

A 77-Year Friendship - My Family's Journey

My journey with East Timor/Portuguese Timor/Timor-Leste began, as did that of many of you, with a father, grandfather or relative having served there in 1942 as a 2/2 Commando and owing his life to the assistance given to him by the Timorese.

My father was Norman Douglas Thornton and my godfather was Geordie Hamilton-Smith, Dad's good mate, in 4 Section of the commandos. Dad never spoke much about his time in Portuguese Timor, but our family did know that he owed his life to a young Timorese man by the name of Nicolau Goncalves. Geordie on the other hand, used to tell us that the Japanese sword Dad kept in the top of the linen cupboard was going to be used by a Japanese soldier to kill Dad, but Geordie saved him. The sword is still in the family and held by my brother, Ross.

In 1968, our family was fortunate to meet Nicolau Goncalves, our father's guardian angel, when, with the assistance of the 2/2 Commandos and the Portuguese government, Nicolau was able to come to Australia and stay with our family in Denmark. I was fortunate to have travelled to Denmark with Nicolau and Ray Aitken.

In the early 1980's, I went to work in Leederville and would often visit Col Doig, who lived close by. Col was one of the original 2/2 Commandos and is the author of the books "A Great Fraternity - The Story of the 2/2nd Commando Association 1946-1992", "The Ramblings of a Ratbag" and "A History of The 2nd Independent Company and 2/2nd Commando Squadron". My friendship with Col kept me closely connected with the association.

In the early 1990's, I joined the activist group Friends of East Timor. A memorable and courageous exile was George Aditjondro, an Indonesian journalist. George was the first journalist to enter East Timor after the Indonesian occupation. He was a vocal supporter of the East Timorese and vocal opponent of Suharto, which is why he was exiled.

On November 12, 1994, the third anniversary of the Santa Cruz Massacres, marches were held in all the Australian capital cities opposing the occupation of East Timor by the Indonesians. In Perth, we had 800 people marching chanting "Indonesia out of East Timor, freedom now".

In 1995, my brother Murray made plans to go to East Timor from Darwin, where he was holidaying with his family and I decided to accompany him.

With a crash course in Indonesian and Tetum and instructions from Col Doig, Ray Aitken, Bob Smyth, John Burridge and Jack Carey, and a large box of equipment for the Don Bosco Centre, we arrived in Dili from Kupang on 11 June 1995. Paddy Kenneally and Ray Aitken had given us written instructions of places to visit.

Murray and I had to take family photos with us to prove that we were in fact brother and sister and not Western journalists.

Sadly, Nicolau Goncalves, our father's guardian angel, and two of his sons had been killed in Bazar Tete in 1975, when the Indonesians invaded.

We were met by Father Woulter Van Wouwe, a Belgian Salesian, who was in charge of the Don Bosco Centre. Father Woulter was an amazing man, who had been present when Saigon fell to the Viet Cong and witnessed the re-enactment of the armoured tank rolling through the locked gates into the palace for the world media. He had escaped Vietnam with only his fingernail clippers, and we felt honoured to have a man with this depth of strength and experience assisting us in East Timor. Father Woulter's help was invaluable to us in arranging to meet with Nicolau's family on several occasions. Nicolau's wife, Florentina, had gone blind and Father Woulter made arrangements to get her to a doctor. He also helped us at the Indonesian bank, changing travellers' cheques, so we could give money to Nicolau's family.

We stayed at the Turismo Hotel in Dili and this was where the Indonesian Intel was also based, so we were in good hands.

We had promised Ray Aitken we would go to Bazar Tete and find Luis Gon Zaga, a carpenter who helped 4 Section during the war. On arrival in Bazar Tete, we asked for Luis and, as we were the centre of attention, it was not hard to find assistance. The police

indicated I should hop onto the back of a motor bike and they would take me to his hut and off we went. Meeting Luis was incredibly emotional, with a lot of hugging and photos being taken and shown. He remembered the men of 4 Section and Nicolau.

We had planned to go to Ainaro where the 2/2 had a hospital during the war. The Indonesian military kept a close eye on us. The bus to Alieu, a 22-seater with 34 people and livestock on board, was stopped and the Timorese had to show their IDs and Murray and I our passports. In Maubissi we stayed the night, albeit not as welcome visitors. We again had to produce our passports and, that night, in the little shed we were allowed to stay in, we had an Indonesian running around the building. Murray assured me we were safe as he had his Swiss army knife. The locals had two-foot machetes and the Indonesians M16 machine-guns.

