

# It all hinged on Harold

The notorious Harold Keke was the linchpin to the success of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in its first 12 months of operations.



Harold Keke is taken into the custody of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands Participating Police Force in Honiara.

Harold Keke, to say the very least, was an enigma in Solomon Islands. For four years he roamed the Weather Coast as a self-proclaimed warlord and prophet. Born around 1971, he was the grandchild of the founder of the South Seas Melanesian Church in Australia. Harold himself became extremely religious as he terrorised the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal.

Ironically, he was accused of everything from arson and rape to abduction and murder. By the time of his arrest on 14 August 2003 he was accused of more than 50 murders – including six missionaries. A local legend claimed he flew around the Solomon Islands in treetops at coconut level on a magic bicycle.



Weapons collected during the 2004 amnesty are destroyed in front of the Solomon Islands' people.

It was this fearsome legend and notoriety across Solomon Islands that made Harold Keke the linchpin to RAMSI's success. Any enduring progress was tenuous while Harold Keke and his militia group were at large. "That is why Harold Keke became pivotal in all of this," says then Assistant Commissioner Ben McDevitt, the first Commander Participating Police Force (PPF). "Whether he deserved it or not, Harold was seen to symbolise everything that was wrong in the Solomon Islands."

Not that Harold Keke was Solomon Islands' only problem. On day four of the mission, the former AFP Assistant Commissioner was sworn in to the Commander PPF's dual role as a deputy commissioner of the then Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP). At a media conference, he outlined the PPF objectives for the immediate future.

A primary objective was to collect the illegal firearms from the community through a weapons amnesty. The

second objective was to then deal with the warring militia groups. The third primary objective was to tackle the endemic corruption that riddled the police force and Solomon Islands' public institutions.

Removing the thousands of illegal firearms from warring militia groups was critical to defusing their respective reigns of terror. Unless law and order was returned to government and the police then there was little chance of tackling other problems such as corruption. Community faith and confidence in public institutions was impossible until a fair and equitable system of transparent justice was in place. That confidence could not be nurtured and developed while armed militia groups held power.

"We needed a trigger point," says Mr McDevitt "to get at least one of those groups to surrender their weapons and use that as a catalyst. Until one of them surrendered we wouldn't be able to apply pressure to the others to surrender."



The RAMSI weapon amnesty removed more than 3700 weapons, including more than 700 military style weapons from the Solomon Islands' community.

## The linchpin

The weapons amnesty was critical. There were four major militia groups operating on Guadalcanal and Malaita – Solomon Islands' two main island centres. The Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF) led by Keke was running a military style campaign against the Isatabu Freedom Movement.

The Central Neutral Force occupied large areas of central Guadalcanal. It was led by Stanley Kaoni, who also went by the name of Satan. The Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) was centred on the areas of Auki and Malu'u on Malaita. The MEF also had strong affiliations with the rogue police elements in Honiara.

However, it was Harold Keke and the GLF that held the key to disarming the militia groups. The reason for this, Mr McDevitt says, was that Keke was seen "almost like a demon" by the people of Solomon Islands. Certainly, this wasn't by accident. Brutal criminal acts weren't confined to the GLF, but Harold Keke managed to set himself apart.

Mr McDevitt cites an incident when one of Keke's cousins was killed in a firefight against another militia group on the Weather Coast. Keke was grief stricken and wanted to demonstrate how deep his grief was.

He then got two groups of brothers from among his own followers. There were three brothers in one group and five in the other. Keke took them down to the beach and gave each group a rifle. They had one hour to decide which brother would die and which brother would pull the trigger. Then within the hour he watched as one brother from each group shot and killed his own brother.

It wasn't as if the authorities hadn't tried to stop Keke. The RSIP tried on multiple occasions to capture him. Invariably, Keke was tipped off and the GLF would ambush the RSIP mission. Out of the whole exercise, Keke and the GLF would only become stronger, more feared and better armed.

His peaceful arrest was paramount. The alternative was the forceful disarmament of the militia groups in the former World War II battlefields. Mr McDevitt says that Keke ultimately surrendered to have his day in court.

"He wanted to tell his side of the story about what had happened to him and I think that was a pretty



powerful incentive for him – one of several. He wanted to be able to say how he had been wronged.”

Mr McDevitt had sent letters to Keke even before RAMSI had deployed to ask for a meeting. Keke agreed to a face-to-face meeting after a long exchange of letters. Initially, he didn't come to the first meetings, but finally surrendered on the 21st day of the mission. “That was the day that the firearms were handed in from the Guadalcanal Liberation Front. That then was the catalyst in the following days and weeks for the delivery of the firearms which were in the possession of all of the other groups in Solomon Islands.”

More than 3730 weapons and more than 300,000 rounds of ammunition were removed from the militia. About 700 of those were high-powered military style weapons. Mr McDevitt says that all but five of the weapons were handed in during the 21 days of the amnesty between 1 and 21 August.

