See the Road Well
SHAPING EAST TIMOR'S FRONTIER

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Shaping East Timor’s frontier

Neil Sugget
For Rebecca, Ben and Jemma
Initially, I set out to simply make a typed copy of my diary, interspersed with a few photos and documents. Something that family and friends could read if they were interested. A simple matter really. Just decipher my handwritten scrawls and a few weeks later it would be finished.

Not so easily done. As I got into it, I started to realise I had a lot to say about my time in Timor. I changed from simple storyteller to a person who realised that maybe East Timor had become old news in Australia as a new age of terrorism dominated the media. Maybe I could help people remember one of Australia’s closest neighbours.

Sari Mattila (at the time working in Customs’ media area) told me that the experience would interest others; it might be something that was worth publishing. I didn’t think so, but after some persistent encouragement, I thought I’d give it a go.

I had the stories but my written bumblings needed to be turned into English. Sari quickly found out that her promise to help meant more than she had bargained for. If we had known how much work was required I am not sure either of us would have started.

Although I went to East Timor as part of a team from Western Australia, soon after my return I found myself on the other side of the country, so I decided to write the story I remembered.

The stories would not exist if Adrian Dandeker, Rick Brook, Lorraine Otieno, Jeff Michael and Peter had not been there with me. I thank them for their efforts and I am sure some of the ‘I’ or ‘we’ in the stories was probably them. They have kindly agreed to allow me to use a few of their photographs.
Thanks also to the support team in Fremantle and Canberra who backed the deployment, particularly my boss Brian Hurrell, Alan Wilson, who set up the first seeds of our deployment, and Adam Campbell who supported us tirelessly.

There was also the other half of the deployment who trained with us before our departure and then took our place. Stan Davis, Louise Moore, Terry Davies, Phil Davis, Ron Dyer, Phil Taylor and Jenny Stokes all played vital roles.

During my time in Dili, I sometimes doodled cartoon strips that summed up my frustrations. It took the writing process for me to realise that I wasn’t much of a writer, but I had always known I couldn’t draw. Many thanks to Judy Stephens for cleverly turning my doodles into a fine comic strip. Her clever artwork helped me to recall some of the stories and although the structure of the book didn’t allow for its inclusion the artwork now hangs proudly on my wall.

Vlado Korenic developed some great initial cover design concepts. Thanks also to Jenny Robinson, who read the first manuscript for us despite the need for a few glasses of wine to enable her to understand my first effort. Also thanks to Margaret Brine, who gently assisted in gaining approval from my CEO.

The story wouldn’t exist without the East Timorese. I wish them well and thank them for their hospitality and understanding, particularly Cancio D’Oliveira and all those mentioned in this book.

Thanks again to Sari for the continuing nudges and behind the scenes work, such as editing, finding a publisher and the hours of playing with photographs and video.

My family lost a father and my mother a lifelong friend just three months before my deployment to East Timor. Many East Timorese also lost family and friends.

This book is dedicated to those who have passed away and, just as importantly, those who were left behind to carry on.
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Preface

The path to freedom and reconstruction is not an easy one. Many of the stories within this book demonstrate the frustration felt by our contingent as we tried to do our bit for the reconstruction of East Timor. Similarly, there were times when it was obvious that the East Timorese were finding it difficult to comprehend what sometimes appeared to be a slow-moving, unfeeling international program.

It was not uncommon for everybody to wonder what, if anything, was being achieved. I would be surprised if you don’t share their frustration or question some of the decision-making processes as you follow the progress of the mission.

Since my return from East Timor, I have shared other experiences and have had plenty of time to wonder for myself. The world has clearly changed since 2000. I hope that the few examples below may help you to better understand the environment in which the stories unfolded.

East Timor has been colonised or controlled by foreigners since the 1600s. Their new-found freedom is their first go at it for some time and they need time to adapt. They are still justifiably sensitive to any insinuation of foreign control. People working with or trying to assist the East Timorese need to avoid the development of a colonial ruler mentality. It is not always easy.

Although this book is primarily about the deployment of a team of Customs officers, the overpowering presence of the Peacekeeping Force (PKF) and its effect on everyday life in East Timor meant it would have been impossible to document our experiences without constant reference to them.
The difficult role faced by members of the PKF cannot be underestimated. It is never going to be easy to be a law enforcement officer and a soldier. Both groups exist to maintain the peace. The hard bit is that both groups normally operate in clearly defined and very separate environments.

I recall a discussion I had with a senior policeman who had trained many soldiers for policing duties on other peacekeeping missions. He related a story about a European regiment which, when being trained to deal with a civilian street riot, resolved the situation by shooting the crowd. When questioned about this inappropriate use of force, the soldiers explained that they had tried to calm the crowd. Unfortunately, the refusal of the crowd to obey their commands had in their minds created a threat that needed to be dispatched.

The policeman went on to say that the soldiers had completed their training and went on to perform with distinction; so well, in fact, that on their return home, their commanding officer wrote a letter to the policeman praising him for his efforts. He was grateful for the training that had enabled his men to complete their duties to such a high standard and, just as importantly, to all return home safely. The commanding officer’s final comment displayed the enormity of what had been expected of his men. He wrote that, although he was very grateful to the policeman, he would now need to spend the next two years turning his men into soldiers again.

Communication is always a major factor when teaching or assisting people. The opportunities for confusion are considerable when people receive direction in what is often their second or third language. Very often it is what the teacher perceives to be the simplest directions that cause the most consternation within the workplace or shared environment.

We were most successful at communicating with the trainees at the beginning of our deployment, when we were still trying to find our feet. With the passing of time, we became more familiar with one another and slipped into the jargon we use at home. Language difficulties are greatly increased by the use of relaxed off-the-cuff comments, sarcasm or simple attempts at
humour. The receiver hears the literal meaning of the statement, not the speaker’s true intention.

With hindsight, situations in which tension clearly developed could have been avoided if we had not fallen into our own version of English.

This was not just an issue for us. Sometimes the entire United Nations mission made the same mistakes. Maybe the ‘almost riot’ was a result of such failings.

In the past couple of years, the continuing Australian and East Timorese negotiations — or squabbles depending on your viewpoint — over oil and gas rights have, unfortunately, put a poor light on the current relationship between the two countries. Sea boundaries have never been any easy matter to resolve.

In 1994, the majority of the world’s nations ratified a convention that was intended to set a basis of international law to solve sea border and resource disputes, which began as soon as people started sailing the oceans of the world. The signing of UNCLOS, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, was the result of a mere 12 years of continual diplomacy and discussion.

Despite this intense effort, some participating nations, such as Canada and the United States of America (a major naval power), refused to ratify the convention, choosing to disagree with a group that now totals 192 nations.

The accomplishment of getting most nations of the world to agree to any rules at all on important issues of wealth and survival was a huge success in itself. Those who wrote the convention were faced with the varying agendas of countries of great economic diversity and histories. The developing nations of the world saw an opportunity to throw off the economic corruption of the past, which they believed was caused by colonialism.

Against this background and the potential wealth of the oil and gas fields, agreement between Australia and Timor-Leste will not be easy.

There were many times during our deployment when different groups or individuals accused others of making poor
decisions or of simply doing the wrong thing. We were not immune to such behaviour. Sometimes we were right, sometimes wrong, and just maybe there were occasions when everyone got it wrong.

I hope that, after reading this book, people departing on any similar quest will take the time to pause and remember that we don’t all think alike in this world. If we all shared common views then there wouldn’t be a need for rescue missions.
In September 1999, a storm exploded and fragmented the lives of the people in East Timor. In a short period of devastation, the lives of an untold number of people were turned upside down and severely shaken.

The East Timorese, through an election, were pursuing their independence with a degree of passion that Australians have never had to demonstrate. Unfortunately for the East Timorese, there was an opposition element that pursued its intentions with far more vigour. This opposition backed its argument with violence and unleashed devastation on a scale that many Australians at the time had not witnessed so close to home. East Timor and its people reeled in the face of this onslaught — fear blotting out the joy of independence.

Australian leaders reacted and eventually Australian soldiers led the International Force East Timor (Interfet) into the country. It was purely a rescue mission and, by November, some degree of calm had been restored. It was only after Interfet had settled the violence that we understood the level of destruction that had occurred. Stories of devastation and misery were numerous.

At home, we viewed the events with dismay and wondered how we could help. Unfortunately, wondering by itself does not bring solutions. The Christmas concert in 1999 for the Interfet troops inspired us to help, but most of us had little idea if there was any role we could play.

Other than being able to make donations of money and supplies, many of us, however much we wished, had little in the way of skills to offer.
Fortunately, for myself and 11 other Australian Customs Service officers, a call from out of the blue on 4 January 2000 provided an opportunity for us to try to help the East Timorese. The call to Customs came directly from the Chief of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). UNTAET sought the assistance of Australian Customs in creating a border service for the new nation.

I imagine many people will ask what Australian Customs officers could do to assist a country such as East Timor on its road to recovery.

A prime task of the UNTAET mission was to assist East Timor to develop as an independent nation in its own right.

An effective border service for any administration means that once the borders are secured, the administration can start to raise its own revenue through duties and taxes. Any nation, particularly one trying to find its way in the world, needs its own revenue source to convince investors and the UN that it can eventually become self-sustaining.

At this early stage, we saw part of our role as developing a civil service; one that would be able eventually to function without the support of the UN military force (or any subsequent East Timorese defence force).

To this end, throughout January 2000, we eagerly stationed ourselves in Fremantle Customs House and to prepare for a task that was still not clear. The lack of clarity about our task made it difficult to make plans. As it turned out, it was good training — the environment of uncertainty was to continue with us throughout our deployment. During our preparations, the deployment was cancelled and reinstated a number of times and, until we arrived in East Timor, we were not sure if we would ever get there.

Making preparations before we left Australia was challenging. Chasing advice was difficult as communications with East Timor were almost non-existent. Much of our time in Fremantle was taken up with securing basic equipment that would allow us to be self-sufficient on our arrival. There was some suggestion that we would be located near the land border, so we prepared ourselves to live in a remote area, which meant
hygiene lectures and first aid activities, and other specific training at Bindoon army training area in remote Western Australia.

With some degree of discomfort, we realised that, like many other Australians, we knew very little about the culture of our neighbour. A run on many of Perth’s bookshops quickly exhausted the supply of Tetum (East Timorese) and Indonesian-language packages, which we studied avidly.

When we arrived in East Timor in March 2000, we were overwhelmed by the Timorese people — they possessed a tremendous resilience of the type that often appears to be reserved for people who have suffered the most horrific adversity. It definitely made our pre-New Year concerns about the possible consequences of the millennium bug seem somewhat insignificant, if not a trifle ludicrous.

The East Timorese had taken a knockout punch, but, with some help and support, they were already starting the unenviable task of picking themselves up off the floor. Within their small communities, they were trying to take those first steps to reignite that small spark that had started their original march for independence.

The East Timorese are quite diverse and there are differing standards of living throughout the country. Theirs is very much a family-based society and it has many of the values of previous generations of Australians. The Catholic Church is a major force within the community, and, despite their departure in 1975, the Portuguese are still very popular in the rural areas of East Timor and are remembered with great affection. In the border regions, the architecture and cuisine is Portuguese.

The political situation within East Timor is a complex one and it would be a fool who believed everyone in a country has the same ambitions and desires for the future. Revolution and freedom are not just a simple matter of finding new leaders and moving forward. The plan for the new country needed to incorporate the various ideals from within the local population.

For this reason, it is important that the various agencies and governments that provide assistance do their utmost to understand the aspirations and desires of the people. During our
time in East Timor, this was one issue that constantly challenged us. The East Timorese always appreciated the assistance, but they did not know how to politely explain that sometimes we were trying to give them something they did not want.

It is important to acknowledge the continuing struggle that the population will have to wage for a long time. I believe that no matter how much physical assistance we provide, although necessary, it will be the East Timorese people's determination that will pull them through. The future of the East Timorese will be assured if they can maintain their positive and friendly demeanour. They are a quiet and calm people, but they can also be passionate if pushed too far.

Of course there were, and will be, many frustrating moments. Redeveloping a country after total destruction is never an easy task. In some of the following stories it will be apparent that all could not be achieved as quickly and smoothly as I (probably quite naively) would have liked. My team-mates and I were, at times, frustrated by the competing demands of our needs, the needs of the East Timorese and the needs of the UN.

In hindsight, many significant issues could have been dealt with too quickly as everyone set a harrowing pace to be seen to be getting things done and as the UN administration attempted to develop policy on the run, while trying to feed and clothe a population which was living under canvas.

This haste was understandable and many of the developments within the civil service, such as legal reform and legislation, were raced through to satisfy the desire for self-determination, freedom and to gain a sense of justice for the population. The negative results of this haste are now surfacing as the country finds it difficult to deal with the complexities of arresting and convicting people alleged to have played a role in the 1999 murders.

Our four-month deployment in East Timor was not just work experience. We all experienced the genuine warmth and some of the idiosyncrasies of the land and we got to view the character and behaviour of one of our nearest neighbours.

As Australians, I am sure we often saw the whole situation in a different light to many of the other foreign missions assisting
the UN. There was also some difficulty in deciding the pose that an international worker should assume. Mission workers should not have to live in squalor or struggle to pay their bills; after all, good people don't usually come cheap. Yet there remains a need for accountability that ensures people remember their true role.

As a team and as individuals, we experienced a huge array of emotions as we were exposed to the realities of the Timorese struggle. Hopefully, in the following chapters, I can convey some of the great deeds accomplished by many of the volunteers and other people serving in East Timor, as well as some of the incredible experiences that we encountered in our brief deployment, which sometimes seemed like a lifetime.

Throughout the book there are many examples of the physical and emotional degradation that left us in no doubt that the East Timorese have a long road ahead of them before they can achieve a peaceful independence. There are many issues to be resolved between neighbours who could have taken differing sides during the conflict. Trust takes many years to rebuild. A little easier but still difficult is the need to overcome the physical destruction of vital infrastructure.

I can only thank the East Timorese people, particularly the 180-plus new Border Service staff, who allowed us the opportunity to assist them, and who showed great patience as we sometimes clumsily, but always with good intentions, tried to give them a little piece of the future.

The network of roads that meander through the countryside are the vital link that holds the nation together. Behind every turn there seems to be some new danger, be it a washaway caused by a recent downpour, an oncoming busload of villagers or a small town divided by suspicions of militia sympathies or political differences.

Decisions about how to go about rebuilding will not always be clear, or easy.

When bidding someone a safe journey, the East Timorese have a phrase, ‘Haree Dalan Di’ak’. It means, literally, ‘Farewell, be safe and see the road well’.

East Timor’s journey to true independence has begun. The importance of seeing the road ahead has never been more significant.
Chapter 1

Arriving in Dili — a front-row seat

As we woke in Darwin on 6 March 2000, our desire to get to Dili soared. The mood of the group was a mix of apprehension and excitement. It was an apprehension that would stay with us until our purpose in East Timor became clear.

It was an extremely long morning. We weren’t flying out until 3pm.

Monday lunchtime arrived and we decided to leave early for the airport. We still had to cool our heels at the airport for another three hours, but at least we were on our way. The seemingly interminable wait was finally broken when our boarding call flashed across the departure monitor. In a blink, we ran down the stairs to board the UN C130 Hercules that awaited us on the tarmac.

During our deployment, our eagerness was the cause of a few blunders — dashing aboard the plane was our first.

We quickly glanced around the cabin and grabbed the front-row seats; there was more leg room up front and we were comfortable in the canvas seats. Surprisingly, we didn’t have to push anyone aside in our rush for the best spots. We settled in quickly — we had only 35 minutes to wait.

It wasn’t hard to identify the new chums on this flight. The other passengers, arriving casually late, held inside knowledge that we would have gladly paid for.
The humidity in the cabin was stifling. Mosquitoes and all their associated nasties were probably going to be the biggest threat to our health in East Timor. Consequently, we had kitted ourselves out in heavy, long cotton trousers, long-sleeve thick cotton shirts (in a straight-out-of-the-packet bright Customs blue) and large Taipan steel-capped boots. No mosquito or other yet-to-be-discovered bug was going to penetrate that outfit.

When your body is slowly melting onto the floor, 35 minutes is a long time. The boots worked well though. The hi-tech mesh, designed to allow airflow to the feet, proved perfectly adapted to allowing the pooling sweat to flow freely to the floor.

As others boarded, we noted that most ignored the front seats and moved quickly past us to the rear. The reason for this became clear when Rick stretched his size-12 boots and dislodged the curtain in front of him to reveal a glistening stainless steel toilet bowl. Too late now, but we all made a mental note for the future — sit down the back.

Eventually, lift-off brought cool relief. With it came the opportunity to lean back and think about what was to come.

There was little doubt that we were at the ‘we have no idea what we have let ourselves in for’ phase. While we had made every conceivable effort to plan and gather as much knowledge as possible, we were still flying into an environment that we could not have anticipated eight weeks earlier.

Since January, the on-again, off-again nature of the deployment, and the lack of any real guidance from Dili about our intended task, forced us to develop our own ideas and plans. Our training and preparation had focused on what we thought might be necessary. We literally made it up as we went along.

If the team had harboured any hopes of this situation improving on our arrival in Dili, these thoughts had quickly evaporated in the heat of Darwin after we met the Controller of the newly formed Border Service of East Timor (BSET — known as the Border Service).

Throughout the weekend, our new boss, who had flown into Darwin to meet us, regaled us with numerous stories of his past life and his vision for the Border Service. He confirmed that
the border was our destination. This placement, a still-tense area near the land border with West Timor, would occur as soon as we sorted out a few minor logistical matters. We would soon learn that ‘minor’ meant something completely different in our vocabulary.

It was clear grand plans were in the pipeline, but this roller-coaster approach to planning was going to be frustrating at times. It was, however, easy at first to get caught up in the dreams and aspirations of such an enthusiastic boss.

The exciting plans of the past weekend were put on the back burner as the aircraft climbed over the mountain range that forms the spine of Timor and finally, after all the anticipation, we descended towards the airport at Dili. For me, the sight of mountains and trees was a pleasant change from the flat red desert of my home in Port Hedland.

For most people, their arrival at Dili Airport set the scene for the rest of the visit. Walking off the aircraft, we were immediately grabbed and embraced by the humidity. Surprisingly, I had retained enough fluid to sweat one more time during the slow walk across the tarmac to the terminal. Accustomed as I was to Port Hedland’s 40-degree-plus heat, this humidity was something I had not experienced.

As we walked towards the terminal, a smattering of various military transports and helicopters were discharging soldiers and cargo. There was a large fuel dump at the far end of the runway. We could see Portuguese and Australian soldiers with dogs patrolling the airport perimeter. The realities of the recent hostilities dawned on us.

The airport had not been destroyed during the September razing of Dili, most probably due to the intrinsic value of the facility to those wanting to leave quickly and the timely intervention of Interfet. The passenger terminal building displayed the dilapidation of 25 years of inattention. The prohibition on direct travel into East Timor meant Dili had operated only as a domestic airport within Indonesia. At best, the facilities had been spartan before the recent events.

One or two amusing sights were on offer at the airport. The baggage handling facilities were basic but functional. The
tug being used by the RAAF ground crew to tow the baggage trolleys to and from the aircraft sticks in the memory.

The big white ‘UN’ painted on the bonnet of the vehicle clearly distinguished it as official equipment. It was the small things that made it stand out, such as the absence of doors, the missing body panels and the lack of a windscreen. It had either half a roof or half the roof was missing. The view of the tug and trolleys pitching and bucking along the tarmac was reminiscent of old cartoon cars with large balloon tyres swaying and flailing across the screen. I later found out that much of the bucking was due to the exaggerated unevenness of the sinking pavement.

The vehicle turned out to be one of many that had been stripped and gutted after the election. Someone had managed to put enough bits and pieces together to make a functional tug. It was a good example of the many improvisations made by Australian defence personnel that we saw throughout our deployment.

After entering the arrivals terminal, we met the New Zealand Customs contingent, which had arrived about four weeks earlier. They had been given the task of setting up customs and immigration processing at the airport. In the circumstances, they had achieved a lot. It was obvious that equipment was scarce but they were full of hope and told us that they were expecting to eventually get some basic paraphernalia such as baggage tables. The terminal itself lacked anything normally seen at airports around the world. There were no toilets, running water, seats, windows or electricity. There were, however, plenty of guns.

A highlight of the Kiwi efforts was the obvious presence of East Timorese Customs officers (Border Service staff) working with them. We were pleased to see the locals were included in a proactive way through early employment opportunities provided by the Border Service.

Having all previously worked at Australian airports, we were looking for a different experience so we weren’t too disappointed that this terminal was not to be our future workplace. We told our New Zealand work mates that we thought we were heading for the land border with West Timor.
They smiled. Whoever had suggested that had undoubtedly come from the school of creative planning. After all, Customs officers from Australia could be forgiven for not knowing anything about operating a land border. Maybe we had been specifically targeted so we wouldn’t be blinded by our previous experiences.

Once we had cleared the airport, we headed off to find our accommodation. The traffic in Dili itself was hectic. Dodging dogs, numerous military vehicles such as armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and Humvees that were far too wide for the roads, made our first taste of Dili life memorable. On our drive through the town centre we saw only two buildings standing in good order. One was a cathedral, the other the old parliament building now being used as UNTAET headquarters. The rest were fire-blackened, gutted buildings with piles of rubble spewing out of them.

Our temporary home, until we were relocated to the border, was to be the floating Hotel Olympia. The hotel was moored on the main town beach among the fish markets and food stalls opposite UNTAET headquarters. This was to be our first taste of real bureaucracy and a lesson in persistence.

I believe the hotel was chartered by UNTAET. There was simply no real alternative as very little in the way of buildings

*The floating Hotel Olympia.*
remained in the capital. Trying to book into the hotel was challenging. The Australian Mission had tried to make a booking before our arrival, as had our new boss at the Border Service, but to no avail. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise to us when we were told we didn’t have a booking and there were no rooms available.

We made an attempt to explain our booking efforts, but, to our surprise we were told it wasn’t possible to book beforehand anyway. Further discussion ensued. The general gist of the conversation was that as we hadn’t booked we couldn’t really expect a room and could we please sit in the corner.

The situation was eventually resolved with five of us finding ourselves in a minute overflow dormitory — Lorraine managed better with a shared room with a stranger. If Rick and I sat on the beds in our part of the dormitory, Adi was able to stand. If Adi wanted to stand and change his clothes while we were there, he was going to have to display the agility of a tree monkey. Peter and Jeff found solitude behind a bulkhead.

After accepting the conditions of our lodgings and cramming our gear into the few available spaces, it was off to the hotel lobby to absorb the atmosphere. Looking around in some awe at the proceedings, I concluded that Gene Roddenberry must have been on a UN mission when he was inspired to create the *Star Trek* chronicles. During my 40-minute wait near the entrance, at least 100 people of various nationalities presented themselves at the front desk. The cacophony of different languages and frenzied activity was quite entertaining.

The majority appeared to be military personnel. The scene reminded me of one of the remote interplanetary bars seen in *Star Trek*, where aliens from all walks of life mingled for refreshment and entertainment.

Costumes were many and varied, with a distinct military flavour. Not all fitted the orthodox Western template. One large powerful-looking gentleman had caught the mood of the moment. For him, it was almost-green fatigue trousers, 1970s Hawaiian-style shirt, brown sandals and a Heckler and Koch machine pistol slung over his right shoulder. I eagerly anticipated seeing his entire company march down the main boulevard.
It was soon obvious that weapons went everywhere with their owners. Maybe this should have been comforting for the local population and ourselves, but I must admit to some discomfort that night when I saw automatic weapons slung over the shoulders of people drinking full-strength beers in an outdoor bar.

With all these sights and sounds digested, our first day was rapidly coming to a close. We met the Kiwis again for a meal and mingled with our various new neighbours. We were introduced to the acting head of the UNTAET mission, who made it very clear that we were expected to get the border posts up and running. It was a priority to ensure civil controls began within the country as soon as possible.

We appeared to have a purpose now.
Chapter 2
Chitties, sights and sounds

Tuesday, our second day in East Timor, was a chance to settle in, explore our new environment and start UN check-in procedures. Little did we know that by the end of the day the words ‘Chitty Tuesday’ would be burned into our collective memories, to remain for the rest of our mission.

Before we could begin our work we had to be inducted into the UN. This was now our priority. A warning the previous night from our new friends suggested that this day could be a very long one. There was the obligatory paperwork to complete before we could become employees. To do that we had to drive to numerous locations around the town. We set off early.

One place we were to visit on many occasions was the site of the UN general administration offices. Previously a school, much of it had survived because it was the scene of the last stand by members of the United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor (UNAMET). The civilian UN police had been stationed in a compound secured by razor wire. It was here, at the beginning of the rampage immediately after the election, that the unarmed international police had protected international observers and other people who fled to the compound. The police had endured awful scenes of trauma, including incidents when pursued people tried to throw family members to safety over the razor-wire-topped barricades.

This was the same location where television news had shown film of people fleeing for their lives up the steep, dark inclines directly behind the compound. In daylight, as we
wandered around, it was difficult to imagine even a fit person scaling the wooded hillside in the daylight, never mind running up it at night.

The compound was not only the home for various administrative offices, but for stores, including, importantly, the bottled water supply. It was here that we learnt the difficulties of organising things through an administrative goliath — an administration that as well as providing aid was attempting to develop a new civil structure and feed its own burgeoning workforce.

Although our struggles in the next two days could never be equated to those that the East Timorese had recently endured, this compound was to be the site of many of our biggest frustrations.

The day was hot and sticky. Positioned as it was at the base of the mountain, the compound, with its collection of one- and two-storey stone and block buildings, allowed very little breeze to permeate. It was an area where movement had to be limited to essentials only. Once again, we enjoyed the sauna effect created by our thick uniforms.

The East Timorese seemed to be unaffected by the humidity, but people of every other nationality wore the obligatory uniform of sweat stains whenever they attempted to lift anything or engage in manual work.

Other than a few Sri Lankan police officers who wore a shirt similar to ours, our uniform was distinctive. It was clear that the bright blue of our new shirts would herald our arrival wherever we went. We attracted a fair degree of attention and, in a very short time, everybody knew who we were. As a marketing concept, this was definitely a coup. For anyone seeking anonymity it was not.

Our intention on arrival at the compound was simple: fill in some forms to establish our credentials, officially join the UN workforce, obtain a Border Service identity card and gain access to the vital bottled water supplies. The administration offices were staffed by an array of UN people from many countries. Other duties, such as security and general maintenance, were
allocated to East Timorese. With luck, we would quickly obtain our blue berets. We could then head off to the Border Services office located within the old parliament building, which was masquerading as the Civil Services office. This was not to be.

The induction and familiarisation process involved visiting various office sections carrying a document that had been issued by the personnel section. During the visits, a total of 11 specific signatures had to be obtained before the ‘check-in’ document could be returned to its provider. What ensued were probably the most frustrating two days any of us had ever endured. It was very late on Wednesday before we emerged with our induction forms duly completed.

Our progress was made difficult initially by our lack of awareness of who was who and where the different office suites were located within the facility. It wasn’t made easier by constantly being asked to come back later when the right person might be available — although definite times also seemed elusive.

As we slowly warmed to the process, we realised that we would need to visit each individual post numerous times before our personnel record would be fully signed by the correct people. Although it was still very early in our deployment, our earlier lesson — that we would need to be patient and persistent — was reinforced.

The fact that nothing could be requisitioned, collected, driven or moved in the UN without a signed ‘chitty’, made it an imperative to get our 11 signatures that day. Without a chitty we could achieve nothing! A correctly signed chitty could help to move the Earth and it did not have to be a complicated document. I remember being photographed by my team-mates enthusiastically waving a small four-by-four centimetre yellow ‘post it’ note. This note contained the necessary signature that would authorise our access to allowances to buy food in the future — or so we thought at the time.

At the end of the induction process we knew a lot of people and had made some new friends. We had also developed a slight reputation for ‘hanging in there’, eventually leaving the compound with a good supply of bottled water.
We did not succeed in being officially categorised for employment purposes at this point in time and this was to haunt us throughout our deployment. Much later in our deployment, we were placed in UN Civilian Police (CivPol) positions. For much of our deployment, however, we were told we were ‘special category’.

Our next mission was to obtain a UN driver’s licence. The UN transport yards, where we were tested for our driving licences, was fenced by an array of destroyed UNAMET vehicles. The airport baggage tug had probably been created from this pool of victims. Rows of vehicle shells lined the fence in various stages of collapse, rusting away as though they were in a wrecking yard.

The people at the testing facility were extremely helpful. The environment there was nothing like what we had experienced at the administration buildings. Reading the driving brochure, I learnt an important Dili road rule — honking the horn was considered impolite. I successfully negotiated a four-wheel drive around the crowded streets surrounding the central Dili market, making me the proud owner of a new driver’s licence.

With our drivers’ licences in hand, we decided a quick return to the market for supplies was a good idea. Going back to the administration offices for a replacement identity card with an imprint of our authority to drive did not enthuse us.

Nothing could be achieved without the vital chitty.
The marketplace was a real shanty-type location, built close to the soccer stadium and positioned on a five-way intersection. Traffic at this circular hub was meant to travel clockwise. It didn’t.

Like most markets, it had a real buzz about it. Many of the tenants appeared to live within the stalls. The stalls were all family affairs and everyone was extremely polite and friendly. The young children eagerly assisted, joked and laughed, and continually tried to shake our hands.

Despite the number of stalls, there was not a wide range of items for sale. It was mainly fresh produce and small essentials such as rubber thongs, toothpaste and soap. Rice appeared to be the basic staple and was available at most stalls, as were coffee beans. We soon discovered that rice and coffee were of a very high quality in East Timor and were the main cash crops of the region. Near the land border, the Maliana district was known as the rice bowl of East Timor.

While the majority of stalls were set up to supply the East Timorese, the small stalls on the streets surrounding the market were definitely placed with foreign workers’ interests in mind. These stalls held what appeared to be a never-ending supply of cartons of beer. Beer was definitely a part of life for the East Timorese and the supply of what appeared to be very old stock
— stock that continued to brew daily in the burning sun — gave locals an opportunity to extract some of that foreign income.

The source of these beer supplies was a bit of a mystery. The quantity available seemed to outstrip known supplies that had arrived since the Interfet force had secured the countryside. The first ships into the port had carried essentials such as food, water, tarpaulins and building supplies. The age and relative low price of the beer suggested another source.

We visited the market many times during our deployment. It was a good source of fruit, vegetables and rice. As time went by, it was also a window into how trade was developing within the country. For customs officers, it provided a sound guide to the types and quantities of goods that were starting to be smuggled across the border from West Timor. It was not too long before a well-developed supply line from Indonesia became a major issue for the newly developing Border Service and the communities living along the land border.

Despite the ever-increasing range of supplies that became available during our deployment, the market stalls themselves never really developed. The original small, metal-framed structures covered by United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) tarpaulins and broken corrugated iron sheeting remained a constant threat to the head of any unwary soul more than five feet tall.

After leaving the market area, we manoeuvred our vehicle back into the chaos of the Dili traffic. The congestion on the roads gave us the perfect opportunity to take in our surroundings — everyone but the driver, of course! We quickly realised that the damage we had seen on the main road from the airport was no aberration.

Dili was a mess. Only about three major buildings in the city’s commercial centre appeared to still have their original roof. Unfortunately, any stories we had heard about the looting and burning of East Timor had been understated. We were absolutely bewildered by the scale of the destruction.

Standing in the rubble was the old parliament building — now being used for UNTAET civil services and government —
a cathedral, the port facilities and the airport. They were the few survivors, most likely due to the determined efforts by Interfet to secure them.

Another survivor was the huge statue of Jesus overlooking Dili from a small mountain to the east of the city. It was built in the 1970s, a symbol of the beliefs of many within the population. My initial thought was that the people who organised this mass destruction had shown some respect for the religious icons of the East Timorese by leaving this statue untouched. This was quashed on further exploration of Dili and later on in the remote border regions. Charred and burnt churches were the funeral pyres for people who did not survive the post-election rampage.

The destruction seemed to have been an organised and planned operation. Whether it was a large administration building, a school or a house, the pattern was the same. Every conceivably useful removable item had been taken, including corrugated roofs, windows and door frames. We were told that buildings had been systematically stripped and the booty loaded onto trucks. The buildings were then torched, leaving previously whitewashed walls and cement floors blackened. Broken wall and floor tiles littered the surrounding streets and laneways. This scene was replicated in every street, whether it was the central commerce centre or the small back lanes.

Some city buildings had been subjected to more concerted destructive efforts than others. The majority of these could never be repaired as they had been structurally weakened to the point that they wouldn’t be able to support any weight. A prime example was a previously grand hotel in Dili. We were told on numerous occasions that this hotel had been burnt and gutted using the city’s firefighting equipment. The local fire engine had its water tanks filled with diesel and that was pumped onto the floors via the fire hoses. The hotel was then set alight.

One area of housing appeared to have remained mostly unscathed — a beachfront suburb being used as the diplomatic residential area for the foreign missions. Another outstanding surviving monument was the Australian Mission building. This was on the road into Dili from the airport. It was a building that
had probably been quite prominent even before the razing of its neighbours.

Surprisingly, despite the disaster, it was noticeable that the East Timorese were already making considerable efforts to regain a semblance of normality.

By the time we arrived in East Timor, many people had managed to return to their houses, or at least to someone else’s house. For many families and their few remaining possessions, protection from the elements came mostly from fire-blackened walls and temporary roofs made of large blue and white UNHCR tarpaulins. Almost every roof in town had one.

Attempts to clean the city streets were being made. The rubble that had spewed across the roads was in many places being piled up along the pavement. These piles of shattered tiles and pieces of plaster, torn plumbing and crushed power boxes remained in situ for a long time. The priority was finding accommodation for the population — the removal of rubble was a long-term proposition.

Later, when we ventured out into the countryside, we found out that the entire nation was in the same condition.
Chapter 3
Whose home is it?

Now that we were becoming familiar with the local environment, we were looking forward to getting into our roles assisting the development of the Border Service. But before we could throw ourselves into this we had one more obstacle to clear. We had to find more restful lodgings if we were to maintain the energy levels that would be needed for the work ahead of us. The search was on.

We had been living in the floating hotel for three nights and, during the previous evenings, a litany of frustrating issues had plagued us. We were still sleeping in the overflow dormitory, but now there were 12 in the same tiny room. Each of us had a space the size of a small fridge. The different habits of people are usually easy to accept, but in this environment it was not possible to accept all of them. We seemed to be sharing our small space with hacking coughs, raging fevers and a few other hygiene issues. We all agreed on one thing — we had to get out.

Our thoughts were further confirmed on the way to dinner one evening. Adi and I tried to lodge the group’s laundry at the reception area as the others went on ahead. Lodgment was refused. Apparently our dormitory was restricted to one small laundry bag. Trying to explain that it didn’t seem like sound business practice had little impact and we were sent on our way with our dirty washing.

During these early days of working with the East Timorese in Dili, our exposure to their lifestyle and a growing knowledge of their difficulties sometimes created confusion in us about the right or wrong thing to do. Our search for new accommodation
was an example of our difficulty to fully understand the situation in which we were immersed.

The word from many people was that there were advantages in finding private accommodation. One of the new East Timorese officers told us that it was common practice for UN personnel to rent homes from the Timorese at a very low cost. During a lunch break, he took us to inspect a house that belonged to his cousin. The drive took us down the main road, along the Comoro River delta towards the beach, then finally down a very narrow and debris-strewn lane. It was mosquito city. We discovered later that the delta was the dengue fever capital of Dili, with a little bit of malaria thrown in for good measure.

It was surprising how many houses were hidden away in the area. The secluded lanes had once been a haven for very neat compact houses, but this relative isolation had failed to protect them.

The house we saw had the standard look — no roof except for a UNHCR tarpaulin. The walls were solid and, with a little work and money spent on flywire and doors, it could have been an attractive proposition. Although it was tempting, the lack of easy access to Dili made it difficult. Also, we were confident that we would be leaving Dili for the border soon.

The rent was going to be very low, but inquiries about the current occupants made our rejection of the proposal easy. 'Not a problem,' our new mate said. The seven family members were simply going to pack up and move two houses up the lane to share an even smaller home with their relatives. One count suggested that there would be 15 people in the second house. There was no running water either. We weren't comfortable accepting the offer and declined. From their expressions, it was difficult to tell whether the first family was disappointed or relieved. Some people claimed that foreign rentals were of great assistance to the locals. This was obviously not a long-term solution.

That night, as we pondered further evenings on the floating hotel, our luck changed. Peter and Jeff came home to excitedly proclaim that they had engineered an escape from the
dreaded dormitory. Amusingly, the next morning, as we gave our notice to leave, we received an offer of some recently vacated rooms. Our reply was a polite ‘Adieu!’

Home would now be across the road from the port, within walking distance of the UNTAET Civil Services office and the old Customs House, which was being refurbished. The Darwin-based owner of our new accommodation had created a varied business, renting cars and providing accommodation. It was primarily a car rental company. For hire were 1970s Holden Toranas, 1980s Mitsubishi Colts and very old army Land Rovers from Brunei.

The accommodation consisted of three rows of old mining-camp transportable huts (dongas) placed within the grounds of a church. There were also a couple of refrigerated shipping containers, one of which was a shop. The shop, complete with a glass sliding door, was fast becoming a regular stop for those in search of imported food and alcohol.

The rooms were basic — a double bunk, small cupboard and a power socket — but at least we could walk around inside, and outside there was grass on the ground. The rooms also came with gaping mosquito access points. Screwed up newspapers used as gap-filler solved the problem.

The church itself was a burnt-out shell that was beyond repair. The main hall had fallen in. At the back was a large workshop that contained the rusted remnants of five or six very large irreplaceable printing machines. These had been too heavy to loot, but not too heavy to destroy.

The Catholic Church had leased the site to the businessman for an extended term. Everyone was a winner on this one. The church was raising money for future rebuilding work, we had accommodation and many East Timorese were employed to run the business, including security staff, cleaners, shop staff, labourers and car washers.

We thought a good meal would be a perfect forerunner to our first night in our new home. This was an evening in which we were once again confronted with home truths that showed that our own perceived difficulties were relatively trivial.
During the day a little restaurant on the main road into town had attracted our interest. It was a restored house. Reports around town were of a good Timorese-style meal there. It turned out to be a fine evening away from the crowd near the Dili Hotel, with a shared platter of food comprising a large tuna, heaps of vegetables and the ever-present chips. The meal was supplemented by cold cans of beer. They tasted suspiciously like they could have been bought from the piles outside the Dili markets, but they were very cold!

Just as we were finishing our meal we noticed one of our East Timorese work mates enter the house and start flirting with the chef and her waitresses. Fully aware that we were interrupting his fun, we waved him over for a friendly chat. Too many questions again.

The restaurant was his family home. Until recently it had simply been a house but it had been rebuilt as a combined restaurant and home enabling the family to earn some income. His uncle had been murdered in the front yard when the house had been burnt down in September. All of this was told in a matter-of-fact way — it was typical of the stoicism we observed constantly. It was a sharp reminder of what this was all about.

Too difficult to take, irreplaceable printing presses were smashed.
While searching for our new home we were also settling into our new jobs. We were the latest additions to the Border Service. During those hectic first few days, we met other international members of the group as well as the recently employed East Timorese. The next few days clearly established in our minds the enormity of the challenge ahead.

Ever since people began drawing lines between lands and claimed them as their own, customs or similar border controls have existed in some form. The new East Timor needed to develop a customs organisation from the ground up.

Customs and immigration agencies in East Timor existed in the Portuguese administration before 1975, and were then absorbed into the Indonesian services. A military boundary had been maintained at the old land border but no customs services had been required. International visitors to East Timor travelled from West Timor, usually flying into Kupang on the western tip of the island. Customs and immigration officers had very little role within East Timor itself. Although scrutinised closely by the military, people entered the ‘province’ of East Timor from other parts of Indonesia as domestic travellers.

Initial plans for the Border Service were to employ East Timorese who had worked in the Indonesian Customs and Immigration services, and to develop a structure around them. In time, new people from other backgrounds would be employed and trained as the organisation grew.
The first East Timorese employed had a variety of experience and backgrounds. Some had been senior officers during the Portuguese administration. Others had been in the Indonesian Customs service, attended the Customs Academy in Bali and worked at Denpasar Airport before the election. Some aspects of the Customs and Immigration service’s anti-smuggling roles within Indonesia had been akin to military operations. One person, who was destined to be a future leader of the East Timorese service, told us stories of parachuting into remote locations on customs operations. Some of the older hands felt that this style of service was not just in the past, but should continue in the future. UNTAET’s intentions were not for a paramilitary-style border service.

The UN had created a two-stream organisation. The Border Control Unit, consisting of international officers, of which we were a part, was to develop the organisation. The second group, the Border Service Unit, consisted of East Timorese officers who would become the permanent members. They would be trained to assume full control of the organisation — they were the future.

Lacking previous UN experience, we took some time to understand the budgetary nuances of the system. The Border Control Unit was funded directly from UNTAET. In most cases, if we followed requisition and approval protocols, equipment and resources for the unit became available. Obtaining equipment or allowances for the Border Service officers was more complex. Understandably, the Border Service needed to be developed as a viable public service, which the future East Timorese government would be able to afford in the years to come.

