dividends.

“When I arrived I commenced immediately renewing and developing the leadership team as well as enforcing basic standards and the performance of the police force improved quite remarkably and rapidly,” he says.

“Now that doesn’t happen because one person comes in. That happens because the latent capability exists and it just needed the right leadership approach to bring it out. It also occurs because the RSIPF has a lot of very talented and committed staff who were trying to do the right thing, and because the Participating Police Force (PPF) has been working hard for a long time to develop RSIPF capacity and capability.

“I was in the fortunate position of being able to build on the good work of a lot of people so my main role was to build an environment that enabled the potential that existed to be realised. In this I had a lot of valuable support from a range of PPF and RSIPF officers particularly the Commander PPF Greg Harrigan, and Deputy Commissioner Juanita Matanga. After the performance of the RSIPF during

the 2014 Election I was very confident that with the right leadership the police force would perform well in the future.

“I was also confident that the work the RAMSI Participating Police Force had done with the RSIPF was bearing fruit. So, like most things, leadership is the most important ingredient.”

The progress of the RSIPF since the 2014 elections has been remarkable. Assistant Commissioner Prendergast highlights that the RSIPF has transformed from being a major receiver of aid to an RSIPF that is increasingly training other Pacific nations. RSIPF officers have, for the first time, deployed with the United Nations to Darfur.

Work continues on getting the RSIPF operational model in place, based on the New Zealand Police crime-prevention model but amended for the Solomon Islands environment. Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says the RSIPF has “a very good strategic road map ahead”, including a five-year capability plan focusing on what is needed to operate in the Solomon Islands environment.

The capability plan is further augmented with a resourcing plan based on the 2015 RSIPF/PPF *Cost of Policing Report* initiative. Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says the road ahead for the RSIPF is well documented and is understood by the force. It also includes the support required from the new Solomon Islands Police Development Program (SIPDP) as the June transition approaches.

Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says the RSIPF is ready. As RAMSI transitions into the SIPDP, Solomon Islands





will still look to its partners, particularly Australia and New Zealand, for support. But that support will be much more in the nature of capability and capacity development rather than operational policing.

“The RSIPF is looking to the new program to build on the partnership that exists with the PPF, and to focus on building RSIPF’s capability, improving RSIPF corporate support and assisting with the implementation of the Crime Prevention Model. I think if that happens the RSIPF will be pretty well placed.”

“The bottom line is,” Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says. “The RSIPF has been working without a lot of operational assistance from RAMSI for the last two years, particularly. For example, last year we were challenged by a large number of special events that required significant planning and operational responses from the police force.”

“Some of those events were concurrent and included coping with natural disasters as well as dealing with major crime issues. At the same time, with the assistance of the PPF we were implementing a major strategic change program within the police force including increased recruitment, cultural and workforce reform, capability development, and the implementation of a new operational model.

“I am pleased to say that the RSIPF Executive and the police force managed all these competing priorities very well, and I believe there is a growing confidence within the police force that ‘yes, we can do this.’”

Assistant Commissioner Prendergast says the RSIPF will need to continue to change and improve. He says any police force that doesn’t “come to grips” with change will quickly become irrelevant.

“What you need is a police force that has got the right culture, is responsive and is capable and flexible enough to deal with whatever challenges arise. Like every other police force, the RSIPF will need to maintain its commitment to continuing to improve.” But with the support of the SIPDP he is confident that it will.

“It is very clear to me that with an appropriate leadership team in place, the work that RAMSI has done over the years has really paid dividends which you can see in the development of the RSIPF today. Everyone who has been involved in the PPF and RAMSI should be very proud of what has been achieved.”