

# UN BLUE

## 5/7 RAR

### in East Timor

BY PETER LONDEY

#### MAY DAY, 2000.

Like an intruder from outer space, the giant catamaran HMAS *Jervis Bay* lies alongside Dili wharf. It is a link between East Timor and the world community which has at last come to save the world's newest nation. In ten hours it can make the journey back to Darwin, and today it is here to pick up passengers. Along the wharf march soldiers in blue berets, who board the ship by a gangplank at the stern.

The soldiers are Australians, members of the 5th/7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5/7 RAR), and they wear their blue berets in proud acknowledgement that theirs is the first Australian infantry battalion to serve with a United Nations force since the Korean War. For its first four months in East Timor, from October 1999, the battalion formed part of the Australian-led Interfet force. When Interfet handed over control of East Timor to the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) in late February 2000, 5/7 RAR came under the command of UNTAET's own multinational Peacekeeping Force, donning blue berets and UN badges on their sleeves. Now they are leaving, their role picked up by the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR).



Members of 5/7 RAR after handover from Interfet to the United Nations wearing their blue berets at Balibo. (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V00064A3)

The last man aboard the *Jervis Bay* is the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Simon Gould. A rangy man with an engaging smile and the air of one with much of his career ahead of him, Gould is proud of the performance of his men. Once that might have meant willingness to be swept to a fighting death. In a modern peacekeeping operation, the demands on the soldier are different: discipline and judgement are needed to keep within restrictive rules of engagement, and any soldier with a weapon has the capacity to jeopardize the political success of the operation. Gould has reason to be proud: 5/7 RAR has worked very hard to ensure a secure environment for the people of East Timor.

#### EARLY DAYS

When the battalion arrived on 10 October 1999, it took over security in the Dili area from the 3rd

UNTAET headquarters, Dili. (Photographs by the author, unless otherwise stated)



Members of 5/7 RAR disembark in the Oecussi enclave early on the morning of 24 October 1999. (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V9914420)

Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3 RAR). Dili was still almost deserted, though the population was not far away: looking around at night, the soldiers could see the hills dotted with cooking fires. Each day, more people returned. The battalion guarded important facilities, patrolled the streets, searched houses and confiscated weapons. Thanks to the work of the Australians, New Zealanders and Ghurkas in the early weeks of the operation, the security situation was good. But tensions remained, especially between the local population and the departing members of TNI, the Indonesian army. The battalion tried to keep the potential antagonists apart; when conflict did break out, for example when the Timorese began throwing rocks at the TNI, the soldiers used "aggressive and robust negotiation" to prevent the situation escalating.

Unlike the other battalions on Timor, 5/7 RAR is mechanised. This means that it has its own armoured personnel carriers (APCs), sufficient to carry the whole battalion into battle. On patrol, the tracked APCs have several advantages: they can get to places a wheeled vehicle cannot; they can carry extra

equipment; and they are an imposing sight, giving confidence to the local population and intimidating potential opponents. Sending the right message was very important.

Once out in the countryside, a platoon would typically drive out to a village and set up the APCs as a mobile patrol base. From there, section-level patrols might go out overnight, following footpaths into remote villages where they would camp and gain the confidence of the local people. Often the best approach was to talk to the ever-friendly Timorese children, who would then pass on the message to the adults that Interfet had arrived and was friendly.

The patrols also gathered information for humanitarian aid organizations about the number of people in each area, whether

Lieutenant Colonel  
Simon Gould







5/7 RAR's armoured personnel carriers pass local transport on the road to Liquica (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V9909824)



ABOVE: A member of 5/7 RAR during the unit's move into Liquica on 14 October 1999 (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V9909523)

LEFT: Major Rohan Martin, Executive Officer, 5/7 RAR, on patrol (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V9913623)

they had enough food and whether there were any problems with militia.

### OECUSSI AND LIQUICA

Late in October, 4 Platoon from B Company was sent to form part of the first Interfet force in the Oecussi enclave. Together with an Australian SAS troop and a platoon of Ghurkas, they travelled around the coast in a landing craft loaded with four APCs, eight other vehicles and 90 men. Landing unopposed at dawn, they were met by an SAS reconnaissance party which had gone in the day before. Oecussi itself was a ghost-town: the population had all fled into the hills. Within days, 10,000 had returned.

After securing the town and setting up a defensive position on a hill outside it, the force began a program of intensive patrolling, clearing routes from Oecussi to other population areas and extending Interfet's presence throughout the enclave. There was no militia opposition. The soldiers reached some areas so remote that the whole conflict had passed them by. Here, where leprosy was rife, and the

people had never seen the TNI, the arrival of Interfet was quite a surprise.