This was a prudent proposal, but during our deployment it caused difficulties, not the least being the very different standards applied to the East Timorese compared with those of the international workers in UNTAET itself. This was most obvious in the remuneration for services and living conditions. In such an environment, it is very easy for people to focus on their own needs, forgetting that they are there to assist wherever possible — not to enrich themselves. I was proud that my fellow
contingent members made a genuine effort to try to understand the issues and assist the needs of the East Timorese. For them, it was a personal matter.

The Border Control Unit was an interesting mix of people. The assembled cast included a range of people with experience in customs, immigration or similar. There was a policy officer from Mozambique, a Nepalese tariff expert, a Thai, a Burmese and a French-Canadian immigration officer. These people were UN personnel who had seen service in many other missions. On our arrival, the unit was commanded by an Australian Controller-General — an old customs term equating to a Chief Executive Officer — who had almost unrestricted power in creating the initial Border Service.

During the early days, we were advised that the Portuguese Government had promised a dozen customs and immigration officers to assist the cause. We were told they would arrive in three days. This advice became the standing joke between the five New Zealand customs officers and us, especially when things became difficult and we craved further assistance.

They did eventually arrive to join the fray, but by that time the catch cry, ‘The Portuguese are coming’, was well entrenched. They turned out to be fun-loving and pleasant people with whom we got on very well.

In our first days on the job we asked how many East Timorese officers were employed in the service. After a few bewildered glances around the room, somebody remarked, ‘It is indeterminate at the current time.’ There is no doubt that the records were available, but things were moving so swiftly that the answers to such simple questions required daily review.

One of the success stories of the Border Service was its genuine effort to be a leader in the employment of East Timorese people. This might not sound like a big deal as most observers would expect it to be the norm. Casual observation of many of the other UN units, however, as well as many aid agencies, revealed that the high ratio of East Timorese to internationals within the Border Service was a highlight within the mission. The technical skills required initially by other services were not
found as readily in the local population, but the Border Service ensured the employment of East Timorese remained a priority.

The East Timorese within the service were a happy and friendly group of people. As we got to know them, they began to reveal some of the horrors they and their relatives had endured. Their relaxed and happy exteriors hid the real trauma that was usually just glossed over. They embraced the UN personnel as people providing them with an opportunity for a better future. They were rapt just to have a job.

Motivation for us was easy. The East Timorese officers were extremely proud that they were part of the creation of their new country. They embraced everyone that offered them assistance and opportunity. They constantly expressed to us their gratitude for helping them and their country. One of our greatest joys was to see them bursting with pride as they graduated from each of their training courses. For them, it was not just a job, they were helping to build their country; an attitude that they would hopefully pass onto people working with them in the future.

Our workplace, the Border Service Customs House, was a little corner in the old parliament building auditorium. The sections at the front of the main auditorium housed the UN Head of Mission and all the associated hierarchy.

Working from this building provided us with a valuable insight into the political atmosphere of Dili. Being in the city centre, and the site of the temporary government, it was a natural spot for people to congregate — the unemployed, those seeking assistance, or those just looking for a place to pass the time. There were changes of mood among the East Timorese during our deployment and it was here where we witnessed the changing focus and sometimes frustration among the population.

The building itself provided an interesting and bustling environment. It was shared with the water department, the civil planning department, civil aviation and almost every other civil service that was being created.

Many people within these departments seemed to be working to a well-practised plan, most particularly the water department. For some time we had observed a group of Japanese
beavering away at their computers with few breaks and with the work ethic made famous in their country. All our efforts to communicate and elicit a hello had been ignored and we were intrigued as to their task. We eventually managed to break through the secrecy to discover that they were from JICA, a Japanese aid agency. They were engineers redesigning an entire water system for Dili. We were impressed.

Almost nothing could stop the frenzied activity within this administrative precinct, except the arrival of peaceful Sunday afternoons.

It was still being claimed that we would be sent to the land border, but a couple of factors made us think this would not be any time soon. The commander of the PKF responsible for the security of the border area advised us that we would be welcome there once a small militia problem was dealt with. Preparations for the relocation were also a long way behind schedule. A lot of effort had to be expended before work at the border could begin. The general talk around the UN headquarters was that we would be deployed within a week. We didn’t think that was realistic.

In the meantime, there were plenty of tasks to complete, including the creation of a revenue collection system and the continuing training of staff. There was also a need for further exploration of the island itself to determine what was needed to establish border posts. This would include exploration of the western land border as well as the secluded coves and bays at the eastern end of the island. This last task sounded good to us, with plenty of adventure in the offing.

For the time being, however, the priority was the creation of a system to collect customs duties. East Timor did not have a tax system or revenue collection means. The administration needed to establish a revenue income separate from UN funding. Initially, the simplest way to achieve this would be to tax imports, but before this could occur there needed to be some degree of control over imported goods. That was where we were to come in.

Preparation of initial legislation for the transitional administration phase was paramount. These legal rulings, known as UN directives, were required to establish formal power for the
customs and immigration functions. Policies and guidelines for the officers in the field also needed to be written. This was the dull stuff. No one had come this far to write policies, but it had to be done. Establishing a diplomatic relationship with the Indonesian authorities before any land border posts could begin functioning was also essential.

We were told that the UNTAET plan for East Timor was based on the general plan for the reconstruction of Kosovo. Replicating the plan in East Timor overlooked the fact that there had previously been a Customs Service in Kosovo, so in that case it had been just a matter of repairing the old one. There was no such base in East Timor to redevelop. When it finally hit home that we were to be the creators, not just people to complete assigned tasks, our performance stepped up another notch. It was a huge opportunity for us, but it did mean we had wasted valuable time. We had a lot to do.

We also had to establish a formal customs presence at the now functioning port. The first voyage of the MV Patricia Ann Hotung to bring people home by sea from camps near Kupang, in the western part of West Timor, was to be made on 9 March 2000, directly into Dili Harbour.
As the post-election violence had swept the country many people had fled across the border to West Timor. Some had been forced to leave by the militia — while many had chosen to leave. Literally tens of thousands of East Timorese were living across the border in refugee camps. Many wanted to come home but didn't know how. Some were waiting to see what happened to those who returned. Many others weren't free to leave.

These displaced people were going to test the mettle of the transitional authority. UNTAET wanted these people to come home. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR were contracted to facilitate this process. There were huge logistical problems to overcome, not the least of which was the need to maintain security in the new nation.

The task of bringing people home highlighted the competing agendas and aims of various organisations — all tasked with assisting the rebuilding phase. There was no right or wrong when it came to the way these arrangements were organised. During the next few days it became obvious to us that the move from war zone to civilian normality would take time and a lot of compromise.

Refugees had already been returning to East Timor since Interfet had taken control of the country. Most refugees had walked or returned by truck in small groups and carried few possessions. The old survey ship, *MV Patricia Ann Hotung*,
Refugee vessel — homecoming

previously seen in Australia as the *HMAS Moresby*, was now going to be used in an effort to transfer larger numbers of people directly into Dili by sea.

To demonstrate that civilian authority was alive and well, we were instructed to process the first voyage of the *MV Patricia Ann Hotung* with its 386 passengers arriving the next day, in an orderly way. We were going to be stretched. Our support was 16 East Timorese staff who had not yet been trained.

A time of high security, during which any movement from West Timor was treated with great caution, was not a good time to be lobbing on Dili wharf with all your life’s possessions and an expectation of getting home early. All the elements of an awful day awaited these first arrivals: a dilapidated wharf with few amenities, a Border Service conducting its first major task, plus stifling heat and humidity.

The afternoon before the arrival, we headed down to the wharf to organise a system that would allow passengers to disembark and be processed quickly. They could then be guided onto waiting buses and driven to overnight camps before returning home. It all sounded quite simple: passenger numbers similar to a jumbo jet, no passports to examine, no quarantine inspections, just a straightforward baggage search and on your way thanks.

We knew as soon as we saw the amenities that things would not be so straightforward.

The wharf area was fine and there was a passenger hall. The Harbour Master was cooperative and helped us to put equipment in place. It wasn’t long before two rows of welded chairs had been placed as barriers to delineate the arrival and baggage search areas. A few metres of plastic link chain proved useful to set up an inward channel so people leaving the boat knew where to enter.

There was not much more to organise. We couldn’t imagine any real difficulties because the lack of equipment would make it a simple process. Setting up had been a little quicker than we had planned so we decided to clean up the old packing crates and steel strapping that littered the floor. An hour of sweeping
and our new arrival hall was finished. So were we. The humidity in the hall was oppressive. A search for some refreshments revealed that there was no water or toilets at all on this part of the wharf. No electricity either.

As we climbed out of the windows and bade the Harbour Master farewell, he promised that the keys to the front door of the hall would be found before morning. We met the captain of a Portuguese army unit coming in as we were leaving. The Portuguese Army held responsibility for the security of Dili. The captain told us that he and his men would be there the next day to help out and to ensure nothing went wrong.

It was probably 35 degrees Celsius when we arrived at 6.30am for an 8am berthing. The Portuguese captain was true to his word and 30-plus soldiers surrounded the area we were to work in. Everyone had their own water supply, but there was nothing for the passengers.

The IOM representatives requested a quick and friendly process. We indicated that our responsibility was to ensure that everyone was assessed properly and that we would search only those we had to.

The ship sailed in about 8.30am with most of the 386 people leaning hopefully, though apprehensively, over the rails. The key to the front door had not appeared and the huge chains required an acetylene torch. Someone went to get one. It was easier to keep everyone on the ship until all the baggage was landed on the wharf. This would happen once the promised forklift arrived.

Forty-five minutes later, a human chain of local labourers began to pass the bags, crates, tins and sacks of rice up from the ship’s hold, down the gangway and across the wharf, where it was deposited outside the hall. Everyone was eager to start the processing but possessions could be searched only with the owner present. The baggage had been loaded without any planning and subsequently the whole lot had to be unloaded before it could be identified by the individual owners.

The labourers were outstanding and eventually we were ready to bring 20 people off the vessel. First down the gangway
was a very old woman who teetered alarmingly at the base of the steps. Watching her climb over the rows of goods strewn along the wharf gave us an uncomfortable feeling. One sack of rice in row one, an old box in row two and a battered suitcase 50 metres away was also hers. She didn’t think the chicken tied to her suitcase was hers but offered to go back on board and check with her grandson just in case.

We were beginning to get things rolling when a few unexpected finds occurred. We had been collecting a vast array of swords, daggers and knives that had been disassembled and hidden within the baggage. Some of the aid workers argued heatedly about the seizure of such items. They claimed that in a basic agricultural society a sword or machete was a vital farm tool and we would ruin the owner’s chance of survival if we confiscated them. They were possibly right, but these swords had been carefully taken apart and deliberately hidden. We had heard some horror stories about the use of swords in September and we were not going to let them onto the street.

A little later it got worse. Two officers searching a sack of rice found a hard object. Emptying the sack revealed a grenade. A few more followed and it appeared that we would need to increase the searches. The Portuguese had responsibility for removing any munitions and became concerned at the new find.
The friendly customs approach was being overtaken by security concerns.

A couple of hand-held metal detectors were produced and handed to the Portuguese. The numerous rice sacks could now be searched quickly. A wave over four bags resulted in four strong beeps. The sacks were eagerly upturned on the wharf to reveal a rusty metal scoop inside each sack. Technology doesn’t always help in such environments. Every sack for the rest of the day beeped. We guessed the beeps were tin cups but could not take the risk.

The day in the sun dragged on. It was hot and humid enough for us to see even the East Timorese sweating. There were many people standing around in the hot sun waiting to eat, drink and rest, or just to get onto the buses. The IOM officials were getting restless and wanted it all finished. They thought if word got back to Kupang about the long day on the wharf it might discourage other people from returning.

We eventually got inside the hall and some of the baggage was cleared in the shade. The East Timorese officers threw themselves into the search and found numerous items of militia paraphernalia. It was interesting to see how much military clothing was among the gear. Once again, aid workers pointed out that such clothing was part of life in the community and

*The East Timorese start work.*
should be left in the bags. Something told us that anyone wearing Indonesian army surplus fatigues or red militia T-shirts in the streets or towns could cause a situation no one desired. Like the weapons, the gear was retained.

The final passengers boarded their buses six and a half hours later. It had been a difficult day for them. Difficult for everyone. The whole exercise didn’t really fit in with the promised easy process. We knew we needed a better plan before the next boat arrived.

Before our day was finished we had to conduct a sweep of the vessel. Many more swords and knives were found abandoned. One of the workers smiled. He told us many weapons had been dumped over the side as the passengers watched our search on the wharf. In the circumstances, we accepted that as a win.

There were many more voyages to come. Despite the difficulties of the day, we were paraded before the hierarchy. The weapon seizures gave the administration an opportunity to publicise an effective border service. We left the pat on the back knowing that there were 500 people turning up in two days’ time.

In the next two days, many meetings were held between all interested parties. Some wanted speed, some tighter security and some wanted the passengers to simply walk off the vessel and go home. We were told that we were to take responsibility for the process. All agreed to do their best to help out and we met at the ship on the morning of 11 March with a very cooperative feeling.

The changes were noticeable. A forklift was provided. The Portuguese sent three times as many men as before. There was water for everyone and some port-a-loos. The arrivals hall was brimming with chairs and everyone in the Border Service had a pocket knife. This time we wouldn’t have to use seized swords to open the cartons.

Considering the passenger numbers increased by about 25 per cent from the previous vessel, we managed to streamline the process into a nine-hour experience. With the increase in passengers came an increase in possessions. This, along with other teething problems that would need ironing out, gave rise to more
frustration — directions to put name tags on the baggage and load it in an orderly manner had not filtered through. The labourers still had to work their muscles. The new forklift was able to carry the gear across the wharf, but it wouldn’t fit through the gate into the hall. The water was a godsend and the queue to the port-a-loos was proof of their worth. Despite the difficulties, the day went far better than the first.

Many more families came this time. We didn’t find any grenades and there were fewer weapons, but there was so much more to search. The average family had boxes and suitcases of clothing, three to four rice sacks with the complementary tin cup that beeped and numerous pots and pans. They also had flocks of chickens tethered to their possessions. Once again, the sun and humidity were unrelenting. Many of the chickens quit their squawking fairly early in the day and collapsed almost motionless in the constant bustle.

The interesting twist this time was that the East Timorese officers were showing far more interest in the passengers. There seemed to be some concern among them that former militia members were trying to sneak back to Dili and they were making every effort to identify and report them to CivPol.

The East Timorese were more boisterous than us when it came to the care of items that they thought were suspicious, causing some concern for the aid workers observing some of their activities. To us, it highlighted some of the differences between their culture and our own.

One officer who had previously worked with customs became suspicious of a kapok-filled mattress belonging to a person he suspected of being militia. Despite the mattress being only three centimetres thick, he was sure it was full of weapons or contraband. In an attempt to find illicit goods, the item was crushed, jumped on and finally shredded with a knife.

Nothing was found and it was casually cast aside. The passenger was led away to the CivPol officers for further questioning. At the end of the day, I tried to explain why such a thorough search of that particular item was not necessary. My explanation served only to confuse the group. Their reaction gave us more insight and was added to the list of training issues.
The fallout from the second voyage led to many more meetings and refinements and things continued to improve. There were a few gems from the meetings. One suggestion was to speed up the process by taking some portable conveyor systems and X-ray machines to the wharf. The lack of roofs, windows and little luxuries such as electricity in the port were pinpointed as the reason for the lack of these more modern search techniques.

During the next few arrivals, I spent most of my time fielding advice and suggestions from supervisors of newly appearing aid agencies. The port workers and the IOM people were continuing to find better ways to do things in the circumstances, just as we were.

As the voyages continued, the people seemed to be returning with more and more possessions. These items included motorcycles, large furniture items and stores in quantities that suggested the owners were about to open a shop. These passengers had probably left East Timor before the devastation and looting occurred. They could have read the signs and left early with their family and possessions, or they could have had inside knowledge.

There were still the sorrowful sights, one being the growing evidence of young children returning with the glazed milky eyes caused by malnutrition.

Although we were finished with the *MV Patricia Ann Hotung* when we moved to the border, we continued to encounter groups of refugees as they returned to East Timor in IOM truck convoys or at the huge family reunions at the border at Batugade.
Chapter 6
Hera Port

After the heat and unpleasantness of the refugee vessels we were looking for an escape. We had been told of the beautiful countryside over the mountains. After much hinting, supported by blatant suggestion, we were assigned to investigate reports of rampant smuggling near the port of Hera. Reports of suspicious activities had for some time been filtering in from the small port to the north. We were off to find the truth. Traversing the mountain roads that surrounded Dili, we saw some of the stark realities of the battle ahead. Not battles the Border Service would endure, but the East Timorese themselves.

At that time of the year the mountain peaks surrounding Dili were obscured beneath heavy masses of white cloud. Life on the mountain seemed totally divorced from that in the city below.

We took one of the East Timorese officers as our guide and headed up the northern route over the mountains towards Hera. The road over the mountains began its lazy climb in the suburbs of Dili. After leaving the suburbs, the road thinned to a series of narrow, winding steep inclines, interspersed with small plateaus. It was reasonably well sealed and curved its way through villages that became smaller and less modern the further we ventured towards the misty peaks.

The few old Holdens and Indonesian Kujangs on the road seemed to traverse the lower inclines fairly easily. It was a different matter when they attempted to conquer the last 100 metres of an incline. We learnt quickly not to tailgate the Kujangs as they spewed columns of black soot in their attempts to conquer each rise.
Small villages and individual houses were built near paddies or coffee crops, which were dispersed along the road at regular intervals. The gradient of the ground made it suitable only for small-scale cultivation.

As we gained altitude, the threat of wash-outs lurked behind blind bends forcing us to slow dramatically. Any foolhardy charge up the mountains at this point would only have increased the potential for a quick, unfettered return to the suburbs below, or an untimely end in a muddy ravine.

It was still early days of discovery for us in the mountains. Metres of videotape were being consumed to film every twist and turn of our travels. Any small landslide, newly discovered village or trucks careering down the mountain were film opportunities. Some unfortunate colleague back in Fremantle was going to have to edit everything sent home. By the middle of our deployment, we received an earnest plea for no further road vision. It seemed we were rapidly creating the world’s longest and most boring road movie.

As we made our way onto a plateau halfway up the mountains, we passed two or three lumbering white IOM trucks loaded with an assortment of possessions. Soon after, we were forced to slow as we entered a small village that appeared deserted. We could see a convoy of buses and more of the white trucks up ahead. They were approaching a larger village and had started to bunch together. The drivers seemed to be driving more carefully than we had come to expect.

The village was built around a sweeping curve, starting as a small scattering of huts along both sides. The number of small fruit and vegetable stands, racks of drying bananas and huts increased until they blended into a concentrated array of small houses and huts.

A hint that something was unusual came as we entered the bend to see the convoy looming ahead of us. We could not see around the curve but the ruckus we could hear ahead was unnerving. The trucks and buses had closed ranks like a wagon train as they prepared to pass through the village. We were now part of this convoy with the trucks we had passed closing in from behind.
We slowed apprehensively, only to get an elongated blast of air horns from the driver of a truck now very close to our rear. Our decision to veer left swiftly proved wise as an IOM truck sped past.

The road ahead was lined with villagers. These people were not waving to the drivers. They were chanting and screaming and showering the convoy with rocks and anything else that could be hurled as missiles.

The convoy pushed through the village as the stones and abuse continued. The truck in front of us veered around two buses that had slowed to a crawl as many of their windows were shattered. The people inside had disappeared from view, most likely seeking refuge under the seats. The bus drivers wisely chose to drive on.

Our windows were firmly in the up position. The noise from the crowd was intimidating. Despite their obvious anger, the abuse seemed controlled and focused. For some bewildering reason, no sticks or debris hit us despite our position within the convoy. As our vehicle passed each large group, the chanting and abuse immediately subsided to be replaced by smiles and waves.

The array of missiles showering the convoy was no longer our biggest concern as we realised we were not a target. We were now doing our best to ensure that we didn’t run over anyone stepping from the crowd to chase the vehicles in front of us.

As soon as we passed each group the pelting of vehicles behind us resumed. The faces of the adults displayed a great fire and anger towards the people in the convoy. The children just seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Eventually, we left the village and its maddened occupants behind. The buses stopped with the drivers inspecting the damage, while the trucks continued on their way. We had a look but there was little assistance we could provide to the bus drivers. No one appeared injured so we parted company with the buses and continued our journey.

The people on the buses were part of the large group of refugees we had processed on the wharf two days earlier. They were being returned to their homes in the countryside. They had been
recognised as former militia. We asked our Timorese colleague how the villagers were able to identify everyone on the buses as militia. He responded simply: ‘They just know!’

We were not sure why the crowd had singled us out as the good guys. Our vehicle and distinctive uniforms were obviously Australian — a part of the UN. It was more probable that the crowd had realised that we were not a part of the convoy.

It seemed to us that reconciliation in the remote regions of East Timor was going to be more difficult than in the city.

Many more people along the road waved and smiled as we passed. They were extremely friendly, or were anticipating a good rock throwing session as they awaited the convoy. The bush telegraph worked well here.

As we reached the top of the mountain road and started our descent into the paddies to the north, we were forced to pull over as a group of Korean military Humvees came speeding around a sharp bend. We waved them down, quickly explaining the security concerns for the people in the buses behind us. A rescue, cavalry-style, with a surge down the mountain was not to be.

One of the difficulties in these situations is that the military can sometimes be caught up in a policing role for which they are not trained. A police patrol may respond all lights blazing to such an incident, but the military are trained for combat. Quite reasonably, they are going to fully assess a situation for any potential ambush before they charge in. It takes more time, of course. Just another example of the difficulties in such environments.

We were enjoying the tropical lushness of the land beyond the mountains when we came across a sight that helped explain the behaviour we had seen in the mountains.

The road passed a huge complex called the Dili Politeknik, a residential technical college. It had been the training ground for a large proportion of the tradespeople in East Timor.

The militia had obviously seen this complex as part of the future for the East Timorese. The damage inflicted here had been systematic and planned. The surviving structures could be best described as walls.
Every window pane had been shot out, every door and fixture removed. The roof tiling lay smashed and broken at the base of each remnant structure. If anything most graphically indicated the special efforts made to complete the destruction of this complex, it was the broken decorative glass panels above the windows, doors and in the ceilings.

These intricate patterns, approximately eight by eight centimetres in size, had been made of hundreds of small glass shapes. Each one of these small panes had a bullet hole in it; no general smashing or bashing to ruin the design. Considerable time and, judging by the spent rounds on the ground, thousands of bullets had been used to ensure every single pane was destroyed. Despite the daily sights in Dili, the obvious intent behind this destruction made us feel sick to the stomach.

Inside one hall we came across some large graffiti murals on the white walls. They suggested that former resistance leader Xanana Gusmao should be shot and that UNAMET people would be destroyed. Another comment suggested that the Timorese should not be slaves to the Western world.

We continued on our way to investigate the smuggling at Hera Port. It was a delightful little port and, with small sandy beaches taking the place of the usual mangrove beaches, it was possible to imagine a small resort there in the future. Even a hint of sea breeze was evident.
This port was the quarantine inspection area for Australian military equipment. As each regiment prepared to return to Australia, the vehicles and equipment were transferred here for a wash-down.

We conducted our inquiries and saw a large number of East Timorese and Papua New Guinean workers cleaning the military trucks and equipment, preparing them for the barges. It was a hive of activity.

‘Just shoot Xanana.’

‘UNAMET. Congratulations for being wealthy mate.’

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When we had finished, we were invited for a coffee by the Harbour Master, who was a former ship’s master full of great little stories and theories on the world as a whole. He managed to put to rest the fishing resort idea. He told us that the port had once been a fishing paradise with up to 60 small boats fishing the area. In recent times, new inter-island migrants had shown no interest in the trusty fishing net and bamboo pole. Their weapon of choice had been the land mine. They simply set the mine and dropped it in. As it sank, the pressure increased and ‘boom’. It was then just a matter of picking up the stunned fish from the surface. Very quick and effective, but leaving no fish stocks.

A few of the Harbour Master’s colleagues also expounded their theories to us. The 1975 Indonesian invasion received the full treatment. US submarines, deep-sea trenches and control of the archipelago all got a run. We didn’t know what parts of the stories we heard were fact and what parts fiction, but it made us realise that it had been a vastly different world in 1975. Communism was still strong at the time.

Armed with new information, mud maps of the area and thoughts on a future Border Service role at the port, we left so we could get home before nightfall.

We took a different route along the coast and had to traverse three treacherous road washaways, where the soil had

On the wharf at Hera port.
been washed from underneath the bitumen surface, making the road look deceptively intact — all providing plenty of grist for the ever-lengthening road movie.

We made it back safely that night, tired, but with our eyes open wider.
Our initial successes with the refugee vessels, efforts by the international group and the work of the New Zealand contingent brought the Border Service to the attention of the UNTAET and CNRT hierarchy.

When we arrived at work on 13 March we were greeted with a request to attend a meeting at CNRT headquarters. Accompanied by the New Zealanders, we arrived at the two-storey red brick building that was also the office of Xanana Gusmao. We were eager to meet him. We were led upstairs to the balcony by some minders and imagined ourselves sipping cocktails as we watched the chaotic traffic weave its way past the floating hotel and fish markets below.

After a considerable wait, a black Mercedes sedan flashed into the grey-walled courtyard. A number of well-dressed people alighted and came inside. We were lined up outside the main office in a hurry. A few minders and executive assistants started the usual spiel that you receive when meeting important dignitaries: don’t speak unless spoken to, do not attempt to touch, and so forth.

The nervous apprehension and excitement on the faces of those in the group who had followed East Timor’s struggle for independence was easy to see. To many people, Gusmao is the Nelson Mandella of East Timor. About 20 of us filed into a room and sat around a large oval table. Gusmao followed and sat at the head of the table. A palpable silence competed with the humidity in the room.
The stuffiness of our initial welcome evaporated as Gusmao waved at us to be seated and started talking. He proved to be a very disarming man. His initial words were quiet and he appeared to linger on every thought before he spoke. He speaks English, Tetum, Portuguese, probably Indonesian, and possibly other languages. His conversation, although slow, was considered.

At first he didn’t seem comfortable talking to us, as if he was under some strain. As we leant forward to hear his softly spoken words he started to discuss the Border Service and the need for a great country to have a safe border. As he talked about our role it was again apparent that many people within East Timor believed that the Border Service needed to be a paramilitary organisation. There was talk of security and safety. The service he was referring to was certainly not a civilian-style authority.

Gusmao was particularly gracious when he thanked us for our earlier efforts. As he spoke, it became apparent that he was a man weighed with many tasks and that he was carrying the burden of a nation. A nation he had inspired to strive for liberation.

The mood of the address changed abruptly when people within the group became braver and began to respond to his comments. He reacted well to repartee and, with a relaxed and vibrant demeanour, soon started to tell stories of his past.

His charisma was obvious and it engrossed us. As he spoke about his imprisonment by the Indonesians, the audience found itself rapt in his story. It was easy to see how this man could rally anyone to a cause. His humour and relaxed narrative was engaging, but he retained a fire in his eyes.

Lighting a cigarette, he told us that during the first six months of his imprisonment he had been allowed only two visits from outside. He had a strong smoking habit at the time and had resorted to rolling tiny cigarettes with the remains of any tobacco he could scavenge or buy. As he told the story, the picture he drew — tiny rolled up papers containing five or six strands of tobacco being smoked surreptitiously in a dank prison yard corner — came alive.
Someone bravely asked if his ‘rollies’ had contained any wacky weed. Gusmao responded with a guarded smile and questioned the intentions of such a question from a member of the Border Service. He said that he had never considered it, adding that two people within the prison had been executed for being found with ganja.

His eyes lit up as he told us that his captors had eventually relaxed and allowed him visits from the United States Consul and his assistants on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The Americans had done what they do best in their old movies — every visitor carried a carton of cigarettes under their arm. His life took a turn for the better after those first visits. He smiled exuberantly as he said that he has never had to buy a cigarette since.

We could easily have stayed with him for the entire day, but his minders informed him that his time was precious. He seemed to be reluctant to finish the discussion, but moved onto his next appointment. Our impression was that the stories of his overwhelming presence were well founded. We had all received a motivational kick that would keep us going for some time.

Although we didn’t meet him again, we witnessed moments when he held huge crowds of emotional people in the palm of his hand.

As we went about our business we learnt that the CNRT had developed a formidable power base. The strongest majority of this variety of political groups seemed to be old Fretilin members.

The CNRT was a representative group of various East Timorese political and community leaders that acted as the guiding influence for UNTAET. They provided a senate-style check and balance system for UNTAET. They reviewed the more important decisions made by the transitional administration and advised UNTAET on future directions, voicing their disapproval if they believed things were starting to go off the rails.
Another influence on decision-making was the Catholic Church. The Church appeared to be the most binding institution within East Timor and, as is the case in times of hardship, grew stronger after 1975 as people sought refuge from oppression.

Many of the UN directives that we were to enforce in the Border Service were guided by this strong Catholic faith, particularly those relating to prohibited goods such as pornography and other items acceptable in most western countries.

A small number of western visitors, like us, at first struggled to understand East Timorese customs. Stationed at the airport, the New Zealand contingent received a few verbal and written complaints from people who had worked on previous missions and did not understand the sensitivities of the country they were entering, or possibly thought that the restrictions on certain goods didn’t apply to them.

One of the most unusual rulings that affected East Timorese life was the allocation of a high import tax on beer. It was obvious that the East Timorese, like so many other nationalities, enjoyed a beer. On our arrival beer had been cheap. When import taxes were implemented, the tax on beer was easily one of the highest. A carton of 24 cans accrued US$20 plus 10 per cent of value in tax. This made a carton of beer close to AU$80. For UN and other first world workers this was still affordable. For the East Timorese the price was prohibitive.

A number of explanations were proposed for the limitations. One was that beer is always highly taxed in most countries. The next was that the Catholic Church wanted the increase in order to reduce local consumption. The third was that it would be an easy way to tap into the high wages of highly paid visitors.

Whatever the reasoning, supply and demand for beer continued. On future visits to the land border we discovered that smuggling cheap beer from West Timor had become a priority for any smuggler worth his salt. We were amazed how far a person could carry a carton or two of beer — across wide rivers and over densely wooded hills — to get to market.
During our time in East Timor one of the more divisive political decisions being considered was the choice of official language for the nation. Throughout the UNTAET mission the language of choice was English. This was intended only for the life of the mission, however, and a decision had to be made about the future direction of language in East Timor. This vital decision was always going to be clouded by emotion. For myself and many others, English was the obvious choice. Internationally and economically it seemed to make sense.

The decision for the community was much more difficult. Everything in East Timor is complicated by its colonial past and the regional isolation caused by its mountainous terrain. At the land border at Batugade — where we eventually set up a border post — the predominant language was Indonesian. The use of Indonesian in the area was due to the closeness of Indonesia and the fact that the Indonesian rupiah ruled the markets and smugglers’ exchange. The US and Australian dollars that were coveted elsewhere, counted for nothing there.

Further away from the border, language differences were clearly delineated by age and social standing. Older people were generally fluent in Portuguese, while those born after 1975 were usually fluent in Indonesian. The higher a person’s level of education, the more likely it was that that person spoke English — usually as a second language. The first priority for younger people was to improve their English. We spent much of our spare time doing our best to teach our new workmates.

In the remote mountains, some of the older people spoke a dialect of Tetum that took Portuguese words and threw them in among an ancient local dialect. A Tetum dictionary is very short. For some time we had practised a number of Tetum phrases to impress the East Timorese, only to later find out we were speaking Portuguese. ‘Speaking’ is a minor exaggeration; stringing together two words to say hello, thank you or goodbye isn’t normally considered a masterful use of language. We did what we could.
The decision over language took some time. Just before our departure an announcement was made in the press by CNRT and reported by the Australian media: Portuguese would be the preferred language of East Timor. This caused some concern among various groups within East Timor. At the end of our deployment the decision had yet to be ratified.
Chapter 8
Exploring the possibilities

We had completed various tasks in Dili, but the move to the land border wasn’t progressing well. Visits to designated land border crossing points were required to give the move a kick-start.

The first was a flying reconnaissance visit to the border for a quick familiarisation. We arrived at the heliport in Dili for a 6am take-off. It had been raining all night, which was a great relief to us as the humidity had dissipated and it was pleasant to be out and about. It wasn’t all great news though, as the pilot announced that the flight would be delayed.

The schedule was tight. Rick and I were on this recce. Others filling the seats included our boss and, at the last minute, some senior UNTAET personnel. Just before six, the leader of the UNTAET group casually advised us that he had to be back for a meeting at 10.30am. The schedule was now tighter.

We could see the cloudbanks that had unloaded on us during the night still clinging closely to the tops of the nearby mountains. We waited out the weather. At 7.30am, we finally took off in the large Chilean Air Force Puma helicopter, painted in the obligatory white, with the large black UN markings on the sides. We were joined by four armed PKF escorts who scanned the world below keenly from the open doorways. As we rose over the mountains it was a comfort to know that the Chilean pilots had flown in mountainous terrain much higher than that in East Timor.

We had planned on an hour at the two main border crossings. First stop was to be Salele on the southern coast. It was
the main entry point to the town of Suai, about 40 minutes’ drive from the border. The second major crossing was at Batugade, a town on the northern coast and the main access route into Dili. We couldn’t access the four smaller inland crossing points by helicopter and would have to take a land patrol to visit these points later.

During the recce we learnt that the term ‘designated crossing point’ was a figurative term used by a bureaucrat and his mate the map-maker. The two major official crossings were bridges over the river. Others were simply fordable sections of the river where people wandered across. Members of the PKF stationed near the border explained the ease with which the local population could ford the river that defined the border. Even the use of the term ford was a little bit of overkill. At certain times of the year many sections of the river were dry. The PKF’s struggle to maintain a sealed border gave us a realistic outlook for our chances at maintaining total control of the border in the near future.

Our flight took the quickest route to the south coast and, after circling near the border, we landed in a muddy field at Salele. As we ran unsteadily through the long grass, crouching to avoid the rotors, our minds were already racing to find excuses to not be the ones deployed here. From the air, we had seen that the town of Suai was some distance back from the border. Salele had a name but little else. It was two cleared fields cut off from the ocean by a forested swamp. A row of army tents and tarpaulins crammed behind sandbagged barriers were the only signs of habitation.

Although the land border patrols consisted mostly of Australian and New Zealand defence forces, the Fijian Army manned this location. It was remote and screamed loneliness.

As we approached the camp the Fijian Commander, a major, and some of his men were returning from the beach where they had been having a cooling swim. They were all armed, but one soldier carried a larger weapon than the rest. The major explained that it had been this man’s turn to be picket on the beach — not for infiltrators, but to keep an eye on the large crocodile that inhabited the swamp next to the beach. He joked that the guard was there for looks only, telling us that crocodiles
were sacred in East Timor. If a choice of whether to shoot had to be made, then it could be better to lose a soldier than to bring further bad luck to the East Timorese.

The Fijians were keen for some new neighbours and were excited when we said we were scouting the area and thinking of joining them in the near future. We wanted to have a good look around but time constraints on this trip were against us. Any further rapport-building with the Fijians and logistical planning would have to occur some other day.

There was no time to visit Suai and we flew back over the mountains towards the northern side of the island, hoping that Batugade might be a more amenable location. The heliport at Batugade was a beach. A good start.

Batugade was a village. It seemed a great spot. There were four transportable huts located near the village square, cleverly sighted on a fork in the road. The border crossing was just a few kilometres away along the road to the right. This was the main route between Dili and West Timor. The road to the left wound its way through the mountains towards Balibo and then Maliana. With time and some luck, a person could eventually make their way right through to Suai and Salele.

Batugade could also serve as a cut-off point on the road to Dili for people who had crossed the border at the four inland sites, as it was unlikely they would have their own Border Service personnel in the near future.

The village square could best be described as a scene from a western movie set in Mexico. The small roundabout within the intersection contained an old police checkpoint or guard post. Stacked green army sandbags, left by Interfet, surrounded it. Goats, dogs and chickens scavenged within the post.

The gradual break down of the sandbags in the blazing sun resulted in a constant film of fine beach sand coating the road, the dust permeating the air. It was definitely a place that would bring on the urge to wander down to the beach for an afternoon siesta.

The army had placed vehicle choke points on the three entrances to the area and more sandbags and barbed wire closed
Exploring the possibilities

these in. For the first time, we also saw the traffic-calmers, or speed humps, that would become common sights in our travels in the countryside west of Dili. The army had developed a very effective system. It was simply two planks of wood nailed into the road parallel with each other. Sandbags were placed between the planks and on either side.

Not all speed humps were placed brilliantly for civilian activities. One was strategically placed on the road as it entered the village from the direction of Dili. Drivers had to first traverse

The town square of Batugade. A reminder of conflict.

‘Traffic-calmers’ lie in wait.
a long bridge and then go down an incline into Batugade before choosing between a sharp left or right turn — something the locals had been doing for years, and at high speed. The incline was steep enough to obscure the hump until the last moment. In the short time we were there, we witnessed a continual parade of screeching buses and trucks bouncing over the hump as wide-eyed passengers clung fearfully to their position on the roof.

Before we returned to the helicopter we noted that much of the village was in disrepair and wondered where we and the 12 East Timorese officers who would accompany us from Dili would be able to live. We spoke briefly to the Australian Company Commander about our hope for an eventual return. He did show some surprise at the possibility of the borders being opened in the near future, but assured us of his willingness to assist in establishing the base.

We didn’t see much during our short visit, but we saw enough to know that this location was the most logical for our first working post.

The flight back to Dili landed in time for the senior officer’s meeting. As he left us at the heliport, he yelled back that we should relocate to the border by 24 March. We didn’t have time to reply as he raced away. No response was really necessary, as the flying visit had given us a clear idea of the amount of work ahead of us.

Rick and I met the others for lunch and told them about what we had seen on the recce and also mentioned the proposed relocation date, making them choke on their coffee. Further visits to the border areas to make arrangements with local authorities to build accommodation and organise other necessities such as water supplies were definitely needed. Another helicopter flight to take our entire group to Salele, Suai and Batugade, followed by a vehicle visit to the four other inland crossings, were also necessary. Our controller was easily convinced and our plan was under way.

The next morning was spent booking the helicopter. After we apologised for the delays and short-notice changes to the previous trip, we managed to arrange a flight in two days’ time.
Monday 20 March arrived and it was back to the heliport. This time we had control of the timing. If we didn't complete a decent recce it would be our own fault. Cancio, the local leader of the East Timorese Border Service officers, was with us and he was going to try to use his contacts to arrange accommodation for the East Timorese officers who were to move to the border with us.

The helicopter left at 7am. It was a 30-minute run west along the northern coast and then a sharp turn south for 40 minutes to Suai. The main feature I could identify from the map was G Tata Mailau, a mountain 2,963 metres high.

The flight through the mountains was spectacular. We flew over the summits and, as we dropped into each valley, there was a soft white blanket of cloud below us. The ridges of the mountains were steep. We could see that the summits were just wide enough to accommodate tiny tracks worn into the landscape from years of use by hardy souls strolling from one peak to another. Beside each path were sheer drops of at least 100 metres. There was a scattering of small huts throughout the mountains, with livestock grazing on the steep slopes.

Seating arrangements in the helicopter meant most of us were sitting side by side facing forward. We could see almost everything the pilot could see. Lorraine was sitting in the jump seat, facing directly out to the side. Forward vision from this seat was limited. As we reached the summit of one particular mountain, Lorraine was dreamily peering out at the clear sky, enjoying the freedom of flying above the world. As the helicopter began a sudden descent over the peak, none of us had any concerns. The pilot took a quick route through a gap in some large trees as we descended the southern side of the mountains. We were calm and enjoying the change in vegetation, but Lorraine’s beautiful vista of clear blue sky was suddenly shattered as first one large tree, and then a forest, flashed into view without warning. To her, the trees seemed close enough to touch. Her shriek of surprise and subsequent impolite words echoed within the helicopter, greatly adding to the in-flight entertainment. Lorraine was still shaking when we landed.
This time we landed on a muddy grass field in Suai. A couple of Caribou transports at the end of the runway were the only clues that the site was an airfield. A vehicle soon drove out from the forest and we were taken into Suai where the local military commanders and UNTAET administrators were waiting for us. Cancio also got to speak to local house owners about accommodation for his staff.

The New Zealand soldiers who were responsible for this southern border region provided us with a security briefing. They reminded us of the sensitive nature of the environment. Things were currently safe but tense. This region was later to be the scene of militia incursions and the New Zealand soldiers were involved in a number of skirmishes.

Suai was worse than any town we had seen. With no roofs, accommodation for most UNTAET people was a lean-to located under the eaves of the remaining buildings. The UNTAET staff and the local population were doing it particularly tough here. They were working in extremely difficult surroundings — tougher than other areas of East Timor we visited.

We were told we would be welcome to stay at Suai while making preparations for a border post at Salele. A Pakistani Army engineering company was in charge of construction in the region and they indicated that they would be willing to assist if we came for an extended period. We were welcome to sleep under a lean-to, but would have to bring our own food and water. We made plans for some of us to return by vehicle in the next week and left for the airfield.

It was a quick hop to Salele, where we met the Fijians again. They took us to a small bridge that served as the border crossing. We had a quick conversation with two Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) soldiers stationed at the bridge, telling them we were making plans to begin customs and immigration functions at the site. Their reaction indicated that people on the ground had been given no indications of ambitions to open a civilian-controlled border.

