

Memories of East Timor service stirred by the post



A life-long interest in philately has recently caused former AFP officer Tony Curtis to write about his experiences with the 1st Australian Police Contingent to East Timor for a German magazine.



Tony Curtis in Dili liaising with a local family.

By Anthony (Tony) Curtis PSM

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While more than five years have elapsed since my deployment as the Civilian Police Contingent Commander for the 1st Australian Police Contingent in East Timor in the lead up to the 1999 Popular Consultation and I have since forged a new career outside of the police service, I was none the less pleased to be asked to write an article for a German magazine.

The request followed a recent transaction on Ebay where I sold several covers to an associate of the magazine. The covers had formed part of my recently deceased father's collection, bequeathed to my daughter, who requested that I dispose of them for her.

Surprisingly, my daughter holds no interest in philately, despite her great-grandfather, grandfather, father and brother all having some philatelic interests.

My father had always been a collector and the early part of his working life was spent with the then Post Master General's Office. In the early 1950s he

spent time as the postmaster in Lae, Papua New Guinea (then under Australian administration) and later in Canberra our National Capital. My father's major interest was Australian military postal history and he had amassed quite a considerable collection which I now hope to build upon.

The East Timor covers in question were either forwarded or collected by me for my father during the period of my deployment in East Timor. The extraordinary interest in these items from philatelists throughout the world has surprised me. However, as has been



pointed out to me on many occasions, the unprecedented media coverage which followed the outbreak of violence (following the announcement of the ballot result) and the subsequent deployment of military personnel (INTERFET) generated and ensured sustained global interest which has naturally flowed on to the world of philately. I am pleased to have been part of that history.

My personal interests in philately are limited to Antigua and the postal history of the Canberra region, where I reside. However, for sentimental reasons I have of course put away a couple of East Timor items in the hope that one day my children or maybe theirs will have an interest.

The East Timor Mission

Established by UN Security Council resolution 1246 of 11 June 1999 for a period up to 31 August 1999, the Mission, led by Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of Mission, Ian Martin from the United Kingdom, was subsequently extended to 30 September 1999 by virtue of Security Council resolution 1257 of 3

August 1999. At its height the mission comprised 242 international staff, 271 civilian police, 50 military liaison officers, 425 UN volunteers from 67 different countries and 668 core local staff. A further estimated 4000 locals were employed for varying periods leading into and during the conduct of the ballot, which took place on 30 August 1999. Mission Headquarters was located in Dili and there were eight Regional Offices located at Baukau, Dili, Ermera, Los Palos, Maliana, Oekusi, Suai, Viqueque. One sub-regional office was established at Same (pron Sarmay). (2)

The close geographical proximity to and relationship with Indonesia ensured that Australia was destined to play a major role in the United Nations Mission in East Timor and the subsequent UNTAET Mission.

Civilian Police

The role of the Civilian Police component in UNAMET was to oversight the conduct of the ballot by United Nations officials, performing a monitoring role and liaising with the Indonesian Police and Military (TNI). The group comprising

representatives from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Ghana, Ireland, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Mozambique, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Senegal, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, Uruguay, USA, Zimbabwe was led by Commissioner Alan Mills AO, AM, APM, an Australian and former colleague from the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Prior to his United Nations appointment Alan had formally retired from the AFP after a long and distinguished career in community, national and international policing.

As a member of the community policing component of the AFP based in Canberra, the furthest thought from my mind in mid 1999 was a policing role in East Timor. At that time I was a Patrol Commander responsible for delivering community-policing services to a defined geographical area in South Canberra. Little did I know, when receiving a phone call from then Assistant Commissioner Mick Keelty (now Commissioner) requesting that I lead the Australian Police Detachment to East Timor, what lay ahead.

Ballot day in East Timor saw a large turnout.



Training and deployment

Following a call for expressions of interest a detachment of 50 AFP officers, both male and female drawn from all AFP regions, was assembled in Canberra to be kitted out and commence pre-deployment training. Training involved a broad range of subjects including history and culture of the region and its people, language, driving skills, field craft and negotiation skills. Members also undertook firearms training, however were ultimately deployed without weapons, a factor that in my view probably led to minimum casualties among police ranks after violence broke out following the announcement of the ballot result.

