

70<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE FOR TIMOR.  
19<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 1942

TODAY MARKS THE 70<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE FOR TIMOR.

A SOMETIMES FORGOTTEN MILITARY EVENT THAT OCCURRED A MERE 500 KILOMETERS FROM OUR DOORSTEP.

IN 1941 THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REALISED THAT THE ISLAND OF TIMOR, THEN PART DUTCH, PART PORTUGUESE COLONIES, PROVIDED AN EASY ACCESS BY AIR TO AUSTRALIA BY JAPANESE MILITARY AIRCRAFT.

SO IN DECEMBER 1941, WE LANDED A MAKESHIFT UNIT CALLED “SPARROW FORCE” ONTO TIMOR.

“SPARROW FORCE” WAS MADE UP OF A NUMBER OF UNITS INCLUDING 2/40 BATTALION FROM TASMANIA, AND FEW HUNDRED MEMBERS OF THE 2<sup>ND</sup>/2<sup>ND</sup> INDEPENDENT COMMANDO COMPANY.

THE AIM WAS TO DENY THE USE OF THE TIMORESE AIRFIELDS BY JAPANESE FORCES.

ON THE 19<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 1942 THE JAPANESE SENT SEVERAL SHIPS INCLUDING AIRCRAFT CARRIERS AND OVER 6,000 TROOPS WITH THE INTENT OF OCCUPYING TIMOR.

DESPITE THE RESISTANCE PUT UP BY “SPARROW FORCE” THE ODDS WERE OVERWHELMING AND AFTER A FEW DAYS “SPARROW FORCE” SURRENDERED. MANY WHO SURRENDERED DID NOT SURVIVE THEIR CAPTURE.

THE MEMBERS OF 2<sup>ND</sup>/2<sup>ND</sup> INDEPENDENT COMMANDO COMPANY, HOWEVER, TOOK TO THE HILLS TO AVOID CAPTURE.

THESE MEN, MAINLY FROM WESTERN AUSTRALIA, WERE EXPERT BUSHMEN AND MANY ALSO EXPERT SHOTS, EXPERIENCE THEY GAINED FROM SHOOTING RABBITS AND KANGAROOS DURING THE DEPRESSION TO FEED THEIR FAMILIES.

THEY WERE LIGHTLY ARMED, RIFLES, PISTOLS, THOMPSON SUB MACHINE GUNS AND BREN GUNS, AGAINST AN ENEMY WHO HAD AIRCRAFT, ARTILLERY, MORTARS, HEAVY MACHINE GUNS AND PARATROOPERS AT THEIR DISPOSAL.

HOWEVER, THEY REGROUPED AND REORGANISED, AND FOR OVER 13 MONTHS CARRIED OUT SUCCESSFUL GUERRILLA RAIDS AGAINST THE ENEMY.

THESE COMMANDOS WERE BEFRIENDED BY THE LOCAL POPULATION, OUR TROOPS SHOWED THEM RESPECT AND THEY RESPECTED THE BRAVERY OF THE AUSTRALIANS.

THEY PROVIDED FOOD AND INTELLIGENCE ON THE MOVEMENT OF THE ENEMY, AND MANY JOINED THE UNIT AS “CREADOS”, HELPING TO CARRY HEAVY STORES THAT ALLOWED OUR COMMANDOS THE FLEXIBILITY TO MOVE QUICKLY THRU THE COUNTRYSIDE.

THIS FRIENDSHIP WAS TO COST THE LIVES OF MANY THOUSANDS OF THE TIMORESE PEOPLE. THE JAPANESE WERE BRUTAL TOWARDS THE POPULATION AND THOSE WHO ASSISTED OUR TROOPS WERE EXECUTED.

LATER IN 1942 A SECOND COMMANDO UNIT, THE 2<sup>ND</sup>/4<sup>TH</sup> INDEPENDENT COMPANY WAS ALSO INSERTED.

HOWEVER, THE JAPANESE HAD COMMITTED MORE THAN 15,000 TROOPS TO THE AREA, TROOPS THAT COULD HAVE BEEN USED ELSEWHERE IN THE PACIFIC, POSSIBLY IN NEW GUINEA. AND EVENTUALLY ALL OF OUR TROOPS WERE WITHDRAWN.

FOR THE LOSS OF APPROXIMATELY 40 SOLDIERS, THE MEMBERS OF THESE COMMANDO UNITS ACCOUNTED FOR OVER 1,500 JAPANESE TROOPS AND TIED DOWN THEIR RESOURCES.

MOST OF THOSE MEN ARE NO LONGER WITH US DUE TO THE PASSAGE OF TIME.

TODAY WE REMEMBER NAMES LIKE CORPORAL ALAN LUBY, WHO WAS ONE OF THEIR MEDICS, AND WHO COULD FORGET THE FEISTY IRISH WHARF LABOURER, JOHN "PADDY" KENNEALLY?

IT IS SAID HIS UNCLE'S FOUGHT WITH THE IRA AGAINST THE BRITISH.

PADDY INCIDENTALLY, MADE SEVERAL TRIPS TO TIMOR IN HIS LATTER YEARS TRYING TO REPAY THE LOYALTY OF THE TIMORESE WHO HELPED OUR SOLDIERS DURING THIS ACTION.

AS A NATION WE OWE A DEBT OF GRATITUDE TO THE PEOPLE OF TIMOR, FOR WITHOUT THEIR WILLING ASSISTANCE OUR COMMANDOS WOULD HAVE SIMPLY DISAPPEARED.

THEY ASSISTED AUSTRALIAN TROOPS WHEN OUR BACK WAS AGAINST THE WALL.

SADLY, HISTORY RECORDS THAT SUCCESSIVE GOVERNMENTS OF AUSTRALIA DID NOT ALWAYS RECOGNISE THAT DEBT, AND INDEED, TURNED THEIR BACK WHEN THE TIMORESE NEEDED US THE MOST.

MR. PRIME MINISTER, THOSE OF US WHO GATHER HERE TODAY, REMEMBER, AND ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DEBT.

LEST WE FORGET THE PEOPLE OF TIMOR LESTE.