Cancio was with us and talked for some time in Indonesian with the soldiers. We were a little surprised by his willingness to talk.
If the chat with the TNI soldiers was a little unsettling then our second encounter with the Fijian major was far scarier. He and his men had not become any smaller since our flight to the encampment a few days earlier. The Heckler and Koch machine pistol still looked like a child’s toy in their leader’s huge hands.

He reminded us that they were keen for some new friends at the post. He was pleased that we were Australian and was hoping his men could play rugby with us. We clutched for an escape clause and told him we were from Western Australia and didn’t know much about rugby. No problems as far as he was concerned. We could teach his men Australian Rules. Given the choice between a physical confrontation with the Fijians or the sacred crocodile down at the beach, it seemed likely the crocodile was going to have guests.

The paddock recently set aside for our proposed post was near the border and close to the Fijian camp. It was very low ground and close inspection of the vegetation and gullies near the paddock suggested it was a swamp during the wet season. The land was going to take a lot of building up before a hut could be placed there. The mosquitoes would also be hell.

The security of the East Timorese officers who would need to be transported on a 40-minute drive from their accommodation
in Suai every day also concerned us. A regular journey along a remote forest track was the perfect scenario for any people who did not like the aims of the East Timorese Border Service officers working at the border. Secondly, there was an issue about transport. While convening some planning meetings in Dili after our last flight, we had discovered something perplexing that was going to cause some difficulties at the border. Quite simply, the East Timorese Border Service officers who would work with us were forbidden from driving UNTAET vehicles. We were going to assume the role of very well paid taxi drivers. The ruling did not fit well with the ideal of training and shared responsibility.

Once finished at Salele, we boarded the helicopter for a 40-minute flight north along the border to Batugade. After 20 minutes we ran into thick fog. The pilot was forced to turn back and try alternative routes. High mountains, no radar capability and the knowledge that another flight was coming the other way made the turn around decision easy. We landed at Suai, refuelled and tried again with a similar result.

On the third attempt, we flew to the central mountains and then skirted east about half the length of East Timor towards Kelikai — a great scenic tour of places we probably wouldn’t get to again. We then headed north through a gap in the mountains towards Baucau on the northern coast. As we passed over one small remote mountain village Cancio pointed out the house where he had grown up.

The pilot wasn’t sure if we had enough fuel to get to Batugade and indicated that we might have to land at Baucau. He did give us a positive — apparently the best Thai restaurant in Timor could be found there. He responded to our bemused looks by explaining that the PKF force at Baucau was a Thai Army regiment. The fuel concerns were allayed and we were soon at Batugade for our final inspection of the day.

Nothing had changed since our last visit. This second recce made it obvious that Batugade should be the first official trade and travel route between West and East Timor and our priority.

We busied ourselves briefing the PKF contingent, inspecting the border post and making notes about our
equipment requirements. The Australian Company Commander told us that there was already some movement of people across the border there, but it was still uncommon. The commander explained that each occasion became an issue of deciding what should be done. We were welcome to come and sort it out and leave the PKF to their security role.

Cancio visited the local Council of Timor Resistance (CNRT) representatives and came back with news that he had found a house for the East Timorese officers. He said it was in reasonable condition and good value. We also looked around for something near to where our office would be located, but the available real estate was mostly four fire-blackened walls.

We learnt a bit about the status of these vacant buildings. People wanting to use one of the numerous vacant residences could apply to UNTAET to rent the property. Lessees were entitled to spend whatever money they had to repair the house to make it habitable. This normally involved installing a thatched or tarpaulin roof, a couple of doors and some flyscreens, as well as establishing a water supply. The nominal rent was held in trust by UNTAET until the owner’s return when it was given to the owner. The owner’s return also meant that the people renting the house would have to move on.

It was always a difficult decision to move in as the status of a home was not certain. They were empty for various reasons. The owners could be across the border in a refugee camp. They could have fled out of fear or they could be militia who had left with the Indonesians. They could also be deceased. People renting such a house could easily return home one day to find their bags in the front yard. We decided that we might go for tents in the backyard near our office.

We looked at an old Portuguese fort next to our proposed office site and this appealed as a place for our tents. It would take some negotiation as some UNHCR staff were comfortably ensconced there at the time and the lieutenant of the small Australian Army unit stationed at the nearby beach told us his men also coveted the location.
We departed Batugade with promises to the PKF that we would return soon and help them with the people movement issues at the post. The lieutenant reminded us to bring our mosquito repellent and patience.

The helicopter lifted off from the sand helipad on the beach. We were keen to get back to Dili and get our relocation plan moving. As the helicopter turned for Dili, we looked down at the place we hoped would soon be our home — and our chance to help establish something for East Timor.
Chapter 9
The things we did

The trip to the land border reminded us that we had a lot of work to do. We lobbed back into Dili knowing that it was not just a matter of planning and implementing a new border regime. We needed to create a basic infrastructure to ensure the East Timorese officers and ourselves could carry out our duties and exist in an environment that contained little support.

During the next few weeks we often went our separate ways, taking on a variety of tasks. Peter, Jeff and Adi busied themselves locating and negotiating for equipment needed for the proposed Batugade post. The rest of us got involved in Border Service work. This period provided the opportunity to mingle among the UN personnel during the day and the Dili population at night.

One day as we congregated for a lunchtime chat about our successes and failures, the group decided it was time to make a last-ditch effort to sort out our UN status. It was almost pay day and we needed to be able to afford basic essentials such as food, drinks and a place to sleep. We visited our old mates at the Finance Department in the UN administration compound. After much searching within the accounts section, it was established that our completed applications had probably been misplaced and subsequently little progress had been made on our behalf. No matter. Apparently they were the wrong forms anyway! We thought we would try again some other day.

During our lengthy visits to the finance and supply offices it was important to remain positive. Patience was the key. It was
too hot to jump up and down and sitting around waiting in the heat can make you angry. You can, however, find an escape in the frivolity of what is going on around you. Simple little distractions helped keep us in good humour and boosted morale.

Resting in the shade of the old verandah, Peter told us that he had gathered two full pages of acronyms he had seen or heard. In an environment dominated by the UN, international aid agencies and the military, this place was acronym central. We quickly gathered around Peter to share our opinions on the matter. Many of the acronyms we had seen lacked any obvious meaning. We had a lively discussion about this with the enthusiasm and intensity that only people lying in the shade of a verandah on a hot, humid day would consider normal. It didn't occur to us at the time that some of the acronyms might have been French or Spanish, or even simply foreign words.

Adi’s time-passer was no less frivolous. He was making a list of the most common responses we received as we visited the various departments and supply offices. Real gems such as ‘In two weeks time!’, ‘You must have a chitty!’, or ‘The Portuguese are coming’ were the front runners, but it was still early days.

We did achieve one thing we considered special that day. We were issued with our blue berets. They look quite good on the odd person, though not on us! Our uniform was complete.

As we navigated our way around the compound, we met a couple of Australian police who worked for CivPol. I knew them both from some years back. They were due for leave in Darwin and were preparing their flight application forms. They had driven in from a far-flung village in the east where they had lived quite roughly in old houses. The population in their area had been decimated and many people still hadn't returned. Others had simply disappeared.

The police were required to deal with the community problems in these villages and they were seeing the problems that occurred when unwelcome people were placed back among their neighbours. We soon got onto the subject of the refugee vessels.

There was a genuine effort to get people resettled in their original homes but, as the two policeman explained, it often led
to violent clashes. Stabbings and beatings were common as people vented their frustrations and anger on the people they had seen turn against their neighbours and bring terror to the villages.

That afternoon I attended a meeting at which the refugee crisis in the West Timorese camps was discussed. We were advised that we might need to prepare ourselves for a higher frequency of refugee vessels into Dili as well as convoys across the land border.

The television news that night quoted the President of Indonesia stating that all refugees should be returned to East Timor by 31 March 2000. This was less than two weeks away. Somewhere along the line I heard a quote that summed up the situation of the thousands of refugees still in the camps and the difficulty in meeting the deadline. I recorded it in my diary and am not sure of the exact source.

‘There will definitely be no deadline extension past March 31st. We are totally committed to not extending the deadline until the very last moment when it is possible that we will extend the deadline by one month. We may have to do this more than once!’

When we left East Timor, many refugees were still waiting to return.

Our work towards getting to the border continued as we scrounged our way through the various supply offices. Our haul of goods was growing and thoughts were turning to how we could get them to the border. Of particular concern were the large flat packs that contained the prefabricated offices that were to be erected near Suai and Salele. A senior supply officer pointed us in the direction of the wharf where a large landing barge had been contracted to move UN cargo.

We headed to the wharf. The Kiwis were working hard trying to develop a controlled cargo environment. This was proving difficult as ships had become accustomed to arriving and discharging their cargo whenever they liked. Some of the big-time importers — overseas companies — had for a while now had free run of the place. It was going to take some concerted
effort to convince a few of these entrepreneurs that East Timor was not there just for them to exploit.

The movement of forklifts and cargo within the cramped spaces at the wharf made for a dangerous environment as everyone competed for room. Leaving a vehicle in someone’s way meant taking the risk of returning to a crumpled wreck. Stepping out onto a road without your full wits could have been your last move.

Our directions to the landing barge were not exact and we sweated our way around the various sheds and jetties without luck, finding ourselves at the arrivals hall where we had processed the refugee vessels. If we needed a reminder to get on with organising the border so we could escape the city, the sight of this hall was it, and we moved on quickly. We eventually found the craft. It was hidden from view, moored behind a huge pile of shipping containers near the northern end of the port. It was just 100 metres from our accommodation.

The crew, a variety of nationalities, was toiling away oblivious to the midday sun. Much of the loading was being performed manually, with an army forklift on hand for the bigger tasks.

We boarded the craft to speak to the master. We were no longer dressed in our bright-blue uniforms — overalls were much more practical. ‘CUSTOMS’ was stencilled clearly in yellow across our backs and the crew gave us the usual vexed, ‘What do you guys want?’ look. They were occupied with their tasks and quickly pointed us in the direction of the captain.

Outwardly friendly, the captain was a man who knew his job and was in control of the situation. I couldn’t help thinking that the captain and his crew would not have looked out of place among the swashbuckling buccaneers of old. We mentioned to him that the UN supply officer had told us that our huts were due to be transported to Suai on the next voyage. He said they had not been delivered and that the landing craft was leaving about Friday. It was Wednesday, but we still had time to make sure they were delivered for loading. I quizzed him further about his cargo instructions and whether departure was to be early or late on Friday, explaining we needed to organise a truck to get the
The things we did

packs to the wharf. He was non-committal, but under persistent probing from some highly experienced customs officers he finally, nonchalantly, told us his intentions.

‘My instructions are very detailed and precise! Fill the boat up until it is full. Departure time is when the boat is full!’

No further discussion was necessary.

During the next few days some of us assisted with the training classes. They were being conducted in the old Customs House, which was being renovated for an eventual return by the Border Service. Everyone else was still located at UN headquarters, but this was the only place available as a classroom. Lorraine had settled in here as she had been chosen to be a training officer on the new induction courses. She was embracing the role.

It was a difficult environment for the new recruits. The heat inside was overwhelming. There was no airflow because the windows had been sealed to keep out mosquitoes. The electricians claimed that they would have the power reconnected in a few days. The thought that fans might begin turning soon buoyed the hopes of trainers and trainees alike. The fans would relieve the heat and, if they were powerful enough, they might even blow away some of the mosquitoes. Sealing the windows had not been a success — rather similar to a rabbit-proof fence, with more mosquitoes inside than out. Customs House was deservedly referred to among the group as Mosquito House.

Electricity also meant the two new computers could be removed from their boxes and plugged in. A working computer proved a great source of encouragement for the trainees. To them it represented progress. Along with other skills, the computers also provided an opportunity for the trainees to develop their English. For the majority this was a priority.

It was only now that we officially met the 18 trainees who would accompany us to the border. We had worked alongside some of them on the refugee vessels but we were not aware then that they had been employed to move to the border. They were eager to find out about their future and we were keen to gain an understanding of their backgrounds and their understanding of the Border Service’s intentions for their future.
We gathered them together for a meeting on an afternoon that turned out to be very enlightening as we got to know each other a little. It was inspiring to hear about their dreams for their new country. The group was quite diverse, in age and work experience. Each of them lived with their families in Dili. They were city people. It was going to be a big move for them.

The get-together was also a very tiring, frustrating and sometimes comical affair. We realised that language was going to be a confusing part of everyone’s life. The majority of the younger trainees spoke Indonesian and were learning English. They were not yet prepared to use English in a large group. The appointed team leaders were older. Some were more comfortable with Portuguese, some with Tetum. Their English was less advanced than that of the younger officers. The Australian contingent spoke English, although Rick was a competent Indonesian speaker and had been our salvation on a number of occasions already. We were going to rely on him significantly. Clear and precise communication was going to be one of our most demanding tasks.

Cancio had come along to assist with introductions and planning. He was doing his best to fill many roles. Not the least of these was ensuring that the East Timorese officers were being given the opportunity to play a big part in the rebirth of their
country. Cancio chaired the get-to-know-each-other session as he spoke all four languages competently. He chose to use Portuguese as a sign of respect for the team leaders.

Every statement in English was translated into Portuguese then into Tetum. The final translation was into Indonesian. Rick said later that he had refrained from joining in as his grasp of Indonesian was found wanting in the exchanges. Sometimes all four languages were used in one exchange. Even my limited language skills detected Indonesian, Portuguese and Tetum words in single sentences. It was no wonder that during our time working with the East Timorese there were occasions when we had misunderstandings in our dealings with each other.

One of the issues to arise from the afternoon was that the East Timorese were being asked to undertake a very difficult task in what some people would consider to be unreasonable circumstances. These 18 people were going to be moved to Batugade and Suai, villages that were a long way and very different from the city of Dili in which they lived.

It was all part of a plan to make the Border Service a mobile group. Officers would be allowed to work in one location only for a year or so. This was a deliberate attempt to ensure that corruption did not find its way into the service. It was a valid concern as the officers would eventually find themselves in positions of power when it came to revenue collection in remote locations. It is an issue quite common in developing countries and one the UN is used to confronting. Although this was a responsible approach to prevent corruption filtering into the system, the decision to move Dili people to the country for short periods was difficult for them.

We had already seen that it would be difficult for the East Timorese to find housing at Batugade and Suai. If this problem was overcome, they were still going to face a financial burden as they were all maintaining family homes in Dili. To make matters worse, they had already lost the majority of their possessions. What little they had left was desperately needed by their families in Dili. They had nothing to bring to the border for themselves. Mosquito netting, beds, mattresses and cooking utensils were
required. Then there was the matter of water. All this on $A158 a month.

We were going to the border too, but we had a strong support network and we had no doubt that we could afford necessary items. The employer of the East Timorese did not always see these issues coming. Once again, the reasoning against providing too much for the East Timorese staff focused on leaving behind a Border Service that could be sustained by the new government. It did not seem that this theory could be sustained in the reality of the devastated surrounds.

I raised the issue with our controller and he suggested we approach the civil service unit. My approach was met with a warm response. I was told to hold basic enterprise bargaining discussions with the officers to find out what they would require and then present the demands to the civil service for consideration. It sounded fairly promising. The week ended with light at the end of the tunnel and we went into the weekend believing we had a good chance of gaining some financial assistance for our new work mates.

Saturday morning arrived and we dashed across the road to the port to see what had happened with our Suai huts. Sure enough, the landing craft had sailed on Friday. A quick search of the area revealed that our plans to have the huts moved from the storage yards to the port had also been successful. It was obvious because we could see them packed neatly on the wharf about 20 metres from where the landing craft had once been moored.

The morning’s activities involved running around looking for items for our transfer and tracking down information about the future voyages of the elusive landing craft. We realised we had to put a little more work into that one.
Saturday afternoons were a little quieter than the rest of the week. Most of the UNTAET staff, including us, worked. The general population had the day off. It was a glorious afternoon, the humidity was waning and the clear bright sunshine made the coastal views spectacular. I managed to visit the Dili Cafe for a snack.

Announced by a sign in a coconut tree as Café Dilli Alfresco, it consisted of three cement walls, a tarpaulin roof, tables, chairs and a fridge-backed bar. Although the sign had one too many Ls, the cafe had become the social centre of Dili. The real attraction was found inside a small black catering trailer next to the seating area — Dili’s only known stainless-steel Italian-built cappuccino machine.

It was a good opportunity to sit down and start writing some of the operating instructions required for the staff at Batugade. After all, we were creating procedures as we went along, so it was important to have a written guide to demonstrate to all concerned that we were enforcing UNTAET policies correctly. I also wanted to develop a personnel guide on some new conditions for the East Timorese officers, but hadn’t got far in my discussions with the civil service during the morning.

The Dili Cafe was a well-known meeting place, which often provided an opportunity to corner someone to try to resolve continuing issues. It could have been the relaxed outdoor atmosphere or the fact that the cafe also served wine, but I spent
much of my afternoon talking to people with gripes about how they had been treated at the airport or other border issues on the wharf.

My attention was drawn away from my work to some activity on the narrow road in front of the cafe. At least 50 children were crowding around a small road-roller about two metres wide as the Bangladeshi soldier operating it tried to grind gravel into some of the large potholes. The general condition of the roads in Dili suggested that the previous administration had done little maintenance during recent years. The excitement of the children confirmed this. It was obvious they had never seen a road-roller before.

The children who had wandered across from their homes at the nearby fish market had managed to bring the traffic to a standstill. Two goats and their kids which had been neatly tethered were now free and joined the crowd on the road, adding to the jam. It was chaos for a while but eventually the situation was cleared with all children and goats living to see another day. The rest of us got back to business for a while.

Sunday arrived; it was day 20, and I had my first full day off. No overalls or uniform to wear, or work to be done. The opportunity to wear clothes that provided relief in the heat was most welcome. It was a very hot though dry day. I did the tourist thing and visited everywhere I could on foot, taking the long hike along the beach to the Jesus statue. It was interesting wandering around by myself — everyone wanted to talk.

At one point not far out of town I was forced to climb the sea wall as the sandy beach had been washed away. I clambered onto the road to find military vehicles restricting access at both ends. A group of police and soldiers were taking photographs in a nearby ditch while others tried to direct traffic around the narrow bend. They made little effort to discourage onlookers and I couldn’t help trying to see what was creating the interest.

To my dismay, the object of interest was the remains of a body protruding from the drain just above the road. It appeared the body had probably been exposed by a small mudslide after the recent rains. A poignant reminder on my tourist day. We needed to retain our sense of purpose. Suitably chastened,
I headed towards the Jesus statue.

The statue was a huge icon built atop a large hill that provided a fantastic view of the city and the harbour. It amazed me how it had survived the carnage. The steep stairs up the side of the hill provided some Portuguese marines with the perfect workout, running up and down while the temperature hovered around 40 degrees Celsius.

One amusing observation for me was the huge globe of the world that supported the statue. Australia was a little askew but I think the Kiwis had more reason to be annoyed as they failed to gain a spot at all. I was looking forward to a little chat about that on my return to the office.

On the way back I watched local fishermen in their dugout canoes. I really wanted to try one out, but they were too unstable for me to risk losing my camera. I decided I would try one a little later when I had taken everything home.

I strolled through the fish market, eating a couple of delicious satay sticks. The fish market was interesting. It was a place to obtain real, authentic rice and fish dishes on banana leaf plates. There seemed to be every variety of fish on display under the small shelters. Size was irrelevant and a pink snapper or similar could be 15 centimetres or 100. The edge of the market was the final resting place of the unwanted stock. Any fish-like substance that wasn’t sold ended up on the drying rack. After the salt was applied, and the heat — not to mention flies — had
done its work, the dried fish were piled up for sale. I didn’t see anyone making a purchase, but there must have been a demand for the product.

The smell of the fish took some getting used to, but it was a good place to enjoy a little breeze and to get to know some of the local traders. The store holders here slept under the tarpaulins where they worked. These markets were very close to our accommodation and were a good escape from the madhouse. As I wandered among the stalls I recalled our visit a few nights earlier. I realised people living in such basic conditions lived two distinct lives, one during the daytime and another after dark. On that recent evening the bustle of the fish markets had quietened quickly as the setting sun left only flickering lanterns and a few customers. It was time for the locals to sit down and cook for themselves, with small groups gathering to discuss the day gone and the future. For us, it had been an enjoyable evening, chatting under the faint light of the oil lanterns. As the clouds had blacked out the moonlight and dumped a load of rain on everybody, the flickering flames of the tent city lanterns had been supplemented by the wash of light emanating from the brightly lit UN headquarters across the road.

I finished my day off with hundreds of bondias (good morning), botardes (good afternoon) and a smattering of ‘Hello, mate’ and ‘Hello, misters’ under my belt. Suitably worn out, I headed home. As I returned a local East Timorese guard met me with a huge smile. Someone had broken into the room next to ours by jemmying open the window. The guard excitedly told me everything was all right and that he’d caught the alleged culprit. The guard was a small, wiry man who carried a very large knife. He had been a member of the Falantil, fighting the Indonesian army for 25 years from the mountains. As he enthusiastically led me around the corner to the car park I was a little apprehensive. Excitedly he displayed the petrified thief lying on the ground trussed and hog-tied. Again that feeling of not knowing how I should react came over me.

Eventually, I went to my room to have a quick drink and then made a quick dash back for that canoe ride.
I managed to convince a couple of young men to let me paddle myself. Lots of hand signals and talk convinced them that I had grown up paddling a surf ski so I would be OK. I ventured out very slowly with the emphasis on wobble. The men appeared a little taken aback that an Australian could paddle at all. The dugout was basic. It handled like a Canadian canoe with an outrigger for balance. The balance assistance was necessary because the canoe was no more than a roughly carved tree — somewhat less well built than the canoes we were to see being made on the road to Batugade. I returned without mishap and the owners were eager to take payment in the form of the baseball cap I was wearing.

I stopped at the local burger shed. It was a fine example of the multicultural approach to currency usage in Dili. I used three Australian dollars to buy a large hot dog. To buy a large chocolate milk, I returned to the counter with one US dollar. If I had used Australian currency for the drink it would have cost $3.50. Other meals were best bought in rupiah. In this establishment it was important to study the prices to get the best value for money. Sometimes the exchange rate calculations were questionable.

That night we met an Australian couple and a young man who had been travelling in a catamaran around Asia for the past three years. They were probably the first tourists we had seen in Dili. With their boat moored just near the floating hotel, they were having a meal at the Dili Hotel and enjoyed spinning a yarn. It seemed being an Australian in Indonesia at the time was not a good thing, so as they sailed the archipelago they had told everyone they were Brits.

One particularly disturbing story among the rumours they had heard throughout the islands was a news item claiming that Australian Interfet soldiers had bayoneted children and raped females as they invaded East Timor.

Monday morning arrived and I was refreshed and ready to get back into it. We took the car out to the airport where the refuelling dump was located. Here Australian army soldiers filled the vehicles from huge rubber fuel bladders that were scattered around the end of the airfield behind small muddy embankments.
After that we went off in search of fuel for the kerosene heaters we had bought to cook our food on, selecting a roadside petrol station that we’d seen on our way to the airport. It was a small fuel supply depot located near the bridge over the Comoro River.

The station was operated by four men who kept watch over the 50 or so 44-gallon drums of various fuels that were stacked near the road. Fuel had already been decanted from the drums in readiness for the expected customers. Plastic four-litre containers, filled with different fuels, lay around on tables awaiting the next thirsty vehicle. We drove into the filling position and stopped. After observing the work practices, we decided we should move the car away to a safe distance and walk back with a small jerry can for the kerosene. Not everyone in our group walked over to buy the fuel; some reasoned it was more important to stay with the car at a safe distance.

We watched the man decanting kerosene into the jerry can while casually smoking a cigarette. Just as much fuel spilled around his feet as entered the can. A quick glance around the depot revealed another man smoking while filling up a bemo, its engine still running; fuel also soaked the ground around him. Worse still was the sight of three men fanning hot coals to create a roaring flame in the large half-drum barbecue being used to cook satay sticks. The open flame was just two metres from the pile of leaky 44-gallon drums. We bought our supplies and disappeared quickly. Either good luck or the severe water dilution of the product being sold was saving the depot from instant incineration.

When we got back to the office we discovered that a new international had arrived to work in the Border Control Unit. He was an American lawyer and was there to try to develop a higher level of legislation to assist with implementation of the border controls. He was a great person and had worked on other missions in Cambodia, Kosovo and Angola.

He said that this mission was different from the previous missions he had worked on and that the developmental model was less defined than the previous efforts he had seen. His view was that the transitional part of UNTAET could last longer than
most people anticipated, but this was not a criticism. He saw the mission in East Timor, in many ways, as more difficult than other missions he had been involved with.

Rick and I looked like being called on to assist with the initial discussions about legislative development and Lorraine was going to continue running the training courses. Peter, Adi and Jeff convinced me of the need for a physical presence at the various border crossings to ensure our site works were being completed. It would also be a good test of our communication system — or so we thought.

Before arriving in East Timor we had taken steps to ensure our communications would be the best available. For this reason we had brought with us two of the latest model, hand-held iridium satellite telephones; state-of-the-art, easy to operate and very portable. There is an old saying about best-laid plans. On the day before the road trip we received news that the iridium satellite network had been closed down permanently.

As the team headed off on their four-day visit, we wished them luck and hoped they could solve some of the issues delaying our move. For them, it would be mountain roads, extraordinary views and an adventure. For Rick and I, it would be four days of legislation and meetings.

Rick and I settled into the routine of trying to organise some of the basic functions that the Border Service would need to deal with in Dili. It seemed that each day brought another role or function that we would have to find resources and officers to complete. We were reminded constantly about how many roles a Customs-cum-Immigration Service had to perform. It was a little overwhelming.

We had a good old-fashioned fiery team leader’s meeting one morning at which everyone got to air their frustrations at the slow rate of our progress.

Just after the meeting we received a phone call from one of the deputy mission heads. He was in Denpasar, where he had led a delegation to discuss with the Indonesian administration the opening of the land border. He was seeking some advice on the current status of our preparations and the ‘immigration policy’
we had been developing. He commented that UNTAET’s preparations appeared to be more advanced than those of the Indonesians.

The conversation made it clear to us that our placement at the border was probably further down the track than we had anticipated. If this was to be the case then we needed to throw ourselves into other local tasks to ensure our time in East Timor would not be wasted.

The workdays were getting longer and we were finishing about 8.30 each evening — and we seemed to be putting out brush fires constantly.

After working all day gathering supplies we took the opportunity to see more of Dili at night. One night we headed off to dine at The Burnt House restaurant. As inferred by the name, it was in fact a burnt-out house.

It took us a while to find the restaurant. It was an extremely dark night and it was in the most inland part of Dili, at the foot of the mountains. The site had obviously been chosen because of its views over the sparkling city. The house was among a myriad of other burnt and looted remains. We drove up and down the darkened laneway a number of times searching for it. Eventually, we deduced that the crumbling burnt house with all the cars parked outside was probably it.
It was a great ‘theme’ restaurant, cleverly created within the remains of the building. No designer or decorator could have outdone the authentic look of the gutted remains. The eating areas had a view of the night sky, with metal sheeting placed above the cooking area to protect it from the elements. The fire-blackened walls were very effective. Huge candles had been drawn with great effect in charcoal over any remaining whitewash. It was almost trendy.

Two Australian-based Timorese women had set it up and the restaurant was developing a good reputation. The clientele that night included many of the leaders of the CNRT. The meal was very expensive by East Timorese standards. We managed to sip on vintage — or was that old? — Australian red wine, enjoy a seafood omelette, as well as dessert. Timor was famous for its coffee, but with supplies difficult to obtain everyone managed to make do with instant. With milk difficult to come by, I had become a black coffee drinker.

This period of activity in Dili gave us the chance to get a few Sundays, or at least part-Sundays off. One Sunday morning of heavy work was followed by a drive along the coast. We headed west for about 30 kilometres, which in the conditions took more than an hour and a half. We came to a small coastal village called Liquica (pronounced Lic-ka-sa). It began as various small farm plots and then developed into a town of some beauty. It was a refreshing visit. There were lots of young children and very friendly people who all wanted to shake our hands. It was on this trip that we first noticed the unrelenting ability of the East Timorese children to wave vigorously at every vehicle that drove by as though it was the first car they had ever seen. Even on our regular trips back and forth to Batugade this waving never lost its fervour.

We visited the beach and there were hordes of young children. They loved to be photographed. We had our suspicions as to whether they had ever seen photographs of themselves. Adi soon fixed this by pulling out the video camera; the playback screen became the highlight of their day. The adults were a little wary of us at first, but they warmed quickly to our show of
friendliness. We did note the lack of males in the 20- to 35-year age group.

We did the tourist bit and drove around the outskirts of the town. It was located on a volcanic black sand beach and the houses spread upwards towards the mountains — a semirural setting: lots of pigs being walked on leads, maize drying on sheets in the sun and numerous kapok trees.

We visited a couple of old stone buildings that were no longer inhabited. The cement and stone entrance steps were the size of at least two large steps for us. We struggled to jump from step to step. More unusual was that we had to stoop to avoid hitting our heads on the very low verandah roof when we stood on the top step. The old rafters that had held the ceilings were also about the same height. We couldn’t find anyone who could explain the history of these odd buildings. All I can offer is that they were built eons ago by a visiting race of people who had extremely long legs and very short bodies.

We tried a meal at a house that was probably once a cafe. We gave the nasi goreng a try. As usual, it was all well presented. Hot spices, though freely available, were not cooked into the local dishes. A small bowl of crushed chilli was placed nearby and, with experience, you developed some expertise on the required quantity — until someone produced a different chilli
concoction. Other than burning lips and watering eyes, we had not encountered any bad effects from these meals. It was becoming apparent that the East Timorese were fastidious preparers of food.

On our return down the winding cliff-top roads, we had to pull over many times to avoid the speeding bemos — the local public transport vehicle — that careered around blind bends towards us. They were always crowded and there were always more people waiting at the next stop. In Australia, the people who board a bus or train near their destination complain they often have to stand in the aisle. On the road to Liquica, it would more likely be: ‘Gee, am I up on the roof again?’

A common sight was to see 10 to 12 people inside the eight-seater vans, two more hanging out the sliding door with a further two to four people clinging to the roof with the baggage. These buses were to become part of our lives and those of the East Timorese officers, who used them to get home on days off.

There were also larger buses that ran through to the land border. The visit by Peter, Jeff and Adi to the inland crossing points revealed that there was already large-scale movement of people, household essentials, cigarettes and beer across the border at the unofficial crossing west of the town of Maliana. This was the source of many of the goods now finding their way to Dili market and much of it was transported to town on these larger buses.
Chapter 11

Feelings in the heat

Where we had once been the wide-eyed and newly arrived, we were now people with an increasing affinity with the way life was lived in East Timor.

People were starting to question what the future held; sometimes it was the East Timorese we encountered within the community, sometimes it was ourselves. As we mingled with the locals, people we had never met before sought out our views, looking for confirmation that everything was going to turn out okay in the end.

This sense of belonging allowed us to be more perceptive to the little signs that indicated things were not always as they seemed, or that people’s attitudes were changing. At the same time, we were able to appreciate the moments of joy as the people we worked with closely celebrated the small achievements of each step they made.

The weather was reasserting itself and the humidity was bordering on intolerable. The debilitating conditions were as much a hindrance to the progress of the mission as any other factor. The conditions could have been tolerable when homes and utilities were intact, but the current situation was a completely different matter. The locals were forced outside looking for relief at night and tended to congregate in places where the spill of light from the UNTAET accommodation and work areas allowed something more than candlelight gatherings.

During the days we suffered, with many of our duties involving light physical work and lots of walking. It didn’t take
long for us to start dripping, a look that went down well whenever we ventured into the old parliament complex among the various civil administrations in our salt- and sweat-stained overalls.

The delays and weather helped manifest the feeling of uselessness. One group member was showing signs of developing the blues. It had been a difficult four weeks, but we didn’t want to lose someone along the way. We could still make a difference.

The weather played havoc with everything. The humidity built up in the morning and by 2pm it was stifling. It was easy to understand why afternoon siestas were the norm in such environments. It was not a great time to have a meeting or to wait in a queue at a supply office or an employment queue. About 4pm, the urge to be active would mysteriously return. Later in the evening huge thunderstorms would often take out the town power supply and bring life in the streets to a halt. For the people living under the small canvas covers at the fish markets it was an unwelcome break. While they were getting wet their business was drying up as their customers stayed at home or on the floating hotel.

When the power went out, the usual floodlit splendour of the UN headquarters was replaced by the flickering of candles from within. For a short time the kerosene lanterns of the fish market across the road would manage to outshine the light emanating from their stately neighbour.

One such night Rick walked among the small food carts and drink vendors along the foreshore. A group of young men, who had been university students before the elections, were hanging around with little to do. They were keen to chat about their hopes for the future and enthusiastically sought his views about Australia’s intentions with regard to East Timor’s future. They expressed concern that East Timor would be left to go it alone when the UNTAET mission was finished and the UN moved on to its next problem.

Their worries probably reflected the concerns of many in East Timor at the time. They were embracing their new-found freedom and dared to hope that the world was now in their own
hands. Their excitement was tempered by the events of their recent past and the underlying concern that their independence could easily be taken away from them due to their total reliance on assistance from other countries. A couple in the group believed that Indonesia might regain control once the PKF left.

They were inquisitive about our beliefs and the religious component of the life of the average Australian. Religion is an important facet of East Timorese life and custom. They were not concerned if people had alternative beliefs and religions, but it was important to them that everyone had a religion or faith. They would worry about the future of anybody who had suffered the ill fortune to have missed out on a religion.

During Easter we witnessed how their passion and strong Christian beliefs galvanised the population. They made huge efforts to create colourful costumes for the traffic-stopping processions. We also saw evidence of other religions being practised in Dili itself, including the Islamic faith practised by the Indonesians who had occupied their country. It appeared, as the young people had said, that they had a high level of tolerance for and acceptance of other religions.

The slow progress that concerned the young men on the foreshore and others was due to the need to create a secure environment. The reasons given for the seemingly slow progress and the initial lack of resources usually revolved around the huge cost of the military operations in the country. There was absolutely no doubt that the military resources were required to gain security for the East Timorese and there was no question of the enormity and importance of this task.

Unfortunately, it came at a huge cost. One country was providing more than one billion dollars in assistance to UNTAET, with 90 per cent of that funding required to maintain their component of the PKF. This division of funds could not change until the security status within the new nation altered significantly. Civil administration and infrastructure repairs received the leftover funding.

We appreciated the efforts of the PKF. They had our thanks for making life safer and easier. Even jogging was easier.
As we settled into our new lifestyle I found that I needed to get back into some of my old comfortable routines. I started jogging again. I was now prepared to leave the coastal road and the comparative safety of the UNTAET headquarters and the floating hotel areas for residential backstreets in the area. During my runs I was starting to notice a slight hardening in the attitudes of some people I encountered. It seemed to me that the people were craving tangible action — or at least wanted a more active role in the redevelopment of their country. They too were after faster progress.

As I jogged along by myself wearing a hat, shorts, singlet and joggers, I often came across military groups also running. They ran with a greater burden than me.

Soldiers carried their weapons at all times, something that often resulted in amusing sights. A typical Australian PKF member jogged in runners, singlet and shorts with a Steyr automatic rifle hanging heavily, sometimes almost dragging, from one arm near the ground. I think I was the only person jogging in the mornings without some kind of firearm.

Occasionally I would see an officer or military policeman with a small hand gun casually jog past a group of soldiers with larger, heavier automatic weapons. The challenge seemed to be too much to ignore. Despite the huge effort required, the soldiers would surge past the officer, then desperately attempt to hang onto their tenuous lead until they arrived at the next corner. They could then take a different turn to that of their pursuer, before slowing to a crawl to enjoy their victory while wheezing and sucking in huge lung-fulls of the steamy air.

The pursuer sometimes cruelly met the challenge, overtaking them again with a display of superiority, crushing their hopes and leaving them wallowing behind. All this in the heat amid heaving, thumping hearts and lungs. Glorious stuff!

Our three intrepid travellers returned from another road trip to the border crossings with a list of essential actions. Peter, Adi and Jeff were bristling with information about how people went about business in the country areas of East Timor and were determined that breakthroughs were imminent.
Our previous helicopter tours had made it clear that the swamp site at Salele near the Fijian compound needed to be built up to avoid flooding. The trio had managed to source a supply of road base located nearby and advised the UNTAET Dili building department, which indicated that it could send workers to Suai to complete the task. The time schedule was about two weeks. The cost would be many US dollars.

Adi, Peter and Jeff had made many contacts in nearby Suai. The local administrator had offered to complete the task using local Suai workers. The cost would be 20,000 rupiah or three kilograms of rice per person a day. The offer was not accepted.

The morning after this decision we got together and decided that we couldn’t get any further with our preparations for the border without the assistance of senior UNTAET chiefs. Our controller was on a break in Australia and we thought it might be a good time to try some different tactics from the ones we had utilised to date. We knew he couldn’t get blamed when he was absent so Jeff and I decided to front UNTAET’s second-in-charge and tell him the state of affairs — action was needed on the gear for the border posts or the deadline of Friday 14 April 2000 was not going to be met. It was only eight days away.

If he accepted our advice things might get moving. If he thought we were out of place going to the very top without filtering our thoughts through the correct channels then we were about to burn our bridges. His reaction was very uplifting. We were referred to Arial, his American assistant, to provide the details of our most urgent outstanding items. She appeared very matter-of-fact about getting things done and assured us that she would shake the trees. We left feeling upbeat and returned to the others full of promises and hope.

Naturally, there was always a check and balance to such successes, no matter how small. Later that day I tried to send a report to Brian Hurrell, our boss in Perth. Attending the official communications centre with my one-page document in hand, I was confident I could have it sent before the sweat ran down my hand and soaked the paper — it was not to be. With his feet
perched on the desk, the operator of the only fax machine said he was too busy and asked that I come back the next day. I debated with him for some time, even offering to send it myself, but to no avail. I left disappointed, knowing I would have to return the next day.

After a busy week of constant and persistent dealings with bureaucracy, Saturday afternoon arrived. Adi and I decided to visit the market after work to buy some meat for a Sunday barbecue. Rick was keen to try out his culinary skills on the barbecue plate near the pond in the courtyard.

Meat was displayed in the centre of the market under the lowest part of the roof, with any customers taller than five foot two forced to crouch. The freshly butchered goat, oxen and pork was well presented, although it would have looked better without the hundreds of flies gathered on each carcass. If we took the meat home quickly it would be okay because it was still warm and obviously fresh. The offerings included heads and offal. We were reminded where meat comes from. In the end, we realised that we didn’t have the cooking utensils to deal with such produce and decided not to go ahead with the barbecue. We went looking for some other appetising morsels.

During the week there had been a lot of discussion about the Falantil camp in the mountains directly behind Dili. This was a mountain route we had yet to explore and on Sunday morning we headed towards the town of Aileu to investigate the realities and to talk to the CivPol officers in the town. We took it easy as we headed up the busier sections of the road. Driving in unfamiliar parts of the country was one of our major concerns, as we didn’t want to cause any accidents or run over anyone. It would be a devastating situation to cause more grief to those we had come to help.

Reality was unfortunately still out there on the roads. A few days earlier we had seen a smashed bemo on the road to Liquica. A rubbish truck had rounded a sharp bend on the wrong side of the road and collided with it. The bemo had been carrying an unknown number of people. There were 21 people injured, including a young girl who had lost limbs.
Aileu was just over the mountain peaks and was defined as a containment area — a place where groups of people were relocated, retaining some level of autonomy from the general administration. This was where former Falantil guerrillas were placed.

The Falantil had fought for many years to gain independence for East Timor and they wanted to remain a force in the development of the country. They had carried weapons of various descriptions for many years and had no desire to suddenly hand them over to the foreign armies that were now securing their country.

The UNTAET administration and the CNRT were still trying to develop an effective plan to utilise this force. In the interim, the majority of their weapons were stored in a secure warehouse in Aileu. Some small arms were still available to them and members of the Falantil had a role in patrolling the town to assist the CivPol officers.

Adi, Rick and I headed up the steepest mountain roads we had encountered so far. The first incline was just five kilometres from Dili, after which the road went straight up. The vista was spectacular as the narrow road wound its way upward with a sheer drop down to Dili on the left side of the road. We disappeared among the clouds and mist on numerous occasions,
but we were also able to stop many times to look at the brilliant view of the harbour and the approaches to Dili.

Villages were small and were scattered throughout the minor valleys or plateaus that we could see from the road. The villages were collections of grass, mud brick or cement-brick huts and the now familiar burnt buildings. Even grass huts had been burnt by the retreating militia, and plenty of destroyed vehicles littered the embankments.

The inhabitants were a mix of ethnic origins. We encountered quite a few people who appeared to have an African background. I discovered later, while reading a book about Australian commandos fighting in Timor in 1944, that the Portuguese administration had brought in African soldiers in the 1800s to put down a rebellion in the colony. Many of these soldiers stayed and the legacy of their assimilation was now apparent, particularly in these mountain villages.

The road was the worst we had been on. The washaways on the steeper sections were dangerous and the road was subsiding quickly. Without maintenance, the road above the clouds was at risk of sliding down the mountain towards Dili.