At the conclusion of pre-deployment training the detachment was air lifted to Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia and located at Darwin Royal Australian Air Force Base. Members were based at what was affectionately known as 'Tin City' and officers housed at the Officer's Mess. We were subsequently joined by colleagues from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Pakistan and Spain. Darwin ultimately would serve as an ongoing deployment and training facility for the UN Mission.

In mid June 1999, following the Security Council Resolution, Commissioner Mills and two officers from my detachment went to East Timor and established an office in Dili. Several days later myself and approximately one third of the

Australian detachment together with our international colleagues departed Darwin for Dili on a UN C130 aircraft. The deployment of Australian police was staged over several weeks, each group under the command of a superintendent.

On landing at Dili airport we were greeted by a large contingent of UN and government officials including Commissioner Mills and a throng of media. I vividly recall the oppressive heat rising from the tarmac as we walked towards the terminal and numerous flashing cameras. Although the temperature in Darwin had been in the high 20s, we had of course left Canberra as winter fell and temperatures at night plummeted towards zero.

Following processing through Customs we were driven into the Dili township and the famous Hotel Dili operated by expatriate Australians Gino and Ernie Favaro. Of predominately fibro, brick and metal roof construction, the single storey building was to serve as more than

comfortable accommodation for many Dili-based civilian police officers during their deployment. A bed, cooked evening meal and a cold Bintang beer ensured this was a very popular location.

My initial accommodation was a room in the Makhota Hotel, shared with the UK Contingent Commander, Michael Holdsworth. The provision of a boiled egg, toast and cup of coffee each morning also made this a sought after accommodation venue. Along with a colleague and one of the international staff I later moved to a house in the suburbs, vacated by the residents and put on the market for rent during the UN presence in the city. Unlike the accommodation available to many of my colleagues deployed outside of Dili it was very comfortable.

My deployment in East Timor was to the position of Regional Commander Dili, which also took in Aileu to the South and Liquica to the West (total population 180,000). Liquica, would ultimately turn out to be one of the 'hot spots' in terms of militia violence and insurgency.

The officers deployed at this location endured periods of sustained violence and intimidation and during their final evacuation by vehicle, a member of the United States of America Contingent was shot and wounded twice in the stomach. Several members of my detachment who were deployed in Liquica were extremely lucky not to have met a similar fate, rounds passing through their vehicles as militia gangs armed with a variety of weapons including automatic rifles attacked them. A young Australian police woman travelling in one of the vehicles had the strap on her shoulder bag severed as a round passed through the vehicle cabin.

Police work and general conditions

While not what one would call traditional police work, the role of the civilian police in East Timor was not foreign to several members of the Australian Police detachment. The AFP had, after all, been involved in numerous peacekeeping missions including Cambodia, Cyprus, Mozambique, Haiti, Bougainville, Thailand, Somalia, South Africa and Namibia and some members of my detachment had participated in one or more of these missions. Australian police have been serving in Cyprus since 1964.

Deployed to remote areas of the island, isolated and plagued by poor communications, the work for many

officers was both demanding and difficult. Despite inoculations and the dispensing of preventative medications, some officers succumbed to malaria and other tropical diseases. Diet varied depending on location and availability of food. Surprisingly, several restaurants and a small bakery thrived on the UN's presence in Dili right up until the outbreak of violence and arson. Towards the end of the mission some officers, particularly those based outside of Dili, were obviously and not surprisingly affected by fatigue, lack of sleep and poor nutrition. As violence erupted at various centres there was a progressive evacuation of regional centres back to the Dili Headquarters compound.

The work of the civilian police involved extensive negotiation, discussion and brokering of outcomes with stakeholders so as to ensure that the process of conducting the ballot proceeded unimpeded. It involved our playing a



bipartisan role, effectively dealing with both sides of politics and in the main the relationship was cooperative and harmonious despite apparent suspicion and concern in some quarters. Had it not been that way, then the ballot may not have taken place. Civilian police also ensured security of the ballot documents transported to Dili for counting.