Another crucial element of success was the decision to destroy the weapons in the local communities and in front of the people who surrendered them. These events became huge ceremonies and attended by thousands of people. RAMSI also appealed to the communities for support. Mr McDevitt says numerous women's groups, church groups, wives, mothers, daughters and sisters were called on to encourage the surrender of weapons.

The PPF then turned its attention to corruption. In many ways this was more problematic than the amnesty. Mr McDevitt says there were some very competent and loyal police officers as law and order dissolved throughout the tensions.

He says many were beaten and threatened and some had firearms held to their heads. Still, unpaid police were covertly collecting briefs of evidence for the day when law and order returned. These would ultimately assist in more than 3500 arrests in the first 12 months of the mission. However, the RSIP had been critically compromised during the tensions.

“At the start,” Mr McDevitt says “I was the deputy commissioner of the RSIP in an office with two other deputy commissioners, both of whom were corrupt. I was also Commander PPF, which they knew was charged with cleaning up their police service.

Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) leader Jimmy Rasta and his men surrender weapons and ammunition. The MEF was one of four key militia groups in Solomon Islands.





The first Participating Police Force Commander Ben McDevitt launches the RAMSI weapon amnesty.

“In fact, I didn’t wear a shirt with the badges of the RSIP until the day after we arrested and charged the second of those deputy commissioners with corruption offences. That was nine months into the mission.

“To me, again that was symbolic of what we were doing and what we were about. It served to be able to say to the community that I felt proud to be a deputy commissioner of the RSIP.”

Eventually, 25 per cent of the RSIP was either arrested and charged with corruption offences or discharged from the force. More widely, an ombudsman, a magistrate, numerous lawyers, multiple public servants, corrections officers and four government ministers were arrested in a very public and transparent cleansing of corruption.

Another component of mission success in the first 12 months was rapidly increasing RAMSI’s reach beyond Honiara and Guadalcanal. Clearly, the PPF



Jubilant spectators at the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) parade in Honiara. The arrival of RAMSI restored confidence in the Solomon Islands’ population.

Commander Participating Police Force Ben McDevitt negotiates the peaceful arrest of militia leader Harold Keke.



realised the benefit of acting decisively and quickly. PPF/RSIP patrols were active within hours of RAMSI landing at Henderson airfield.

## First police post

The first post outside Honiara was opened at Avu Avu on the Weather Coast on day 14 of the mission. By day 100, RAMSI had established 16 police posts in all nine provinces. Just short of RAMSI's first anniversary, the 17th post was opened at Lofung on the border of Papua New Guinea.

Like the weapon amnesty ceremonies, the public openings of police posts were community events. Mr McDevitt says local villagers walked 20 kilometres to come to the police posts. Newspaper reports from Honiara's local paper, the Solomon Star, were posted at the stations to provide community updates on RAMSI activities.

"We ran numerous events. We would hold soccer matches and games of volleyball. The police would even arrange slide shows and movies. They were extraordinary places and hubs of activity and of course the added benefit was they were extraordinary places for gathering intelligence about what militia groups were doing and who had firearms still."

Mr McDevitt reflects on that first 12 months of RAMSI operations and says decisively "it's fair to say that the start of the mission was very successful". He quickly adds that all PPF members and representatives from the other agencies, disciplines and nations should "be very proud" of what was achieved.

He says the greatest challenges are still with us in terms of the third phase of the initial RAMSI mission – sustainability and self-reliance. "The back end of nation building is always harder than the front end." And so the long road to transition in Solomon Islands began.

## What's in a name?

It's a bit of an institution at Guadalcanal Beach Resort (GBR) and many would have enjoyed a break from the stress of work at Harry's Bar located at the main dining complex.

Some may even have pondered which 'Harry' the bar was named after.

It may then come as a surprise to know that the Harry in Harry's Bar is none other than self-proclaimed warlord, Harold Keke.

The former militia leader was a 'guest' at GBR for more than four months in 2003 after his arrest on serious criminal charges from arson to murder.

As a linchpin to success of the RAMSI mission — Keke was one of the first persons of interest to be detained and later tried for crimes during the troubled times of the so called tensions.

However, inaugural Commander Participating Police Force Ben McDevitt says at that point Keke's wellbeing would have been in serious jeopardy at Honiara's main Rove prison.

"I had real concerns about the integrity and security of the goal," Mr McDevitt says — and with good reason.

Members of militia groups already had been allowed access to the prison where rival militia members had been shot in the elbows and knees and left where they lay.

A former police member arrested for the murder of Royal Solomon Islands Police Force Commissioner Sir Frederick Soaki also had escaped from custody at Rove.

Consequently, military engineers were tasked to build a remand facility within the site of the former beach resort's existing buildings. Keke's family was also relocated to GBR for their safety.

Harold Keke's initial court hearing was held at GBR where Mr McDevitt gave sworn evidence as the arresting officer and Keke was then remanded into the custody of the PPF. He was later transferred to Rove prison when its security could be guaranteed.