

Profile —

Dt. Insp. Rangi Rangihika

By Tapu Misa

Detective Inspector Rangi Rangihika keeps a letter from the wife of a man he helped send to prison for manslaughter.

Her husband was one of 14 men convicted for the manslaughter of Mongrel Mob leader Lester Epps. Rangihika led the investigation that eventually led to the men being sent to jail for 18 months.

The woman wrote not to abuse him, threaten his life, nor even to reproach him a little but to thank him.

She praised him, and the men under him, for the sensitive way the investigation was handled and the understanding shown to the convicted men. Typed neatly, on behalf of the wives of the other 13 men, on the Petone club's letterhead.

Says Rangihika: "That was one of the hardest inquiries I've had to do, partly because of the number of people involved... but that made it worthwhile."

The letter is a little like the carved chunk of totara that hangs awkwardly on top of a grey filing cabinet in Rangihika's office at Wellington central.

Carved for him he says by an ex-con whose body was found on a Tolaga beach not long after he presented it to Rangihika. No suspicious circumstances, as they say in suicide cases.

These are marks of what Rangihika calls his rapport with offenders. He takes time out to treat them as human beings, he says, and if a case ends in conviction he always makes a point of following up with a visit in jail.

"If you treat a person with dignity, then you get somewhere. I like meeting people and talking to them.... that's how I was able to build up this sort of rapport."

He says the majority of offenders he has dealt with have not held grudges against him. "If you can say that as a policeman then I think you've achieved something."

Rangihika is an up and coming detective inspector in a very limited edition of Maori policemen at Wellington's CIB. About 7 per cent of the force taken on in the last six years are Maori, few make it to top positions.

At 38, Rangihika has been in the force in Wellington just over half his life, a long way from his Ruatoki roots in the north. He has tribal affiliations there as well as in the Taranaki area, in particular Parihaka.

He manages what he called "passable" Maori. His grandfather spoke



Maori to him until he was five; now spurred on by two intensive Maori language courses at Wellington Polytech it is beginning to come back.

Rangihika has wasted little time coming through the ranks. His experience has been in the capital — he's done his time on the beat there, and in the CIB where he specialised for a long time on the drugs scene.

Lately, Rangihika has sprung into the limelight through a series of cases he's handled. He was in charge of the police operation that saw mental patient Ian Donaldson blow himself up in a booby-trapped car in Pauatahanui earlier last year. That incident became the subject of an inquiry.

And he was one of the star negotiators who talked an armed gunman into giving himself up after a seven-hour siege that paralyzed much of Wellington city one June morning.

A member of a small police hostage negotiation team, Rangihika is a man who's had to learn to string out conversations.

"Really the difference between a

successful negotiation and murder is very thin."

"It is not until you negotiate that you realise how easy it is to say the thing that could push him off the edge or make him pull the trigger."

Each incident, he says, must be treated differently and although he's often called in to talk as a Maori policeman there are times when being Maori rules him out as the last person needed.

Rangihika has found that being Maori has been an asset for him in the force, although he says he's never seen himself as a token.

"It's helped in my dealings with gangs and groups like that because I think they can relate better to me as Maori."

And he is full of praise for the comradeship he has found in the police force — "We're all once race in the CIB" — but says that over the years there have been very few Maoris in Wellington CIB.

"It's not because they have been kept out but because there just haven't been that many Maori cops in Wellington full stop."

From gangs, from family, from other Maoris, Rangihika says he gets none of the flak that goes with being a policeman. Neither has he been touched by the racist abuse that has apparently beset many of his Maori and Pacific Island colleagues and recently sparked off a police investigation to find out if a disproportionate number of Maori and Island policemen were getting into trouble because of it.

It has helped him, he said, to have a "free and easy" approach to work. Something which has kept him on top of situations placing him under tremendous strain.

There are unpleasant aspects to his work, he says like carrying out an investigation into the activities of people he knows.

He does his duty but admits being sent back to his home town, Rautoki, to work as a policeman would be almost impossible for him.

"It would be difficult for me to work there... it would be very hard arresting my own relatives."

In Wellington, Rangihika manages to sidestep any conflict of interest in being both a Maori and a policeman — he has relatives there, and he is not a compulsive policeman.

"I think it's important that you have interests away from the police force. I joined a tramping club, a skiing club and other organisations which have no policemen in them at all."

Other sporting activities include indoor basketball, rugby, squash and coaching basketball.

"Total police commitment, in other words, drinking in police bars, having all your friends as police and becoming completely police oriented is unhealthy."