The people strolling in the gutters along the roadside were friendly. As the front-seat passenger, I spent half my time high-fiving young children through the open window. The shouts of ‘Hey, mister’ reverberated through the villages as I tried to make sure my arm wasn’t wrenched off as each child tried to outdo the other for the title of ‘Mountain king hand-slapper’. Once again, I had the uncomfortable feeling that someone might end up under the wheels as the children jostled for position so they could be next in line. A very slow pace was required as we passed near homes.

Our search for Aileu and the famed Falantil was cut short. We had driven for two hours and climbed only 15 kilometres when the oil light flashed red. A check of the oil level on the flat showed it was not too bad, but subsequent checks on an incline showed little evidence of any fluid. The Falantil would have to wait until another day.

We turned the vehicle back down the mountain and, with an intermittently flashing warning light, low-gear driving with
regular braking and lots of idling, we made it back to Dili with the engine intact. We had travelled for four hours, managing just 30 kilometres. We headed to the beach for a swim and prepared for work again the next morning.

One of our best days in Dili occurred during the next week. The first group of East Timorese recruits was graduating. Lorraine had put in a huge effort organising much of the initial basic training and we were keen to recognise their efforts. This first group contained quite a few people who were going to be members of our border posts and we were eager to celebrate with them.

The acting Director-General of UNTAET came along — a powerful demonstration to the East Timorese officers that they were considered an important part of the new structure for their country. The new graduates were beaming as they received their certificates and were congratulated by UNTAET’s leader. They were proud and many of them made statements about how honoured they were to be the first trained officers to begin the rebuilding of East Timor.

It was a poignant moment for many of them and their emotions flowed out. It took us aback a little and proved to be a day that redefined our belief as to why we were in East Timor. A perfect cure for the blues — we were feeling useful again.

Our Canadian immigration officer friend was acting as the Border Service Controller. He also got caught up in the emotion

Small villages are scattered across valleys and plateaus.
of the moment, making an impassioned six-and-a-half-minute speech about the future and the responsibilities that these graduates carried on their shoulders. He told them that they were part of a service created to demonstrate and maintain East Timor's new sovereign rights. It was a great speech. The importance of the occasion was lightened with typical Australian irreverence as everyone fell over laughing at the interpreter's 30-second translation of the speech.

We shook hands and went into party mode. An unexpected present was that I also started to get calls from many of the supply supervisors — our new American ally was obviously working hard.

We had a few quiet beers with the group and then later with the Kiwis and others. A hint of euphoria was developing as the excitement of the graduates carried us along. This and the news that the Portuguese would arrive on Saturday morning meant the world was starting to look good!

The Portuguese arrived on the Saturday morning flight and we went to help them with their gear. Their arrival was a little different from ours. We had arrived with our new uniforms and a huge collection of equipment that we had considered necessary to complete our tasks. The Portuguese were more relaxed. No uniforms to be seen and no equipment.
Greetings and introductions revealed they were a 50-50 mixture of immigration and customs officers. I was quite sure they were no wiser about their initial role than we had been on our arrival. The important issue was that they were here and we needed all the help we could get. They were a friendly bunch. Three of them had been born in Timor pre-1975 — this was going to be a bonus.

Their check-in process was a little of the same-old, same-old scenario. They were not quite as patient as us. We survived the floating hotel for four days. They saw the accommodation and were visiting their embassy within an hour.

We got together with the Kiwis on Saturday night to meet the Portuguese properly. They were fed a diet of embellished stories and I think they finished the night wondering what was actually going on.
Some issues of concern just wouldn’t go away, most notably the procurement difficulties. The gear was out there somewhere, it just wasn’t easy to get. There were frustrations for others as well.

Not long after celebrating the first graduation, Cancio, our East Timorese leader, and I were called down to the training rooms to assist with some delicate negotiations. It appeared that a group of former customs officers was causing trouble at the training centre, harassing the training staff and students. We arrived to find an angry group loudly supporting a man who was waving a metal bar at anyone he saw.

He and the others had applied for positions in the Border Service when they were advertised prior to our arrival. They were demanding to know why they had been passed over for people who had no experience in border control activities. This was a reasonable demand as they had worked for the Indonesian administration prior to the election and had probably assumed the new Border Service would employ them. It was an issue about status and the ability to feed oneself. Emotions were running high. One of the training staff told us that the man with the metal pipe had been in the building the week before threatening students and promising to wreck everything if he wasn’t given a job.

Our discussion didn’t start that amicably, but our priority was to take possession of the pipe so Cancio could talk. Fortunately, my presence as a foreigner seemed to assist our appearance of strength. I was able to remove the metal pipe with
a little bit of bluff and a close body manoeuvre — also known as sneaking up quickly from behind and grabbing the pipe out of his hand. Once the weapon was taken away, we were able to talk to the group and Cancio was able to explain the process of selecting and training applicants. A few promises were made about the future and the need for more officers when the Oecussi enclave was opened in two months. I didn’t envy Cancio having to sell this proposal to his countrymen, but he did a terrific job. The man who had wielded the pipe was still very upset. He had taken a seat in the back row, but maintained an angry stare.

It was turning into an eventful day. Next it was back to UN headquarters to see our new American ally who was banging on doors on our behalf. The confrontation with the unemployed group had reminded me of the need to get the service conditions sorted out for the staff moving to the border. I raised the issue of the relocation expenses and was immediately put in my place. We were told equipment issues had been keeping her busy. The issue of relocation expenses for locals would be looked at later.

The frustration at the lack of an instant solution was building, but as usual, in that environment, there were no quick fixes. Our next challenge came in the form of fridges. Adi and I arrived at the UN compound to seek out some small refrigerators that had been allocated to Border Control. Anyone who enjoys a little understatement would be delighted to hear that things did not quite go to plan.

We found our way to the building management supply office and were greeted by Kim. Earlier in the week, he had told Adi that we could have four small fridges, all we had to do was sign a form. Upon our arrival, however, it was obvious that his cooperative demeanour had evaporated.

Our request for the fridges was met with by the response: ‘Sorry, I can’t give you any. Mr Lim [the supply supervisor] owns the entire consignment. They need to be counted and I’m waiting for him to tell me how many he doesn’t want.’

We asked how long this process might take. Kim said that it would happen as soon as Mr Lim knew how many fridges he didn’t want. He was unwilling to explain the process or suggest
when they may become available. Our further attempts to clarify
the matter were met by a tirade of meaningless excuses. Kim had
clearly lost interest in providing us with fridges.

When Adi suggested that we should visit Mr Lim, Kim
sighed and said, ‘What a great idea. Bye!’

As I walked along the verandah of Kim’s office muttering
and complaining about the delays, it finally dawned on me that
I was engrossed in a conversation with myself; Adi was nowhere
to be seen. I backtracked to find him lying on a shaded wooden
bench, breathing deeply as he attempted to calm himself. I had
forgotten that this was not Adi’s first meeting with Kim. It was
obviously getting to him.

We found our way into the supervisor’s office and, on
approach to his desk, it was impossible not to notice the absence of
any hint of a smile on his face. He glared at us before delivering an
unwelcoming tirade, including the shouted: ‘Not you again!’ I felt
a sense of foreboding. Adi had been here before too.

After explaining to Mr Lim that we had come to see him
about his consignment of fridges, he ranted for some time, the
general gist being that he did not own the fridges, that Kim was
a stupid man and that we should never return to his office.

Adi tried to seize the initiative, asking if he was suggesting
that we should go back to Kim and tell him that Mr Lim didn’t
care what Kim did with the fridges, so he should give us four? Adi
then demonstrated incredible agility, quickly covering the
distance between himself and Mr Lim in order to put his arm
around his shoulder and attempt to quell his steaming anger.
It was time to go. Hurriedly leaving the shaking Mr Lim behind,
we dashed back to Kim’s office where our news resulted in Kim
handing me a pen to sign the release form. The fridges were just
a scribbled name away from becoming ours.

At the last moment, however, Kim’s fear of the possible
consequences overcame his desire to rid himself of us at any cost
and he rang Mr Lim for final confirmation. We heard Kim say our
names and the word ‘fridge’ before the blood drained from his face
and he feebly crumpled over the counter. His right hand dropped
the telephone as his left hand screwed up our requisition form.
The sound of the ball of paper landing in the metal bin preceded the slamming door that announced the arrival of a storming Mr Lim. The fiery encounter between the two men left us in no doubt that we should leave. Mr Lim now claimed that neither he nor Kim could release the fridges and that someone else higher up the chain of command chain had to make the decision. Much to my surprise, Adi suggested to Mr Lim that we should visit this person straightaway. Mr Lim didn’t care, but gave us a final piece of advice: ‘Don’t ever visit me again!’

Adi now had his second wind. There was a challenge to be overcome, there was pride on the line and, of course, the small matter of actually needing the fridges.

The ‘person of higher authority’ proved to be adept at dealing with nuisances such as ourselves and we were made to wait. Our explanation of the day’s events and request for four fridges led to a most unfortunate response. The manager decided to ring Kim for clarification. I am sure Kim appreciated the call. For the next five minutes we listened as the two discussed the need for the entire shipment of fridges to be counted and why we couldn’t have any until this was completed. At one point, however, the tone of their conversation changed and it appeared that there had been a breakthrough in discussions.

We were bemused when the manager hung up the telephone, absentmindedly looked at a loaf of bread on his desk and said: ‘Do you know, since you guys started collecting duty my bread now costs two dollars instead of one dollar fifty?’ I refrained from saying that we didn’t know food was getting dearer as there was no point buying food when you don’t have a fridge.

With his views on the cost of living out of the way, the manager suggested that, if we came back with our van on Monday, it was possible that the fridges would have been counted and he might be able to release four. We knew we were beaten and couldn’t afford to spend a full day pursuing the matter. That afternoon we convinced our fellow team members (and ourselves) that we had received a commitment of sorts and that everything would turn out fine after the weekend.
When the new week arrived, it was time to return for the fridges. Adi and I approached the task with a grim determination, tinged with an expectation of battle and possibly defeat at the hands of a hardy foe.

An 8.30am arrival got us there just in time for the old wooden door to be unlocked from within. Missing the metallic click of the lock would have prolonged the sit on the outside step. Our senses were too in tune to miss such a telltale sign!

Once inside the game was on again. We were still there 40 minutes later. Eventually, Adi and I went for plan B. We decided to sit in! It was airconditioned in the supervisor’s office so it wasn’t the most unpleasant decision we had ever made.

Out came the notebook and pen. Every excuse offered to us was dutifully recorded. If we didn’t quite understand the explanation we would ask for it to be repeated and then it was slowly and dutifully recorded. It was probably the fact that we weren’t going away that finally won the day. Before the sweat on the requisition form smudged away the prized autograph of the supply supervisor, we were out the door and heading for our vehicle to find the supply store on the wharf.

That night some of us went for a meal at the food carts opposite the UNTAET headquarters. We were developing a taste for the authentic local meals. Pork satay sticks, mixed vegetables and rice wrapped in a banana leaf were excellent. The cleanliness and food preparation skills of the people in this somewhat unsightly market were of a very high standard and we were becoming regulars.

Our next day was no less eventful. The Kiwis had been running the airport for two months and were due for a few days off. We took a turn at the airport. It was an eye-opener to deal with the various nationalities and different people who flowed through the tiny buildings.

A great example of the language difficulties that occur, even when we all think we are speaking and understanding each other’s English, was when Adi became engaged in a conversation with a Timorese man who was working in the small drink kiosk that had opened in the passenger hall. For 20 minutes, I listened as Adi told the man that he looked a lot like the man who worked at our accommodation units in Dili.
Adi kept saying that they must be related and the young man responded with nods and smiles as Adi persisted with his story. The conversation got around to them possibly being brothers before I could hold my tongue no longer. The smiles and nods from the man were not an attempt to agree with him — simply bewilderment. Adi was not happy when I explained that the man was not a relative of our friend in Dili, it was actually him!

Airports are always interesting places and we got to meet six Australian ex-servicemen who flew in to visit an orphanage for which they were benefactors. The six men had been in the 2/2 Independent Commando Company that was stationed in Timor when the Japanese invaded during World War II. They were the same men I was reading a book about. Their arrival took me by surprise. The Australian Defence Force was sponsoring their visit. Peter and I were invited to visit them at the Australian Army mess before they headed off into the country to see the orphanage.

The night at the airport finished with a wet season downpour. The transport for the local airport staff did not arrive so we offered them a lift home. Much easier said than done. We headed off to the outer suburbs and backstreets where we had not ventured before, splitting the groups into those who lived near each other. I was the winner and got the group who claimed they lived near our own accommodation.

To make it easy I headed to our units and then took directions from there. I took the opportunity to brush up on some Indonesian and insisted they called out kiri (left), kanan (right) and lurus (straight ahead). Things would have been far easier if kiri started with L and kanan with R.

An hour and a half, three river crossings and an indeterminate number of ‘kiris’, ‘Make that left here, no, no, straight ahead’ and ‘Oh, there it is over there!’ later, I finally deposited the last passenger near the Comoro River. To deliver the group I had driven about 70 kilometres. I drove through many places I hadn’t seen before and, due to the teeming rain, I can safely say I still hadn’t seen much of them.
The Border Service was becoming a viable force within Dili and at the airport. Even the system at the wharf had improved significantly. At the same time, Dili itself was changing rapidly. With development came a noticeable shift in attitude among many of the East Timorese.

Incidents such as the stoning of the refugee convoy and the struggles in the training centre had given us an inkling of the group mindset that sometimes pervaded the society. The tendency to very quickly form large noisy groups was a common way the East Timorese expressed their concerns and feelings.

One concern for the Border Service was to ensure that a system of underhand payments or gratuities to obtain favours did not creep in. It was a prime consideration of the selection committee when selecting suitable candidates.

An incident we witnessed at the training centre demonstrated the need for the strict selection procedures. It was an insight into some of the difficult situations the East Timorese officers would probably encounter in the future. A couple of us visited the old Customs House to find about 20 men milling around the entrance, arguing heatedly with the Canadian acting controller. Just before going on leave, the Kiwis had seized a large quantity of undeclared goods during a ship search at Dili wharf. The master of the vessel had a supply of goods that were not listed on the cargo manifest. He intended to bring them ashore illicitly during the night when the wharf patrols were less active. They were favour parcels for some of the wharfies.
It was the Border Service’s first official seizure of any significance on the waterfront and the action had not been well received. People had the right to appeal such seizures and the wharfies decided to pursue this option, but not in the most common way, by writing a letter or complaining at the front counter. Their appeal took the form of arriving at the door en masse and attempting to intimidate the staff into returning their possessions.

The majority of staff were housed in the civil service common area at the main UN headquarters. The only things at the old Customs House were the training centre, the workmen rebuilding the place and the seized goods secured in a temporary strong room.

The wharfies should not have known that the seized goods were being held at the training premises, but they did and they wanted them. The East Timorese officers were still in the classroom and weren’t experienced at dealing with this type of confrontation. They had borne the brunt of violent group rampages in the recent past and could easily be forgiven for not wanting to take a stand against this group.

The wharfies had chosen their ground wisely. They had most likely been tipped off about the storage area and knew that there were no security staff at the old Customs House.

We arrived as the struggle of wills was nearing an end, though our arrival hastened the departure of the appellants. After some initial subtle questioning and demands, the group had rushed the front doors, yelling and screaming as they tried to force their way through the building. They had come face to face with the acting controller, who stood his ground and refused them further entry into the building.

Once again, we witnessed the curious nature of East Timorese group displays. The protest had the appearance of violence, but was just a bluff. It was performed with a boisterous enthusiasm and was very convincing. So far, I had only seen situations in which the group understood quite clearly how far they could push a situation without it descending into mayhem. This knowledge was probably not any comfort to our Canadian friend, but he held his ground.
Later, we suggested to the acting controller that he act a little more carefully in the future to ensure that the word ‘temporary’ described the position he held as acting controller and not his existence in the world. We didn’t think it wise to place oneself in a dangerous predicament too often in the belief that the protagonists would always stop short of carrying out their threats. The afternoon ended with the acting controller issuing a statement to the Kiwis to find a better place for any goods they seized.

That night Peter and I went to Australian Defence Force headquarters to meet with the old commandos who had arrived earlier in the week. They were sprightly and as tough as nails. The youngest member of the group, a mere 82 years old, was full of stories from their war days. They had nothing but respect for the Timorese, who had helped them through those tough battles and escapades. It was an incredible feeling for us to meet and speak to these men only a few days after reading the book of their adventures some 60 years earlier. Talking to them left no doubt that every ounce of the hardship and the struggles recounted in their book were true.

Their plan was to visit a town called Los Palos, situated at the eastern end of the island. There was an orphanage there that had received money and gifts from this group since 1945. They had come to visit for the last time to make sure that someone else would carry on their work after they were gone. The Retired SAS Members’ Association gave an undertaking to these old diggers that the unit would continue the good work on their behalf. In a very emotional moment, one of the men remarked to his wife that he would now be able to die happy in the knowledge that the orphanage was in safe hands and would not be forgotten.

The next morning was a bit slow for Peter and I. We started work at the airport at 5.30am — an early start after our late night with the army. An easy day would have been ideal. On our arrival there seemed to be more than the usual number of East Timorese staff on hand to process the flights. My first thoughts were grateful thanks that the Kiwis had arranged for extra staff so that as inexperienced Aussies we didn’t ruin the processes they had worked so hard to implement.
The reality was that the roster had been misinterpreted by one of the shift supervisors. Two full shifts had turned up for the early start. One group was six hours early and no one was going to admit to being the wrong group. The most difficult part of an early morning shift is obviously the early bit. After making the effort to get out of bed and travel to work it is all downhill from there. There would be no prizes for the group that admitted it was wrong and had to go home only to return later. No one could get home right then anyway. The drivers who provided a shuttle service had completed their part of the bargain and were home enjoying breakfast, or were at their second job.

The situation wasn’t solved quickly. Both groups were adamant that they were right. When we stepped in with a solution our ability to speak clear English vanished. The problem was solved when a plane landed and everyone swung into action. No one went home. Adi and Jeff would be disappointed on the afternoon shift, as in all likelihood they would be there alone.

Friday came and the Kiwis returned. With great fervour we handed back the keys to the airport. For us it was back to meetings and arrangements for the border. We were convinced our place was out in the countryside.

That morning I attended a meeting to continue planning for the Border Service. We were continually trying to find ways to enhance the feelings of pride within the East Timorese. We needed to prove to them that progress was being made and remind them that we were in East Timor to assist them to develop, not to take over.

It was agreed that one of the best ways to develop pride within the organisation was the provision of a uniform. Uniforms bind groups and this group would rely heavily on a team ethos. Operating in an environment in which almost everything had been taken away from them, the worth of the uniform could not be overestimated.

Like us, the Kiwis had brought their uniforms to East Timor. We had all added a few items, such as national flags and other UN paraphernalia. The sheer volume of badges we had managed to fit into the available space was amazing. It was a small pleasure we all enjoyed.
The East Timorese were still wearing their civvies — a situation that was made worse when they had to crawl under trucks, through cargo holds on ships or unload lorries in a paddock. Early in our deployment we made attempts to organise uniforms for the local staff, but it wasn’t really on the agenda at such an early stage. Understandably, it was a small issue for the hierarchy dealing with the myriad reconstruction issues. For the East Timorese workers, it was a very important matter.

As we tried to solve the issue of the uniforms it became apparent that there were definite benefits in having our new friend within the UN administration, proving once and for all that having friends in the right places works. After some timely advice and lots of digging around, we discovered a yet to be tapped budget that would enable us to make some interim purchases until the formal system kicked in further down the track. If we were ever in such a situation again this knowledge of the system would make us more effective at a far earlier stage.

This new discovery was relayed to the others at a team meeting one morning, when we told everyone that we had found a way to make a quick purchase of two pairs of trousers, five shirts, a pair of boots and a few other items for every officer on the payroll. Now a very simple choice needed to be made — was it to be khaki, green, brown or blue? East Timorese and internationals alike embraced the idea and eagerly discussed the colour options.

Next came the question about what symbol or name could be embroidered on the uniform to depict the Border Service, which opened a can of worms, but at least everyone was arguing about something positive that was going to happen.

The word ‘Customs’ was definitely out because we were a combined customs, immigration and quarantine service. We also knew that our controller would prefer not to have customs embroidered boldly in yellow on the uniform as it was on our blue overalls. The controller, being absent in Melbourne at the time, was not a factor in this decision-making process.

The first badge suggestion was ‘POLATIL’, a CNRT preferred term meaning both East Timor Customs Police and Police Customs of Timor Leste.
A second suggestion was ‘CONTROLE DE FRONTEIRA’. This translated from Portuguese as Border Control. The final suggestion was for a large embroidered patch that covered a few languages and ideas — Customs Police, Border Control and Frontier Guards, the lot. POLICIA ADUANEIRA — BORDER CONTROL — CONTROLE DE FRONTEIRA.

This matter was one for the Timorese to decide. They eventually decided on a symbol representing ‘the land of the sleeping crocodile’ as a suitable Border Service badge.

Future political issues about names could be dealt with by the administration when the official uniform was developed further down the track. The long-term solution probably rested with the choice of an official language for the country.

Cancio and the CNRT representatives made some thought-provoking insights at the meeting. We were aware that UNTAET was keen to develop a civilian-style customs and immigration administration. Cancio casually suggested that he saw a different set-up. His ideas reflected those alluded to by Xanana Gusmao at our recent meeting with him.

Their thoughts were quite distinct. They wanted a police-paramilitary type regime.

The next Saturday morning turned out to be very interesting. We were at the UNTAET headquarters dealing with some office issues and Adi and I decided to wander outside to see what was happening.

We had noticed on our arrival that there were far more people than usual hanging around in the car park. Security staff prevented entry into the administration areas for those without business to complete, but access to outdoor areas was
unrestricted. The number of people scattered around under the verandahs and large trees suggested that something other than normal business was in the wind. This was supported by the fact that it was Saturday, a day when the average person should have been at home enjoying a day off.

It turned out to be what I refer to as the day of the ‘almost riot’ in downtown Dili. On Friday, an announcement had been made on UNTAET radio advising that anyone who had recently registered for work should visit the administration building on Saturday morning. People selected for work in the next week would find their names posted on the noticeboards. We had no idea this announcement had been made.

About 1,500 people arrived by 9am to be confronted with a list of just 50 names. You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to see that 50 was not a significant percentage of 1,500. There were certainly more disappointed attendees than those leaping for joy. Very soon more than 1,400 people had become agitated. By midday, friends and relatives were arriving and the mood was fast becoming unpleasant as they sat around brooding in the hot sun.

Eventually, the swelling crowd began to congregate at the front of the UNTAET complex looking for somewhere to vent their frustration. By this time, the authorities had noted the restlessness and were anticipating potential problems. About 40 Portuguese military police, dressed in full riot gear, arrived to form a barrier at the front of the complex. The outfits suggested that they were very serious about the situation that was developing. Each man was decked out in a heavy-duty black flak jacket and carried a large baton. There were numerous firearms on display, most noticeably bulging rubber-bullet guns.

The police at the front of the formation nearest to the crowd wore rigid armour. The body armour was made of Kevlar and covered the chest, stomach, groin, arms and legs. On their arrival, they had also been wearing full-face helmets with visors — reminiscent of Robocop. The senior Danish CivPol officer had convinced them that this look was a little too provocative and they had secured the helmets out of sight.
The now massed crowd of job seekers, friends and relatives continued to mill around and the discontent was turning to shouting and the odd launch of a stone. By this time, Adi and I had moved among various parts of the crowd. There was some history in the making here. The unusual part of the entire exercise was that no one from the administration or police appeared to make any attempt to negotiate with the crowd as the restlessness grew. Everyone appeared a little bewildered by the whole situation.

Adi and I tried to get some action on the video camera and moved among the crowd. We were careful not to get cut off from the police. It was a typically hot day and the sweat was running down our backs. I couldn’t help thinking that a good sea breeze could have provided a timely panacea. On this occasion, the climate was not going to play a part in any calming process.

As time passed, some of the people developed a look of agitation, their eyes betraying serious intent. The real agitators among the group stood out, with the vast majority of people simply looking very annoyed and frustrated. Eventually, lots of noise and banging started up. The agitators made a big effort to make the crowd aggressive and stir it into action. They were smart enough to foresee the futility of making a charge at the police, wisely choosing not to commit a frontal assault and the possible casualty list that would follow.

This turned into a huge reservoir of aggressive energy that didn’t have anywhere to go, resulting in a display reminiscent of a Zulu war dance. En masse, everyone started chanting, stamping their feet and jumping up and down. It was another display of Timorese controlled group aggression, which clearly projected anger and a forceful image. There just didn’t seem to be that extra catalyst that was required to push them over the edge. Although the crowd gave the appearance of a Zulu army ready to surge forward, it didn’t happen.

The protestors even allowed room for the passage of the East Timorese version of an ice-cream van, which arrived with refreshments for the crowd during the troubled gathering. Wheeling a handcart brim-full of coconuts, a young man made his way through the crowd. As people danced and ranted around
him, he calmly hacked the tops off coconuts with his machete and sold the instant two-in-one drink and meal for 2,000 rupiah each. The thirsty throng welcomed it, although the riot police didn’t seem too comfortable with the presence of the machete-wielding coconut-seller among the crowd.

The lack of any conciliatory moves by the administrators was the missing link in this situation. The only move that had been made was the positioning of the riot police.

Salvation eventually arrived. A police car moved slowly through the crowded entrance and stopped at the front of the building. Xanana Gusmao alighted and was immediately surrounded by local CivPol officers. Chants turned to cheering. After some discussion, Gusmao stepped up to a small dais and made a passionate though measured speech. His charisma floored the crowd. He held them spellbound for 20 minutes. To me, it seemed like a lifetime.

Even when faced with a large agitated group, Gusmao spoke very quietly, almost with reverence. Most of the crowd probably did not hear a word he said, but that did not seem to matter. Gusmao’s mere presence calmed the whole situation to a whisper. Replaying the video proved it; we could hear a rooster crowing in the distance during his speech.

Gusmao seemed to allay their fears. I couldn’t help thinking that I was in one of those South American newsreels from the 1970s in which the likes of Peron and others captivated the crowds. Soon after Gusmao stepped off the dais, the crowd started to disperse peacefully.

A short time after the incident, I wandered around the nearby streets seeking some lunch. I ventured out apprehensively, expecting to see small groups of people sitting around brooding further. This was not the case — everyone had gone home.

It had all ended well but the East Timorese had sent a firm message. Employment was wanted, desired and needed! A short-term solution was easily found. Timorese were paid about $A150 a month to clean up the mess around town. Long-term employment was a more difficult issue.
Riding large four-wheel motorcycles isn’t a bad way to spend a Sunday morning at work. Someone had to do it! A Canadian army unit had been stationed on the southern land border. Their time was up and they were going home. The Canadians had 11 four-wheel motorcycles that were about six months old. They were the typical hybrid farm/racing four-wheeler, except that they were camouflage green. The Canadians had operated in the rugged border area near Suai. It was going to be too expensive to take the bikes to Canada so their diplomatic mission decided they would donate them to the cause. Border Control and CivPol were getting the lot.

I was to make a speech on Sunday afternoon thanking the Canadians for their generosity and they wanted us to parade the bikes for the cameras. We were told to do a few wheel-spins in front of the UNTAET building, but first we had to get the bikes from a storage shed and ride them back to the office.

Driving around Dili was difficult in a car. Riding through the main streets on bikes intended for the dirt was very interesting. They handled poorly on their big balloon tyres and manoeuvring them on bitumen wasn’t easy. There were no indicators, mirrors or helmets — which was no different from the traffic already out on the roads, as nothing on the road was licensed at the time. Anything that moved could appear on the road. We were fortunate it was a Sunday and the traffic wasn’t too thick.

The press show went smoothly. The area in front of the UNTAET building was bathed in sunshine. It was empty except for us. The only noise was that of the bikes and the photographer telling everyone to smile and shake hands. It was hard to imagine that 24 hours earlier this car park had been the scene of a tumultuous display of discontent by the East Timorese.

We eventually took the bikes to the transport yard where the UN vehicles were serviced and housed. Maintenance was needed on the majority of the bikes before they could enter service. It was with some trepidation that we left the machines. Firstly, we had to negotiate with someone to access funds for the repairs. Secondly, we knew these racing machines would be the
envy of every person in Dili. I hoped the bikes would be there when we returned.

A late-afternoon swim at the beach cooled us off after leaving the bikes. Peter and I were driving to Batugade the next day to attend a meeting with senior PKF officers on the border and some TNI representatives. It would be our first chance to officially tell the Indonesian Army that we were intending to begin our activities there in the near future.
April was passing rapidly. Security agencies along the border, led by an Australian brigadier from the PKF contingent, were having discussions with their opposites in the TNI units securing West Timor. The meetings were held every two or three weeks.

The meetings could help us develop a better understanding of the border security environment and give us a direct link with the Indonesian administration through which we could keep them informed of our intentions. It was vital that everyone was aware of any changes that might upset the delicate status quo at the border to prevent misunderstandings that could result in undesirable reactions. Peter and I set off to Batugade to attend one of these meetings.

There weren’t enough Border Service cars to spare so we booked a vehicle from the car pool in advance. Our reward for an early booking was receipt of an almost new, shiny, white four-wheel drive. It was part of a gifted shipment of cars that had recently arrived in Dili. This particular vehicle had only 760 kilometres on the clock and still had the manufacturer’s plastic protective film on the inside of the doors. It was a five-speed manual turbo-charged diesel, something that we thought would be great for the steep mountains we would have to negotiate on the coastal route to Batugade.

The vehicle was not like any I had driven before. Although probably very capable in the environment it was designed to operate in, it was not overly comfortable in the mountainous
terrain of the western end of East Timor and it was definitely no climber. Of the five gears, even second was too high for a climb of any significance. There was no choice but to drop into first gear quickly to prevent the vehicle from stalling halfway up a steep incline. It became basically a 10km/h crawl up each hill, though the manual gearing was great for the descents.

The mountainous sections of the road to Batugade were a repetitive series of blind bends and steep inclines, followed by long, sweeping downhill runs that usually ended abruptly at the next blind bend. The road was wide enough only for one and a half vehicles, with cliffs that fell away alarmingly to the ocean on one side. It was easy to see that possible death or injury awaited any person who sped into the corners on this part of the coast.

Although the trip was slow, the view for the passengers was scenic. Magnificent sweeping views of the ocean on the right and steep jungle-covered hills on the left, merged with a narrow road winding its way up and down the coastal range. It was only a 120-kilometre drive to Batugade from Dili, but it took at least two and a half hours. The middle section was very mountainous, while the flatter sections near the border were dotted with small villages. In the villages, the majority of homes were built close to the road — a road that was never intended to be a major thoroughfare. The villagers considered the road their front yard and they strolled casually from house to house. It was wise to slow down considerably.

The mountain landscape changed on the drive west, from thick jungle to cliffs of bare shale. The rock faces had subsided numerous times and years of frugal maintenance on the rock walls and barriers had left the road at grave risk of being buried under a landslide. It was also possible that the road could simply drop into the sea as the uncontrolled streams running down the ravines cut it away from underneath.

Traffic was reasonably sparse for the majority of the journey, but that did not deny us some excitement. As we rounded a sharp bend and speared through the canopy of trees that encroached from a ravine below, we were confronted by
a person jumping up and down, motioning madly for us to stop. We obeyed swiftly, quickly scanning the surrounding area for any sign of trouble. We need not have worried. The man was simply trying to prevent us from running into three vehicles stopped immediately around the next bend. We pulled over to see what was happening — although we had no choice really as it was impossible to pass.

The right-hand side of the road was a 90-degree cliff drop. It was heavily wooded with small but finely entangled trees, which was fortunate as an old ute had been caught by the branches about 20 metres down. Its rear pointed down the cliff and only the tight meshing of the trees had prevented the vehicle and its occupants from crashing to the huge rocks that jutted upwards from the sea hundreds of metres below.

On initial inspection, we were horrified to see a pair of legs protruding from under the front end of the vehicle, but soon the legs moved. They belonged to the driver who was keenly gathering up the fruit and vegetables scattered throughout the trees. He was trying to save the cargo and it seemed no risk was too great to ensure every piece of produce was recovered.

From the confused conversation and the reversed right-angled position of the car to the road, we assumed that the driver had attempted to stop and turn around on the bend. A manoeuvre like that on a steep incline in wet conditions had no chance of success, particularly as the vehicle had stalled during the turn.

Our demonstrative friend on the road had been stopping all oncoming traffic in the vain hope of finding someone with some heavy-duty rope to assist in recovering the vehicle. The three vehicles in our path had now moved on, unable to provide assistance. They were happy with the meagre rope we offered them from our kit and, after establishing that no one was injured, we also continued our journey. We were extremely careful as we entered the next few bends.

The five-kilometre strip of road just before Batugade was a stark reminder of the economic extremes of East Timor. As the road crossed a salt-producing tidal flat, there were a concentration
of huts made of old baked-earth bricks or mud walls. The roofs were thatched palm fronds through which smoke from the fires used to produce salt drifted slowly across the flats. The whole environment looked like it had stopped developing a hundred years ago and wealth was simply not a factor in life.

The most important possessions in this area appeared to be the small East Timorese horses used to carry produce to market. The people eking out a living on these muddy flats probably looked at the vehicles roaring by on the sealed road and wondered what world the people within inhabited.

Batugade was far more developed and, before the elections, it would have been a thriving rice-producing town on an important road junction. There seemed to be a population of about 100, but closer inspection revealed many houses scattered in the surrounding paddies and cultivated land. Numerous collapsed houses suggested the population had been larger.

Peter and I arrived at Batugade and went immediately to the Kobe huts that were to be our office. We didn’t know anyone so we settled in for the evening. There were no police or administration staff of any description within Batugade. The Australian Army occupied the beachfront near the spot where we had landed in the helicopter on our previous trip, but there were no other UNTAET personnel living in the town. There was a house down the road with a Timor Aid sign posted outside, but the doctor was out working on a vaccination program in the nearby villages.

There was no power in the town so we ate early, preparing for an early night. As the light waned, we consumed the army pack rations of canned beef and vegetables, dry biscuits with canned cheese and washed it down with some tepid tea. Dessert was the four-pack chewing gum I was sure had been left over from some World War II ration pack.

Dinner was over and we were just starting to wonder if 7pm was too early to climb under our mosquito nets and go to sleep, when a person appeared out of the shadows with a big ‘Hello!’ The crumbling old Portuguese fort next door had been claimed by the UNHCR, but it had appeared deserted on our
arrival. There was life after all — the occupant had just returned home and offered us some hospitality.

We leapt excitedly to our feet and headed for the fort. On the northern wall facing the ocean an old gun tower had been converted into a palm-leaf shelter. A cushioned cane lounge suite filled the space extremely well. Before we knew what was happening we had a cold beer in our hands and some cooked prawns on a plate. During the evening we were given the good oil on how the town was run. This included some advice on how not to cause any difficulties for the international staff who crossed the border daily to assist with reparation and refugee business. We returned to our post that night coveting our host’s accommodation.

The night was not as quiet as we had hoped it would be. After 150 rooster crows, innumerable pig squeals and yapping dogs topped off by two goats trying to burst into our net-encased accommodation, we arose at 5am, probably not as refreshed as we would have liked.

The sandbagged police post that stood in the middle of the intersection, immediately outside our hut, appeared to be the playground for the wandering goats and stray dogs. This accounted for the rapidly deteriorating condition of the sandbags — the dusty contents slowly spilling across the town centre.

The meeting with the PKF, Indonesian and other border security representatives was an interesting experience. Both sides
of the land border were under military administration, resulting in 95 per cent of the attendees being soldiers or police.

It was held about three kilometres east of Batugade within a complex that had probably been a school until recently. The location placed it well inside East Timor and the Indonesian representatives had driven in convoy through Batugade to get there. It was very well guarded. Some locals might not have been as understanding as the administrators about the Indonesians’ presence.

We sat in a sweltering room about 20 metres long and four metres wide. It had a new corrugated iron roof and the numerous holes in the walls were covered with nailed-up flywire. The diplomatic conference table was a collection of hessian-covered trestles. The meeting went for three hours.

It was a tactical meeting conducted with the highest level of diplomacy. Many issues were covered. Some were crucial, others somewhat petty. The important thing was that everyone from each side was talking.

The hardest task was that of the interpreter, who needed to translate every word, though a casual observer could see that everybody in the room already understood what had been said. The translator left the meeting a drained man.

It was going to be interesting to see how some of the issues would be solved in the future. We now had a role in this delicate and intricate part of the UNTAET mission. We had never been in such a position before. People in authority were expecting us to represent the regional civilian government.

For the rest of the day we took the opportunity to develop as much knowledge and intelligence about our area of operation as possible. Our inquiries and patrols in the area indicated that there was a lot happening in the border region. Disputed sections of the wide and dry riverbeds were being marked with pegs to prevent further incidents.

The family reunion days held at Batugade were another consideration for us. On specified days the border was opened at the bridge crossing and thousands of people swarmed across to visit relatives. The days were necessary, as the border that now
divided the two countries had separated many families. For the past 25 years families had lived on both sides of the river — they were now split. Similarly, the many people who had fled to West Timor were now cut off from family and friends. This could have been by choice or by circumstances, but they were all keen to find out more about what was happening in East Timor and to each other.

The upcoming reunion at Easter looked like being a huge occasion. Good Friday was two days away. It was the last planned reunion day before we were due to arrive to begin our duties. Even after our arrival, it would be an organisational and security role that remained firmly in the hands of the military.

While in Batugade we were also introduced to the region’s United Nations Military Observers (UNMOs). UNMOs performed a dangerous and exacting role along the border. They were military officers from various countries acting as border policemen — not police for the community, but police ensuring the two military forces obeyed the border protocols.

Two UNMOs were stationed on each side at various locations along the border. They acted as an independent referee and were the daily link between the military on each side. If there was a border incident, UNMOs would investigate and provide an independent assessment of the incident. They also tried to identify difficulties before they became problems. Unarmed and wearing their national military uniform, UNMOs had a vital and extremely dangerous role.

The UNMOs later proved to be an essential source of communication on our behalf with the TNI at the border posts and the Polisi Republik Indonesia (POLRI). Unfortunately for us they rotated positions along the border constantly. This was understandable as the need to remain impartial was more important than the need for them to have a developed knowledge of the area of operation.

Adi and Jeff drove into Batugade late in the afternoon. They had driven across from Dili to oversee the installation of equipment at the post. They intended to then drive across the mountains down to the south coast to supervise similar
construction work at Suai. Very little had been done to our quarters since the helicopter visit and we knew they would not be pleased when they saw the lack of progress.

We left Batugade armed with a great deal of new knowledge and the understanding that Adi and Jeff were hard at work speeding up our transfer to the border. As we drove back to Dili, we were surprised as we passed the scene of the cliff-defying vegetable truck. The owners had managed to haul it up the cliff.

As we neared Liquica, we saw an elderly man by the side of the road standing inside a tree trunk making a canoe. The tree, selected carefully for its canoe-like shape, was just 10 metres from the main road. After choosing the tree he had simply chopped it down and begun work — on location.

The tree was a soft whitewood and the man was carving it as he stood inside the cavity he had created with a tool that looked like a big metal rod with a chiselled end. It was a time-consuming and physically demanding task. We asked about the manufacturing process, eliciting an ‘Empat hari’, meaning it would be finished in four days. Adi and Jeff saw him a few days later as they passed by and it was almost done. The form was excellent.

Good Friday arrived and the Timorese had planned a huge celebration. The rebuilt churches of Dili were going to be filled to the brim and processions were planned for this important day on the East Timorese calendar.

For the local staff it meant three days off, so the international staff took up the slack at the airport and wharf. I got up early on Friday morning and went for a run before work. Not a lot was happening because most Timorese activities were on hold. Only the Chinese traders and a few others were going about their usual business.

Near the beach I came across a horse eating a coconut. No ordinary horse. It had somehow broken the coconut open and was slurping the milk and eating the soft flesh within. Either East Timorese horses were adept at cracking open coconuts, or I had come across a very special horse. The horse was enjoying its meal and was oblivious to my stunned gaze. Eventually, with a smile
on my face, I jogged on, knowing probably nobody would believe me.

It was difficult trying to move around the centre of Dili near the cathedral during the day due to the many processions. Enormous efforts had been made to create delicate wreaths and religious artefacts to carry. This Easter was probably the most significant occasion the East Timorese had celebrated in many years. They had celebrated Christmas as a newly independent country, but this was the first time they had been in a position to march together in the belief that things would only get better. Their sombre mood reflected the spirit of Good Friday and the mood of people who were drawing on their faith to get them through a difficult time.

Getting into the spirit of festivities, we finished work a bit earlier on Friday, just in time for a swim at a great beach past the Jesus statue. That night, we found one of the newly opened restaurants. Dili was fast becoming a city of cafes and restaurants. The numbers grew throughout our deployment. It was the only industry really developing at the time.

This new restaurant was Chinese and it was full that night, proving popular because Chinese cuisine was a new taste among the many cafes, and because the Chinese were the only ones working on Good Friday. For us, the attraction was the choice of many dishes without meat.
Before we finished that night, Peter had some great news. He had been out prowling around and had discovered a source of basic but necessary items for the border post, proving once again that things could be done speedily by people finding things themselves. There were no prizes for those who sat back and waited for others to do it.
Easter Saturday was a quiet day within the predominantly Catholic community. It was also a quiet day for the UNTAET people. We needed to work over Easter so that we could have a couple of days off before we moved to Batugade. Not much was happening at the port or airport. Writing the UN directives that would provide the new legislative structure for customs and immigration matters would be difficult because many of the decision-makers and UN personnel we needed to discuss these matters with were in Darwin. We got ourselves back into procurement mode.