After five weeks, 3 RAR took over the enclave, to be followed in February 2000 by a Jordanian battalion. 4 Platoon moved to join the rest of B Company, which had taken over the Liquica area in early November. Liquica had been in the centre of an area controlled by the Red and White Iron militia, and signs of the post-election violence were everywhere. Many bodies were discovered. The most terrible find was the baby son of a pro-independence activist. The boy's legs had been cut off, and his charred body propped up inside a house, beside a religious picture. For soldiers who had arrived

A member of 5/7 RAR at a family reunion day on the border (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V0007108)







An armoured personnel carrier from 5/7 RAR patrolling banana plantations in the back streets of Dili (Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V9931426)

too late to prevent the atrocity, it was a distressing sight; but it brought home the importance of their protective patrols. For the time being, though, the greatest threat of violence was against those accused of having been part of the militia; Interfet troops were kept busy conducting rescues.

### ON THE BORDER

In January the battalion moved into the northern sector of the border area with West Timor. The primary tasks here were to control passage across the border and to maintain security in the whole area. For the Indonesian soldiers of TNI across the border, the arrival of a mechanised battalion with its 90 APCs might have been a worrying sight. Was Interfet about

to take on a more aggressive role, perhaps even planning to cross into West Timor? Such fears soon proved groundless, as 5/7 RAR adopted a professional approach to build on the work of their predecessors, the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR).

2 RAR had approached their task essentially as a counter-insurgency operation. Without 5/7 RAR's APCs, they had not been able easily to maintain coverage of the area from permanent company patrol bases, but instead used an "ink-spot" approach to the territory: each company would be moved into a limited area of operations for a period of ten days, before moving on again. At night a company or platoon would defend itself in a way appropriate to a military operation, without lights, with razor wire and machine-

guns. 2 RAR were known as a tough, traditional battalion and were very successful during their time on the border.

Now that it was clear that neither the militia nor TNI posed a serious threat, 5/7 RAR took a different approach. The battalion saw its mission as providing the security to allow the Timorese to begin the process of nation-building. That meant making the local population feel confident that, with the peacekeepers on the ground, there would be no more attacks from the militia and that the country was at peace. Soldiers at guard posts thus carried rifles instead of machine-guns, and lights were allowed at night; it may have represented a risk, but was worth it to convey the right message to the local people. 5/7 RAR was willing to work with TNI across the border, taking the view that the two armies shared responsibility for maintaining security along the new frontier. Regular meetings took place between the local commanders on both sides.

There were still moments of real danger: one was at a

family reunion near Batugade. The reunions had been instituted by the UN for families which had been split by the new border or whose members had fled to West Timor as refugees, and to encourage refugees to return. Timorese could enter the meeting area from either side of the border, under the supervision of Australian soldiers in the east and the TNI in the west. At a reunion on 19 February, fighting broke out when youths threw insults and rocks at each other. Part of the crowd of 14,000 broke and started running back towards West Timor, while the more hot-headed youths began throwing rocks at the Indonesian soldiers who were guarding the western side of the meeting place. In a misconceived attempt to calm the situation, the Indonesians started firing hundreds of warning shots over the crowd's head.

A small group of Australian soldiers found itself caught in the middle. The local company and platoon commanders had been joined for the occasion by the battalion commander, Simon Gould, his operations officer and the Regimental Sergeant Major. They had been chatting to the refugees; Gould had been discussing football with a woman from Melbourne, who was there trying to convince her relatives that it was safe to return to East Timor. When the firing started, the outnumbered Australians would have been within their rights to use their own weapons, but that would only have made the situation worse. Instead, Gould called on the Indonesians to stop firing, while the others tackled the rock-throwers to the ground and pushed them back towards East Timor. In a few minutes calm was restored, and within a quarter of an hour the company commander was discussing what had gone wrong with his Indonesian opposite number.

### THREATS FROM MILITIA

The battalion was far better equipped than any likely opponents: its own security was not a problem. Apart from the APCs, the greatest edge was provided by its Ninox night-vision goggles and night-firing system. As the population learned about these advantages, there was less likelihood than ever that any militia would take the Australians on. But face-to-face superiority was not enough. The battalion's task was to ensure a safe environment for a local population spread over a large area of difficult terrain. It was all too easy for small groups of men to slip across the border to terrorise or even kill the local people. Patrols would often be given information about militia activity by local people: sometimes the reports were worth following up, on other occasions they may have been given in the hope of receiving more protection.

