

GETTING A HOLD RIGHT ON THE GOLD COAST

Words and pictures by **Rod Cowan***

SPENDING TIME IN SECURITY CIRCLES requires some getting used to cognitive dissonance that disconnect between your surroundings and your activity.

It's sitting in a five-star hotel in the Middle East with private military contractors discussing an insurgent attack on a convoy they were leading; or in a delightful European restaurant with UN investigators going over details of political assassinations; or a Gold Coast luxury resort café having the finer points of using a transport wristlock explained.

In the case of the latter, the disconnect is even greater, because Henry Davis the person explaining what works and what does not is well-built in a way that someone would have to be very, very dumb, or very, very drunk (or a heady mixture of both) to argue with him, especially if physical contact is likely to result. To boot, his New Zealand Special Forces background and a stint with the Queensland Corrections Service, pretty much ensures they will come off second best.

His voice, on the other hand, is quietly cheerful, as he speaks with sincerity and intensity about the underlying psychology and physiology of verbal and physical confrontation. A practical demonstration with great front-rower claws wrapped around your skinny hands is conducted with the precision and deftness of a surgeon, though, no doubt, the slightest increase in pressure would result in excruciating pain. Get him on the subject of his wife and he is downright sappy. "She's a beautiful

woman. She's probably the best angel I have ever met," he says, when asked to describe his wife, Irene, whom he met when working the door at the Parkwood Tavern in 2000.

"The conversation we had was about everything and was really, really good," remembers Davis. "I'd never dated a patron in my entire security career, so I left the Tavern, because of the potential conflict of interest."

At one stage, Irene told him: "I don't know what you are doing working on the door, you should be running your own business."

Davis recalls: "One day, she went down to the Office of Fair Trading and registered a business name, Hi-Tactical Protection, and came back and said: We've got a business, so let's go."

Seven days later, they were back at the Parkwood Tavern, this time as the security contractors.

"We had absolutely no money and started our business with absolutely nothing," says Davis.

That may be true in terms of cash and assets, but what they did have was his years of experience, knowledge and obvious passion for security, especially crowd control, possibly the most unloved of security sectors.

Davis joined the New Zealand Army at 17 years old and volunteered for the SAS.

"I heard the SAS lived longer," he jokes, explaining that in combat an infantry soldier has a life expectancy of about five



minutes, whereas the SAS can last as long as 5 minutes and 30 seconds. "That extra 30 seconds is a long time to me."

The hard work and knowledge he gained, including working the Special Warfare Wing, the SAS CounterTerrorism unit, he says, gave him a good grounding in security, especially when it comes to risk assessment, structuring operations, and executing plans.

Leaving the military in 1996, Davis headed for Queensland's Gold Coast and looked for security work.

"I came to crowd control because it is one of the hardest roles in security and I love a challenge," says Davis.

It was a very different environment compared to that of today's training, standards, and legal requirements in that there were none.

"One job interview was in a strip club at 10 o'clock at night," he says. "I got the job because you needed to be a certain weight. That was the criteria for [employers]; no qualifications, no experience, you just had to be over 100 kilos."

By working for a number of security companies, he was able to conduct a risk assessment of them, finding that most had little in the way of systems or procedures.

A career detour took Davis to Queensland Corrective services for a year, but he resigned in 1999, returning to New Zealand to look after his mother after his father died.

"I'm such a hard head, my mother asked me to get back to Australia," he says, laughing.

A short time later, back on the Gold Coast, when he and Irene started their fledgling security firm, the industry had improved, but only a little. Security licensing had tightened and local liquor licensing laws set quotas for patron to security ratios (seven crowd controllers for 1,000 patrons and one extra guard for every additional 250 patrons).

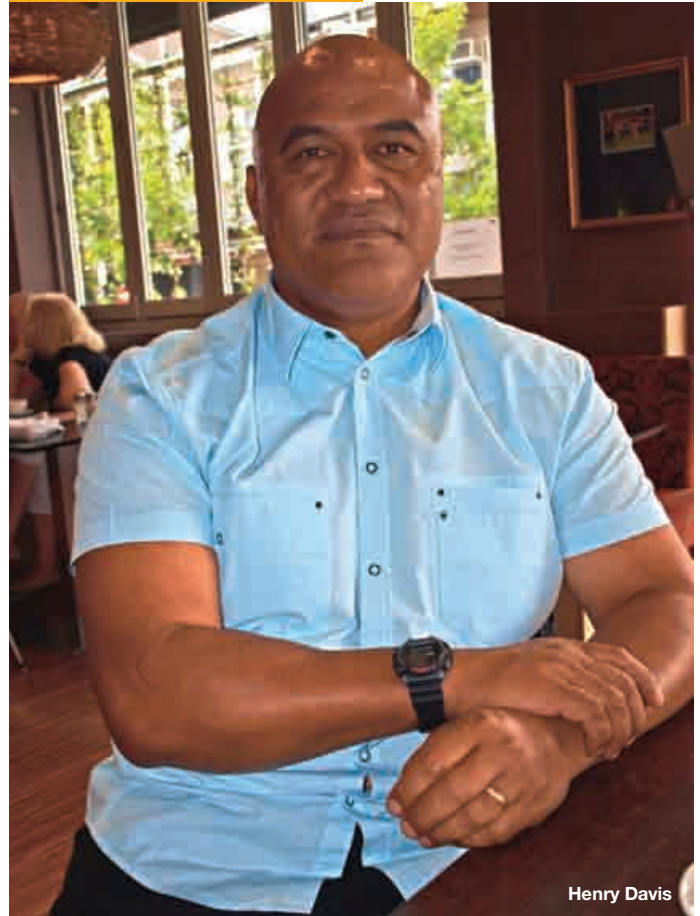
The first thing Davis did was to take his military experience in developing standard operating procedures and adapt them for civilian operations.

For him, the aim is to "create a presence in order to provide an environment everyone can enjoy." After that, it's about de-escalating situations and, if necessary, extracting unruly patrons with the minimum amount of fuss. That, he says, takes training and lots of practice, beyond the licensing requirements.

"The current courses, from a hands-on point of view of doing control and restraints, in some places takes about 30 minutes of doing physical application of techniques, which leaves a lot to be desired," says Davis.

"Over nine years, I have never met anybody from any security guard course that has learnt to do a transport wrist lock effectively."

That lack of ability, he says, leaves the company open to liability issues.



Henry Davis

"A lot of people are unaware that they are responsible for their own actions everyone is and [in an incident] no one holds that person responsible for a particular occasion. It always goes back to either the venue or the security contractor," says Davis.

His staff attend two-week training courses annually where they are engaged in daily exercises to keep their skills honed, which is as much about mental as physical training. For example, they memorise relevant laws to quote verbatim to add authority to requests to quieten down or leave, as well as practicing physical control techniques.

Davis also pulls officers out of crowd control to do static guard work for a month. Staff may complain they don't like it, but Davis maintains it is necessary to keep them balanced and able to handle the stress.

The end result is an operation now called HTP Security covering 20 venues on the Gold Coast, which has had no serious incidents or public liability claims.

Although Davis accepts it is probably a case of "not if, but when" something goes awry, he is determined that his company will have done everything possible to ensure that staff are properly trained and prepared.

As to the future, he says: "I have been conducting training over the years and would like to get more into the training side. Like everyone, I want to try and improve the industry, and the only way to improve the industry is to have the training at the coal face from the start and at a young age."

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