Unfortunately but not unexpectedly, violence and dealing with its aftermath were part and parcel of a days work for many of these officers. As was widely reported in the media, events leading to the conduct of the ballot did not proceed as smoothly as the UN had hoped and there were several instances of persons being murdered and property destroyed. These of course paled into insignificance with the militia rampage that followed the announcement of the ballot result (75 per cent support for independence). The country, it's buildings and infrastructure were almost totally destroyed. From my perspective it was interesting to observe how the community reacted and responded to such events.

Witnessing the death of a young man, shot in the head during an outbreak of

Unrest after the announcement of the result of the ballot caused some terrified local residents to force their children under the razor wire of the UN compound in Dili, hoping to escape marauding militia.



violence and carried in to our office one afternoon by his friends, I observed first hand the emotion that drove these people. I witnessed death, grieving, bravery and heroism but importantly I witnessed self restraint and control, followed by recovery, determination and achievement. The following day people got on with their jobs and worked towards their ultimate goal of delivering independence to their country. While they grieved they never lost sight of their objective.

The privilege of being able to experience working alongside police in a foreign jurisdiction is something that many detachment members valued, despite the occasional problems and tensions emanating from language and cultural differences, different laws and judicial systems and sometimes different values. None-the-less the relationship with the Indonesian National Police deployed in East Timor was generally harmonious and productive despite these occasional tensions. Importantly, learning took place on both sides and undoubtedly the relationships forged have assisted both Australian and Indonesian police in responding to several regional events and issues that have emerged since that time i.e.: Bali bombing and the recent tsunami. AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty who has played a leading role in the response to these most recent tragedies provided constant and unqualified support to me during the East Timor deployment.

The people

Despite having endured decades of turmoil and violence it was my observation that the East Timorese people were generally friendly, caring and a very resilient. That they withstood constant threats and intimidation to deliver a ballot result, which would ultimately bring democracy and independence to the country, was a demonstration of their fortitude and will to succeed. I have nothing but admiration for them as a people and a nation.

The faces of thousands of smiling children greeting us with 'hello mister' wherever we travelled in the country is an image that will last in my memory forever.

Just as importantly, the UN community including non government organisations and volunteers, of which we became part, is something I will never forget. Hundreds of committed and dedicated individuals, many of who move from one mission to another giving their life to assisting humanity. Truly incredible people. Our integration into that 'community' and working with all facets of the UN operation was critical to the mission's success.

It was my pleasure to work alongside dedicated individuals like Fritz Krebs, Regional Coordinator, Dili Region and his team including District Electoral Officer Dr Tony Lapsley and Administrative Officer Jan Karlsson, three men I came

to greatly respect and admire. Their story is something that was mirrored by like individuals in every region of East Timor. People that made things happen.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my colleagues both Australian and international police officers together with the respective Military Liaison Officers. The nature of the mission and the manner in which it concluded made communications difficult and prevented me from personally thanking many of those officers for their contribution and support. Their display of courage and bravery in carrying out their duties, some literally putting their lives on the line, is again something I will never forget. While each member of the 1st Australian Police Detachment to East Timor was subsequently awarded a Group Citation for Bravery and one officer received a Bravery Medal, the actions of many of my international colleagues undoubtedly went unrecognised in the turmoil that ensued after the ballot result was announced. Their contribution did not go unnoticed by those of us who served with them in East Timor.

Postal facilities

The United Nations did not establish or provide formal mail services for UNAMET during the period of our deployment however, it is my understanding that there was an arrangement where official mail was despatched and forwarded



An AFP officer talks to local residents sheltering in the UN compound fearful of the consequences of a UN withdrawal.

These were probably applied by exuberant staff at particular ballot registration centres.

