

SPEECH FROM JENNY BEAHAN (NEE AITKEN), PRESIDENT OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE 2/2nd COMMANDO ASSOCIATION

ON THE OCCASION OF THE 2/2nd ANZAC DAY LUNCH 2011

I have, like many of you, grown up with the presence of the 2/2nd Commando Association of Australia very much part of my family environment. We may not necessarily all know each other, but mention one of our father's names and it is very likely that we will not only recognise it, but recall fragments of stories, situations and places, in which these brave men, *our fathers*, played a vital role. . The very recognisable double red diamonds themselves, the insignia of the 2/2nd is, in itself, part of the wallpaper and texture of our lives.

This was not the only dimension of the 2/2nd story to permeate my home environment and I know, many of yours. The tiny country of Portuguese East Timor and its extraordinarily brave people were the other most vital dimension. I am sure, if we spread out a map of Timor Leste in front of us, now and traversed the names of towns, villages and districts, many of you would hear a little bell of recognition ring in your head. Dare, Remxiou, Ailu, Baza Tete, Ermeara, the Glano, Liquica, Tureskai and of course, Dili. Images of rugged mountain ranges, towering breadfruit trees, Timor ponies, scraggy looking men with beards, coconuts being chopped open with jungle knives by Timorese boys, may have found their way into your family photo albums and possibly into your father's hearts. My own father returned to this brave little island and its people, as many times as he could. In a letter to my mother, he wrote

*Am going back to Baza Tete on 30th to see 3 creados, one of them Rufino, Tom Nisbet's boy..... We arrived back at 4.30, now 5.30. Water doesn't arrive until 6.30 so this (note) may smell .Everything O K this end, but have had enough of mountains for a while, though I really love this island - **and Baza Tete, particularly, is rai hau mian**-my own land.*

For him, Timor had become a second home, it was now a 'land of the heart'.

Even better known to many of you, will be the names of your father's creados. The creados of course were those brave Timorese boys and young men, (some as young as nine years old) who assigned themselves to individual commandos acting as guides, path and food finders, porters and critical messengers. Together, with other Timorese people, they played a central role in the survival and eventual safe return of our commando fathers to Australia and to their ability to resume normality and daily life.

Till the day he died, my father carried two images in his wallet, a photo of my mother as she was before he went to war and a little pencil sketch of his creado, Mau Lare. (My brother and I always knew that Mau Lare was as loved by him as we were and

that in an indefinable way, Mau Lare was part of the circle in which we and our mother, fitted.) We understood too, the great sense of grief, when it became clear that Mau Lare had been killed, during the Indonesian occupation.

As James Dexter and I explained to the energetic young project team working on the *Debt of Honour* Exhibition in at the Western Australian Museum, we each grew up knowing that our father's credo **was family**.

I know also, (and I don't think he would mind me mentioning it to you) that the very brave and plucky Keith Hayes, carries in his own wallet, a photo of Donabella Martins, the wonderful gracious and courageous Timorese lady who hid and nursed him back to health after he was all but mortally wounded in an ambush near the Comoro River, outside Dili. Great love and respect has developed between the 2/2nd and the Timorese people, which endures to this day.

When Churchill ordered Australia to occupy Portuguese East Timor, a neutral country, an illegal act was committed. As Australia's first commandos, our fathers were catapulted into a small and to them, completely unknown foreign front to deter Japanese advances in the Asia Pacific region.

Our fathers suffered great privations, near starvation, severe tropical illness without medical supplies, fear and great sorrow, when comrades did die. The thing that brought them through, was their inherent skill and training, their larrikin humour, their steadfast comradeship and the courageous support of the Timorese people. Today, those remaining, of this mostly *lucky company*, (the majority made it home) are still there for each other, if not in person, then by telephone and letter.

The Timorese, in contrast, were not so lucky. Between 40,000-70,000 of their population of 700,00 perished, either directly from Japanese reprisals, or from starvation linked to the invasion and occupation of their lands. Compare this with Australia's losses of a total of 48,000 (of 5 million) across all fronts in WW 2 and one begins to realise the stark dimensions for the Timorese. Almost every family on the island would have been affected, very often losing the critical breadwinner and protector. The effects of these losses still impact on Timorese families to this day, something we should never forget and should convey to other Australians. I am proud to say that this has never been lost sight of by the men of the 2/2nd.

Perhaps the thing to feel most proud of as a member of the ' 2/2nd extended family' is that its members have, from this time on, sought ways to honour their debt to this small and now fledgling independent nation. Timor Leste. This support has been at the practical level in intelligent and thoughtful overseas aid programs, funded by the members of the Association and in other ways, through lobbying of the UN, submissions to the Australian Senate Inquiry to support the Timorese peoples wishes to be a free, independent and democratic country. Most recently, this was provided to support Timor Leste's quest with the Australian Government for a fairer share of the gas and oil reserves in the Timor Sea.

The 2/2nd Commandos have now passed the torch to us, their children. We are in awe of what they, so small in number, but big in heart and principle, have achieved. Today, however is about honouring and celebrating the 2/2 Commandos, past and present, tomorrow is about taking up the challenge they have set us. Thank you all for being here.

Viva the 2/2nd Commandos, the double reds!

Viva Timor Lorosae/ Viva Timor Leste!

Jenny Beahan

25 April 2011