From Maubissi to Ainaro, we rode on the back of a truck with the locals. On the back of a truck you see everything, you feel everything and, when you are in a cloud, you get wet! Once the Indonesian military saw us, they joined us and our chatting with the locals stopped, but the three Indonesian soldiers were friendly enough to us and told us they were on a tour of duty. It took us two hours to travel 50 km. On arrival in Ainaro, we again had to present ourselves to the military with our passports and explain why we were there. We stayed one day in Ainaro and caught a bus back to Dili. As we came down into Dili one of the brake drums blew, due to constant braking on a winding mountain road, and the bus had to stop. After the smoke settled the driver said it was okay to get back on the bus. Murray and I did, but none of the locals with their chooks took up the offer!

Walking around Dili, you could feel the apprehension with people wanting to talk to us but being afraid. Words can never describe being in an occupied country. On leaving Dili, we vowed we would return. We would soon get that opportunity.

Early in 1999, Indonesia's President Habibie agreed to a referendum to be held in East Timor in August. Voluntary, self-funded international observers were being recruited by the Australia East Timor International Volunteers project. Without hesitating, Murray and I applied and were accepted. We wanted to repay, in some *small* way, the debt we owed to the Timorese. Had it not been for them, many of us would not be here today. To quote a commando, they were "our guardian angels, who helped us find food and bathed our wounds"!

During our time in East Timor, we were to experience many traumatic and dangerous events. This year, I opened the diary I wrote 20 years ago and recalled those events.

Sunday 15 August 1999 I left Perth for Bali where I would meet Murray and from there we would go to Dili. The Commando Association had given us boxes of equipment for the Don Bosco Training Centre. We arrived in Dili on the 16th August and spent time walking around. We woke on the 17th August, Indonesia's Independence Day, to gunfire, as the CNRT building just down the road was being attacked. That day, we watched as Eurico Guterres, leader of the pro-Indonesia Aitarak group, circled Dili five times with his armed militia. It was an aggressive show of strength.

After registering with United Nations Mission in East Timor in Dili as voluntary observers, Murray and I, along with Liz Book, decided to travel to Suai, to be observers. To do this, we had to travel into West Timor, Indonesia along the border and then back into East Timor.

Thursday 19 August 1999 at 6am we caught a bus from Dili for West Timor, passing many houses with the Indonesian flag fluttering out the front. The 20-seat bus had double that many passengers *and* livestock on the top. The trip was not without its dangers, and, as we travelled along the steep, winding coast road, we noticed a truck that had gone over the edge and lay at the bottom of the drop. In Atambua, the bus circled the city, picking up passengers for two hours and we stayed on the bus for safety. We had to produce our passports and documentation on several occasions at checkpoints along the route. It took us 10 hours to travel 250 km, arriving in Dili at 4.30pm. Later that evening, Murray and I walked around Suai, to get an idea of the town. We met the local TNI Liaison officer, who spoke excellent English and had spent time in Darwin and Queensland.

A young Timorese woman had advised us to stay at the Wisma Covalima and it was there that we met Catharina Williams Van Klinken, an amazing young woman who was working up in the mountains at Zumalai for the United Nations, registering people for the vote. Also living at Wisma Covalima was Simao Da Silva Barretto and Alipio Baltazar, who were two young Timorese acting as interpreters for the United Nations. Simao and Alipio provided invaluable assistance to us.

Friday 20 August 1999 we went and registered with the Police and also the UNAMET staff who told us, "If shit happens, you are on your own".

Murray assured me he had a planned route for us to walk out of Suai - albeit into Indonesia - if there was trouble. We had to keep our shoes on or within reach, as you cannot run without them and to also never have a solid wall behind you because, when there is trouble you need to run. And, of course, he had his Swiss Army knife.

In Suai, we were to encounter two militia groups. The Laksau and the Mahidi, who were both well equipped with M16s, hand-made guns and machetes. One member of the militias was wandering around Suai with grenades, threatening to throw them into crowds. The militia groups would organise autonomy rallies, trucking the locals in and forcing them to listen to pro-autonomy speeches and at times you could cut the tension with a knife.

In April, 400 people had been killed around Suai and, in the church-grounds just down the road from the Wisma Covalima, there were 2,500 internally displaced people who had been there since April. Father Hiliro, Father Soares, Father Dewanto and the nuns were trying to care for these people. We would often go down and visit the IDPs.

