



**2/2 Commando  
Association of Australia Inc.**

43 Marriot Way  
Morley WA 6062

27 February 2017

His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)  
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia  
Government House  
Dunrossil Drive  
YARRALUMLA ACT 2600

Your Excellency

### **A little known WWII story that needs to be told**

After watching the telecast of your address at the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the surrender of Singapore and subsequently the address commemorating the bombing of Darwin, I am perplexed as to why there has never been due recognition given to the Timor Campaign and the role it played in keeping Australia out of Japanese hands.

*"This is an important story of the courage of two peoples, the Australian commandos and the people of Timor-Leste.*

*The effects of this war are still felt in Timor-Leste today because most families were affected and suffered as a result of this conflict.*

*The bonds of friendship forged at this time, which endure today and the shared history of struggle, are as much a part of Timor-Leste's cultural heritage as they are Australia's".*

José Ramos-Horta  
President of the Republic of Timor-Leste  
26 October 2010

I am on the committee of the 2/2 Commando Association of Australia Inc. <sup>1</sup> and the son of one of the men who enlisted (selected) in the 2nd Independent Company, later to be known as the 2/2 Commando Squadron, (**Double Reds**).

As you are no doubt aware, the Double Reds were Australia's first commandos. They were among the first Australian soldiers to be trained in guerrilla warfare, and the first to successfully practice it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://doublereds.org.au/>

Why is it that the role of the Double Reds in Timor and the **debt** Australia owes to the people of Timor-Leste is never mentioned?

This story needs to be told, celebrated and honoured.

A good example of what can be achieved in telling the story is the 'Debt of Honour Exhibition'<sup>2</sup> which was put together by the Western Australian Museum. This exhibition included amongst other things; artefacts, company stories, videos, personal effects and military regalia.

I understand the Debt of Honour Exhibition was offered to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra (**AWMC**) but the offer was declined.

The Association recently posted on its web page the story of "the Ration Truck massacre"<sup>3</sup> in commemoration of the murder of 15 commandos on the 20 February 1942. At the date of this letter there have been 42,525 hits on Association's Facebook post.

A new documentary which examines the largely overlooked story of the dispute between Australia and Timor-Leste titled 'Time to Draw the Line' is available for screenings around the country from 19 February 2017. This documentary opens in 1942 and depicts one of the commandos (Major Laidlaw) and a creado, and after the war, Paddy Kenneally and his creado.

I write this letter to seek your support and voice with the aim of achieving the following objectives:

1. on important military anniversaries (example surrender of Singapore, bombing of Darwin and ANZAC day) some mention be made in formal addresses of the:
  - ❖ Timor Campaign;
  - ❖ assistance the Timorese people provided to the Double Reds; and
  - ❖ devastation they suffered on the withdrawal of the commandos from East Timor;
2. provide funding (grants) for the 'Debt of Honour' to be displayed at the AWMC and other museums in the east coast of Australia;
3. the Winnie the War winner display at the AWMC to be expanded to more reflect the Double Reds story (not sparrow force) and their Creado's;
4. the volunteer guides at the AWMC be briefed on the Timor Campaign and be asked to include the Double Reds story in their commentary before moving to the "Z" force Operation Jaywick display; and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/museum-media/timor-exhibition-preview/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://doublereds.org.au/news/the-ration-truck-massacre-75-years-ago-r20/>

5. a speedy and fair settlement of the Timor Gap boundaries.

Lest we forget.

Yours sincerely



**John Denman**  
**Vice President**  
**2/2 Commando Association of Australia Inc.**  
**<https://doublereds.org.au/>**

CC The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP  
Prime Minister

The Hon. Julie Bishop MP  
Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mr Andrew Hastie MP

Steve Bracks  
[info@stevebracks.com.au](mailto:info@stevebracks.com.au)



## Further readings

In 1999, as commander of the International Forces East Timor, you were responsible for overseeing East Timor's transition to independence and no doubt would have been aware of the:

- ❖ Timor campaign during December 1941 to December 1942;
- ❖ rugged terrain in which the Double Reds would have operated;
- ❖ success of the Double Red operations was made possible by the support of the Timorese people (Creado)<sup>4</sup>, who provided food and shelter, ponies for carrying heavy equipment, acted as porters and guides, and helped set up ambushes. Some took up arms themselves and fought alongside the Australians.
- ❖ **debt** the Double Reds **and Australia** owes to the Timorese people;
- ❖ feeling in Timor-Leste that Australians, as a whole, felt any lingering sense of debt or responsibility for the terrible suffering that were endured by the Timorese people in the interest of protecting Australia from a Japanese invasion; and
- ❖ Timorese casualties following the withdrawal of the Double Reds from East Timor (40,000 - 60,000 died as a result of this conflict and their support of the Double Reds).