Peter went out to investigate a report from friends that the army might have a cache of equipment that we could access. He struck paydirt. Just as the Canadians had done earlier, the Australian Blackhawk squadron preparing to leave East Timor had decided that it was not practical to take back low-level support equipment such as chairs, tables, plastic water containers and blackboards. Much of it was subject to quarantine restrictions while other equipment was simply worn out. It was not worth freighting back to Australia and was not suitable for any other regiments in the region. The whole lot was there for the taking — a garage sale without charge.

Peter did us proud. He was out there among the hordes, searching relentlessly for anything that might help our cause. He was a sight to behold as he battled his way among others coveting the same items. Peter cajoled and swapped and grabbed whatever he could.
This day and a half of frenzied collecting and carting of goods back and forth in the stifling humidity was the turning point of our mission. I am in no doubt that had Peter not obtained this booty, we would not have managed to relocate to the border during our deployment.

Not only did we now have some furniture and other office essentials, we had simple tools such as shovels, axes and picks, which allowed us to clear the area where we were to set up camp at the border. Just as vital were the well-used canvas army stretchers, mosquito nets, new cakes of soap and other basics that we provided to the East Timorese officers who relocated with us. These items, which made our colleagues a little more comfortable were simple, but important. It was humbling to realise that simple items like these were of great value.

One item that Peter managed to store away in Mosquito House was a portable toilet. He was immensely proud of this converted metal bucket with a toilet seat — not just an ordinary seat, but one that could be raised and lowered. Peter was very protective of the seat during the ensuing days as we divided and stacked the equipment into lots for Batugade, Salele and a third pile for any other post we might be told to open.

While our sudden accumulation of assets meant that we could now dare to believe that we were seriously close to making the move to the border, it was not necessarily such a godsend for our Timorese colleagues. The impending move meant that they would be uprooted from their families as they transferred to the country. Our frenzy of excitement was tinged by their apprehension and it reminded me that our attempts at obtaining some relocation expenses for the East Timorese had not been finalised.

After our initial approach to the Civil Service a few weeks earlier, I had been instructed to go back to the East Timorese trainees and advise them that they were required to present their case for relocation expenses. I suggested they put together a list of demands. The East Timorese needed a starting point so we had a meeting to offer advice. Conscious that we were there to help and train the officers, we made an effort to be as impartial, but fair, as possible, all the while remembering that these people
This request was to house and feed nine people and to provide monthly return transport to their Dili-based families (translation below).

1. Rice for nine people for three months
   3 sacks per month = 9 sacks at 200,000 rupiah each = 1,800,000

2. Money for side dishes / daily = 75,000 rupiah for nine people,
   That is monthly = 2,250,000 rupiah x three months = 6,750,000

3. Money for renting house / monthly 1,000,000 rupiah,
   That is 1,000,000 rupiah x three months = 3,000,000

4. Money for transport back to Dili, per person,
   1 month = 100,000 x nine people = 900,000 rupiah,
   That is 900,000 rupiah x three = 2,700,000

5. Costs for power and water / month = 200,000 rupiah,
   That is 200,000 rupiah x three months = 600,000

Total 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 = 14,850,000 rupiah

(Fourteen million eight hundred and fifty thousand rupiah)
[approx. $A3,008]
relied on us and really needed our help. At the same time, we had to remember that the new administration would need to be able to afford any subsequent costs.

I hoped that the East Timorese would not get carried away and get too greedy. Little did I know how little they desired. There was no risk of an over-inflated request. They were looking for some extra money to cover things such as new cooking utensils, a bed, rent and access to clean drinking water, as they were leaving all their possessions with their families who would remain in Dili. There was also the issue of transport. They weren’t allowed to drive the cars we took to the border and they didn’t have cars of their own. They needed to be able to go home every now and then on their days off.

I was wide-eyed when their demands were presented to me on a piece of scrap paper. The group had discussed it at length, with great concern and thought, and this was the sum of their needs — and they felt bad about asking!

They explained that they would be very grateful for the assistance. I had presented the request to the appropriate authorities (the Border Service could not make such decisions) and was waiting for an answer. As we were now making our final preparations for the move, the matter needed to be resolved, but I would have to wait until the Easter holiday was over. It weighed on my mind. I was confident of success, but was also anxious for a result.

On Saturday night we went out to dinner at the house rented by the Portuguese. They had invited us to their place a few times and claimed to have some great chefs among the group. We needed to relax and took the opportunity, as very little else was open.

Their house was in the Comoro Delta. To the casual observer, driving along the main road towards the Comoro River, it wasn’t apparent that large suburban areas were situated just off the road. The small side laneway to the houses was squeezed in between a line of shanty-type tin shacks, including the fuel station with the fiery satay cookers.

The winding lane was paved but in need of urgent repair. The narrowness and condition of the road gave the impression of entering a poor shanty estate — accentuated by the sight of
numerous decaying fences and the haphazard positioning of the houses. The fences were broken cement pillars and bamboo sheets. There were many unkempt tropical gardens.

We arrived at the house to find the Portuguese anxiously awaiting us. They had encountered some minor trouble during the late afternoon and were clearly glad to see us. Once inside the house we discovered that the exterior façade was the antithesis of the interior. The large interior had been designed to maintain an extended family. Although most of the fittings were gone, it was easy to see that people of reasonable wealth had once occupied the house.

It had seven bedrooms, a large sunken lounge room and was tiled throughout. The tiles had been relaid since the Portuguese arrived. It was rare to find a house with tiles intact unless they had been replaced after the September violence. The kitchen was a large room with cupboards and a bench top but nothing else. No electrical equipment at all.

The smorgasbord they produced proved the Portuguese had not made exaggerated claims about their cooking abilities — the meal was sumptuous. They had explored the markets and backstreets for various ingredients and produced a remarkable meal. The smoked chicken was the pièce de résistance. A bowl of chilli was placed prominently to allow the personal touch. It contained pure fire. Someone tried a quarter of a teaspoon — most of us used a fraction of that, except for our Sri Lankan friend, Two Seats (his real name was far too difficult for us Australians). He not only enjoyed it, but took great delight in eating copious extra servings to highlight our inability to handle the fiery spice. We provided the Australian red wine courtesy of the Cafe Dilli Alfresco and, for a few hours, we enjoyed ourselves.

The evening went well until about 9pm when a shower of rocks began to rain down on the roof of the house. It started out as the odd rock and slowly built up as the salvos turned to multiple launches. A few brave souls raced outside, but the culprits were well hidden in the thick gardens and strewn rubbish piles of the unlit street. Once we returned inside, the fusillade of stones recommenced.
We had probably been a little loud during the evening. Hindsight provided an easy explanation for things. Unwisely, and very insensitively, we had picked a poor time to party. We realised that Easter Saturday was not a time of celebration and we had deservedly enraged the neighbourhood. After thanking each other we decided to call it a night and head home. We had been reminded that we were visitors in East Timor and needed to exercise a little more awareness of the local traditions.

The Kiwi house was relaxing that night as well and we dropped in on our way home. We completed the night with some fine New Zealand hospitality in the fenced compound area where the Kiwis maintained a base for their customs officers and various resting soldiers and personnel. At the end of the evening, we agreed an early morning swim at Baucau Beach would be good.

We did make it to the beach during a quick break on Sunday. While there, we met a CivPol officer recovering from dengue fever. We had heard rumours of a woman who had gone down with dengue fever within a few days of arriving in Dili. The officer on the beach was the unfortunate victim and she confirmed that it was not a pleasant experience. Her time in Dili so far had consisted of arriving in Dili, a quick incubation period and then being very sick in hospital with the fever. She was now on the way to recovery and keen to get in and do her bit.

Sunday evening was another Easter highlight, with a huge procession passing by the cathedral and winding through the streets near the port area. Intricately embroidered costumes and finely made offerings were once again proudly displayed. The crowd was the largest we had seen since our arrival. After the sombre Good Friday marches, the Easter Sunday march reflected the crowd's belief in the rebirth of Jesus, and of East Timor itself. Everyone in the crowd wore smiles from ear to ear.

On Easter Monday, things picked up a bit and a few people returned to work. Peter was back at the army base locating items that might still be lurking in corners. At Mosquito House, things were still being stacked and sorted. The number of mosquitoes in the building was growing and we hoped that the refurbishment would include some flywire meshing over the windows.
While we were there stacking and sorting a report came through of a foreign catamaran that had appeared near the port of Hera. During our previous visit to Hera, we had developed some worthwhile contacts. This call had come from those contacts so we headed off into the mountains.

Once again, we found ourselves among an IOM refugee convoy of people who had arrived on the *MV Patricia Ann Hotung*, or the *Patty Ann* as she was now affectionately known. This time there were 10 buses of people returning and six trucks carrying possessions. There was no escort for the group. They were moving home during a holiday and this meant there would be more people in the villages. We didn’t see any trouble as the streets appeared surprisingly empty. We hoped that a similar quiet scenario awaited these people when they arrived at their destinations.

Passing the convoy, we continued on to Hera and located the catamaran. The owner was hospitable, although a little eccentric. We briefed him on the new requirements regarding arrival procedures into East Timor. We managed to convey to him that East Timor was in fact a country and that, like everywhere else in the world, people couldn’t just come and go as they pleased. He seemed taken aback by this development. He even tried the line that he had travelled all over the world in his catamaran and had never been required to report to customs or immigration in any other country.

As we left the port of Hera, we were called in for a chat with the local village chiefs. They had heard about the Border Service and were keen to get a unit developed in their region. They discussed their plans to develop a locally based customs unit in the fishing village. Their conversation suggested a preoccupation with the revenue collection role of the unit.

Back in Dili, when we discussed the meeting with Cancio, we discovered that these chiefs were in fact an unofficial group interested in a little private tax collection. They were not related to any real administration. We went back quickly to Hera and located the real chiefs to tell them of our meeting, before any noses were put out of joint by us appearing to make plans with the wrong people in the village.
Late on Monday afternoon, we discovered it was payday for many members of the mission. We still had time so we headed up to the compound confident of finally receiving our allowances. No surprises really but, after enduring the queue, we were advised that despite our efforts so far we had still not made it onto the official list. We were still in the ‘Special Category’ and were asked if we could come back the next day.

Tuesday 25 April was our day. Every Kiwi and Aussie in Dili headed to the beach behind the airport for the Anzac Day dawn service. It was not a holiday in East Timor but anyone who wasn’t on the front-line at the border was attending. It was a rare opportunity to share an Anzac Day overseas with operational ANZACs.

Dawn arrives early in East Timor at that time of the year and most of us were up for a 4am drive to the airfield. A joint Kiwi and Australian service was to be held at 4.40am on the small beach.

The crowd had been gathering long before we got there. There were 1,500 Kiwis and Australians on the beach. The atmosphere was perfect. Everyone fidgeted awkwardly as they awaited the first slivers of dawn. You couldn’t help feeling that this was Anzac Cove only minutes before the hell of the gunfire. The gentle sound of the ocean rolling in and out across the darkened beach seemed for a while to mask the feelings of nervous anticipation of those who waited. The number of armed soldiers in attendance further enhanced the moment.

The sun put on a magnificent show as it rose slowly over the ocean. The stunning vista of the sunrise was enhanced by the angelic sounds of a choir wafting across the paddock. In the low light the choir appeared only as shadows in the distance. Their voices were stunning, sounding like a Polynesian choir with those born-to-sing-to-God voices. As the light improved, we were delighted to see that they were East Timorese singers from the local churches. They did everyone proud.
The New Zealand Commander led the service and other Kiwis and Australians played a part. It was very emotional and the reality of the moment was heightened when the bugler appeared to struggle with his emotions as he played the Last Post. My Anzac Day service sheet is my most treasured souvenir from East Timor.

During the build-up to the service there had been rumours that a senior Australian politician would lead the day. This was not to be. The grapevine reported later that they had gone to Turkey instead.

Security was tight during the service. It couldn’t be ignored that this occasion might be an opportunity for a militia payback, as both forces had played and were still playing a major role in securing East Timor. After the service, there was a ‘gunfire’ breakfast at the base. By 6.30am, we were back at our accommodation ready for work. It was still early and Adi and I managed a swim at the beach.

The rest of the day was busy and held a few surprises. I was sitting in the front office at UN headquarters distracting myself with thoughts of an ANZAC beer with the Kiwis that night when a lieutenant colonel from CivPol arrived at the desk wanting to chat to the senior officer heading out to the border at Batugade.

I was quickly awoken from my daydreams as the lieutenant colonel collared me for a detailed run-down of the tasks he had just been handed. He was to be in charge of 150 officers — a new arm of the CivPol unit that would create a border patrol. This unit would be separate from the normal
Anzac Day

A civilian police force. He indicated that they were intending to create an armed police border patrol responsible for security of the border. They also hoped that they could help us control the movement of people across the riverbed border. He was after information about our plans for deployment and about the status of the border, aware that we were moving there soon.

This force appeared to have been conceived along the lines of similar groups, such as the US Border Patrol on the Mexico/US border. I could see a role for such a force in the future, as the border in East Timor was long and remote and, in relation to the customs and immigration role, it was very porous. My concern for the moment was that this patrol was being formed too soon.

The lieutenant colonel said his group was going to be armed with light machine guns. Alarm bells rang when I discovered that there had not yet been any discussions with the PKF, who were already patrolling the border and who were also heavily armed. A clash in the dark between friendly forces was not a vision I enjoyed.

I soon realised we were the first stop in his information gathering chain, so I spent considerable time explaining the current situation in the region. I took time that day to introduce the lieutenant colonel to appropriate contacts, wanting to ensure that the idea of a border patrol was implemented after consultation with other affected people. Maybe our experiences were starting to pay off and we were becoming more useful than we realised. I told the lieutenant colonel we would take him to the border within a few days for a tour and promised any assistance we could give.

He mentioned that border police from Thailand, Spain and the Philippines would be the first to arrive. This was a comfort for us as it would be necessary in the future to conduct civilian or paramilitary police border patrols. For the time being, and the foreseeable future, the PKF had the security role. The border patrol wouldn’t be implemented during our deployment.

Our final news on Anzac Day was unpleasant. We had our usual Tuesday night meeting with all the Border Service
international team leaders at UN headquarters. In other circumstances it would have been an almost romantic setting. We found ourselves in the dark on the second floor of the old parliamentary offices as an evening storm raged outside. The myriad bright lights at the headquarters had been extinguished by the storm. The UNTAET staff, ourselves included, now joined the throngs who worked at night by candlelight.

We congregated in one room around candles. Despite not being able to take notes or read anything in the dark we managed to soldier on until almost 9pm. It was then that the leader of the Kiwi contingent received some bad news.

A New Zealand Unimog (a large armoured off-road vehicle) had rolled over in a ditch at Suai during the afternoon. One soldier had been killed and two seriously injured. All three had been due to return home to New Zealand within a week. The New Zealand soldiers often took their leave breaks at the large house occupied by the Kiwi customs officers and the accident hit home. It was not a good end to Anzac Day, especially for the Kiwis.
Chapter 16
We’re in place

Everything was coming together with only final preparations to make. This included a quick visit to Darwin for some of us to arrange extra equipment and obtain stores. There were still a few issues to organise, such as the final site works at Batugade, assistance for the East Timorese officers, some legislation to work with at the border and a mass of meetings to attend.

The last days before our trip to Darwin were hectic. There were many other departments competing for the time of the few legal gurus and the development of legislation was lagging behind our deployment of resources.

We were still trying to arrange the allowances for the East Timorese and it was starting to look like they wouldn't be ready to move to Batugade with us the next week. The reality of the move had suddenly hit home and they realised there were quite a few private matters to attend to.

Dili was a place where policies were being written from the ground up and the spectre of competing ideologies always hovered. Differences became particularly evident as we were dealing with new tax laws, immigration and refugee issues. There were many organisations presenting conflicting views. It seemed that just when there were 10 people in a room nodding in agreement, someone else would walk in with a reason why something couldn’t be done. Often the argument was a valid one, and it was a surprise to us that not everyone shared the same vision. Everyone had a different set of experiences to draw on. Finding common ground was the hard part.
As a result, we were heading to the border with very little migration policy in place. It appeared that we would need to develop something on the run and then refer it back to head office. It was easier to write something and then let people debate changes. We had spoken with as many CNRT and UNTAET leaders as possible in the previous month to ensure we had some understanding of what was desired. This knowledge, combined with our Australian experiences, would allow us to develop some basic guidelines to work with in the initial stages.

Once at the border, we could talk with the Indonesian administration, such as POLRI, Customs, Immigration and the TNI. The Indonesians were one half of the border and without the full cooperation of both sides, and a mutual understanding, the riverbed might as well have been the Berlin Wall.

Later in our deployment, after we had spent more time living and working closely with the East Timorese at Batugade, they began to be more candid with their opinions on border issues, including who they thought should come and go in their new country. We were then able to start developing policy and focus our training to create a border service the East Timorese actually wanted.

The day before our quick Darwin trip was a stinker. The humidity hit again and, late in the afternoon, I staggered back to see the owner of our dongas. He was busy serving customers in his recently upgraded shop.

It was lucky for me that he was busy. The new set-up was a refrigerated shipping container. I managed to secrete myself down the back of the large fridge while the hungry crowd waved fistfuls of US dollars at him, grabbing every luxury he could provide. Once I was cooled and refreshed and, forgetting the reason I needed to see him, I bounded back into the humidity with all the vigour of a reptile aroused from its winter slumber by the summer warmth.

That night we had an interesting chat with our international buddies — Portuguese, Sri Lankan, French-Canadian and New Zealand officers were there. We were ranting about the successes and failures of our recent meetings and the subject of
language differences reared its head. There was a close bond developing between many of us. No longer new work mates, who had to be restrained from pointing out small cultural differences, we were fast becoming comfortable at highlighting the amusing peculiarities. An easy target for the others was the Australian accent.

One of the Portuguese started the assault shyly, stating that he was struggling with his English. He was having great difficulty understanding what was being discussed at our team meetings. He had always considered that his English was fine, but since arriving in East Timor he realised he needed more practice.

We immediately tried to placate him and told him his English was excellent. We were not being polite; it was true! We were impressed more than he knew because most of us spoke only English. Or so we thought. We kept on chatting and soon the reason for his difficulties became apparent. Our friend said that he regularly spoke with people from English-speaking countries and had no trouble understanding them. It was just the Australian accent he had trouble with. He bravely went on to say that Australians spoke too fast and with a very low bass tone that lacked high intensity. Finally, he told us that we joined too many words together and constructed very long sentences.

The French-Canadian waded in with his thoughts on the matter. His language skills, in order, were French, then Spanish, followed by English. He was a full-time UN employee who had served on numerous missions. He viewed the current Timor mission as an opportunity to develop his English — it was not common for UN missions to be officially deemed English-language missions.

As everyone laughed, he confided that he had arrived in December to be met by our current controller and two other Australian Customs officers who had been in Dili to help establish what assistance Australia could provide. He was adamant that it had taken him two full weeks before he was able to confidently grasp what the Aussies were talking about. We were taken aback by these revelations as we had always happily believed it was the Kiwis who no one could understand.
As the group discussed a plan for a feast before our departure to Batugade, I wandered off to do an interview with a Western Australian radio station. After the conversation we had just had, I was careful not to speak too quickly or to join too many words together. The interview went well despite delays caused by an overloaded telephone system. I found it extremely easy to talk about East Timor.

Our flight to Darwin was the next morning. With limited seats, even a duly signed movement request did not ensure we would be on the flight. It was possible to be bumped off the manifest at the last moment if someone with a little more influence wanted to travel. This was particularly difficult for the CivPol officers working in remote villages. They would drive into town the night before hoping their seats were still available. Flights could not be confirmed until 4pm the day before. If the CivPol officers stayed home until confirming their flight, they wouldn’t be at the airport in time to catch the plane.

Rick and I got up at 7am on the day of the flight, managing a fruit salad of pineapple, banana (red and yellow varieties) and a sweet green mandarin, before heading off to the airport. It was a most enjoyable meal, particularly as we didn’t eat again until early evening.

Darwin was a whirl of meetings and of chasing up necessary items, punctuated by swims in the pool. Darwin was definitely cooler than Dili. We struck it lucky with our timing as the Mindil Beach markets were being held for the first time during the new dry season. The cosmopolitan nature of Darwin was highlighted by the range of Asian foods on offer, which far outstripped anything that could be found in Dili. There was Indonesian, Malay, Burmese, Thai, Vietnamese and Indian food to choose from. It reminded us that the Timorese were still living a very basic and unvaried existence.

We returned to Dili on Saturday morning confident that the second part of our mission would be one of continuing achievements. It was 29 April — a big day in Dili as another essential service was coming back on line. The Dili Post Office had been rebuilt and was opening for business in a building next
to the Portuguese bank. The post office was a joint effort, developed by the Portuguese Postal Service with advice and assistance from a New Zealand postal manager.

It didn’t seem that long since the postal manager had wandered up to the Border Service counter to advise us that we would soon have another role to fulfil with our already limited staff numbers: the mail centre had been rebuilt and we would have to allocate staff to examine parcels arriving from overseas. UNTAET embraced the opportunity to let people know that the post office was opening. It was a public step forward. The post office, an essential service, was another sign of life returning to normal.

Speeches from Xanana Gusmao and Sergio de Mello, the head of the UN mission, were highlights of the opening. A bishop prayed for success before the office opened and the first-day covers went on sale. The post office represented many employment opportunities for the East Timorese as well as an opportunity for some badly needed income for the administration.

I wasn’t an invitee to the opening function; I stumbled across it during my lunch break. As I watched the ceremony, I was struck by the intricate planning of the occasion. There must have been some concern that a situation similar to the recent ‘almost riot’ at the nearby UN offices would occur.

The post office was in a building on a corner opposite UNTAET. A bank faced one street and the post office the other. A concrete verandah fronted the street and a small grassed area about 20 metres wide separated the building from the road. A small chain fence ran through the grassed area.

Speakers and invited dignitaries were inside a cordon of international police officers — a reasonable security measure as Xanana Gusmao and other dignitaries were present. East Timorese were gathered in large numbers beyond the fence. The speeches concluded and the dignitaries entered the post office for the signing and licking of stamps. It was possible for any UNTAET person with a plastic ID card to enter the building and stand among the ensemble. The East Timorese had to content themselves with leaning on the chain fence and craning their necks to see what was going on inside their new post office.
A strike by the East Timorese Civil Service over conditions of service and continuing employment shortages had begun the day we departed for Darwin. The difference between international and local staff allowances had been raised regularly before the strike. Day one of the strike had started off reasonably. The security staff at UNTAET headquarters had arrived as usual and everything appeared normal. Appearances were deceiving. The security officers were well organised and a plan was under way. Stories began to emerge that they were not there to secure the building, but to monitor the movement of any local civil servants who entered the building. A picket line of sorts.

Despite the concerns about the strike, there were more specific concerns for us. We intended to move to Batugade and if the strike continued it was likely that we would not be able to get a truck driver to move our gear. It also meant that our East Timorese officers would definitely not be able to accompany us.

As we moved equipment around and made final preparations, we decided that we would go ahead with the move the next day. With some trepidation, we agreed to head off and leave the others to complete the final preparation of our staff. Our controller had been unable to obtain the necessary allowances for the East Timorese. Although there was a proposal to pay some minor travel allowance to assist their move, the full list of demands was still being discussed.

On the day before our departure for the border, the strike continued and there was some trouble at the Dili markets. If rumours were to be believed, there had been a gang dispute there.

For most of the day, we had been locked away in the warehouse organising our gear, but that evening and the next morning we were told numerous tales. The most common stories were that either two people had been killed during the fighting or that three had been seriously injured. The Portuguese riot squad and CivPol officers had been called in to restore order. Sirens and racing cars were heard throughout the night. Without mediums such as radio or newspapers — things we consider simple basics — it was not possible to confirm the real story. It was a good example of the way rumours escalated in an environment in
which the main method of passing on information was by word of mouth.

Rumours were growing stronger during the morning of our departure that the strikers would march on the city in a May Day extravaganza. Interestingly, May Day was a public holiday in Dili as it had been an important occasion for the Fretilin movement pre-1975. We managed to get a truck despite the strike.

Our morning was spent loading the truck and then unloading it as the front wheels threatened to lift off the ground. A bigger truck arrived, it was packed with the gear and we headed for Batugade, leaving all the rumours behind. Our convoy consisted of a truck, a van and two four-wheel drives, one of which was the not-so-suitable vehicle we had driven previously to Batugade.

We were given a rousing send off. My comment that I couldn't wait to get to Batugade to sleep on the beach had been noted — the controller and others presented me with a huge Border Control-embroidered sombrero. After the obligatory photo session, I tucked it into the rear of the vehicle and promised to spend a day under a coconut tree soon.

The road through the hills was littered with far more large stones than usual. Every time we were just starting to gather speed on a difficult incline we would be forced to slow or turn
sharply to avoid a large stone in the middle of the road. For a while, I thought the stones had rolled down the nearby hills, but then I wasn’t sure. I was certain of one thing though — no one else seemed to care about them and no one ever got out of their vehicle to throw one off the road.

We had been told it would be a sign of good fortune if we saw some of Timor’s famous monkeys as we passed through the mountains on our way to our new post. Monkeys were rare as the past few years had been hard for the local people and, apparently, monkeys tasted quite good. None were to be seen that day.

Closer to Levant, we were stopped at the PKF roadblock where soldiers questioned everyone heading east. The block was the usual railway sleeper-style wooden planks across the road separated by sandbags. The sentries always checked your identity before radioing ahead to advise that there were vehicles on the way. We never saw who it was watching us further along the road. We had to accept that we would not get to know the soldiers at the roadblock and be waved through without a check. The rotation of units was frequent and seeing the same soldier twice was rare. This prevented any easing of security due to familiarity. A good thing really.

We passed through the small coastal towns and made pretty good time, although there was some delay on the final set of tight mountainous turns. We had to pull over for a convoy of APCs travelling in the opposite direction. Children continued to wave as we drove past, making us shake our heads in amazement that they hadn’t tired of it yet.

Batugade finally appeared before us. We traversed the bridge, negotiated the obnoxious traffic-calmers and turned into the small village square near our office. We got out of our vehicles just in time to see an overladen bus launch its passengers skyward as another driver failed to respect the planks of wood and sandbags laid across his path. I had a feeling that one day we could wear one of those errant vehicles and made a note to not sit on the side of the office nearest the road.

As I took in the view of the few small houses, two tiny drink stands and the small cafe across the road, I knew that five
people turning up to live in the town had the potential to cause an inflation problem in the small economy. We were the centre of attention as we quickly unpacked the vehicles. The truck drivers were in a hurry to get home before dark.

Showing the foresight we were famous for, we decided to arrange a meal at the small cafe across the road, knowing full well we would be too exhausted to organise our cooking gear that night. The live-in owners were pleased to see us and couldn’t wait to find out more about us, but the cafe had one rule — warning had to be given in the morning if we wanted to eat at night as food was not always available. A few times I had the uncomfortable feeling that when we did eat there we were taking food from the family.

Unable to eat, we continued to set up our accommodation while the local children crisscrossed our path, running in and out of the yard area, enjoying the new game in town. As anywhere, the children were up-front and cheeky. The adults didn’t visit that night — it took a little longer to get to know them.

Dinner was a smorgasbord of Australian Defence Force ‘D’ rations: lovely rice, curry and something else we couldn’t quite make out. No teeth were required for this meal. We made a pact to scout out some local rice the next day and cook up a feast. After all, we were almost in the rice bowl of East Timor.

School children hover for a photo opportunity.
There was another cross-border meeting the next morning. Peter and I had to make sure that the Indonesian administration knew we were in place and were preparing to open the Batugade border post. The meeting was to be held across the border in Motaain, so we would get to cross the line into West Timor. It was all happening now.

As the light faded, I remembered our previous attempt to sleep here some weeks earlier. As I playfully stirred the others that a restless first night was on the cards, I foolishly convinced myself that it was just a joke.

We were finally at the border!
Chapter 17

At the border

As expected, we had a restless first night. For the remainder of our time at Batugade, we never grew accustomed to the ever-present noise of chickens, goats, dogs and armoured vehicles that regularly haunted our attempts to sleep. Even when we collapsed in an exhausted heap onto our stretchers, a yell or screech in the night would stir us.

Our first official day in Batugade was a good example of what was to follow. Our lives became a series of difficult and challenging obstacles, interspersed with the humdrum of fending for ourselves in the basic conditions.

Peter and I were going to cross the border into the small village of Motaain. It was a couple of kilometres along a narrow coastal road to the border crossing. The crossing itself was a small bridge spanning the murky river that defined the border. It was one of the few clear-cut border crossings along the river’s length.

In reality, East Timorese life ceased at the PKF border checkpoint positioned just a few hundred metres from the bridge. To the north was the Savu Sea. A mosquito-infested swampy forest prevented normal access to the river on the southern side.

The layout of the post was simple. The main structure was built on the seaward side of the road. It was a sandbag and corrugated iron box designed specifically to house two to three soldiers at a time. A boom gate with a small halt sign was placed strategically close to the road, making it clear that it was necessary to stop. The boom was fairly flimsy and provided little deterrence.
to anyone who didn’t want to stop. It was rarely lowered. The 50-calibre heavy machine gun mounted within the post provided a formidable accompaniment to the halt sign.

The post was simply a machine-gun nest. A small row of army hooches in the nearby forest provided accommodation for the PKF section that supported the post. Australian soldiers lived there. They were rotated with another section from their company, who were bivouacked near our post in Batugade. After their stint at the border, they enjoyed some time guarding the helicopter ‘H’ that was clearly marked on the beach with white painted rocks. Sometimes they had the unenviable task, in the humidity, of patrolling the heavily wooded mountains. It was real mountain-goat territory; although goats would not move around in the daytime heat. The soldiers had no choice.

At Batugade the border had a foreboding feel about it. Although the road to the bridge curved away behind the forest to the left, the TNI (Indonesian) border post in Motaain was situated in the line of sight of the PKF post. Like the PKF post, it was built on the beach. Three TNI soldiers manned the observation post, which was built high off the ground with a commanding view of the PKF border post. The raised platform also held a large-calibre machine gun.

It was an eerie feeling when we first stood there. The feeling that a thoughtless act of bravado by someone could lead to a maelstrom of bullets was hard to shake. Fortunately, we had seen a fair bit of the PKF and TNI forces in this region and had found them to be professional and highly disciplined soldiers.

Within a few days, the East Timorese officers and ourselves would be working in this environment. The more difficult and intensive searches of selected vehicles would be conducted further down the road on the beach near the old Portuguese fort. Despite this, it was necessary to have a physical presence right at the border to conduct the initial immigration functions and assessment of people as they crossed the border in and out of East Timor.

The site lacked an office. There was no room in the gun nest and, even if there had been, it didn’t seem that a machine-gun nest was an appropriate place to meet and greet the expected
At the border

trickle of travelling public. We were glad the security was there though!

On that first morning, Peter and I were part of a convoy of about six vehicles that passed through the checkpoint on the way to Motaain for the meeting. The convoy included UNMOs, PKF, UNHCR and IOM representatives and a few officials. The PKF security stayed at the border and our security was handed over to the TNI. We would be able to regale the others that night with stories of what it was like on the other side. Hopefully, by the time we got back, all the mundane work, such as building our new living area and clearing away the rubble, would be finished.

The village of Motaain was a collection of grass huts about 800 metres from the bridge on the western side. It could easily have been a small resort in 1970s Bali. The striking difference between the TNI and PKF camps was the accommodation. For the PKF, the most common accommodation was a camouflage tent. The TNI were living in Indonesian-style wooden-walled huts that had roofs made of dried coconut palm leaves. Things appeared far more relaxed on this side of the border.

The meeting went for a few hours and, once again, the skill of the interpreter was tested. I was surprised how quickly we were asked to inject our thoughts and explain the intentions of the Border Service. We would have to quickly ensure that we had some policies and feed the situation at the border back to UNTAET headquarters.

The meeting was good for us. It was clear that the Indonesians accepted that we were in place and understood that we wanted to open the border. While we had been frustrated by the length of time it took us to assume our role at the border, the Indonesians seemed surprised by the speed of our arrival. They promised that the next meeting would include some customs and immigration staff who were coming to the border soon. That sounded a little familiar.

I knew that I was not going to escape attending meetings during my deployment, but at least the meetings near the border were interesting.

After the meeting, we headed back to the new Border Service office. It certainly helped our credibility when the PKF
guards saw us returning from West Timor with the delegation, including their commanding officer. The meeting across the border sent the message that we were there to get on with the job and had some high-level support from UNTAET.

We got back to camp to find the others hard at it! Together, the five of us put the finishing touches to our backyard, completing tasks in the stifling humidity. Before nightfall, we had chopped stumps from the ground, raised tents and filled in a collapsed septic tank. The septic had been hidden from view, caving in after two people walked over it. We wondered what other hidden surprises lurked nearby.

Other tasks were to set up a few home comforts by building a tarpaulin-style pergola, a clothesline and by knocking down a small cement wall that wound its way through our living space, so that no one would trip over it in the dark. Already a few kilograms lighter, we filled and humped a large number of water jerry cans from a well in the old fort. It was possible the effort to carry water caused us to lose more water in sweat than we carried across.

The afternoon ended with the traditional Timorese burning-of-the-rubbish. Everyone burns everything in East Timorese country areas. Destroying refuse is the only way to prevent it from spreading disease. Digging in the wet soil, or the heat, is not feasible, so everything is burnt. It takes some practice to read the wind and ensure that you don’t smoke out your neighbours.

We were a novelty in town. We had a uniform, but it wasn’t camouflage fatigues; it was blue and everyone wanted to know who we were. They wondered if we would change their lives. The answer was clear to the people across the road in the small cafe — they were keen for business.

Before we collapsed, we had a 120,000-rupiah (about $A25) feast across the road. Rice, fish, a potato dish, sliced chips and crackers. It was fantastic. This was definitely a meal for potential long-term customers. And all this from a cafe with no food supplies the previous night.

Once we had eaten it was back to the tents. Darkness was descending and streetlights were non-existent. The glow of some
kerosene lanterns from the small huts and our own lamps filtered through the dark night. Bedtime comes quickly without electricity.

During the afternoon, a technician had driven from Dili to install our satellite phone so we could communicate with Dili. Peter took the first call and was pleased to hear that the uniforms for the East Timorese had arrived in Dili. He had left clear instructions that no one was to touch them unless he was there. He had done all the hard work and was determined the Timorese coming to work at the border would get their share before anyone else jumped in.

Although Lorraine, who had remained in Dili to complete the vital induction courses for the East Timorese, promised to guard the packages, Peter spent a restless night eager for dawn so he could make the trip to grab the uniforms. This trip was one of many that would be made between Dili and Batugade.

The morning brought with it the reality of living away from the meagre comforts of town. Peter had escaped early for his rush back to Dili and the four of us were left to queue for the waterbag shower. The lack of heated water wasn’t an issue as the steamy liquid was warm enough to shave with. Shampoo made a good substitute for shaving cream.

Three of us already had a pile of sweat-sodden uniforms to wash. Our first hand-washing effort in a black plastic bucket took about 40 minutes for a couple of sets of uniforms and overalls.
After the laundering in Dili, our uniforms had faded to about 50 per cent of their original colour. Soon we would be wearing stonewash-style uniforms. As I scrubbed, I found it difficult to believe those old advertising posters that showed a large woman stirring clothes in an old copper pot. It was hard work and definitely a calorie-burner.

The thought of humping more water to wash clothes made us keen to see the arrival of the workmen who had promised to build a pipe from the well at the fort. In the interim, we were sorely tempted to join the locals who ventured to the large pools in the nearby riverbed to scrub their clothes. At least then we could relax under a shady tree while the clothes soaked. The Brazilian military police who worked with the PKF at the border post had it all worked out, paying the locals a few rupiah for the service. It wasn’t uncommon to see their vehicle sitting in the creek being washed by the children.

After our wash-a-thon and breakfast, we got on with the meet and greet around town. I met with the Australian Company Commander, who was in charge of the Batugade region, to discuss security and the border opening. The 6th Royal Australian Regiment had begun its tour of duty on 26 April. The bonus in this was that the new regiment was fresh like us, and keen to see things develop. I was extremely grateful for their eagerness to assist.

As we tried to locate the various dignitaries around town, each of us took the opportunity to visit the border to get ideas for how we could set things up. We quickly developed a rapport with the PKF and the local townspeople. I was glad of the variety of personalities within the team. Whether it was liaising with the PKF commander, the gunner in the machine-gun nest, the cafe owner or the town’s children, the range of personalities in the group ensured that there was always someone who got on well with any given person. It was not long before everyone had a good understanding of how things worked and who was who.

During our comings and goings we were approached by a couple of journalists who had been travelling on both sides of the border, including visits as far west as Atambua. The next major
population after Motaain was found at Atambua. It was a large modern town with a widely populated hinterland. It was probably the most economically powerful region on the eastern side of West Timor.

The journalists claimed that the area around Atambua was still a thriving base for militia groups that had departed East Timor when Interfet arrived. They claimed that there were about 1,000 militia operating there.

They also said that the West Timorese administration officials they had spoken to had rejected their theory. The officials had explained that these men were in fact a home guard auxiliary group that had been formed in East Timor to assist the TNI to maintain security. The group had apparently arrived in West Timor as part of the recent transmigration. They were mostly older men who would retire within two or three years. The TNI continued to pay them. The men were just passing the time until their retirement.

The departure of the Indonesian administration from East Timor had not been completely good news for the East Timorese. It had led to a complete dislocation of the civil service, hence the need for groups such as ourselves to re-establish various government services. On top of losing their jobs, and in many cases their homes and possessions, East Timorese civil servants who had worked within the Indonesian administration had lost all their entitlements and any future pensions. There were a large number of people who had been relying on receiving pensions after many years of government service. These pensions had been their hope for the future.

UNTAET was negotiating with the Indonesian Government to have these pensions recognised, but it was going to be a long and arduous process. Evidence to assist any claimants was not going to be easy to find. Huge mountains of burnt documents had been piled up outside all the major government buildings when we had first arrived in Dili. In a country where computer records were not the norm, the destruction of these documents could have been just as damaging to some people as the burning of their homes and possessions.
During our first days in Batugade, we continued to talk with as many people as we could. Without radio, television or newspapers, the only way to let the population know what we were doing was to get out and talk. Rick’s Indonesian language skills came to the fore again. Meanwhile, the overloaded buses continued to bump into town and whiz by. Not as fast, but just as alarming, were the APCs that continually patrolled through the small town square intersection.

Peter returned from Dili with some blue shirts marked ‘CUSTOMS’, which had been kindly gifted by Brian Hurrell, our Customs boss in Perth. They would provide some recognition for the Timorese staff. The claimed arrival of the full uniform issue had been a cruel hoax. Peter would have to wait a little longer before that shipment arrived.

We did have some early success. The workmen came to connect the water pipe. Water was ready to flow. They even promised to raise the water tank so the water could run down into the taps. No complaints. The UN international volunteer workers and the local labourers they employed in the border regions were proving to be extremely hardworking and innovative people. No task was too difficult and they performed admirably with the most basic tools and building supplies.

Before their departure, Adi managed to get the team leader down to the border crossing and, under the shade of a coconut tree, a basic plan for a shelter was conceived. Soon we could expect a fully functioning office near the gun post.

During the next few evenings we heard many rumours, stories and theories about the predicament of the East Timorese. The refugees in West Timor were always high on the list of discussion points, which was particularly relevant in Batugade because the population grew by 10,000 people every couple of weeks when family reunion days were held. The Easter reunion had been cancelled at the last moment. There was another organised for the coming Saturday and it was expected to be large.

Someone told us that many of the refugees did not want to come home to East Timor because they had heard that life was extremely difficult for those who had remained. The fact that
so many people crossed the river border at Nunura to buy food from the riverside market in West Timor had convinced them that there was no food to eat in the east. It was another example of how the lack of communication fuelled rumours that confused and alienated the remote communities and the people in West Timorese camps.

The Nunura crossing was about a 50-minute drive from Batugade via the mountainous region of Balibo. The market had concerned us while we were in Dili. Our next goal was to get there and find a solution — if there was one.
The administrative districts in East Timor were still largely those set up during the Portuguese administration. The districts on the land border were known as Bobonaro (northern and central) and Kova Lima (south). The main town in Bobonaro was Maliana, a large town in the middle of the border region.

The road from Dili forked at Batugade. Our office and home were wedged firmly within the fork, and the resulting small roundabout was the so-called town square. The right fork took you to the border post and on to Motaain in West Timor. The left fork headed south through the mountains to Balibo, and then followed the river to the rice bowl of the Maliana district and Bobonaro town.

Locating our office in the fork of the road meant we could cover the traffic through the official border crossing at Batugade. That was the easy part. The position of our base was designed to also cover the road to the south that ventured towards Maliana and beyond.

The theory was that anyone crossing the border at the unofficial crossings at Nunura and Memo would still have to run the Border Service gauntlet at Batugade before continuing to Dili. It was a theory, of course. Realistically, not everyone who crossed at any of the unofficial crossings, or at any other point on the river where it could be forded or a route could be hacked through the jungle, wanted to go to Dili. Maliana was a thriving town in its own right. There was a large population that included
people who had never been to Dili. They had their own markets and shops.