Official government postal services in East Timor were provided by the Indonesian Government Agency 'Pos Indonesia' with post offices operating in a number of major centres including Dili and Bacau. I am not certain as to the period of time that they continued to operate after the commencement of the UN mission. However, I am aware that Dili Post Office continued to operate for the duration until the outbreak of violence in early September 1999. Mail posted from a number of major centres in late August appears to have been transported to Dili for processing and interestingly a number of items addressed to me were processed on Ballot Day 30 August 1999 and delivered the same or following day. Strangely delivery of several items was delayed for about a week despite postmarking in Dili on 30 August 1999 and no obvious reason for delay.

An item sent to my father from the enclave Oekusi in July 1999 was processed and postmarked in Kefamenanu, West Timor (see picture). Another item posted to me in Dili was also postmarked Kefamenanu. These are the only two items that I am aware of that were posted at Oekusi through the Indonesian system. Items posted at other regional centres including Bacau all bear a Dili postmark suggesting that all mail may have been transported to that location for processing.

through the UN's New York Headquarters. The terms of that arrangement were not communicated to me however, I am aware of international staff having used that facility.

The Australian Government provided a 'locked bag' mail facility through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra – Locked Bag 40, Kingston ACT, 2604, for Australians deployed with the Mission. Mail forwarded through this facility was transported by air from Canberra to the Australian Consulate in Dili, East Timor, via Darwin and on forwarded to UNAMET Headquarters where Joint Operations Centre staff placed it in bags to be transported to the various regional centres by UN helicopter. The frequency of flights to regional centres was determined by operational priorities. From what I observed there were no distinguishing markings of any kind on this mail, other than the locked bag address and manuscript marking indicating the regional centre where a member was deployed. A member of the Australian Detachment

deployed at UNAMET Headquarters in an administrative role placed that marking on the mail using a coloured marker pen. Outgoing mail forwarded through this system either went back to Canberra or more often Darwin from where it was mailed through Australia Post facilities. The majority of 'official' mail was returned to Canberra in the locked bag from where it was dispersed.

Members of the Australian Police Detachment were issued with a small quantity of stationary on deployment including official coloured printed envelopes (example depicted in the photograph) and letter head. A circular rubber despatch/receipt stamp (example pictured) was utilised by the Detachment Commander's office. A rectangular boxed rubber stamp "Official Mail To Darwin For Postage" was also utilised by that office.

Some examples of mail with imprints of the official rubber "UN Ballot" hand stamp (applied to ballot papers) and circular "Registration Centre No.#" are also known to exist.

Postal rates for internal mail ranged between 900 to 2000 rupiah and 4000 to 6000 rupiah for mail addressed to Australia. There was no apparent reason for the variations.

Conclusion

The Dili Regional Office, in which I was located, was hastily evacuated in early September 1999 and I am advised that the civilian police accommodation including my office was subsequently trashed and destroyed by fire, along with its contents. A similar fate was to be met by the Dili Post Office some days later. It was estimated that approximately 80 per cent of the buildings in Dili and much of East Timor were destroyed during the militia violence. Thousands of refugees fled into West Timor.

Mission staff along with many locals were eventually evacuated from UNAMET Headquarters to Dili Airport, transported by Indonesian Military trucks under armed escort, from whence they were transported to Darwin by UN and Australian military C130 aircraft. Order was not restored in East Timor until a military force, INTERFET, under the command of Australian, Major General Peter Cosgrove, was deployed into the country.

Reflection

The events in our office that I referred to previously in which a young East Timorese man died, were mirrored and

witnessed by my colleagues on numerous occasions during our deployment in East Timor. For many of my colleagues these events were life changing. Some, like me have since left the police service to pursue careers in other fields. Some, have pursued careers with the United Nations. Several returned to East Timor with later deployments. However, none will forget that period - June to September of 1999.

I hope that through this brief article I have been able to provide readers with some insight to the UNAMET mission.

(1) Fact Sheet – United Nations - Public Information Office (PIO) of UNAMET 1999

(2) Fact Sheet – United Nations - Public Information Office (PIO) of UNAMET 1999.

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Many militia carried hand-made weapons nonetheless able to inflict serious injury or death.

