

THE EAST TIMOR NATIVES

When we arrived in Timor we were instructed to avoid contact with the natives and this carried on into East Timor. The section I was in (2 Section A Platoon) was camped first of all on Cactus Flats and then on the Dili aerodrome. We saw very few natives in any case except, on occasion, in Dili at the cock fights and the markets, etc.

Not being able to converse, little contact was made and so we were quite ignorant of the language and the customs of the Timorese. Consequently, in the exodus from Dili when we were avoiding Jap patrols, we were unable to distinguish the difference between Japanese and Timorese "chatter" and had to avoid them all. In retrospect, it is obvious that this was a very shortsighted policy as, even a rudimentary knowledge of the native language early, would have been a Godsend. Of course we didn't know then that we would be living with them.

BERIMOU

It was quite some time after the Drome episode when we were at Ainaro that some of the lads started to acquire "creados". Mostly young native boys, to carry gear, etc.

I was approached by a Timorese lad - a fairly tall, skinny 12 year old with a wide, cheeky grin who made it known that he wanted to be my Creado. His name was Berimou and came from the village of Orvulo (near Artsabe) which had been overrun by the Japs. He wanted to help the "Australian Soldados" to get rid of the Japs. He wanted no pay, just wanted to help.

I didn't have much gear - it was all lost on the Dili Drome - but I was grateful for his assistance as I was physically weak due to recurring malaria and dysentery (a legacy of the Cactus Flats period). Berimou looked after my bits and pieces except for my rifle, ammo and a small haversack of personal papers. He also helped with the Section's gear and with scrounging for food.

In the beginning we communicated mainly by signs but gradually we picked up sufficient words of each other's language to make ourselves understood. Of course, they picked up the great Australian expletives first - I well remember them calling each other "bloody black bastards" while talking at their singsongs at night.

The Creados were very loyal to their "patron" or "tuan" and would often be heard boasting about, or defending the attitudes, of their Boss. They would become worried if, having been sent to a safe place when action was imminent, they didn't know where Boss was..

A case in point was when we moved aout of Maliana and set up an ambush position in the saddle on the road to Bobonaro. I was sent

to Rita Bau to tell the Sigs. there to get the radio set out to Morobo. However, on the way I slipped off the mountain track in the dark and fell onto rocks, fracturing a bone in one ankle and spraining the other. This was about half a mile from the village so I hobbled there to find it abandoned.

I did find a horse and managed to catch it and rode it to Morobo to rejoin the section. The point being that, when the Section arrived and I was missing, Berimou was distraught and wanted to search for me but was restrained. In any case, I turned up half a day later, complete with a horse. That made his day because now he was a horse owner as well - so we set off for the hospital at Same.

Berimou's help was invaluable on that trip because we were restricted to obscure mountain tracks due to the presence of Jap patrols. I could not possibly have found my own way or managed the horse or found food without him. While at Doc Dunkley's hospital both Berimou and the horse came in handy as we had to make several hurried moves to other locations because of Jap activities, some at night. Doc and the lads needed all the help they could get.

Berimou was a boy with a cheerful disposition and very few things worried him. One time he took leave of absence to visit his village but when he returned he was very subdued. He told that his whole village - family and all - had been wiped out by the Japs. He believed his association with us was the cause as, natives who befriended the Japs had been initiating these actions. However, this made Berimou all the more determined to help us against the Nips.

We were at Betano when the Voyager went aground and we had the task of moving the 2/4th Coy. gear in a hurry. Berimou came into his own. He loved to boss the other natives around and took to running packhorse teams (at least once under aircraft fire) like a duck to water. There was always a couple of us with the train but Berimou was "boss of the boongs". Of course, in this incident, we were only part of an estimated 400 natives and horses.

When we were told we were to be evacuated we asked if the Creados could come with us. We were told that it was not possible and we then realised that we would eventually be deserting them - leaving them to their own devices - although Headquarters said it would do all they could for them.

The night of the evacuation arrived and, as we prepared to leave, I told Berimou what we were doing. I wrote out an ownership receipt for the horse, a Surat (letter of commendation for all his help) and gave him everything I owned - horse, gear, money, etc. Everything except for a small haversack with personal papers. Said goodbye and swam out in the darkness to the boats of the "Tjerk Heddes".

The Creados were of tremendous help to all of us in many other ways besides carrying. They helped us to enlist the aid of the villagers where we were camped, helped in procuring food, obtained information on the whereabouts of the Japs and their informers, etc.

All in all, without the help of the East Timorese natives generally, we certainly would not have survived.