Local knowledge also made it possible to slip around Batugade on the way to Dili. The reality — that the border leaked — had to be accepted in the early days. Rather than a simple north-south line down the middle, the border between East and West Timor was created by a series of rivers. From Batugade, the border ran south for a short distance and then swung inwards to the belly of East Timor. A large section of West Timor jutted into the central border region of East Timor like a large head forcing its way in. The border then swung west again before it turned south for its journey to the southern coast.

The mountainous terrain and gulf-like indentation on the East Timorese side of the border were the reasons that people driving the roads within the region were often unaware of their proximity to or the direction of the border. Roads twisted, turned and dropped quickly. A map was essential. Navigating using the sun or landmarks was not reliable as it was easy to become disoriented as the mountain mists rolled in.

The PKF was providing security along this constantly turning border, but there were not yet enough resources to deal with the issue of revenue evasion. It would have to be dealt with in stages.

Before we transferred to Batugade, the collection of revenue in Dili had begun, resulting in complaints from some importers who had previously had carte blanche to do what they liked. The complaints were understandable, but the Border Service had to start somewhere. The port had the largest flow of goods by far and was the easiest to control — the airport came next.

Now we were beginning to exert some controls over the road from Motaain. This road began at the western tip of West Timor in Kupang and, in time, was certain to develop as a major route for imports from Indonesia. It was a good source for goods that at the time were far cheaper than those that were coming predominantly from Darwin.

The unofficial points along the border and the crossing at Salele had initially been given the lowest priority, but the
numerous stories of rampant smuggling at the Nunura crossing soon made us shift priorities. We needed to check it out for ourselves. We had to find out just how much a person could carry across a river on their head.

We also had to start our liaisons with the local administrators. Maliana was the base for all council-type functions along the border. This administration would employ our local workforce in the future. As East Timor settled down, the various UNTAET civil services would not be so free to run with their own plans. We would all become more accountable to the local administrator. We thought it was a good idea to start fitting in with them from the outset.

Rick, Adi and I headed off at 4.30am for Nunura. The market opened early and we wanted to witness the whole thing. Adi was our guide as he had been there with some of the others on an earlier trip.

After the initial rice paddy flats it was straight up into the mountains. With sheer drops and nowhere else to go, this was stomach-in-the-mouth stuff, exacerbated by the sudden appearances of lumbering APCs from around blind bends. We came across an army Land Rover left in a ditch. With no sign of people around, we assumed it had been driven off the road to preserve somebody’s existence earlier in the morning.

Balibo was only eight kilometres from Batugade, but the steep ascent meant the drive took about 30 minutes. Balibo fascinated us. There was a large old Portuguese fort at the top of the mountain that made our little fort in Batugade seem like nothing but a few walls and ramparts near the beach. The PKF had set up camp within its walls.

Our favourite road object, the wooden sleeper and sandbag traffic-calmer, was in abundance in Balibo, so the drive through was slow, giving us the opportunity for a tourist-type look. The sun comes up early in the mountains and it was light as we passed through. We couldn’t help wondering which house it was that the five journalists — including three Australians — were killed in during the 1975 invasion. During our time at the border, we never really got an answer on that one. It was a
sensitive subject and everyone had an opinion on it. There were at least three ‘guaranteed’ locations suggested to us. Our belief that no one really knew was enhanced when someone told us that the house had been burned to the ground.

After Balibo, the road got worse, and had collapsed in places. The rain and large trucks constantly travelling on the road threatened the existence of sections of it. If the road was cut, it would prevent access to Maliana or Nunura. The road dropped suddenly at Nunura and, without realising it, we were out of the mountains and approaching a steel bridge across a river. On the left was a tributary, which lay in East Timor. The main river was to the right, curving around from behind the mountains that we had just traversed and then heading east towards the central part of the jutting head of East Timor. West Timor was on the right riverbank.

The Nunura bridge was tightly controlled by the PKF. The traffic from Maliana was mostly military and aid convoys. Lone vehicles such as ours were uncommon. The bridge was a PKF company base and a large sandbagged gun emplacement was strategically placed. Everything was bigger here and, once again, the small gun pit at Batugade, like the fort, suddenly seemed insignificant. This was possibly a place where things were scary at night.

The patrol commander told us that the early morning market wasn’t happening so we headed into Maliana hoping to return for the 9.30am market.

Maliana was old and had not escaped the burning and looting. The central base had a Portuguese influence and was a richer area. Hidden away in the river area, was a shantytown of corrugated-iron houses. The distinction between the two standards of living was pronounced. Agriculture was highly organised and labour-intensive; equipment was basic, and a large proportion of Timor’s rice was grown there. It was awe-inspiring to see the huge sacks of rice piled high after witnessing small groups of people winnowing the rice by whacking the rice stalks on sacks on the ground. Hard work added up in the end.

Another amazing sight was the location of the house the UNMOs were renting. To deliver something to them we had
to find our way through the most basic shanty housing we had yet seen in Timor. The house, previously occupied by a militia commander who had left East Timor, was perched on high ground in the middle of a squalid area. It was a white two-storey brick and cement house, with decorated doorways and ornamentation typical of the Portuguese influence. Once inside, it was easy to imagine a dance being held in the downstairs lounge and the owners regally descending the staircase to greet the guests. This was definitely a house out of place.

We drove to the administration area within Maliana. This would have been a magnificent centrepiece in the past. The Portuguese architecture was evident, with old cannons pointing out over the mountains towards the west. The town would have thrived in past times. Most people we spoke with told us that Maliana had been a militia stronghold pre-independence. Consequently, the population was significantly lower than before.

We knew that we would visit Maliana many times during preparation for our eventual Border Service regional headquarters in the town. It made sense to establish a base there as the river border in this region was going to be a place where mobile response teams would be the preferred option. This was not a place to build permanent structures. Within a few days of anything permanent being completed, the crossing points would surely move to some
other unmanned site and spark a never-ending game of catch-up. We made a few contacts at the administration office and then headed back to Nunura for the market.

We saw the market in action several times as we sought the solution the Border Service craved. Each time the scenario altered, but the first viewing was entertaining.

It was a whirl of people gathering basic supplies, and was a great example of the ability of some people to take advantage of a situation and make a living out of a new opportunity. The infrastructure that developed around this successful enterprise was fascinating.

From seemingly nowhere, just before market time, the population near the bridge checkpoint increased 100-fold. As it was an international border, the gathering hordes weren’t allowed to just wander across to the other side willy-nilly.

Crossing the bridge that spanned the East Timorese tributary was pointless. To get to West Timor, market-goers had to take a walk from the road and along the riverbank for about a kilometre to where a narrow track cut through the low scrub before crossing the river.

We decided to sneak ahead and wandered down the track, gingerly stepping over the muddy holes and swampy parts that made the going difficult, setting ourselves up at the last part of
the track where it was easiest to ford the river. This location had a small sandbagged sentry post that was manned during daylight hours by a couple of PKF soldiers and two Brazilian military police with metal detectors. Previously, they had been busy scanning people as they returned from the market. Now they were too busy to even consider such a task.

The market opened when the PKF soldier manning the barricade on the road said go. I still had no idea where the hordes were going. The soldiers pointed to a site across the river where there didn’t appear to be anything other than a few heads bobbing around between the trees.

The gathering throng had to wait on this occasion while they were entertained by an Australian soldier who insisted on a few rounds of, ‘Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi, Oi, Oi!’ before allowing access. The crowd appreciated the game and joined in loudly. Once released, the crowd bounded at full speed over the ground we had just traversed so warily. Those who were too slow were pushed aside and, within minutes, the first runners had surged into the water and were dashing to the other side. For some time, stragglers continued to pass by and eventually a few thousand people had crossed the river. Although the river was low, there were a couple of points where the flow was strong. We thought this would restrict the ability of people to bring back larger items.

As the crowd reached the other side, we could see them gathering behind the trees. We couldn’t see the exchanges because the market had been moved back a little at each gathering as political niceties started to demand some subtlety.

The market was no more than a site that developed on each occasion. It was a piece of flat ground, semi-concealed behind trees, where people brought goods from Atambua daily. There were no structures there at all and the leftovers were taken away.

It wasn’t long before people started returning with their purchases. We were wrong thinking that a person would be restricted in their illicit activities by a flowing river and the need to walk a kilometre in the dirt. The first shoppers returned in
quick time with thoughts of a return journey clearly on their minds.

One person passed by carrying a sack of rice on one shoulder and a carton of beer on the other. The most common item being carried on people’s heads were cartons of cigarettes — the 10,000-stick cartons, not the 200-stick variety.

After the frontrunners had dashed back, the returning groups became more orderly. It wasn’t long before an ant train had formed — there is no better way to describe the scene. Hundreds of people slowly wandered back across the river and walked along the bank to the road. It was all very neat and orderly. Huge numbers of people, each bearing huge weights on their heads and shoulders, battled on towards their homes. We were going to have to stop it one day. We were certain the market represented a major leakage of tax revenue for the new government. In just one hour, we saw enough cartons of cigarettes to greatly increase the revenue of the East Timorese administration.

A woman of advanced years staggered by us carrying a four-litre container of kerosene on her head and a large hessian bag around her neck. We followed her back towards the road — she was someone we could keep up with. We fought with thoughts of offering to help her. She was probably more able than us, and we reminded ourselves that we were there to find a solution to this whole situation.
As we watched her begin to stagger near the end, we seized on an idea. Glancing around, we noticed that no matter how fit the porters appeared, they all seemed to be struggling by the time they got to the road. Wobbly legs were the order of the day. A quick and easy solution would be to move the roadblock back a further two kilometres, possibly making it just a bit too hard for these people to bother.

I had many discussions with senior administration officials and PKF commanders. We were never really able to establish how the market had grown to the proportions it had. Before independence, the markets had operated in Maliana and Atambua. There was some evidence that previously a few locals crossed the river to buy rice or small essential supplies, but nothing significant. After Interfet arrived, the border would have been sealed off completely in the area. At some time, a generous official had allowed a few people to start wandering across to the other side to buy stores. As long as they were searched on the way back, it was all okay. The cracks in the dam soon became major leaks as human ingenuity had grabbed an opportunity.

It would take some political will to close this down. The crossings had developed from a small local exchange to a large security issue. There was also overwhelming evidence that the goods were now heading for the Dili shops and markets in large quantities. Trucks parked further along the road whizzed off as soon as they were filled.

Some of the best minds on the border discussed this issue at length. The local administration argued that there was a new vibrant source of employment in the small town near the Nunura bridge. There was no easy solution other than to suddenly close it down. This idea could potentially cause civil disturbance. The real danger was that closing the market would simply move the ant trains on to a new ford where control was more difficult. At the time the security part of the situation was the real priority. The revenue and immigration issues would have to wait.
Things were starting to happen in Batugade and beyond. The politics of who ran what were becoming clearer. Some of the more difficult issues, such as the unofficial border crossings and the need for a consistent immigration policy were being worked on. The only things missing were the East Timorese officers.

Our initial goal was to develop a functioning border post. At the end of the day, this would mean a post run by East Timorese. It seemed that this was still some way off, but overall, the Border Service was well ahead of the field when it came to employing Timorese.

One factor encouraging the quick employment of high numbers of staff was that customs functions could be labour intensive. The international staff were not be able to do it all by themselves. The managers of the Border Service had pulled out all stops to employ as many East Timorese officers as possible and to ensure that they were paid at a level above many of the other East Timorese civil servants.

In such an environment, the spectre of officers being tempted by extra income opportunities always hovered in the background. It was vital that officers were paid enough to be comfortable to resist such temptations. The pay levels were going to be a continuing issue for the organisation. The controller fought hard to keep them at the highest level throughout our deployment.

We were never really sure what went wrong, but the arrival of the first nine East Timorese officers in Batugade was not the
uplifting event we had hoped it would be. We did know that nine people left their houses and families in Dili and arrived at an unfurnished house with one small bag of clothing each — and nothing else.

We returned from a border inspection late in the afternoon to find our nine colleagues had arrived in town. The UN car pool drivers had dropped them at their accommodation and immediately headed back to Dili. It wasn't long before we were called up to their house to assist.

The house had been selected by Cancio during our helicopter trip. It was one of the few available — close to the office and affordable — but with nothing other than a bag of clothes each, they could not live in the house for one night, never mind three to six months.

I have to admit that we were a little annoyed by the whole matter. This was the very reason why we had fought to gain some allowances for the group and one of the reasons why we had left them behind when we moved out from Dili. They needed to buy some utensils, beds and initial food supplies. The battle for the allowances they had requested was going to have to be fought back in Dili. Meanwhile, it meant hurriedly setting up suitable lodging for the night.

Peter's procurement efforts from the departing Blackhawk squadron had saved the day. He had managed to squirrel away enough old camp stretchers, mosquito nets, tables, chairs and other utensils to get the new arrivals through the night with some semblance of pride. It wasn't quite the glorious arrival they had anticipated, but at least they were comfortable. I am sure the Blackhawk squadron would be rapt to know that much of their discarded gear found its way to help the East Timorese instead of ending up on the black market.

Although understandable in the current environment, once again the East Timorese had to rely on us for things to be done. It was the first priority of our mission to help them out, but it was also important that we didn't fall into the role of the benefactor. We had to build their confidence. If they were going to make their way through the UN system after our departure, we had to teach
Local staff arrive them the system we had learnt through our own persistence. The UN would certainly still be in East Timor after we departed. We had to teach them to work confidently within it.

That first night, after the East Timorese had shared our dinner and departed carrying our lanterns under their arms so that they could see inside their house, we made a pact. Maybe in hindsight it was obvious, but at the time it was a revelation to us. We decided to consciously involve the more senior East Timorese officers in all our visits and discussions with UN personnel and other agencies.

We knew that this was easier said than done. We were trying to break new ground and bring East Timorese officials into the process. Not everyone was ready for it. Initially, it was going to take a big effort to get them into meetings, but before that could happen we had to develop their knowledge sufficiently to allow them to take part confidently and change their belief that foreign ideas and policies were superior. Other than a small Timor Aid unit in town, there were no other groups that employed Timorese. Groups responsible for border security, such as the PKF, were all made up of internationals. Although a police academy had recently begun training, an East Timorese defence force did not yet exist.

We had already seen examples of foreign helpers doing little to foster self-confidence among the East Timorese. When we had relieved the Kiwis at Dili airport, a couple of large passenger aircraft had flown in to Dili with a large contingent of foreign soldiers arriving to join the PKF. Military arrivals required little processing and we saw it as an opportunity to allow the senior Timorese officers to go onto the tarmac and take charge of the situation. Processing and welcoming the force was a big deal for them and also a display that they governed their own airport.

Much to my embarrassment, the force commander with his under-the-armpit pogo stick, a little pompously, refused to discuss matters with a Timorese officer and demanded action and advice from the Australians. The situation was eventually sorted out, after an angry tirade. We had no intention of tolerating that kind of situation at the border.
Despite the disappointment surrounding the arrival of the East Timorese at Batugade, our dinner that night was a great bonding experience. The 14 of us managed a great slap-up meal at the trestle table under the moonlight. Rick and Adi were the chefs — the rest of us mucked in later to do the dishes.

The meal revealed the similarities and highlighted a few differences between the groups. One common liking was for consuming a few beers. Another was the enjoyment of a fine curry and lots of rice. One of the Timorese female officers cooked the best fluffy white rice I have ever eaten. The real difference came with dessert. Everywhere we went there were always East Timorese selling, swapping or consuming enormous quantities of fruit. It was a staple. Rick and I served up a heap of it for dessert. One mistake though — we chopped it up, mixed it together and made fruit salad. All fruits are great to eat but a firm belief of the East Timorese is that fruit should not be mixed together. Our cajoling eventually encouraged one of the nine to try it, but the others politely declined. Even a liberal splattering of army-ration condensed milk failed to tempt them.

We were expecting an early helicopter arrival on the beach the next morning. It was to be a snap visit by our controller and some senior UNTAET administrators who wanted to see our set-up. After the visit, we planned to take the nine officers to Dili so they could gather some more possessions for their house, as well as try to obtain the long awaited allowance.

The helicopter was to arrive at 5am so we had to be on the beach at 4.30am, just in case. Our rooster alarms didn’t fail us and we were up in plenty of time. The Timorese were still in a little shock and didn’t make it down for the landing. It was to be a short visit — a quick information update so the UNTAET number two, our initial contact on arrival, could discuss the border issues with the Indonesians in Bali the next week.

Everyone made it in for a quick opening ceremony of the border office. The controller was pleased when we handed him a coconut with a sprouting green shoot to ceremoniously plant behind our shed. It was a good photo opportunity and he managed to pull one of those great-occasion speeches from nowhere. I got to wear my sombrero.
Two UNTAET women and the Portuguese immigration woman had also come for the ride. Arial, our enforcer at UN headquarters, took the photos for UNTAET news. The visitors wanted a quick tour of the border, so, while the others looked around, I took the three to the bridge. They loved it and grabbed a few more photo opportunities. We raced back to the helicopter with rotors whirring. The boss was going to be late for another UNTAET meeting in Dili due to the longer than expected border visit.

Before he left, I surprised our controller when I told him that we would be taking the Timorese back to Dili that day. I didn’t think it was appropriate to tell him why in front of the boss.

Adi and I crammed the nine East Timorese officers into our two vehicles and headed for Dili. It was a long trip with a few stops for dried garfish near the fishing village of Levant. Every time we stopped it seemed that one of my group saw someone from their family. Eventually, I understood that everyone in East Timor knew everyone else, and it wasn’t possible to travel without meeting a friend or acquaintance. Even someone the East Timorese had met once five years ago, and hadn’t seen since, was greeted with a wave.

The last half of the journey was spent driving in rain squalls with wipers just clearing the window. Not a good time to meet one of the large speeding convoys of aid lorries or APCs coming around a blind bend.

Except for the two senior men, we dropped the officers off at their homes. The time had come for the senior people to be taken to all our meetings. We had to confront the allowance issue and the East Timorese way was for the older people to be the senior and respected leaders. The younger people still expected to be told what to do by their elders. The elders also expected to be in charge. Any effort to unseat the elders caused great hurt and loss of face. It went against the customs of the East Timorese.

We saw the three women from the morning’s visit who said that although the boss had been late to his meeting, he had been impressed by the arrangements we had made. The Portuguese officer told us she had been considering joining us at
the border as our immigration adviser, but the visit had altered those thoughts. Having seen the end of the Earth, she was now looking around for other opportunities.

The controller did his best regarding the allowances, but it just didn’t seem to be able to happen. Adi and I returned before dark to Batugade. The Timorese returned four days later with much more gear and soon settled into a routine. They also had a little cash to make some vital purchases for the house. I believe this came from the controller’s own pocket.

Their house was large but by no means comfortable. The senior officer spent the day digging a new toilet while the rest fixed up other things, as we had on our arrival — building a clothesline and clearing some land. The well at the house seemed okay for washing and cooking — a bonus, as the Timorese couldn’t access the bottled water. They managed to get by for drinking water by sharing ours, as we managed to cook and make coffee with boiled, boiled and reboiled water from our well. They had one last surprise — the landlord told them that there had been a little confusion and the rent was now twice what they had expected.

It was time to bite the bullet and start some official activity at the crossing. We had enough staff to start running things, although it was going to be a long while before we would have full control. The PKF would need to maintain a full-time presence at the post for the foreseeable future. An incident near Nunura, and another one a few kilometres from the post, made everyone realise that despite the promises of civil recognition and a partial opening of Batugade, there were still dangerous people out there with conflicting intentions.

Despite this, we were about to achieve our first goal. The Timorese were about to decide who could enter and leave East Timor through an official border crossing with West Timor.

The next few days were interesting while we got to know each other better and tried to establish a work pattern. The group was divided into three shifts, with Adi, Peter and Jeff leading one each. They took on responsibility for training and organising their groups and developed close links among themselves.

Rick and I managed the situation and attempted to establish protocols for immigration and customs activities. The
Local staff arrive

senior East Timorese officer worked with us and we attempted to move him slowly into the hierarchy. Our intention was that he would issue the instructions to all groups — he was the boss. Rick’s language skills and the English skills of one of the young Timorese proved invaluable.

The Timorese threw themselves into the role and they were keen to do their bit. Unfortunately, they never really settled into the house and the environment of Batugade. Sickness, mostly malaria, seemed to pervade the group and they struggled to keep up the numbers at work. It was often difficult to establish the degree of illness, or what the problem was, as communication was not always clear.

At one stage, we were sure that a couple of them were suffering from malaria. They all claimed never to have had malaria before. This was difficult to believe, as a couple of them had previously been Falantil guerrillas fighting and hiding in the jungle. The others had lived in various parts of Dili where the mosquitoes were rampant. One thing was certain though, a few of them became very sick. Another couple also went down with serious influenza. It was not easy to distinguish between that and malaria, but they were now being exposed to numerous strains of the flu from people from all over the planet.

The Timor Aid doctor proved a valuable resource and his efforts were commendable. He was a Kenyan doctor and was conducting a vaccination program along the border. As a back up, we had the military medics at Balibo and they were called on more than once to attend to illness. Because the Timorese were not allowed to drive the UN vehicles, it meant that many times we had to drive staff around ourselves.

One time Adi and I drove one of our young officers back to Dili as he was suffering badly from malaria. An army medic had given him some medication before we departed. The harsh realities of the time meant that all we could do was dump him at home to recover and then drive back to Batugade to get back to work. It would have been almost impossible for him to get back once he had recovered, so we gave him 20,000 rupiah for the bus. If he chose to sit on the roof, he could keep some change for his family.
We felt awful about the way they had to deal with these matters, but they were grateful for our assistance and willingness to help. I was very proud to see that no one in our group ever shirked from the tiring responsibilities thrust on them simply because they were the ones with the equipment and financial ability. The will to help had not been dampened by the hard work and frustrations.
The Easter family reunion day, for various reasons, had not taken place. For those still living in Atambua, or in the refugee camps, the reunions were the only official way to cross the border, unless they chose to join the refugee groups returning permanently via the IOM truck convoys or the MV Patricia Ann Hotung. Although risky, some people in the Maliana region managed the odd visit via the Nunura River market.

There were many reasons why people chose not to return permanently. One was that they were receiving misinformation in the camps about the current security situation in East Timor. There were also claims that many were being prevented from returning.

The family reunion days would no longer be required once a formal agreement regarding the border was made between UNTAET and the Indonesian administration.

For most people, the next opportunity to cross the border would not come until the next reunion on 6 May. We were keen to get down to the border post for the first reunion since our arrival at Batugade. It was going to be an early start as people came from all over East Timor for the day. Our sleep deprivation continued. The town square turned out to be the drop-off point for the trucks and buses carrying the masses to Batugade. The noisy congregation of people outside our accommodation at 4am cheated the roosters and dogs of their daily role.

It was difficult to wash, shave and dress for work at 4.30am with hundreds of people crowding around our small
outdoor living area, peering in, examining this new development, which had appeared since their last visit. The crowd kept growing until about 5.30am. They were prevented from moving past the old Portuguese fort by a PKF barricade and they started to back up around the square and onto the beach. It was here that the first part of a difficult security process began. All vehicles were stopped and the drivers were directed to the beachfront car park — previously known to us as the heliport. Cars were not allowed to go any further on reunion days.

The PKF scanned everyone for metal objects before they could start the walk towards the border post. From the first barricade to the post was almost three kilometres. At 5.30am, everyone was in a buoyant mood, heading off at various paces as if to a local carnival. The narrow road wound through another two or three small roadblocks before leading the walkers to the designated meeting point. The left side of the road was forested and lined with razor wire.

The party atmosphere soon began to disintegrate as the intense heat and humidity started to drain the spirit from the walkers. It was one time when the East Timorese were not at home with the conditions. People had replaced their usual hot weather casual clothing with their Sunday best. They didn’t get to see their relatives too often so it was inappropriate not to dress well. Unfortunately, the long trousers, fancy shirts, dresses and shoes did not suit an environment in which physical exertion was required. For one rare day, the East Timorese were sweating and tiring like us.

The crowd started to string out as the security stops split them. The younger people would keenly stride out while the older people struggled along with sticks and old umbrellas. There was no courtesy bus for the older or disabled people. The walk tested the young and fit; for the infirm, it was hellish.

The PKF did all they could, offering a ride to the most obviously distressed, but their time was mostly consumed trying to maintain security.

I didn’t know how many reunions had been held so far, but with the slowly changing economic situation a few people had managed to establish a few small market opportunities
en route to the border. A few trinkets were for sale along the way, but the drink stations set up by coconut vendors under the shade of large trees were more popular.

Eventually, the head of the procession arrived at the meeting area, located on a flat field on the beach side of the road, about 500 metres from the border post. It was flat because at high tide it was covered by a small amount of water. It would be best described as a tidal swamp.

There was one final security check to pass before the people could enter the compound where people from both sides of the border met. It was here that the crowd swelled and people became agitated as they looked over the razor wire barriers, furtively scanning the growing mass for someone they knew. The search at this point was very thorough, and once again we saw the ‘Robocops’ who had come from Dili to oversee the occasion.

It was a volatile environment and UNTAET could not afford to allow anyone from East Timor to take any items that might be transferred to the people visiting from West Timor. The discovery of people taking illicit goods into West Timor could have provided an opportunity for the authorities to stop the reunions permanently.

For every person marching down the road from Batugade there was another coming the other way from Motaain.

This group from West Timor had less distance to travel, but the gauntlet they had to traverse was more unpleasant. They were searched at the border by the Indonesian authorities and, after being searched again in the shadow of the high TNI gun tower, they were corralled through a long wire race towards the border. I never worked out why they didn’t get to walk around the bend in the road and across the bridge.

After the people were herded across the shallow river mouth and entered East Timor via the beach, the PKF and CivPol met them for another round of searching. No one complained about the river crossing. They were as keen as those from Batugade to get into the compound for the reunion.

Once inside the compound the race was on. There was a system of sorts. Each family placed a couple of sentries at each
entry point. The subsequent clogging at the entry points made it hard to find anyone. A new arrival with a familiar face was screamed at until they were eventually dragged into a huge family embrace. As the crowd grew, and people relocated to the middle of the compound to find some space, or shade, the gathering started to settle. Late arrivals were no longer greeted at the gate and were forced to run around feverishly seeking friends.

On this occasion, it was a little quieter than usual and only about 7,000 people were massed in the compound. By midday, it was standing room only. The reunion closed at 2.30pm. Any late comers, or those who struggled to make the long march, had little time to converse, so every encounter was a whirl as information and greetings were exchanged excitedly.

The UN’s aim for these days was to spread the word back to the refugee camps that it was safe to return home. The environment was not particularly helpful for this intention. The rules at the reunion required all the people who crossed from West Timor to return at day’s end. Besides the intense humidity and lack of amenities, there was the lingering threat of a suspected militia member being recognised by someone who had had their home torched or a relative killed in September.

The stress took its toll on everybody. Fights were common, but on this occasion there were few incidents of major concern.
If someone was recognised or identified as militia, there was little that could be done other than encouraging them, or escorting them, on a hasty retreat to the other side.

As the reunion started to wind down, Rick and I joined the crowd for the walk back to Batugade. Near the end of the walk we decided to try a coconut. Under the shade of a large tree, we managed to consume some of the milky white flesh. It was refreshing, but we could not eat it all. The family who sold them to us were able to enjoy the free offerings we left behind.

When we returned to the office our East Timorese colleagues told us that our 2,000-rupiah coconuts were more than a light snack. They said that if you eat a freshly cut coconut in Timor you will never leave. They were pleased that we liked their island.

The next reunion day occurred within a fortnight. It followed the same pattern of the previous events. The word had got around that these days were relatively safe. Almost 5,000 people came from East Timor, with a similar number from the west.

The difference this time was the man in the suit. There was always a light moment among the most dire of situations. For the crowd lining up for the final search, it was the arrival of a man in a purple suit. He was tall and thin and displayed a regal demeanour as he waited in line. When he walked forward for examination it was with a very pronounced sashay.

Timorese Sunday best is usually very neat, reasonably formal and definitely conservative. The man from Motaain was everything but that. His bright-purple three-piece suit and high-heeled coloured leather shoes were not the only things that made him stand out in a crowd of 10,000. The accompanying fluorescent boater hat with elegantly upturned brim added immensely to the opulence of the outfit.

Wolf whistles and light-hearted heckles greeted his arrival at the checkpoint. The difficulties of the day were momentarily lost as every set of eyes in the queue watched him stroll nonchalantly down the wire race to meet his friends. His entrance into the compound was met with a resounding
'Oooooohhhhh!', as thousands of eyes simultaneously noted his arrival. As he disappeared into the crowd, most people in the queue strained their necks a little more to see just who his friends might be.

At the previous reunion, we had been bemused by the lack of assistance for those with difficulties walking to the compound area. There seemed to be a lot of people available for security, but few from the agencies there to assist. The lack of solid planning to look after the thousands flocking to these events resulted in a few difficulties. The problems were exacerbated by the lack of any administrative staff within Batugade. The town might have been on the main road across the border, but it was small and was a lightweight when it came to administrative importance in the Bobonaro district.

The huge crowd left the reunion site during mid-afternoon. By about 5.30pm, it was apparent that a group of 50 people, mostly men, had missed their transport home. They were congregating in the town centre outside our office and were obviously waiting for something to happen. This was not a place where buses ran after dark; it just wasn’t part of life.

We had finished for the day, as the border usually shut down for any official business on reunion days. Our place was now secured by the presence of full-time local security officers. These newly created positions provided much needed employment for the village locals.

The security officers were always willing to take up our offers of a meal. They were never comfortable eating with us when they were supposed to be securing the area, so the sudden arrival of an officer at our dinner trestle table, with meal in hand, confused us. At first, we thought that he wanted to join us, but we soon realised he was agitated about something.

The group of 50 hot, tired and hungry people was still in Batugade as dusk descended. No one had a plan to get these people home. We would have to assist so we got out of our comfy chairs to see what we could do. We had some concerns that the group could turn nasty. Our nearby office was clearly marked ‘UN’ in very large letters and people expected the UN to help them. If they were
disappointed, the UN would often bear the brunt of their anger. This was to be another situation where Rick’s Indonesian skills proved vital. He and I ventured among the group with the security man and learned that they had come from a variety of towns stretching back to Dili, including Atabae, Liquica and Malbara.

Although there was a great family spirit in Timor, these people were well away from the people and places they knew. In our visits to Maliana and Nunura we had discovered that some of our Timorese officers had not been there before. People just didn’t have the ability or money to get around the place easily. For the men left at Batugade there was a mix of frustration with the authorities and apprehension about being left somewhere foreign after dark.

We tried to whip up some interest from the various agencies we thought had the ability to do something to help this group get home. Our vehicles could each carry only four passengers and we were technically prohibited from giving lifts to people. Our initial requests for assistance were met with a firm ‘No’. After playing our last card and telling our contact that the 50 or so men and boys were without food and water in a town without accommodation, the response was: ‘None of our drivers work after dark. Those people have been to family reunions before. They should know how to get home. It looks like they may just have to sleep in the market or on the beach tonight.’

Using the satellite phone, Adi started to ring anybody we could think of. Eventually, we contacted someone within the District Administrator’s office in Maliana. After about an hour of discussion, explanation and pleading with the various people who were passed the telephone, we managed to, firstly, establish our bona fides and, secondly, elicit a promise of help.

The promised help was a bus and driver from Maliana. It would be at least another hour before the bus could get to Batugade. It would be a long drive into Dili and then back to Maliana in the dark. We were grateful for the offer. The driver was not allowed to leave until we confirmed our acceptance of the terms so we raced outside to the group to negotiate a deal.

As Rick and I stood on a crate in the dark, we tried to explain the deal. With a combination of Rick’s Indonesian and
some English from an emerging group leader, along with the security officer, the deal was laid on the line. A bus would come from Maliana and drive into Dili, stopping en route where required, but it would cost 800,000 rupiah.

Simply dividing the figure by 50 to work out what each person would have to pay would not work. The people who wanted to go only as far as Liquica had no desire to pay as much as those travelling all the way to Dili. We started with the standard bus fare of 15,000 rupiah for a trip from Batugade to Dili. The group was told this wouldn’t be enough as the bus driver had to drive for at least an hour to get to Batugade and he would have to complete a return trip.

It was difficult to hurry negotiations along with the language difficulties, combined with the desire by all to save money. Many within the group already felt someone had let them down. Finally, a deal was made. The agreed cost would be 20,000 rupiah to Dili, 15,000 rupiah to Liquica and 10,000 rupiah to Atabai. Children were free. We rang back Maliana and said ‘Go!’

The leader of the group, known to us only as the man in the green beret, did a bit of convincing and organised the collection. He collected the money with us and then scrutinised the count. The sum total was 625,000 rupiah. Rick and I looked at each other and knew the rest of our mates would willingly assist. We would ask them a little later. Rick threw in 175,000 rupiah from our food tin and everything was in place.

We were now committed to the group and couldn’t retreat to our home until the bus arrived. We produced 12 bottles of water that disappeared quickly. The kids received treats that my family and friends had been sending from home. Lolly cigarettes, chocolate bars and lollipops were scoffed eagerly. The adults consumed a large quantity of army biscuits.

Much to our chagrin, two empty UN trucks drove through the town at 8pm. Fortunately, our truck — not a bus — turned up at 8.40. Everyone clambered on board and the officially sealed envelope was torn open so the driver could count the fare. All was correct and soon the now happy group was waving and bidding us farewell. They bounced over the speed
hump on the edge of town and disappeared over the bridge. We knew we had done a little good for the UN that day.

After the truck had departed the local residents began to appear in the street. This was quite odd as they were rarely seen after dark. Not long after that a PKF foot patrol probed its way through the square and continued on its way down the road.
Chapter 21
Open for business

The official opening of the border at Batugade was a low-key event. There was less pomp and ceremony than the impromptu coconut planting we had held recently at the office.

It was 8 May 2000 and the Border Service of East Timor at Batugade and the Motaain post (known as Junction Point Alpha) was opened for business. The UNTAET administration was extremely pleased that we had managed to create a workable structure. There was now tangible evidence that the UN administration was endeavouring to develop harmonious relations with its neighbour.

To truly fit the definition of ‘open’, people would have to be able to cross from either side with official approval. At the time of opening the border, no high-level official agreements had been signed with the Indonesian administration. The government powerbrokers needed to take their time to grapple with a myriad diplomatic and national issues before making formal policies. While the big-picture politics remained in a state of flux, we knew any agreements we made would be at the mercy of the local commander’s mood and, although it gave them the opportunity to flex some power, it also enabled us to gradually obtain what UNTAET desired.

While the people living and working at the border waited for official direction it was important for the smaller players to get on with life. We managed to obtain tacit approval from the local TNI and POLRI commanders for travel across the border to occur. It was a start and with it the seeds were sown to start
low-level trade and travel between the two countries. The road through Batugade could, in time, become second to Dili Port as East Timor’s most important trade route.

It was an 8am start at the post on day one. We had agreed with the PKF to be in place from 8am to 4pm. The PKF did not want the border open when it was dark for security reasons. They guaranteed that no one would be able to cross after dark because the TNI would turn people back. Apparently, we wouldn’t be disturbed by travellers knocking on our doors at odd hours.

The daytime shifts suited us because we really didn’t have enough staff or equipment to do much more than that anyway. There were only five of us and nine East Timorese trainees.

The Customs and Immigration office had been built to ensure that it couldn’t be confused with the PKF gun post, or the army encampment across the narrow road. Four spindly wooden struts made of tree branches and a couple of rafters from old roofing timber described it adequately. Vehicles coming from the direction of Batugade were stopped by the PKF before they reached the boom gate and were pointed in the direction of this new office.

There was parking for vehicles just off the road on the small, muddy and rutted clearing next to where the team eagerly awaited the opportunity to deal with a new client. Except at family reunion times, cars were the most common mode of transport, as few people wanted to walk to or from Batugade itself. It would be a long time before a bus or something similar would cross the border.

Our first arrivals turned up at 8.35am. It was three young women from a child reunion assistance organisation intending to enter West Timor. They were surprised to find us there, having anticipated just a quick wave to the PKF guards as they barrelled by in their car.

At first, they didn’t seem keen to move their vehicle off the dry road into the sodden ditch until a soldier pressed the point. The women then climbed apprehensively from the car, bewildered looks on their faces. They could see there were a few blue-uniformed people, who were definitely not army, sitting
underneath a small tarpaulin-covered shelter, framed by a brilliant blue sky. A small wave moved along the shore in the background as these blue-overall-clad men jumped up and moved as if to embrace them.

The quick move towards them was actually an excited welcome by the new Border Service officers to their first clients. The women were motioned to the small table under the tarp. They even got to sit in the officials’ chairs. From then on an intensive interrogation began and the situation resembled most other happenings at an international border.

Two of them had only recently flown into Dili from Europe and were keen to get to work. Their destination was Atambua. Hopefully, they could rely on the experience and wiles of the more experienced woman, who had been there before.

The women seemed impressed by the swaying palm trees and the view of the ocean and took some convincing that the office itself could have been a little more luxurious for its occupants. Things had to be rushed along a bit as the PKF corporal wandered over to advise the driver that a large armoured personnel carrier, or two, would be arriving within minutes. The nearby piece of mud was not a well-planned parking space for the Border Service after all. It was a quagmire created by the wide turning-circle of the large steel-tracked vehicles.

The three child reunion workers were keen to move on, but Adi couldn’t be hurried. There were some procedures to observe. A casual look in the car was probably in order. Within a reasonable time, the thump of the brand new Border Service Stamp 7 echoed in the serenity of the post as their passports were stamped. After the honour of receiving East Timor’s first land border stamp in their British passports, the trio hurriedly moved on. One day, they might appreciate the occasion a little more.

We had to get a new shelter built quickly. The UN labourers from Maliana had checked the site when they had visited Batugade to finish installing our water supply. It was time for the team’s procurement experts to follow up on the promise to build something. The corporal nearby told us to speak to the major back at company headquarters if we wanted to change
anything. There were things such as line-of-fire issues to consider before we changed the landscape.

The three women were not the first people to cross the border — just the first officially recorded people. Previously, representatives from various aid agencies and a few itinerant travellers had been crossing. The aid workers crossed almost daily to go about their business. The itinerants bargained or argued their way across, often convincing one side of their bona fides only to take the long walk back when rejected on the other side. It was the price they paid for living on their wits in a place where there was an element of lawlessness.

Anyone crossing the border at Batugade now required identification documents. Some of our international compatriots found it a nuisance. Previously, they had been flagged through quickly by the PKF, but they were now being asked to stop and identify themselves.

We began hearing complaints such as: ‘Why do I need to stop and identify myself when I cross the border? When I was in Kosovo or elsewhere in Yugoslavia I could travel freely over any border at any time!’ Then there was the standard: ‘I demand the right of free passage. Don’t you know who I work for?’

People accustomed to getting what they want could usually take advantage of the lack of clear direction among those tasked to run things. We learnt very quickly through our failures that we needed clear and firm directions to ensure the new Timorese officers, and at times ourselves, were not bluffed or bullied. It was a good learning experience for our trainees. Initially, they were a little taken aback and we took the lead role. Over time, as they developed confidence and a belief in their role, they started to stand up to challenges to their authority just as their colleagues at Dili Airport had started to do.

Rick and I crossed the border regularly to discuss our requirements with the TNI and POLRI commanders at Motaain. We had met them all previously at the tactical meetings run by the TNI and the PKF. These issues were not military matters and the time had come for us to deal directly with them on customs and immigration issues.
The priority was to establish who the Indonesians would allow to cross from the East into the West, and who could return. There was no point in us allowing people out to see them returning sombrely five minutes later after being refused entry on the other side.

Our visits were a little off-putting at first. We travelled across with the UNMOs, who arranged every visit. We left the security of the flak-jacketed and heavily armed PKF and military police at the border and drove or walked across to have our chats. These meetings were far different from the large tactical meetings run by the PKF. It was just Rick and I, two UNMOs, a TNI captain and someone from POLRI. We decided to forgo our earlier decision to include the East Timorese contingent leader in all discussions. He was happy to wait until a meeting was held in East Timorese territory.

Despite the amicable and relaxed nature of our discussions, everyone was guarded. We knew anything we said probably went straight back to Kupang, or even to the administrative capital on Bali. They likewise knew that we reported back to Dili.

Before they would explain their intentions, the Indonesians wanted to know our requirements. We were able to clearly demonstrate our intentions as we had been working on our rules while biding our time in Dili. Theories and practices would change drastically in the future, but we handed over a written guide of our plans to the TNI captain.

The Indonesians had yet to fully consider their options. They simply told us that anyone wanting to drive their car across from East Timor would need a visa from the embassy in Dili. The embassy was located on the floating hotel. This was not practical for those living in Batugade or any other remote location.

People with a visa could not take their car past Motaain. They were required to leave it there and take a bus to Atambua or beyond. Our rules were a little more conciliatory. We were able to issue a border visa on the spot to anyone who met certain criteria.

The interesting issue regarding our immigration guide was that we were operating on a loose set of rules based on a UNTAET directive that established which people were entitled to have East
Open for business

Timorese citizenship. A couple of problems soon reared their heads.