Sunday 22 August we attended mass in the small church beside the partially completed cathedral. The church was packed, and many people stood in the grounds outside the church, as Fathers Hiliaro, Dewanto and Soares celebrated the mass. After mass, we met with Father Hiliaro, who was very concerned about the 2,500 internally displaced people living in the grounds, as water and food had been cut off since 19 August. The situation was getting desperate in Suai.

Tuesday 24 August Murray and I had managed to hire a microlet to take us out into the districts. As we came to an intersection, the microlet slowed down and a militia member went to climb aboard. Murray and I quickly jumped up and shook his hand. Thankfully, this took him by surprise, and he stepped back off the microlet. The microlet driver quickly did a U-turn and we sped off down the road with the driver signalling to us how close we were to danger by dragging his finger across his throat!

Thursday 26 August 1999 the warungs are closing down, as there is no food, and the Indonesians are pulling out of Suai en masse.

Friday 27 August thousands of CNRT members were finally allowed to rally in Suai. When they returned, 8 hours later, the numbers had multiplied to roughly 3,500. It was an incredibly joyous event which very nearly became a disaster, and would have done, had it not been for the Brimob (the special operations, paramilitary and tactical unit of the Indonesian National Police) stopping the militia as they were coming down the road with their weapons.

Saturday 28 August 1999 I phoned headquarters in Dili and Alannah MacTiernan who was in the same group as us answered the phone. The news is not good. Ten people had been killed in Dili Thursday and four on Friday. Was told there were probably plans to evacuate the Australians, as the militia wanted to kill them. This was not very helpful to us, as we were on the other side of the island in Suai.

Sunday 29 August 1999 Bishop Belo conducted the church service as the militia made a token gesture of handing in their weapons

Monday 30 August 1999 was a historic and to us an extremely unforgettable day as thousands swarmed the polling stations hours before they opened to vote. They would not be deterred by the militia members moving amongst them. Witnessing these proud people who were prepared to put their life on the line for their freedom was witnessing the human spirit at its finest. To see an elderly Timorese gentleman come out from the polling station proudly holding up his inked finger was something that will stay with me forever.

Murray and I escaped from Suai on the last plane to leave for Dili. On one occasion in Dili, our group of volunteers were all staying in a house together. It was evening and everyone was relaxing, when the power went off and there was movement outside. When the lights came back on, Murray and I had our shoes on! We had no way out of Dili or East Timor in fact, as all transport out of Dili was cancelled. We heard of a flight being chartered by BBC journalists and this was how we were to leave East Timor. As we sat in the Dili airport waiting for the flight, local Timorese in the airport hoping to catch a flight were being taken out of the airport by the militia. Finally, we boarded the plane and, as it took off, we could see Dili burning below us. One of the journalists stood up and said, "This is a flight of shame".

Murray returned to East Timor in September 1999, after INTERFET landed, and worked for the NGO Timor Aid. He employed Januario Goncalves, the son of Nicolau Gonclaves,

our father's Kriadu. From a bond formed in war between Norm and Nicolau, their sons were now working together to help rebuild East Timor.

Alannah and I returned to East Timor in April 2000 to visit Murray and experienced first-hand the devastation caused by the militia. On reaching Betano, on the south coast, the beach was littered with clothing of women and children who had been forcibly taken from East Timor to Indonesia as the men and boys had gone into hiding in the forest. With me was Paddy Kenneally.

Since 1995, Murray and I have returned to Timor Leste many times and each time visiting Nicolau's family. This year was very special, as we returned to Suai to celebrate 20 years of East Timor/Timor-Leste independence. We had not seen Simeo Da Silva Barretto for 20 years and to meet him again was incredibly emotional. The highlight of our trip was attending mass in the newly completed Ava Maria Cathedral with Simeo Da Silva Barretto and his family. The cathedral had been a shell when we were there in 1999 and it was where Fathers Hiliaro, Dewanto, Soares and hundreds of refugees were slaughtered on 6 September 1999 two days after the ballot result was announced on the 4 September, 1999.

This year, for the twentieth anniversary, we were fortunate to meet with the Timorese President Francisco Guterres, who shared his story with us about his family's involvement assisting the commandos in Ossu during the war and we presented him with a copy of "All The Bulls Men", the unit's history.

I want to thank all of those people and groups who support our association and those who are on, or have been on, our committee. I would like to give special thanks to Rob and Louis Crossing who have provided our association with a digital platform to publicise the little-known story of the Timorese Kriadu, and of the incredible help they gave to the Australian commandos during the war.

The gift of that help is now a debt that we, as Australians, owe the Timorese.