Within a few days of arriving in the border area, one of D Company's platoons had a trip flare set off outside





An Australian soldier provides cover for members of his patrol as they search houses in central Dili.

(Photograph provided by the Electronic Media Unit, Department of Defence, V9904926)

Soldiers of 5/7 RAR board HMAS Jervis Bay in Dili, 1 May 2000

their position one night. The soldiers observed a number of men with large packs who slipped off into the night skilfully enough to suggest they might even have been TNI soldiers on reconnaissance. January and February were quiet, but late in February came the transition from Interfet to the UNTAET Peacekeeping Force. For battalion headquarters and for the support units in Dili, it meant another layer of bureaucracy; for the soldiers in the field, there was very little change. But for militia elements in West Timor, it might have seemed to be an opportunity to assert themselves. The UN's reputation for peace enforcement had been tarnished in recent years; perhaps they thought it was time to test its mettle.

In the first two days of March there was a spate of incidents. Near Batugade about 40 rounds were fired at a section from B Company. The forest was so thick that the soldiers could not even see the muzzle flashes, so it was not possible to return fire. A clearing patrol found nothing. Next day the spot from which the shots had been fired was found about 300 metres away.

It was an assertion of presence rather than a serious attack. The same night NZ soldiers near Suai came under "harassing fire" from the border, and the next

One of the ever-friendly Timorese children

day an Australian helicopter was fired on.

Worse was to come. On the same night as the earlier incidents, a small group of men entered the border village of Memo, west of Maliana, stood in the centre of the village and fired 23 rounds at an Australian observation post. It was not a serious attack – "cowboy shooting, really", as one officer described it – but again the real message was intended for the local population. A platoon was sent to reinforce the troops at Memo; the same night shots were fired at a patrol. This proved the precursor to the most serious test the Australians were to face: over the next seven days, several small groups of militia crossed the border and travelled east.

The battalion worked desperately to find them. Local people passed reports to Australian patrols, and officers at headquarters steadily zeroed in on the militia's position. From a starting point 24 hours behind, they reached the point where they were only six hours behind the men. Frustratingly, they could not close the gap.

For the troops it was a period of intense action in rugged terrain. One soldier recalled that he was just getting ready to sleep when his section was ordered to prepare to leave that evening for a three-day patrol. After hanging around for further orders, they moved off in pitch-black at 11.30 pm. Carrying huge loads, they soon found themselves climbing an "absolute bastard" of a hill. There was plenty of time to contemplate the prospect of being attacked when they were so heavily laden and exhausted, but they reached a village at the top without incident.

The village was on a route which it was thought the militia might take if they were forced to retreat. The villagers said that five men, well-armed (four with semi-



5/7 RAR spends its last few days in East Timor under canvas at a transit camp on the site of the airport used by the Japanese in the Second World War.

BELOW LEFT: To avoid bringing noxious plants into Australia, every piece of equipment is cleaned before departure.

automatic SKS rifles), had passed through. The soldiers prepared an ambush in case the militia returned, and set up an observation post in a pigsty. With their night-vision equipment and trip flares set up, they were well prepared but knew that any confrontation would be a serious business. To add to their nerves, the wind set off a trip flare one night, and the next night a wandering horse triggered another. The post was manned for nine days, but nothing happened. Other sections progressively climbed the hill to relieve the first, but the militia did not come back that way.

At battalion headquarters there was frustration. The Australians were convinced that they could eventually catch up with the infiltrators, but they could not do it before they had left their area and entered the central sector, occupied by a Kenyan company. In the Interfet period, the Australians would have been able to pursue them, but under the UN they were restricted to their own area of operations. The Kenyans were successful in catching one of the militia near Atsabe, but not before the group had killed one person and

wounded another in a village. The rest of the group then withdrew south through the NZ area. For the local population, it was a frightening period. Afterwards, however, things settled down again.

### THE FUTURE

5/7 RAR has gone home, replaced by 6 RAR. The Australian presence in East Timor is likely to continue for several years. Apart from the infantry, there are several other Australian units which form part of the UNTAET Peacekeeping Force. These are mainly logistic units, such as the Force Logistic Support Group and the Battalion Support Group. In addition, nearly 80 Australians are members of UNTAET's civilian police, many of them in small groups around the island, working even more closely with the community than the army. Supervising all this is UNTAET itself, facing a vast task on many fronts in trying to rebuild civil society. That task will continue long after an improving security situation allows the infantry battalions to go home.



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