One was that the directive was restrictive and difficult to understand. This lack of clarity was particularly problematic when the person entrusted with enforcing the directive was trying to make informed decisions on the spot, while sitting at a basic border post under a tarpaulin near the road. Verbal instructions were confusing at the best of times. Talking in two or three languages made it considerably worse. The need for detailed and definitive instructions to guide the East Timorese officers was a must. After continual prompting and pushing from my team mates, I was forced to take time out and produce a step-by-step guide.

These detailed instructions included stamp impressions to make the task straightforward. Later, these basic but functional instructions would have to be referred to Dili to ensure the air and seaport officers followed the same procedures. Fortunately, the Kiwis and Portuguese did not already have their own version.

Our bilingual cheat sheet was complete. Joao, a young Timorese officer, had translated it with enormous care. This led to a second concern. Now that the Timorese officers could readily understand the rules, they didn’t like them. It became apparent that the average Timorese had not had any input into the definitions of who was East Timorese, and who they might like to enter their country.

It was with some consternation that they highlighted that they were unhappy with what was going on. This was an issue we had to refer to the policy makers. It was also something for the Timorese officers to take up with their representatives in the CNRT. The situation as it stood gave them a sense that they weren’t controlling their own destiny.

In the early days, the comings and goings across the border proved to be quite irregular. The three team leaders spent much of the time going over the guidelines and practising basic English with the Timorese. They certainly wanted to learn the customs and immigration rules. They were also keen to check out the importers to ensure that they paid the appropriate taxes and didn’t cheat the system.
Initially, most of the difficult problems at the post related to the identification of travellers. An East Timorese who could prove that they were East Timorese usually did not have a travel document. Most people had an Indonesian-issued Kartu Tanda Pengenal (KTP or identity card). The KTP was intended as a domestic identity card. There had never been any intention for it to be used as a travel document.

UNTAET had produced a temporary credit card-style identity document for some East Timorese. This card could be used to travel overseas through the airport in Dili. Australia had agreed to accept them. Some other countries, including Portugal, were studying the proposal. Many people did not have sufficient identification to meet the criteria to be issued with the card. Making matters more difficult was that the administration was being restrictive with the number they were issuing. A classic catch-22 for anyone wanting to travel.

The problem for the people living near the border was that they couldn’t easily get to Dili to obtain a card. Most didn’t even know that such a card existed. People usually just wanted to visit their family across the river or to go to the banks in Atambua where they had left their money.

In those early days, the answer at the border was to produce a KTP. There were many versions of this card and we learnt to read them all. If the Border Service let you out then the Indonesians would most likely let you into West Timor. Unfortunately, anyone with a KTP that had ‘born in East Timor’ printed on it, had to go to the floating hotel in Dili for an accompanying paper visa before they could enter West Timor. For many people who needed to travel, the unofficial crossing at Nunura was considered a worthwhile risk.

The identity document issue did not go away during our deployment. I attended meetings at which a soft border regime
was discussed. This proposal meant a system where people living within a certain distance of the border on either side could travel freely within a defined area near the border. At the time, the security situation and the lack of any formal identification document prevented the idea from being implemented.

Despite the rules, it wasn’t long before truckloads of Indonesian-made hardware items and cooking utensils from Atambua began to arrive at our side of the border. Their destinations were the fast-growing general stores being rebuilt in Dili.

The traders were streetwise and quickly picked up on the lack of manpower and equipment in place at the border.

At first, almost every importation required a complete examination. Sometimes trucks would arrive loaded at Motaain where the goods would be transferred to older trucks before crossing the border.

When trucks arrived at the post the officers stationed there would deal with the immigration issues. Sometimes the crew were unable to enter and the truck would have to turn around and would not be seen again for a few days. Other times the driver would leave the truck and go back to Motaain and a replacement driver from Dili would appear to continue the journey. If all was okay the truck would be driven under escort the three kilometres to the office in Batugade for a cargo examination.
One thing missing was an area to unload trucks under cover. The search area was on the beach side of the old Portuguese fort. The only firm ground to use was the road or a small grassy strip bordering the beach sand. There was no shade or tarpaulins here. The roof was the searing sun. Sometimes there was cloud cover, making it humid and sticky instead.

Everything in the trucks was usually jam-packed tightly into the tip tray or inside a caged tabletop. The search team simply climbed up the sides of the truck and started hoisting everything clear. Sometimes the metal was too hot to touch. Being on a beach is usually a pleasant experience. This was oppressive. Soldiers nearby would help, but once a search began and the security angle was covered, they were smart enough to go back to their own business and leave us to it.

The importer rarely had a manifest. The excuse usually was that everything had been purchased from separate suppliers at the markets in Atambua and no manifest was available. A cargo search brought with it five certainties:

1. The truck would be heavily overloaded.
2. All items of similar description would be scattered throughout the truck.
3. The first two, sometimes three, invoices produced would be false.
4. A number of crying children or women would be in attendance to make the examination more difficult.
5. People speaking Indonesian couldn't speak the dialect the Timorese officers spoke.

Fortunately, the East Timorese officers were keen to prove themselves and their persistence was enviable. Even when we were physically exhausted and ready to apply a little risk assessment to various shipments, the East Timorese insisted on going through everything. Their local knowledge about prices was a bonus. Although the continual attempted fraud was tiresome, it did provide an opportunity for the Timorese staff to prove they had skills that we didn't. It was the beginning of something.

Quickly, the importers learnt that the false declarations were being uncovered and it was costing them dearly. Eventually,
they altered their game plan. They picked up on our hours of business and fairly soon trucks were arriving in our lunch breaks, just before closing or after hours.

It was possibly a plan to wear us down. A last-ditch effort was made to get by us on Sunday when we Australians were alone. Sunday morning was church time for the Catholic Timorese officers. The border was closed and the PKF had agreed to this.

At 5.30am on a Sunday, as we lay in our stretchers anticipating a day of peace, a soldier disturbed our slumber to advise us that a truck was waiting for us on the beach. Not only was it well before the 8am opening time of weekdays, it was Sunday and the driver had managed to con his way past the PKF at the border post. He had driven the three kilometres to our office without hindrance. We were forced to examine the truck.

The most interesting truck arrival occurred in early June. The importer had dealt with us on a number of occasions and it was always entertaining, although annoying in the heat, to see what his next attempt would bring. We were wise enough to know that we were not getting the full revenue owed by him. Our aim was to make sure we got a reasonable amount to ensure he was doing his bit. He was always going to sail close to the wind.

On that morning, he arrived with two old dump trucks and his car. As usual, the trucks were stacked to the limit. There were still no registration requirements in East Timor so anything that moved could take its rightful place on the road. These particular relics were very old and tired pieces of machinery. It seemed at first that our man had learnt from his previous attempts as he produced a couple of detailed manifests and invoices — the first manifests we had ever seen. We had recently issued a warning to him that failure to produce manifests would result in the seizure of the relevant shipments.

A quick examination revealed that the carrying capacity of the two older trucks was far larger than anything else he had brought across the border. There was no way that we could unload these trucks on the beach without risking life or limb. For a moment, we considered accepting the documentation and
collecting the appropriate dues without a search. One of the Timorese officers wasn’t so keen and started poking around, and it wasn’t long before he was struggling to relate any of the goods he saw to the documents in his hands. It put a halt to our plans.

After much thought, we decided on an escort to Dili. This would take a couple of officers about five hours and little effort except for the driving.

Recently arrived members of the second New Zealand Customs contingent were establishing a going concern at the Dili wharf. They were determined to make a success of things and were extremely efficient. I was sure that they would enjoy the opportunity to go through the two trucks with the 30 or so Timorese officers on duty there. They also had some ramps and equipment they could use — and a shed.

Nelson, one of the East Timorese officers, and I set out at 10am and took up the rear of the convoy. After we covered the nearby flat beach areas from Batugade we entered the first hills. The smoke and burning smells coming from the older trucks were disconcerting.

On the first real hill we were travelling so slowly that the speedometer on our vehicle failed to register. We kept our distance. The thought of a truck careering down the hill backwards was foremost in our minds. It wasn’t just a matter of the brakes failing and the truck crashing out of control that worried us. Even if there was no mechanical failure, we could visualise the bald tyres spinning madly in a vain attempt to prevent the weight of the cargo taking the truck backwards in a slow downhill slide. I didn’t want to become a blob on an East Timorese road, so we dropped back further. Soon we were on the radio to tell the Kiwis our two-and-a-half hour trip was looking like four — if we were lucky.

No such luck. One truck almost expired just west of Liquica. The smell of a burning clutch of that size was overpowering. The driver managed to coerce the beast on until it finally gave up, fortunately for us, just outside the Liquica police station.
The commanding officer wasn’t overly enthusiastic about taking responsibility for the truck. It took some time to convince him of our need to move on. We promised someone would come for it in the morning. While negotiations occurred, the other truck and the car we were escorting had continued towards Dili. After 40 minutes of racing manoeuvres, we caught them just out of town and took them to the port.

The Kiwis were very pleasant about the whole matter being dumped on them. They even arranged for the pick up of the other truck and its contents the next morning. We managed to get back to Batugade about two hours after dark. The lack of late-night electricity or enthusiasm ensured a simple meal — Cruskets and baked beans.

The search by the Kiwis the next day resulted in another seizure of shopwares, alcohol and pornographic material. It was good that the false declarations had been detected. Our preference was for the traders to start cooperating and to learn that the system was hard to beat. We were not there to constantly battle and hinder the importers. The whole idea was to establish a normal trade pattern in which people would abide by the rules. We were aiming for a system where the border officers had only to conduct a small degree of searching to keep the bad traders honest. During May and June, we continued to search everything.

One evening as we locked up the office we couldn’t get the door of the second hut closed. After much shoving and heaving we took out the torches to examine the matter more closely. The room was stacked with so much detained gear that the floor was buckling. The doorframe was no longer square. We spent a long time struggling in the torch light to redistribute the weight within the building.

There were no more escorts during our time at the border as it hadn’t been worth the trouble. There was an attempt at a later date. A couple of Timorese officers were sent as escorts in July, but it ended unpleasantly — they were chased away at knife-point when they were halfway to Dili. The continuing
battles with the traders did allow the Timorese officers to get plenty of practice coping with difficult situations. Some of them were learning quickly. We had to remember that every phase was new and challenging for them.

Besides learning the rules, some of them also had to learn to confront people. This was not part of their nature. They could confront other Timorese but they weren’t well-practised in dealing with foreigners or the ethnic Chinese businessmen. There was also a lot of cash being bandied about by some of the importers while examinations were taking place.

Peter and I came back with a personal computer after a visit to Dili. We had ordered it weeks before and wondered why it hadn’t turned up. Everyone at Mosquito House had a new computer on their desks, but ours hadn’t appeared. The good thing about visiting Mosquito House every week for night-time meetings was that we were able to check the supply registers. We found that our computer had been purloined by someone and was set up in a back office. There was probably an unhappy person in the back office when they arrived for work the next morning.

We needed to develop simple computer systems to assist the entry of goods at Batugade so we could become a little more efficient. The Nepalese customs officer in Dili produced a very good spreadsheet-based document. We were able to use it and to modify other forms to improve the customs audit process. Each import at the border brought about another document alteration. We were gradually refining the process.

For our officers at Batugade the simple systems were good. It meant that they could learn to use the computers while also practising English. It didn’t matter how basic the Border Service might end up, there was no escaping the need to use a computer in the future. We ensured that we gave the entire group the opportunity to practise.

Immigration issues were a long way from being resolved, but at least a process was in place at Batugade and there was a working post that the Timorese could take over.
Throughout April and early May the threat of further violent incidents in the Bobonaro and Kova-Lima districts appeared to have subsided. For those living and working in the region, the levels of concern had stabilised and had even begun to fall away.

Many of the original troops who had controlled the tense border areas had transferred out. In my eyes, many of the civilian elements, as well as the local population, were developing a more carefree lifestyle. Activities that would have been deemed dangerous a few months earlier were now often being seen as risk-free.

People from non-government organisations passing through our recently opened border post seemed to be ambivalent about the possible risks they could face on the other side. They often dismissed, or did not understand, the levels of resentment in Atambua and similar strongholds.

Many of the NGOs were new to the region. Their casual attitude was probably due to them not having witnessed the earlier tough times. Others, who had been at the border since the outset, had just become too comfortable in the environment.

The changes in attitude were often small, but they were perceptible to us.

On our early travels to Batugade, the town had been littered with all the signs of a war zone. Coils of razor wire stretched across the landscape. The best way to move around the town was on the major pathways or road. Trying to access the backs of buildings, or using the time-worn small foot tracks
around town could have resulted in a bloody entanglement. The wire had been there since the Interfet days in September. It was rusting, unsightly and annoying. At the behest of the village heads, it was removed early in May. The important sections were left in place but the imposing prison-like environment was gone.

The attitude to the Nunura River crossing had also eased. A conciliatory approach was being taken as the importance of the trade and work for people in the area was recognised. The ‘Aussie, Aussie, Aussie! Oi, Oi, Oi!’ episodes showed that everyone was getting along nicely. Night travel was still officially frowned on between Batugade, Balibo and Maliana, but it was happening.

Other changes were not a case of easing off, but added up to a calmer lifestyle. The APCs at Batugade were disappearing. The previous regiment had departed, replaced by a unit operating Light Armoured Vehicles (LAVs) instead. To the unqualified like me, the LAV seemed just as deadly as the APC. The difference was that the LAVs were running around on rubber wheels — not noisy grinding monsters like the APCs — adding to a more peaceful environment.

It didn’t last. In the space of a few days, everyone got a wake-up call. Very quickly, people were battening down again to face a renewed threat.

Our post had been open only a short time. It wasn’t yet a time of mass crossings and this particular morning was a little slow for us. I was working on the written guidelines while the late shift was boiling the billy before relieving the early shift at the post. The Timorese rostered off for the day were hanging around. No transport, no money and nowhere to go!

The two-way radio was quietly lying on its side. None of us anticipated its next call to life would be anything other than routine. The first words delivered at a high pitch were not quite clear as the rapid-fire voice pierced the morning-tea atmosphere. The next sentences were clear.

‘There has been an incident. I repeat contact has been made at Junction Point Alpha. One unfriendly casualty.’

The radio didn’t rest again for some time. Everyone from everywhere wanted to know what was happening. Every UNTAET
radio in the western region was on the same frequency. There were no secrets.

As the radio squealed, the sound of motors from the nearby army post could be heard coming alive as soldiers responded swiftly and roared off down the road toward the post. We were immediately concerned for our group down there. It all seemed a bit improbable, but there it was on the radio for all to hear.

Was it possible that someone had been foolish enough to start trouble at the crossing? We all clamoured around the radio craving more information. There were plenty of weapons at the crossing. And then there were the two heavy-calibre machine guns looking at each other from the gun pits. The radio voice told all who listened that the contact had occurred in the family reunion area. This meant it was on our side of the border, between the post and us.

As time went on, the radio chatter calmed. The PKF Company Commander assured us that everyone at the post was safe.

Soldiers were everywhere for the rest of the day. The details of what had happened were somewhat hazy. The general story was that a contact occurred about three kilometres from Batugade in heavily wooded country near the river. Somebody crossed the border there and was shot.
The PKF had in no way lowered their guard in the border region. A determined show of force had been maintained. For the troops slogging their way through the hellishly steep and heavily forested mountains near the river there had always been the ever-present threat of coming under fire. If someone decided to take a shot at anyone in that environment it was unlikely that the targets would have any idea where it came from.

Similarly, for the troops in small encampments such as Junction Point Alpha, sleeping would have been the norm. Darkness was not a comforting cover. Everyone there was well aware that an incursion could happen at any time. On the few occasions that we had driven to the post at night, the feeling of control that we had in the daylight quickly disappeared and things seemed dangerously scary in the dark. Every sound echoed through the trees. A goat rooting around at night or a barking dog near our camp was annoying. A howl in the night for someone sleeping in a hooch with a gun and trip-wires for company would be a different story.

Near Batugade, and I presume elsewhere in the region, there was a massive resurgence in overt PKF activity and many emergency meetings. Before the morning was over, 15 helicopter flights had been made low over our camp. The wind direction that day put us firmly under the landing path. For most of the day, a helicopter hovered around the area of the contact. The forest was so thick that the helicopter was being used to try to lead the investigating patrols into the contact site.

It would be a long time before anyone could establish exactly what happened. The growth was so thick that no one was going to go blundering in with great haste.

The next morning the rumours and theories about what might have happened continued. The stories from both sides were vastly different. The PKF believed that there had been an armed incursion. The newspapers and radio in West Timor reported that an innocent woodcutter from Atambua was now in hospital after being shot by the PKF.

It was at times like these that the UNMOs came to the fore. It wasn't long before they had set up high-level meetings as
the armed forces from each side of the border tried to establish what had happened and who was to blame.

I attended a meeting and heard the PKF version. The TNI then provided their version. Importantly, everyone on the eastern side of the border had a big rethink about the way they went about their business. Civilian controls on the border, such as Customs and Immigration functions had just been given a major setback. Security was again number one and there was more to come.

The upshot for Batugade was that new and very sharp looking razor wire began to reappear in town. New sandbags replaced old deteriorating dust makers. We also joined the ranks of people who slept uneasily.

The difficult political issues raised by the contact continued for some days. Official investigations were undertaken on 16 May 2000. The contact would be investigated to the same degree as a police shooting was investigated in Australia. For the soldiers in a war zone, it was an added pressure. Were they soldiers, policemen or security guards?

Once again, the UNMOs had to organise everything and were under pressure from each side. Theirs was a difficult role as they had to act as an independent referee and, although the UNMO might have been from one of the nations involved, they were required to remain impartial. Not easy.

If there were doubts about the 11 May incident then the events of 28 May at Nunura were far clearer.

The PKF base at Nunura sat very close to the eastern end of the Nunura bridge. A small guard post controlled traffic from Balibo. It was slightly isolated from the main force. The company encampment was a little way back from the bridge, off the road on the left. Duties involved controlling the Nunura market crowds during the day and, more importantly, guarding the river crossing at night. No real village had existed until a shantytown developed to service the market and trains. There were no streetlights or other modern utilities. At night, they were on their own.

During May the river there could be crossed just about anywhere. The Brazilian military police and a few PKF soldiers
manned the small checkpoint at the bridge crossing during the day. At night, they withdrew to their camp.

During the night of 28 May, people slipped across the river and made an attack on the post. An Australian soldier was seriously wounded when a grenade was thrown at the sandbagged defensive line. The soldier was saved by his flak jacket, but his injuries were serious enough for him to be evacuated to Darwin the next day.

It appeared that after a period of quiet, someone was now starting to probe the PKF defences. They could have been nuisance attacks or it could have been a genuine attempt to start an upheaval along the border. The result was that security tightened swiftly. The attackers were well aware of the PKF’s rules of engagement and appeared to be exploiting them to the utmost.

Travelling the mountain roads from Balibo to Nunura was no longer a casual trip. Before the attack, the biggest threat had been the risk of colliding with an oncoming speeding bus, or the possibility that the road beneath your wheels might slip down into a nearby ravine without warning. We had taken a step back to where every situation had to be considered a potential threat.

The battle of minds was further heightened when someone managed to get their hands on a UN radio. The CivPol base in Maliana received several unpleasant threats over a period of days before the batteries of the stolen radio ran down.

Reports of shots being fired near the border began to occur more regularly. Someone was trying to wear the PKF down. We heard stories that vehicles would drive very close to the border in various remote locations. A burst of automatic gun fire would be heard before the vehicle would drive away at high speed. The PKF units had a job to do, resulting in a PKF that had renewed vigour. It steeled itself for the task at hand.

We had no doubt that there was little chance of sloppy practices infiltrating the security forces. There were some bonuses for us. A solution to the uncontrolled Nunura market was now higher on the agenda. It was most likely that whoever had attacked the PKF there had used the daytime crossing to conduct their reconnaissance.
A few subsequent incidents at Atambua firmly established that things were heating up. It was not going to be easy for UN people to conduct business in Atambua or anywhere else in West Timor. The refugees in West Timor might not be coming home for some time.

Unfortunately it also set back one of our primary goals. It would surely be some time before a friendly international border would exist.
Chapter 23

The woman and her money

Every now and then a situation comes along in which someone really needs help. Sometimes you can’t help because you aren’t in a position to do much about it. Sometimes everybody knows the solution but efforts to garner enthusiasm for the person’s cause bring frustration when attempts to assist are met with ambivalence.

The case of the woman and her money was one such situation.

By late May, we had settled into a routine. When the border was open the main group usually worked at the crossing or conducted a vehicle search near the beach. A few worked from the Batugade office itself.

One morning, we noticed a Timorese woman hovering around the small cafe across the road. A couple of men accompanied her. In a town the size of Batugade, visitors stood out, especially when they stayed after finishing a drink or a meal. Something wasn’t quite right.

The morning passed and we couldn’t help noticing that almost everyone we knew in town seemed to have spoken to the woman at length. It seemed they knew her but, perplexingly, no one invited her in. Our friendly cafe owners took time out to talk as they went about their business, but she didn’t seem to be family. Even our local security guard wandered over for a chat.

It was becoming apparent that we were the focus of her attention. Despite encouragement from the townsfolk something was holding her back.
During lunch she made her move, appearing around the side of our building, self-consciously tapping against the prefabricated wall. Her attempts to grab our attention were timid and could have gone unnoticed for some time if I hadn't chosen that moment to run out to our car, almost bowling her over in the process.

Conversation was slow and difficult. Her English was poor, though leagues better than my Indonesian. She was definitely agitated and although she was uncomfortable in our presence, she wanted something from us.

Our local guard leapt eagerly to her aid. With the help of the excitable guard, loud, rapid chatter from the now congregating neighbours and some manic sign language, we had a feeling that she wanted us to accompany her into West Timor. We still didn't know why.

The woman refused our offer of a calming brew. Further discussion only moved us further and further from any semblance of understanding. We now had no idea whether she had just come across the border, whether she wanted to cross the border or whether she had been stopped from crossing and was very annoyed. The best option seemed to be to drive her down to our post and see what she did when we got there.

The drive was conducted in silence. She seemed pleased that we were headed for the crossing, but we felt that at any moment the car door would be flung open and she would somersault away into the forest never to be seen again. Her face revealed a range of emotions. I don't think trust was one of them.

The mood changed as we arrived at the post. She stumbled into the mud as she alighted from the vehicle. Rick and a few of the Timorese officers emerged from the post and our language problems evaporated.

The facts were that she had crossed into West Timor from Batugade the previous morning and had come back early that morning and made her way to Batugade, hovering around town mulling over whether to approach us for help. As her story was prised out, it became clear that she was having difficulties with various government officials. She needed our help although she
had no reason to believe we would or could help her. Desperation had driven her to us.

The previous week the woman had driven into Atambua to visit a bank. A problem for many Timorese was that most banking institutions had ceased operations after the destruction of Dili. For the East Timorese, the nearest functioning major centre was Atambua. Unfortunately, it was in West Timor. Some banks that had previously operated in East Timor had branches there. For many Timorese, access to their savings was just a dream.

The woman told us she had visited the bank in Atambua with her husband the week before and they had withdrawn 52 million rupiah — just more than $A12,000 — a significant amount of money for anyone to save, especially in East Timor. In the moments between having her money handed to her by the teller and leaving the bank, a few members of a gang she claimed to be militia had been alerted to her booty. She was robbed within a few steps of the door.

All unofficial reports that we had heard indicated that the militia had a strong presence in Atambua. Her story seemed plausible. Interestingly, the money was not lost forever. Very quickly the police had reacquired everything, but the woman claimed the hard work had only just begun.

She waved a Polisi incident form in our faces, which supported her claim that the Polisi had received her complaint immediately after the robbery. She angrily told us how the police had contacted her and that the money was now in safekeeping in Atambua. It appeared that she was keen to reclaim her money, but was unwilling to venture into Atambua again.

Her trip into Motaain the previous day had been an attempt to contact the POLRI Commander to seek help. She had been unable to find anyone to speak with.

It seemed that a simple exercise in cross-border liaison could probably solve the matter for her. After all, we now had numerous contacts in the area. We knew how things were conducted there, and who was who. The local UNMOs responded to our radio plea and did us a favour. They drove the woman across the border to Motaain to see the POLRI Commander.
Though we were developing a relationship with the TNI and POLRI, our relationship was based on the exchange of information and the development of border protocols. We had no role in visiting West Timor for any other activities. UNMOs were the logical choice as escorts — the nearest CivPol were in Maliana.

Ten minutes was enough time for us to wish her well, have a quick chat with our colleagues at the shelter and drive back to the office. It didn’t take the woman and the accompanying UNMOs much longer to visit Motaain and then appear forlornly in the dining area behind our office.

The UNMOs were apologetic. The POLRI were unable to assist her with an escort to Atambua. The reason offered was simple — it was Friday. No further explanation was given. The UNMOs left to deal with another matter.

This time, a Timorese officer was on hand as we spoke with the woman. Our discussion with the increasingly distressed woman elicited that she had been told to come back the next day at 9am. She returned to hovering around the cafe. We tracked the UNMOs down at their house. The word was that the POLRI would take her to see the Atambua Polisi in the morning. They would arrange a TNI escort if she was really concerned. When we relayed this news to her it was greeted with apprehension. Her recollections of the previous September meant it was not her preference to travel anywhere with such an escort.

The woman left during the evening with the two men who had been with her near the cafe. We learnt later that one was her husband. The chance of two males going to Atambua and returning was not considered very high by the trio so the woman was conducting all the efforts to recover the money. During dinner we discussed the woman’s options. The TNI seemed to be a worthwhile bet. I am sure it was an extremely worrying night for her, wherever she was.

In the morning, the UNMOs arrived at the border post early. Rick was on station at the crossing and radioed me at the office with the news. Their mindset had changed over night. A new plan had been formulated. When the woman arrived she was to be told that they could offer no further assistance. No reason was given for the cancellation of the offer.
It was not a pleasant moment. It was probably the only time, in all the frustrations we had battled through, that Rick and I were totally flabbergasted. I imparted my feelings about the situation over the radio. I remembered that everyone on the eastern border shared the one frequency. I drove down to the post to find that Rick was now alone. The two UNMOs had left the scene after my tirade, which was borne of disappointment, and his own comments.

Rick told me of another option suggested by the UNMOs before they had departed. They suggested that Customs liaise directly with a specific security officer in Atambua. Rick had been given no indication as to how such a liaison might occur.

The woman arrived at 9am and received the news. She returned to the cafe and waited. Afternoon brought us a visit from a concerned UNMO supervisor. Our broadcast had been heard and reasons for the change of mind were offered. The UNMOs had to liaise with the POLRI and TNI. It was possible that assisting the woman might compromise their role or the mutual respect they had developed with the officials. We were also told that there had been more discussion on the matter and if the woman was able to come back the next day, something would be done for her.

Things improved dramatically during the afternoon and that evening we were advised that the POLRI Commander had gone to Motaain. He would return the next morning with her money. All she had to do was sign for it. We found her sleeping on a wooden bench across the road. The locals had bedded down for the night and she was being kept company by a flickering candle and the local dog. Immediately on receiving our news, she drove off into the night. Somewhere unknown.

Sunday morning saw the woman on our doorstep. We were keen to see the matter resolved. A few radio calls and we established that the courier had yet to return from Atambua. For the rest of the day we passed many messages to the woman, such as: ‘Please wait an hour’; ‘It shouldn’t be too long now’; and ‘Can you return in two and a half hours?’

She was still waiting at 1pm when Adi and I left to drive a sick East Timorese officer to Dili. We were assured that we
wouldn’t see the woman again and she thanked us warmly as we left her with Rick to wait for the arrival of her money.

It was a quick turn around for Adi and I. Two and a half hours there — drop off our colleague with his family and make arrangements for him to obtain medical assistance — another two and a half hours home. We returned to a dark town. We had done our good deed for the day and were rapt to be home safely again.

Rick wasn’t so ecstatic. The woman had waited until dusk and had driven away in disgust.

Monday arrived but the woman didn’t. No one called us that day about the matter.

Tuesday brought another possible resolution. We had been pushing to find someone who could help, but there weren’t many options left for us. The matter was raised at a few official meetings. A POLRI officer had her money at Motaain. Her access to a better future awaited her, if she could only be found.

As we suspected, no one in Batugade knew her. Everyone had talked with her and had encouraged her to seek our assistance, but she was just a stranger who had come looking for help. We had her name from the border crossing records, but that meant little in a place such as East Timor where most of the population had been uprooted. When success was near she would now miss out.

She returned out of the blue for another attempt later that week, but she was not able to obtain her money. Nothing more could be done for her in Batugade and we convinced her to see the UNTAET security chiefs in Dili.

In early June, after we had driven to Dili and brought our replacement contingent to Batugade, we saw the woman again. She approached the office seeking a permit to cross the border. I think she was elated, though she was trying hard to remain restrained. She told us arrangements had finally been made to obtain the money. We were just as ecstatic.

I wish I could report that she picked up the cash that day. She was thwarted twice in quick succession. The first reason given was that the person with the key to the locker in Atambua had travelled to Kupang, on the western side of the island, for the
day. The second reason was that the police could now hand over the money only if the woman produced a letter from the bank in Atambua confirming the money was hers. She still was not willing to visit Atambua.

The events of that day gave the new contingent a good insight about how difficult some matters were. A scenario is worth a lot.

The last time we saw the woman, there was talk of a tax of some kind. I don't know if the money was ever recovered.
Chapter 24
What have we done?

The post at Batugade was an achievement. It was working as well as it possibly could. The hard political negotiations were still being sorted out. Realistically, in the short time we had, we could only help lay the foundations for the creation of the new East Timor. We would be leaving the East Timorese to continue the building work.

The regular morning disentanglement from the mosquito net, after a night spent tossing and turning in the netted cocoon, had become a fact of life. Despite the difficulties, time was passing rapidly and we needed to get a grip on what we could finish before we left.

We had to admit that some of our plans weren’t going to be realised. We could keep things rolling along for the next group, but it was only a start. I was sure they would thank us when they got to East Timor — they wanted something to do and there certainly wasn’t a shortage in that area.

While the post continued to battle on slowly, there was lots of travel for the group. Everything we needed to organise was always found elsewhere. The weather was also causing delays. The dry season had become a really wet one. If it kept raining the roads would probably disintegrate and the rebuilding process would become a real crawl. Even worse, many people would go hungry.

We also had a few tasks in Maliana. The district administration had been trying hard to find a site for us to set up the eventual regional headquarters for the Border Service. It was
close to the Nunura area and would be run by a sizeable, highly mobile force.

During the previous month, we had been shown over a number of potential sites. They were all supposedly prime locations. We were given the impression that we should grab one of them quickly, but in this case ‘prime location’ seemed to mean that no one else wanted it. Most of the town of Maliana sat on a small mountainside, but, in keeping with its status as the rice bowl of East Timor, the surrounding area was flat and waterlogged. Everything we were shown was a burnt-out shell in the middle of nowhere.

I had no desire to build an office in a dark, sodden field far away from the main town. Security would be a major issue and Border Service officers would probably not be the most popular people as this stretch of real estate was probably the most active smuggling area in East Timor. An industry was developing to support the ever-growing ant trains at the Nunura River crossing. A Border Service officer would not just be bad for business, he or she would be a threat to people’s livelihoods.

A greater and more immediate concern for us was the mosquito-ridden environment surrounding the offered sites. I had never seen so many mosquitoes. For those living on the outskirts of town, it wouldn’t matter how many pills they swallowed or how many litres of stinking oils they swam in each day, catching malaria would be inevitable.

On this latest visit we had come to see the administrator about some sites we were considering. We had studied every empty space in Maliana. Two of the younger Timorese officers accompanied us. It was an eye-opener for all.

Unfortunately, every site we had chosen was already allocated, usually to the PKF. We were told to come back when the allocating officer returned in a few days. She had travelled to Suai by helicopter and was now fog-bound.

We headed off to the outdoor market for lunch. Joao and Ita had never been to Maliana, so we were the tour guides. They were keen to buy some supplies for the house while they were there so they raced around bartering for a fair price. We just looked for a meal. Just when it seemed that there wasn’t any
prepared food for sale, Adi spied some doughnuts. He grabbed some for a later snack.

Wandering the markets with Joao and Ita gave us more of an inkling into the diversity of living standards in East Timor. Joao was fantastic for us because his English was far better than he imagined. He had been the one who had been translating our cheat sheets and was worth his weight in gold to us. This visit to the market confirmed that he was a city person. Not all of the East Timorese who lived in Dili realised how difficult and basic life was for people in the regional areas.

As we lounged under a tree devouring a mandarin and banana, we watched as young children with huge toothy smiles played among the little stalls. They tightly clasped handfuls of rubber bands as they chased each other, stopping every now and then to shoot at sticks as in a game of quoits. They were having a ball.

Joao expressed his concern about the poor lifestyle of these children. Where were the video games and the VCRs? There weren’t even any CDs for sale at the market. His concern was genuine. It struck me that even he sometimes struggled to understand the harsh reality of the time.

In the background, there was a reminder of the past in Maliana. The electricity poles standing haphazardly along the streets were a clear image of what had once been. The lack of any electrical wires connecting the blackened posts told the current story. The town of about 4,000 people did not have any basic utilities at all, never mind electronic games for the kids.

We headed away from the market. To balance our fruit lunch, we thought it was time to enjoy our doughnuts, which Ita now told us were banana fritters. It had been Adi’s shout. He spent 1,000 rupiah — a whole 20 cents — but 20 cents had never been so poorly spent.

As he chewed into it, his warning that it was nothing but dough and oil failed to register with me. Before I had comprehended his outburst, the glutinous, oily mass was sliding down my throat. The taste was repulsive. For the first time I could remember, we didn’t have any water in the car and, with the vile oil regurgitating in our stomachs, we quickly returned to
the market for salvation. Joao grabbed a few citrus fruits, no further identity established, and we scoffed them down, the citric acid slowly cutting through the oil. Every region has its delicacies, but they can also have a horror story — we had found it.

On our way back to the car, Adi ran into a Filipino chap who had helped us greatly with the construction of our office and post at Batugade. He still had plans to upgrade the little beach shelter for us. He was one of those really refreshing people you meet who always seemed to be laughing. As we climbed into the car, Adi made a kind gesture to our friend, absentmindedly handing him the white greasy bag, telling him to help himself to the last two fritters. It struck us only as we drove away that the gesture might not have been as kind as we had meant it to be. Thankfully, he did not eat the fritters there and then. We hoped it would be some time before we needed his help again. Time heals all!

As we passed the army checkpoints on the way out of town, we were a little annoyed by the lack of progress. Having to stop at three roadblocks before we were back on the road into the paddies only served to further ruin the afternoon. I think it was at one of these stops where a PKF officer attempted some insight into the history of Maliana. He kept referring to how quaint and pretty the town must have been before ‘the incident’. After he had referred to ‘the incident’ a few times, I had to find out just what this incident was. Turns out it was the sacking and burning of Maliana in September. A funny description really. I hoped we weren’t going to see politically correct descriptions of the horrors start to creep into historical vernacular.

After leaving Maliana, we stopped at Nunura bridge to discuss the market with the PKF. A new plan to deal with the issue was being bandied about due to the recent attacks. The PKF wanted to close the market and move it to Batugade. CivPol and most other agencies weren’t interested. The local Maliana CNRT people were also torn over the idea.

The majority of the goods were destined for the Dili market and shops. The people of Maliana were enjoying the cheapest cigarettes and beer in East Timor. Although a lot of revenue was not being collected, and despite the security
concerns created by the immigration issues, the river market was proving to be a boon for employment. The tin shacks and canvas shelters seemed to stretch further along the road every week.

We watched the last stragglers of the afternoon ant train wind their way back across the river. They seemed to be carrying more and more. The proposal to make the pick-up trucks park even further away from the track still seemed the best solution.

Naturally, the PKF were nervous about the issue since the militia incursions. They had a strong reason to help us deal with it. The final solution would be a task for our replacement contingent.

We had been driving back and forth between Dili and the border continually. If it wasn’t for a meeting, it was because of sickness or to provide an escort. This time, it was to meet our boss from Australia.

Brian Hurrell, the Western Australia Regional Director of Customs, and Alan Wilson, from Customs in Canberra, were coming to East Timor to make the final decision about contingent two. If they were not convinced that we had achieved anything of significance, there would not be another contingent.

It had started raining at 6pm the night before. At 10pm, it was still bucketing down. Everything was starting to leak profusely. Stores and clothing went into the middle of huts and tents. The tents themselves were doing a pretty good job of keeping the water out, it was just that they were threatening to collapse under the sheer weight of the downpour. At least the well was not going to dry up.

During the night, I wondered if I would be able to get away to meet Brian and Alan for their arrival in Dili. The roads wouldn’t be that great. I had to drive down by myself. Jeff was already there after doing some preparatory work at Suai earlier in the week. In the morning, I went for it. Brian and Allen were arriving early from Darwin. If I told them I couldn’t meet them because of a little rain they would probably not have been
amused — about as believable as the old: ‘Sorry, I can’t hear you. You are breaking up’ excuse.

When I got to Dili it was great to have a chat with people from home. We had to discuss all the issues, past and present, to allow them to make further decisions regarding our replacement contingent, who were due in a month. By the end of the day, we needed only to convince AusAid that we were doing something worthwhile, because nothing comes cheaply. If we were wasting our time then the money could be spent elsewhere.

Things went well and it was uplifting to hear reports from the embassy that the Australian Customs group was well thought of and appeared to be getting the job done. The rest of the group could do with such a pick-me-up.

Our day of discussions ended with a big dinner in one of the better restaurants. After all the gushing accolades from the various people we had met throughout the day, I thought it would be wise to humbly demonstrate to the boss that we did have some failings. My opportunity came when, quite by accident, Brian’s dinner was served up to me. It was a great big fish with a fantastic serving of fries — much nicer than the rice and small fish I had ordered, and had forgotten about. I managed to damage the earlier accolades by eating most of the chips before somebody mentioned that they weren’t mine. Promotion prospects could have slipped a little that night.

Brian and Alan had discussions with others during the next few days and checked the Batugade post. It was always good to let the boss know how hard things were for you out in the field. Fate was on our side. Jeff and I drove back to Batugade separately from Brian and Alan. The controller very generously loaned them a four-wheel drive for the journey — one of the vehicles that wasn’t quite made for the environment. I think they had an incident on a steep hill — a scary moment, when their world almost went backwards.

Their visit was extremely helpful and their support was most welcome. They impressed us particularly with their understanding of the difficulties faced by the East Timorese officers. Both men took part in discussions about the future of
East Timor and also went in to bat to improve the lot of the East Timorese officers.

After seeing them off at the airport we drove back to Batugade. Rain had continued to fall intermittently throughout the visit. The soil beside the first stretch of road out of Dili was now sodden. We were forced to move slowly as rocks the size of lawn bowls regularly bounced across the road in front of us. Initially, we thought we might have been the target of people in the hills who were sick of the sight of cars emblazoned with the big initials of the UN. We soon realised that with the volume of water washing across our path, the higher ground was simply being washed away, leaving small boulders to bounce downhill in ever increasing quantities. Some of these falls were becoming minor landslides.

As we drove through the village of Atabai, we were amazed that the villagers were still out in the heavy rain, wandering along the side of the road. We rounded a bend to be confronted by 20 people, each bearing a large freshly cut palm frond above their head. Once our astonishment had subsided, we realised they were carrying very large and ingenious umbrellas.

That night as the rain continued there was a major disaster. The constant downpours had undermined the soil in one region so gravely that a huge landslide of mud and water surged down the slopes washing away an entire village. Radio news reports from Darwin indicated that up to 60 people could have drowned.

This disaster was another test for UNTAET and the aid organisations. Anyone who had concerns about UN bureaucracy would have had to admire the swiftness of their response under pressure. In a very short time, three convoys had passed through our post to snake their way to the desperate souls in the West Timorese mountains.

It was an extremely circuitous route from the UN storehouses of Dili through Batugade and on to the mountains past Suai. The more direct route to Suai had been cut off by the
The convoy moved through Batugade, Atambua and up into the mountains behind the southern coastal border.

The response also proved that the UN took its charter to assist everyone seriously. Food, medical and building supplies were high on the list of items the East Timorese needed. It must have been a little frustrating for the East Timorese to see these badly needed supplies disappearing over the border, but no one begrudged any of the assistance being given to the people in West Timor.

Later reports confirmed that the floods were the worst in the region since 1931. The rains affected the entire border region for some time. We visited Maliana, but were still unable to speak to the woman who would make the final decision regarding the office. She had still not made it back from Suai. The fog had eventually lifted, but the helicopter had flown back to Dili. She had accepted a lift back to Maliana by road. Our last communications with her occurred via the radio as she advised us that she was trudging across the 10-kilometre wide landslide that had engulfed the road some distance from Maliana. She was hoping the car she ordered, reordered and reconfirmed would be on the other side of the slip when she finally made it across.

Rain was going to be a problem for the rest of the deployment. Jeff had organised the building essentials for Salele, but it was too wet to do anything there. The Maliana office was similarly delayed.

A few issues had been solved and we were now sure of what we could achieve before our handover. We would concentrate on training the East Timorese and slowly hand further responsibility over to them. The operations at the post were improving every day. We just needed to work hard on the Indonesian liaison and make some plans for Oecussi.

The decision to send a second contingent had now been confirmed.
Discussions with Brian, Alan and our controller had revealed a few of the future plans the Border Service had for us. One was that we were to conduct a reconnaissance of the administrative region, or enclave, of Oecussi. The enclave, created many years earlier, was on the northern coast inside West Timor.