## Today few Australian today are aware that:

- ❖ the story of the Double Reds begins in early 1941 when about 270 officers and men were trained at a secret army base at Wilsons Promontory, Victoria, to be sent on secret missions into enemy-occupied territory in Europe;
- ❖ Australian forces fought in Portuguese Timor during WWII;
- ❖ Japan's entry into the war changed the Double Reds destination<sup>5</sup>. The Double Reds landed in Dili on 17 December 1941, 22 men were based at Dili airfield and the remained had been moved into the mountains so that they could recover from, or avoid, malaria. The men had been so badly equipped (they were fitted out to fight in the deserts of Europe) that, after a short time in Dili, nine out of 10 came down with malaria;
- ❖ with the surrender of the 'Empire' forces in Singapore to the Japanese, the Double Reds became the only unit in the South-West Pacific to remain an integrated force and continued offensive action. Winston Churchill later said:

***"They alone did not surrender,"***

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<sup>4</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/the-criados>)

<sup>5</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/introduction/raising-independent-companies-australia-s-first-special-forces/japan-ent>



- ❖ Darwin was bombed on the morning of 19 February 1942;
- ❖ Just before midnight that same night, as Darwin was bombed, a Japanese battalion landed west of Dili and headed for the airfield. The 22 men from No 2 Section, defending the airfield, heard Dutch artillery fire but received no alarm<sup>6</sup>;
- ❖ the Ration Truck massacre<sup>7</sup>. On 20 February, unaware of the Japanese landing, the Australian ration truck headed downhill for Dili on its daily run. The truck and its 16 occupants, most of No 7 Section, were captured. Keith Hayes<sup>8</sup> miraculously survived the massacre;
- ❖ In mid-April 1942 nearly two months after the surrender of Singapore, the engineers of the company built a radio (Winnie the war-winner<sup>9</sup>) devised from pieces of other sets and from parts scrounged among the troops or stolen from the enemy;
- ❖ on the night of 20 April 1942 they got through to Darwin with the message<sup>10</sup>;

***“Force intact. Still fighting. Badly need boots, quinine, money and Tommy-gun ammunition,”***

- ❖ many young Timorese and Portuguese volunteered to serve alongside the Australians. The result was a rag-tag army of professionals and volunteers that is unrivalled in Australian military history;
- ❖ the Double Reds and their Timorese supporters fought the Japanese to a standstill in the colony of Portuguese Timor during the period 12 month period to November 1942. The many extraordinary facets of guerrilla warfare undertaken by the Double Reds during this period pulling off scores of successful ambushes that kept the enemy running around in circles. During this period the Japanese troops in Timor rose to nine battalions, or more than 9,000 men, men that could have made a real difference had they been deployed in the Kokoda campaign or elsewhere<sup>11</sup> ;
- ❖ the Timorese deaths as a result of this conflict. Their losses far exceeded the deaths of any other nation that supported Australians in war;
- ❖ the Timor Gap Treaty<sup>12</sup>;

<sup>6</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/battles-timor>

<sup>7</sup> <https://doublereds.org.au/news/the-ration-truck-massacre-75-years-ago-r20/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/battles-timor/ration-truck-massacre>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/alliesinadversity/japanese/winnie/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/communications-force-intact-and-still-fighting>

<sup>11</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/dunkley-s-mobile-hospital/guerrilla-campaign-hit-hit-hard-and-run>

<sup>12</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/timor-gap-treaty>

- ❖ although the 'Double Reds' is best known for its time on Timor, it also saw extensive service in New Guinea and New Britain; and
- ❖ it has been said that by the end of the Second World War, the Double Reds could:

***'...claim to have spent longer in contact with enemy in the Pacific than any other unit of the Australian Army'.***

Winston Churchill in 1942 noted "Little known but of great significance are the men of the 2/2 Independent Company in Timor, they alone of all the troops did not surrender".

David Dexter, a platoon commander with the Double Reds, after the war, wrote Volume VI of the official history of the Second World War, The New Guinea Offensives. In this volume he wrote amongst other things:

- ❖ 'the Timor campaign could not be compared to anything else he had seen or heard of in Australian military history';
- ❖ 'they were a remarkable unit';
- ❖ 'like no other in Australian military history'; and
- ❖ 'the 2/2's year-long campaign was fought by a "tattered cavalry of Australians and Timorese" in the "real wild hills" of the colony.

Despite the many extraordinary facets to this epic in guerrilla warfare it appears as a minor footnote, if that, in most histories of the Second World War, overshadowed by the New Guinea and Pacific campaigns. Indeed, Australia's official history of the Second World War includes most of the Timor campaign as an appendix.

Last year I visited the AWMC and was disappointed with the lack of recognition of the feats of these men and the debt of honour Australia owes to the Timorese people. In the second war gallery the only reference I could find to this campaign was a section in which Winnie the War Winner was displayed. My disappointment was further enhanced as:

- ❖ Winnie was featured next to the surrender table on which the British commander in Singapore (General Percival) unconditionally surrendered the Empire Forces to General Yamashita;
- ❖ there was no mention by the volunteer guide, who I followed throughout the memorial as to:
  - the Battles for Timor<sup>13</sup>;

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<sup>13</sup> <http://museum.wa.gov.au/debt-of-honour/battles-timor>

- Winnie the War Winner;
- the Double Reds; or
- the Creado.