It sat on a coastal strip surrounded by mountains. West Timor surrounded Oecussi on three sides. The border lay somewhere among the mountain peaks. When the Portuguese had ceded West Timor to the Dutch East Indies, the current East and West Timor border was created. During Portuguese control, the region of Oecussi had been the main administrative centre. As times changed, much of the important functions were transferred to places inside East Timor and its importance began to wane. Subsequently, when the Portuguese gave East Timor independence in 1975, the Oecussi enclave was included. A Catholic enclave, firmly wedged within Indonesia.

Since the arrival of Interfet, the enclave had been controlled by the PKF. Food and almost everything else was brought in by barge or helicopter. Since our arrival, there had been a lot of talk about the development of an Oecussi corridor — an idea probably a little ahead of its time. There had been all sorts of discussions about convoys being allowed to travel from Batugade to Oecussi and back. It sounded good, but was proving to be a bit too hard.

Some people were calling for Oecussi to be a free-trade zone. An innovative idea — and it would take clever ideas, as
East Timor would not be able to afford to service the region by sea or air in the future. The enclave could become a burden for the country if the wrong decisions were made.

Such situations would not be easily solved politically while the two countries were still suspicious of each other. Questions about whether convoys should be escorted were raised. At one stage, plans involved TNI soldiers escorting the PKF guards, who would be escorting the convoy. It was likely that there would be Border Service officers and some CivPol and POLRI roles as well. Scenarios involving more difficult issues included: what would happen if a truck broke down and couldn’t make the journey with the rest of the convoy; and, what would happen if a vehicle stopped and somebody got out and wandered off? The corridor to and from Oecussi was not going to happen in those early days.

Although discussions about corridors and convoys through Motaain had so far come to nothing, Rick and I were heading off to Oecussi. The controller wanted us to visit the enclave with him and a number of senior UNTAET people.

It now seemed that border controls needed to be implemented there as well. There were three road crossings where people from West Timor could drive into Oecussi and the idea was to draw up a preliminary plan for the creation of posts at these points.

There still hadn’t been any formal agreements made with Indonesian Customs or Immigration about movement across the border, at Batugade or anywhere else. The Indonesians advised UNTAET that they intended to meet our party when we visited Oecussi. It would be our first opportunity to meet with our Customs and Immigration counterparts.

A family reunion day coincided with our visit. It would be interesting to compare the process with those we had seen elsewhere.

Rick and I were keen to be involved in this visit, though some of our reasons were purely selfish. The majority of East Timorese had never been to Oecussi. The same went for most UNTAET personnel. This trip certainly had some tourism elements.
With senior UNTAET personnel on the trip, we would be there for on-the-ground advice only. As usual in East Timor, things did not go as planned. A rapid reassessment of our role was undertaken at 6am on the day of our trip when the satellite phone rang. The controller’s voice sounded annoyed as he told us that he and the entire Dili group had missed the helicopter. He said something about it leaving early. The schedule, as always, was tight, so latecomers missed out. The new plan involved just Rick and I representing UNTAET. The only other change was that the 8am helicopter arrival on the beach at Batugade would now be 6.20am.

There was no queue for the washroom that morning and the ironing was never a problem. Before we knew it, we were ducking swirling rotors and wiping the beach sand from our eyes as we clambered aboard the big white Puma. By 6.55am, we were hovering above the paddock used as the Oecussi heliport. It had been a straight run along the coast after clearing the territorial sea of the Indonesian zone. Our knowledge of the local geography was expanding quickly. We discovered that the landing ground and the town by the beach were also known as Oecussi, often spelt Oekussi. Once again, the best word to describe the town was gutted.

The large Chilean load master told everyone to get out, so we did. A few jeeps appeared and raced our fellow passengers away. They didn’t seem interested in us so we played the dumb tourists and stood there hoping someone would come for us. Our itinerary was back in Dili with our leaders, and knowledge was power. We didn’t have any. It was going to be a day of looking after ourselves, mixed with a little bit of placing ourselves at the mercy of our host. Basically, we would make it up as we went along. No problems there really; I would have been disappointed if we couldn’t do that brilliantly by now.

The pilot reappeared and told us to get back in as we were going to Bobometo. We climbed in, wondering where Bobometo was. Once we were aloft, the load master produced a ratty map. Bobometo was a town in the mountains near the Oecussi-West Timor border. It seemed that our meeting would be there.
Our view of the spectacular mountains was cut short as we began to descend on a small house atop a sheer cliff. We assumed this was Bobometo. The load master confirmed this when he told us it was to be a hot landing. His instructions were: ‘The engines won’t be stopping. Run quickly. You are on your own. We’ll be back at 1500.’

A major from the Jordanian Army welcomed us. Everyone else seemed to be lying down. The sight of a the major was reassuring, as the one thing we had known was that the PKF unit in Oecussi was Jordanian. It was another hour before the visit to the border so we enjoyed some army hospitality. As the major gave us the background to the situation in the enclave, we sat around a small raised courtyard and ate dates and flat bread accompanied by heavily sugared rosemary tea.

Eggs were also offered. The major suggested we try them with salt, quickly recanting the idea when the mess man serving the food spilt an entire container of salt across the plate. He waved the plate away with a smile. He told us a few grains would have been sufficient.

It was a big change for us there. It was cold. For people who had perspired constantly for three months, this was almost heaven — if only we had a jumper. The major motioned towards the towering mountains in the distance, telling us that he had small observation units camped among the peaks. The border ventured close to Bobometo before climbing steeply to traverse the middle of the range. For the soldiers at those isolated posts, woolly coats and thick gloves were a necessity. It was a tough life and they could be resupplied only by helicopter.

Before breakfast was over, at the risk of offending our host, the obvious question about what desert-raised Jordanians were doing in the Bobometo highlands had to be asked. The answer was simple. It was a deliberate attempt to engender a harmonious relationship along the border. The East Timorese living in the enclave were Catholic, but the Indonesian TNI, who shared the border, shared similar Muslim beliefs to the Jordanian PKF. It was a thoughtful approach. The desert also gets very cold at night.
Our host pointed down the road and told us it was only a few kilometres to the border. He would arrange a lift. We still had plenty of time so we declined. A walk in the cool air would be pleasant. As we strolled down the stone stairs towards the road, a PKF vehicle raced into the compound and halted suddenly in our path. The driver's news topped off the day nicely. The Indonesians and their accompanying party from Kupang had also struck delays. They wouldn't make it that day.

Bobometo didn't appear overly large — just a few brick houses and quite a few grass-roofed huts about two kilometres from the border. The locals were anticipating a few visitors due to the reunion that day. They had laid out a variety of beads and trinkets upon tais mats near the road. Tais was a traditionally woven East Timorese cloth worn like a sarong. It could be adapted for any decorative purpose involving cloth. The Oecussi patterns were very different to the styles we had seen in Maliana.

The border environment was also completely different to Batugade. A winding mountain road connected West Timor and Oecussi. Straying off the road meant entering the forest or the paddies. The road had a clearly defined border post. The Indonesian checkpoint was another kilometre away around a few more bends. There were no machine-gun nests or towers facing each other here. There was a central no-man's-land that separated the groups.

The soldiers here had been isolated for some time and were keen for a few essentials. We did the right thing and asked for permission before taking photographs. An excited mob fell on us and all film except that in the camera was soon passed on as the soldiers offered anything but their weapons for a 35mm film.

We surveyed the area for possible sites for our own post and drew a few mud maps for the people back in Dili. This would be a very remote post. It was clear that there would be a daylight post near the border and a more secure after-dark post back at the village. Few vehicles would be using this road in the near future.

The local administrator gave us his view on the free-trade-zone idea. He said it might be worthwhile because it wouldn't be
an easy place to monitor. The cost of goods in Oecussi would be prohibitive if things couldn't be bought cheaply across the border. The administrator had made some rough calculations. He was working on a plan to arrange for a contractor to provide a regular ferry shuttle from East Timor to Oecussi, but even with the huge cargo loads it would be carrying, the UN would still need to top up the costs by $A40,000 every month. This was not a cost the East Timorese Government would be able to cover once UNTAET was dismantled. Oecussi was going to be difficult. Economic realities might force many inhabitants to spend most of their lives isolated from the rest of East Timor.

An old man appeared near our gathering playing a flute and singing. He appeared to be a village elder. Rick filmed him on the video camera and, once he had viewed himself in action on the playback screen he became unstoppable. We eventually had to tear ourselves away. The start of the family reunion day was a good excuse.

The reunion was completely different to the other East Timorese days. Everybody was security wanded before entering the no-man's-land, but that was about it. Our impression was that these people got to see each other reasonably regularly. Our initial observations were that no one was trying to score political points at these remote meetings. They didn’t figure in the big picture.

We met a couple of IOM personnel from Kupang, who said that the rest of the party would arrive within hours. They were keen to meet us. We made it clear that we would have to leave within a few hours when our helicopter arrived. We were leaving East Timor in a few weeks and if we missed our ride we had no idea when we could get another.

Much of the morning involved further reconnaissance. We then made our way back to the Jordanian compound. The IOM people from Kupang told us that the Indonesian party had arrived when our helicopter was only 10 minutes away. No time to meet here. We arranged to meet in Batugade or Motaain the next day.

The flight back to the Oecussi paddock was uneventful. Quite a few passengers joined us there. Not enough to fill all the
seats though. Once in the air, the load master busily moved everyone around. There were too many people on one side of the passenger bay, causing the helicopter to lose trim.

Back in Batugade, we regaled everybody with stories about being cold. We discussed the meeting with the Indonesians that was planned for the next day. The leader of the East Timorese officers was keen to attend. I had been interested to see how they would react to meeting the Indonesians. I had forgotten some of our officers had previously worked in the Indonesian Customs service. They had friends there and were keen to see if they were among the group.

Our thought was that the initial meeting should take place in Motaain not Batugade, although the Indonesians were keen to see our post. If they had come they would have been surprised at how basic it was. It could have helped our cause as they would have realised that they had very little to do to match our efforts. We weren’t sure that the villagers were ready for Indonesian administrators in their town just yet. The PKF definitely were not.

The next day became a little more complicated. There was also a family reunion on so the border itself would be closed for most of the day. The PKF insisted that only reunion people
would be able to cross so we wouldn’t need anyone at our post that day.

Later we received word that a small group of people were waiting to meet us at Motaain. We drove to the post, doing our best not to scatter the family groups as they strolled along. This time we were allowed to drive all the way. To appease our consciences, we picked up a couple of struggling elderly people and gave them a lift to the congregation area.

We crossed the border with a couple of CivPol and PKF liaison officers who had asked to attend. It wasn’t a tactical border meeting so the usual PKF commanders weren’t with us. The party met us on the bridge. Just a small group of 25. Once again, we had been a little misinformed. This was a major fact-finding mission and included UNTAET and CivPol people from Kupang as well as IOM and other agencies.

Everyone was keen for a group photograph on the bridge. It took some doing. No one took any notice of the man with his suitcase joining in for the group photograph. With pleasantries completed, we wandered over to Motaain and sat under a large tree. The Indonesians had planned well and we all received a cardboard box lunch pack with a variety of treats.

Fact-finding was definitely on the agenda. Rick and I were expected to run proceedings. In the shade of the tree, I spent the next two hours giving a run-down on the Border Service — our current status, plans and intentions. It was a good opportunity to get UNTAET’s intentions back to Denpasar so formal negotiations could begin. The Indonesian Customs and Immigration officers had similar ideas to us. They were keen to visit our post, but agreed to do it at a later date.

My two-hour talk was tiring. Most of the group spoke English, but it was still a slow process. I found I was starting to pick up a lot more Indonesian. I couldn’t talk to anyone, but I could understand the gist of what they were saying to me.

The meeting broke only once during the two hours. A POLRI officer came over to tell the group that there was man with a suitcase who had come over from Batugade. He was asking
everyone where he could catch a bus to Kupang. The officer thought someone should discuss his arrival with him.

It turned out that our mate had wandered across the border. The PKF had closed it down for the reunion and he was stranded at the post. When he saw us he had tagged along. The PKF thought he was with us and let him follow. After joining everyone for the photo, he had casually ambled across the bridge with the group and had almost made it. Confusion obviously creates opportunity for those who brazenly make their way in the world. A bit of bravado had almost got him past 30 senior border officials and quite a few PKF and TNI guards.

We finished the day knowing that we were developing a good relationship with the Indonesian administration. Oecussi was definitely a long way from becoming a Border Service-controlled region. We advised our controller that any plans to establish ourselves there needed to be reconsidered in the short term. Any threat to revenue or immigration was miniscule. The people living within the enclave could gain some advantages in the interim, but there was no threat to the rest of East Timor. No one could travel from the enclave unless they used official UNTAET transport. The Border Service’s scant resources could be better directed elsewhere.

An impromptu conference photograph at the Batugade-Motaain bridge. The man with the suitcase is there.
The working-level relationships we were developing with the Indonesian administrators at Batugade would assist in the future. The high-level issues between UNTAET and the Indonesian Government would take longer to resolve.

The Indonesian Customs and Immigration officers were keen for us to travel to Kupang on the western end of the island. We had applied for visas nearly two months earlier. We couldn’t travel there without them. UNTAET had to get them via the Indonesian Embassy on the floating hotel. Soon it would be too late. Three days before our departure, we were given our visas by the UNTAET travel department. Two days later the clerk was perturbed to see us handing in our identity documents as we completed our official checkout from UNTAET. He said, ‘Didn’t I just issue you with visas the other day?’ We just smiled.
Living in a small border village wasn’t bad. Country life had its benefits, with most of our time spent outdoors. Escaping the madhouse of Dili was a big bonus. Village life also provided an interesting insight into the more traditional Timorese society.

It was an eye-opener to see the impact that simple policies, developed in the city, had on those living in the country. The East Timorese officers also found life there a learning experience. Like us, they had to make a lot of adjustments.

Local politics was another factor. Many of these towns had been militia strongholds. I am not sure whether these border-dwellers supported the previous occupation, or whether the militia just found it easier to terrorise people in remote areas. The massacre at the church in Suai supports the latter.

From early on, we had been accepted by the cafe and shop owners across the street. We provided income for their struggling business as well as entertainment for the children who hung around our huts. We fondly called them our very own street urchins.

It didn’t take long for our desire for fresh food to become well known. Batugade was on the coast and we thought fishing would be a well-practised art. The nearby town of Levant on the road from Dili was undoubtedly a village built around fishing, but Batugade, surprisingly, was not. On most days we saw a small number of dugouts fishing, but very little else. There definitely were fish out there because the PKF had been trying to stop the West Timorese fishermen sailing across from Motaain on nightly raids.
There was an unsubstantiated rumour in town about why the locals refused to eat the local fish. It was difficult to gather evidence that this had occurred, but it seemed to be a genuine belief among some of the people that after the massacres there had been a mass dumping of bodies at sea near Batugade. The locals believed that if they ate fish they might eat one that had fed on their relatives.

Despite this, there appeared to be a gradual loosening of attitudes by some of the old fishermen who needed to find a food source and an income. These people couldn’t just go out and buy a rice paddy to replace their fishing. They soon picked us as buyers of the very large tuna they sometimes caught. There was no marketing or in-your-face sales. The fishermen simply hovered around our huts or wandered past nine or 10 times in the afternoon whistling loudly as they carried the catch of the day on a pole.

On the days when they caught a big one we usually succumbed. It was a simple meal for 40,000 rupiah. The night of our first purchase was a gourmet meal: tuna steaks with rice, of course, kacang (beans) and squash. That evening, a Sri Lankan working with the UNHCR joined us. Although it was an early night, it was a big night in comparison with others. Big nights aren’t really late when there is no light, music or other entertainment. Thoughts of wandering the streets were dampened by the prospect of sleeping in the razor wire.

One night we received an invitation to our neighbour’s seventh birthday party. He was one of the likeable street urchins and was always there when our packages of lollies arrived from home. He was a boy with a real fire in his eyes and was great to muck around with.

In Timor, the seventh birthday is a very big affair for boys. We had no idea what to take or how not to offend anyone. The party looked like it would be big. Preparations had gone on all day. The cafe owner quietly suggested that we should take some
food and a gift. A large curry, a Rick speciality, was the order of the day. Adi and I had picked up some nuts and dried whitebait from Maliana, so they were also fried up and taken along.

To our surprise, it was a sit-down formal affair with about 150 people. We didn’t want to intrude on the party and turned up a little late, as we were a little embarrassed. We got it wrong. The party started a little late because they had waited for us. We were seated right at the front so our attempts at a subtle and dignified entrance failed.

The young boy was literally king for the day. He sat proudly on a large throne facing the guests. The other very important seven-year-olds sat close by to his right in a designated area. Single women sat to his left. In front of him were the village heads, elders and us. Behind us were the rest. The guests were neatly divided into teenage girls, families and then couples. Single men were right at the back.

The party followed a traditional format. The large group of single women continually munched on betel nuts, with the red leftovers being deposited graciously in the bins. The men smoked, but they had to go out the back for that. The young women sat together most of the night, and the young men ate and then hovered around outside the party chatting, drinking beer and making noise. No intermingling could occur.

Two older men who seemed important, although not popular, turned up late and were ushered to the front near us. We were later told that the negative attitude towards them was because of the older men’s politics and the fact that they had worn sarongs. Sarongs at such functions were apparently far less acceptable than the shorts some of us had unwisely chosen to wear. It was a little boy’s party, but we should have read the etiquette section in the tourist guide. We would know better next time. Gifts were handed out before dinner. We had managed to find him a new kite. Most people handed him an unmarked, sealed envelope.

Eating was uncomfortable as we were made to help ourselves to the smorgasbord first. It was difficult because we had no idea how much food there was and we knew that many people
were struggling to eat every day. Worse still, they had a couple of cartons of cold beer and insisted we drink a can each. Our polite refusal of the beer was a risk, but it seemed to be appreciated in the end.

The meal was a slaughtered goat and it was delicious. So was dessert: a simple though delightful crème caramel served in a glass. Every one of our mouthfuls was watched — as the novelty guests, we provided entertainment. Any dropped utensils or crumbs brought great mirth to the crowd. A shortage of cutlery and dishes intensified the watching as the people at the rear waited for their turn with our utensils.

Then came the bit we all dreaded. Old Portuguese music blared loudly from the stereo. We had been asked to leave our generator on during the night to provide some power for the boom box. Surely we had done our bit and they wouldn’t ask us to quickstep and foxtrot. They did!

The next day we were told it had been a great success. Despite our blunderings, we had lifted the profile of the boy’s party so we had done something good. His next big event would be his 17th birthday. We now owed the families a good time.

We had a couple of birthdays of our own during our last few weeks in Batugade. Rick and Adi both enjoyed a feast. The first party was in the cafe and the second at our camp. The East

Birthday celebrations at the Batugade café.
Timorese joined in the first party and it was great to see that despite all the difficulties the two groups had developed a very good camaraderie. Despite some differing views on a few work ideas, the feeling was one of mateship.

The birthday dinners were feasts as far as we were all concerned. With enough warning, the cafe could prepare a great meal. So could we. The Timorese officers certainly knew how to prepare rice — we left out the fruit salad. A couple of Kenyan medical officers from the Timor Aid post also joined us for one of the parties. In the middle of the evening, while watching the sunset near the beach, everyone was able to forget for a short time the troubles of the country.

We were getting more adventurous all the time with food. Sunday was meat-cart day in the village. A bullock or something similar was slaughtered on Sunday morning and carted down the street for sale. The vendor pushed a two-wheeled cart with the day’s fare. The cart was an old wooden thing with two large bike wheels. The meat was presented in two-kilogram lots and no one had any idea what was for sale. No such offerings as a leg or a shoulder. Everything had been hacked up so everyone got a little of everything.

We surveyed the numerous bundles of meat dangling from bamboo string on the side of the cart. After much consideration, we decided on two kilograms of meat that seemed to have more fat covering than the rest. We knew it was fresh, but our theory was that the more fat there was on it, the less chance that the flies had penetrated. I still wonder how the blood was cleaned from the cart afterwards.

Late Sunday afternoon was a chance to wind down and make a big meal. We went back to camp to cook up a Thai curry while our East Timorese colleagues bargained for a better price for their meat.

The East Timorese didn’t work on Sunday. By the time they cooked breakfast, went to church and then prepared lunch,
it was mid-afternoon. Sandwiches, biscuits or packaged food were not part of their diet, which meant all meals were cooked. The East Timorese officers were split into three shifts, with one group always off, and there was always someone at home preparing the meals.

One Wednesday, Adi and I had to go into Dili. As usual, we offered a lift to the officers who had the day off. We were in a hurry to get away and the person coming with us was running late. That morning we had our first real disagreement with the group we were training.

Before our late-comer appeared from behind our huts we could smell something absolutely awful. We had no idea what it was. As he appeared near the car, we saw him carrying a large, black plastic garbage bag that had attracted an unfathomable number of flies. He was struggling with the heavy contents. We had some language difficulties as all the other staff were at the border and the officer carrying the bag spoke the least English of the group.

He seemed to want to bring the bag in the car to Dili. We did not think it was a good idea. It would have been impossible to share the cabin space with the pungent odour. Much discussion took place before he angrily told us that he would take the bus instead. We still had no idea what was inside the bag and as the car lurched out of Batugade, we found it hard to believe that 50 or so people would be prepared to share the bus with the smell.

Adi and I returned to Batugade the next evening to discover our friend had caught the Dili bus that morning, with his bag. The story had been cleared up. On Sunday the group had been caught up in the excitement of the meat cart. Although we paid 20,000 rupiah a kilogram, they paid only 10,000. As the price of meat back home in the Dili markets was 50,000 rupiah a kilogram, they had bought some for their relatives: 15 bundles, or 30 kilograms. It was a fantastic gesture and I am sure their intentions were great, but with the heat and the flies and no refrigeration, it had become rotten by Tuesday.
The buses were an interesting mode of transport. I had often sought an explanation for the large rocks that we always had to avoid when driving in the hills. Rocks were always part-way up the steepest inclines and were directly in the vehicle tracks. They were placed too regularly to have fallen there. We wondered if the famous unseen Timorese monkeys were at play. On one trip to Dili I finally found the answer.

We were approaching the small mountain area west of Levant. It was a difficult initial climb as evidenced by the non-recoverable crashed truck that sat at the bottom of the first incline. This was the section where it was common to come face-to-face with the APCs and LAVs that took up both sides of the road. It paid to be alert.

As we entered a U-bend, we saw heads bobbing up and down through the scrub. The road was there somewhere, but the up and down movement was strange. We slowed apprehensively as visions of some Pythonesque skit came to mind.

We slowed to a crawl as we lost the precious momentum required on such a hill. It was some time before we caught up with the six bobbing heads. They belonged to six people who were running up the hill chasing the thick cloud of black smoke pouring out the back of a roaring bus.

What we observed next was a tried and true routine. The bus entered the incline at high speed and struggled on until it all became too much. At this point a few people, also known as ballast, jumped off. Those on the roof always got off first. Somewhat lightened, the bus picked up a little speed. This routine was repeated until most of the passengers were running alongside.

Eventually, the big diesel engine regained control and the lightened bus escaped the runners, who were starting to huff and pant loudly. When the bus reached the first plateau it slowed to let them reboard. Unfortunately, the incline was often too steep and the tiring passengers couldn’t get there in time. Consequently, as the bus slowed to a halt, one of the lucky passengers still on board would leap from the doorway, quickly finding a large rock and shoving it behind the back wheels of the bus. All this without being run over! With the brakes firmly on, the now heaving, sweaty mob could catch up.
With some rearranging and an opportunity to grab a breath, everyone was ready to go and it all started over again. The rock was left in the middle of the road. On this stretch, there were five more inclines before the climb was complete. Everyone on the bus slowly rotated. By the end of the trip, the roof riders were inside and the cabin people were outside. It seemed that the roof was prime real estate due to the fresh air. We were certain that our friend and his rotten meat would have started on the roof and the black bag would have been the first ballast thrown off.

During each of our visits to Dili we noticed changes. Unfortunately, we could see little happening in Batugade. Other than the opening of our Border Service within the town and the efforts of the PKF to secure the situation, little else was changing.

Just up the road from our place was a small school. We had driven past it regularly, but couldn’t see much except the crumbling schoolhouse. The schoolchildren had been wandering past our place on their way to school and we were intrigued. For some time we had wanted to go in to have a look.

Rick and I visited one morning with one of the Timorese officers. Classes were being held in the shade of a large tree near
the rubble-strewn building. There were 130 students taking lessons from two teachers. Ages varied from seven to 14. There was no high school here. You went to work.

Despite the rebuilding that was occurring in Dili, little had taken place in Batugade. The school was a prime example. Batugade was either the furthest place away and last on the list, or it had no one to represent it in the bidding wars. Possibly, its history as a militia stronghold played a part. Whatever the case, the school needed help.

The equipment situation was worse than the building. The headmaster sat at the only desk — literally half a desk, with one side propped up with a rock. The students shared two old trestle seats and some of them watched keenly as the second teacher used the four available pieces of chalk to write on the blackboard, which was about the size of a door. Not surprisingly, the students did a lot of running and playing. The focus of the two teachers was to keep the habit of attending school uppermost, so that students were not lost to the paddies.

We wondered what we could do to help. The teachers told us the best things we could get for them were paper, books of any description, Tetum textbooks, pencils and maybe a roof. Some Australian soldiers had been to look at the roof of the building, but the walls were too unsound for anyone to bother trying to put up a new roof.
The next time Rick and I went to Dili we searched the markets for Tetum texts but had no luck. The best we could come up with were loads of exercise books, pens, pencils and other stationery. We visited a few educational organisations, but it was procurement hell all over again.

On our return to Batugade, we handed over the meagre supplies. They were gratefully accepted. We knew that we had to do better. Adi went to the school with the video camera to get a story to stir up his local school back home. Maybe the school his daughter attended could help. Fate awaited him. The first student he walked up to was a young girl wearing a T-shirt from his daughter’s school. They had already donated clothing to East Timor and the shirts had made it to far-flung Batugade.

The PKF health unit that had tested our well water came back with the news that boiling and boiling again would definitely make the water okay for washing our clothes. They also mentioned that they might be able to help us out with the mosquito problem. The next afternoon I went for a run. My route was over the bridge and a few kilometres up the beach towards the PKF Company headquarters. At the farthest point, I usually stopped to do some exercises. On this day I looked back to see a smoky, white haze hovering over Batugade.

My temptation to race back to see what disaster had occurred was tempered by my exhaustion in the heat. I had no idea what danger might await. The white haze billowed seaward and very slowly dissipated from a thick cloud to a mild mist. I returned to Batugade to find out the mosquito van had visited. I had seen mosquito fogging while living in Port Hedland, Western Australia, but this was something different. The kindly pest control men had not only given the town a dose, they had been true to their word and given us a little bit extra.

The camping area had been totally covered. On the way out the man with the small hand-held sprayer had even put a few shots into the air vents of the huts. Nothing would live again
in the huts for many days. The spraying went on regularly after that, except for the air vents. I am not sure what the villagers thought about it all. It was something new to them.

Electricity was still a long way off in Batugade, although there had been electricity previously. The old generators were located just beyond the small stores and the old market. They had been destroyed so completely that repairing them was not an option. Until new generators were supplied, the town would remain in the dark. People here were learning to live a more basic existence.

This was rough on the locals. It was also rough on our staff. Despite the difficulties in Dili this was something worse again for them. The villagers invited them to functions, but they were still out-of-towners, there for a short time. Towards the end of our deployment, the initial East Timorese group was beginning to long for home. There were too many people in one house and no real amenities.

The fact that they were Border Service officers also made it difficult for them. With the subsequent responsibilities, they could not join the throng of people visiting the West Timorese side of the Nunura market to obtain cheaper produce and small luxuries. The villagers themselves were keen to access cheaper goods. Buses and trucks drove past Batugade on their way from the Nunura bridge to Dili. The goods stacked on board were of great interest to them.

Only time will tell how the town of Batugade will develop.
Chapter 27

Can’t wait to tell you everything, but …

Things were coming to an end for us. The new contingent would be in Batugade soon and we would hand over some successes as well as some difficulties. We were wearing down mentally and were in need of a good rest. A few of us would have liked to have taken a short break and then returned to continue the job. Fresh minds and bodies were needed to finish things off.

The East Timorese were learning well and had developed significantly. We were starting to identify the leaders among them as well as those officers who were just not suited to living in the country. Not everyone is cut out to live in remote environments or to move away from family. Hopefully one day the Border Service would be able to draw staff from the local community. A policy of staff rotation would ensure the highest ethics were maintained.

The accommodation difficulties hadn’t changed. The East Timorese were in dire need of some reasonable housing. It was no picnic for them with 10 to 12 people sharing a house with no amenities.

We knew it would be important not to press all our ideas on our replacements. They would probably arrive all fired up with their own ideas, just as we had. Still, the issue of conditions for the East Timorese officers was one matter that we would let them know about. We were determined to impress on the new contingent the need to put significant effort into this task.
One of the biggest issues was the possibility of an owner turning up to claim the house once it had been refurbished. Obtaining land to build anew at this stage in the development process was an impossibility. Convincing UNTAET to provide a temporary structure for the East Timorese was also beyond us. We had to carry on and do our best to obtain scarce second-hand resources to keep the East Timorese officers as well provided for as possible.

There had been some improvement at the border post itself. The UN volunteers and the East Timorese labourers from the Maliana office had redeveloped our small shelter. It was now a permanent structure — as permanent as anything else being built at the time.

Observing the workmen, I found the reason for the many crumbling concrete structures littering the landscape. The mixing of the cement for our little shelter occurred on site and, although the bagged cement was good quality, the sand additives and the forming water were not. Black beach sand and seawater are not conducive to long-lasting structures. The shelter looked great when it was finished, but I couldn’t put a lifespan on it.

Our tents were pitched around an old concrete pad — the remains of a house. The pad seemed to deteriorate more and more each day. It was not uncommon for us to step right through it while cooking or doing the dishes. Leaning on a chair often caused the floor to shatter.

Despite the lack of resources, the border post shelter did look good. The workers from Maliana had put in a much-appreciated effort. The muddy floor was no more, the structure looked solid and the East Timorese officers could work from it with pride.

Pride and confidence within the East Timorese group were also developing as they became more comfortable with their role. They realised that they had skills that we lacked. Their ability to converse with traders and travellers in two or three languages was impressive and essential, as was their understanding of the whole market and trading environment. The Border Service in Dili had grown significantly. The training group had been pushing
through with more induction courses and the number of officers with basic training had increased.

After many false starts and delays, their uniforms arrived. The number of new uniforms was insufficient to dress the entire service, but Peter was determined that the officers at Batugade would get first pick. There would not have been a uniform if we hadn’t cajoled the administrators and then found a way to order the components ourselves. We thought it right that the Batugade group received a uniform before the newly employed Dili-based officers.

It was a big day for the group when they turned up for work at the post in their new outfits. The uniform not only improved the self-belief and morale within the group, it helped convince members of other agencies that these officers belonged at the post and had a definite role there. It wasn’t just Australian Customs officers running things.

Other seemingly small events were convincing us that the Timorese were now taking their rightful places. It was a delight to be down at the post one morning when the Salvation Army van arrived with morning tea for the soldiers. It was a defining moment for the group that day when, as newly uniformed Border Service officers, they were recognised and called over to the van. They accepted the offer enthusiastically. The chewing gum and sweet snacks were obviously their favourite treats.

The Border Service itself was also proving its worth. One of our prime objectives had been to raise revenue. Word came through from Dili that the Border Service had just collected its first million US dollars. This was no small feat and the UNTAET people were elated. The East Timorese were on the road to raising some money internally, with locally raised revenue available for allocation as deemed fit by the East Timorese. The ball was starting to roll.

Despite these positive changes, the East Timorese officers were still experiencing some difficulties. The level of sickness within the group was a concern.

During one weekend in early June we had only four East Timorese officers available for duty. Of the other five, one was in Dili recovering from malaria, another had come down with a bad
case of influenza and had left town. It had been impossible to establish just where she was and she had not been seen for nine days. Another two officers had come down with something and we had rushed them up to the army medics at the old fort in Balibo. The group leader had gone to Dili for talks with other senior East Timorese officials.

We were run-down ourselves, though we remained free from sickness. As we kept things running, I realised how tired everyone was. I hadn’t been home since starting the planning and training regime on 4 January 2000.

As the deployment moved inevitably towards its end, the tendency for people to start counting the days caused some consternation within the group. Countdowns are something to avoid. Saying that there were so many days to go did not engender confidence in the East Timorese camp. It could easily be misunderstood and could have given the impression that we couldn’t wait to get out of their country, when in fact we were just in need of a rest. The East Timorese knew us now and soon someone else would be coming to work with them. Their concern about what the new people would be like was obvious.

On many occasions the East Timorese reacted to situations far differently from Australians. The ‘almost riot’, the group attempt to retrieve seized goods from Mosquito House and the stone-throwing incidents were examples.

Still, it was a surprise when, on the morning three of the officers were supposed to catch a bus to Dili to start their English course, they refused to go. They told someone else to tell us they weren’t going. The primary aim of most of the officers had been to gain a place on the English course being run by an educational group in Dili.

The concerns over relocation expenses had finally come to a head. The officers had discussed this issue with me during the week and I had told them about the process they had to follow. They could only do this when they were in Dili. The subject was not raised again and I had assumed things were okay. I was wrong. They had been brooding on it. Their team leader was now going to Dili to sort it out and would return in a few days. The other three would remain at the house.
We had to convince them that they needed to go to Dili while their leader dealt with the matter. Refusing to complete the English course didn’t seem to us an appropriate reaction. They would be giving up something they treasured.

Our negotiations emphasised our differing views. We thought if they weren’t going on the course then they should come to work. Their view was that if they didn’t go to the course they should wait at home for three days until their team leader came back from Dili.

We understood the cause of the situation, but this was going to be a case of making a hard decision. We were there to help them and be their friends. If they didn’t go on the English course then I needed to send three others. We couldn’t waste three places. This came as a shock to them. They thought that if they didn’t turn up for three days the course would be held over until they got there. The sudden realisation that three of the other 135 Border Service officers would eagerly grab their spots changed things dramatically. They chose to attend the course.

It had not been a pleasant day and I had an uncomfortable feeling that I might have caused a major rift between us. Other than the rotten meat incident, we hadn’t had many problems. This was the first time we had forced an issue with them. We all agreed they needed a greater allowance and had been trying to find a solution. The good news was that the three of them were on the bus and would get the training they wanted.

That night, while I sleeplessly tossed about on my camp stretcher, I had time to ponder what it would be like to be in the shoes of our East Timorese friends.

I pictured my original home of Perth gutted by riots, with most of the infrastructure destroyed. The UN arrive to help and bring foreign customs officers to assist the rebuilding process. They work at Fremantle Customs House, planning the rebuilding of the Australian Customs Service. They have good intentions and try their best.

The difficulty is that they have been tasked with recreating customs and immigration services, not just rebuilding them. The power brokers within the World Bank have indicated that the old way of doing things in Australia is outdated and will be
ineffective in the new world. We (the locals) have to be taught a completely new system from scratch. Our experience and knowledge, gained from maybe 10 years or more on the job, is basically useless.

We have very little equipment and rely totally on the goodwill of the foreign officers who try to share around the meagre supplies they were able to bring with them. We have not had access to the type of equipment they have brought with them and we have no idea how to use it effectively.

I visualise the UN administration deciding to re-employ everyone because it doesn’t like our management structure. Suddenly the managers and supervisors are on the lowest level of the structure and must attend induction training.

We don’t have a basic home to go to at night, but the trainers appear to be quite well off. The weather is a bit cool for us in winter, we want the heating on, but the UN staff have brought in cooling machines to chill the rooms because they come from a snow-covered land and it is still too warm for them.

To top it off, it is decided that English is not an appropriate language for the service. People who don’t speak English will train us and all our instructions are written in the new language. All we dream about is going to language lessons to learn the new one.

As I closed my eyes, I tried to imagine how any of us back home would cope with such a situation.

Things were tight at the post for the next few days. We were five people down due to the course, malaria and the missing female officer. Two recruits from Dili turned up to replace the three who had gone to attend the English course in Dili. These two had significant experience with Indonesian Customs and had just completed an English course. They were more confident than our initial group. It was clear that the post would remain in transitional mode for some time as staff, including the internationals, came and went.

It was now only a couple of days before our replacements would board the UN flight to come and take our place in East Timor. Before they arrived, Peter and I headed inland, past
Maliana, into the mist-covered mountains to Bobonaro to inspect what had once been the District Administrator’s town.

It was a one and a half hour drive from Batugade into the central mountain region; not a great distance, but as always there were numerous bends, inclines and deteriorating roads. Once in the mountains the views were spectacular. At one point we were high enough to make out both the northern and the southern coasts. This route would have taken travellers to Suai and Salele until a few weeks earlier when landslides had cut the roads in several locations.

Bobonaro had seen better days but it retained a genuine Portuguese feel about it. It was a one-road town built on a mountainside. The Portuguese built it in the 1700s. How they did it was hard to fathom. It had fantastic tourist potential. Bobonaro was the home of the original tais cloth and many people worked in small huts creating it for sale in Dili.

Another 17 kilometres of road and four kilometres of a steep dirt track, which tested the limits of our four-wheel-drive vehicle, brought us to an amazing structure. Hidden in a valley was a 20-metre swimming pool that the Portuguese built in the 1700s. It was white bricked and tiled. A quaint changing block was built to one side of the pool. The condition of the pool and site in general suggested that the place had been rebuilt a few
times. The real question was how it came to be in such an isolated location.

The pool was fed by a hot spring that seeped from a rock formation near the base of the mountain. An ingenious array of cement and rock waterways fed the water from a small spring into a series of locks and small waterfalls before emptying into the swimming pool. As the pool overflowed, it emptied into a watercourse below.

The flow of water was little more than a trickle but the pool maintained a steady level. It was an amazingly well-engineered self-regulating pool. The warmth of the pool provided welcome relief from the cold mists that descended on the valley. It was possible to shower under the small waterfall, although on some days the water was hot enough to scald. Sneaking a visit to the pool would not be possible either, as the water had a high sulphur content and its smell lingered on the skin and in your hair for some time.

The entire location was stunning. There was an intriguing history to discover for any adventurous tourists thinking of making their way into the inland mountain areas in the future. There would be many interesting stories to tell.

Peter and I eventually made it home to Batugade. The next morning a trip to Dili beckoned.
We arrived at Comoro Airport early to await the arrival of our replacements and to welcome them with stories of our struggles and recent life. They had been given plenty of advice before arriving and had probably watched some of our video footage, so the look of the place probably wouldn’t surprise them.

The check-in process at UNTAET had changed. Headquarters was no longer in the old school compound. Everything had been moved into Kobe huts erected behind the UN offices in the old parliament building. It was a one-stop shop now.

A woman from personnel helped our replacements through the induction. When tempers frayed a little, she smiled and explained that with patience, within one and a half days, they would be part of the family. We left them to battle through. We’d had our turn. The newcomers had to find out for themselves.

The worst thing for us was the hot dogs and other fast food that now dominated the menus in the cafes that were springing up everywhere. It wasn’t easy to get a Timorese or Indonesian-style meal. After check-in, we travelled quickly back to Batugade. The cafe across the road put on a splendid local feast.

The next couple of days involved introductions, reconnaissance of everything and many war stories. A handover is
difficult. We wanted to tell our replacements far too much and we didn’t want them to change anything.

For many weeks in Dili, I had listened to Rick’s one and only music CD, with the Baz Luhrman song, *Everybody’s Free (To Wear Sunscreen)*, becoming etched in my soul. As keen as we were to hand over our wisdom, I was haunted by the words: ‘… advice, a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is … recycling it for more than it’s worth. But trust me on the sunscreen!’

It was an overcrowded few days before we moved on. A few surprises still awaited us though. One of the Maliana administrators showed us all a few possible sites for the planned office in Maliana. They were far more reasonable than previous offers. This was the fourth time we had visited Maliana to discuss the issue, but the administrator seemed to think this was a new experience for us.

The feeling that it was time for us to go washed over us as we tried to hand over our contacts. The TNI unit across the border was leaving for Bali the next day. The local PKF company had left that morning. It was going to be a fresh start for everyone.

We had one afternoon and one night left. The camp site was becoming a shambles. Nine people were living where five had been before. I understood even more now how the East Timorese felt in their house.

That afternoon we handed over the torch to the new chums. Suddenly, we had no responsibilities. That afternoon on the beach at Batugade was fabulous. Two hours of swimming, soccer with some kids and suddenly it dawned on us that it was the first time we had all relaxed together during a day in Batugade.

Our last night was supposed to be a big send-off at which we would entertain our East Timorese buddies. It was thwarted somewhat by a wedding invitation. The whole town was going. This time, we planned ahead. We definitely weren’t the important guests this time and wouldn’t hold things up by arriving late.

Protocols tested us once again. I almost got it right. First, a handshake with everyone standing near the entrance. Another
handshake with the best man followed by one with the bridegroom. Then a handshake and a kiss on the cheek for the bride. The bride moved across for the usual second kiss on the cheek but I had gone. The bride's mother stepped forward and a handshake was followed once again by a kiss on the cheek. This time, I knew better and followed up with the second cheek. The sudden hush from the crowd told me I had got it wrong.

The wedding was far livelier than the birthday party. Once again we supplied power for the music box. This meant we would have to dance. Our attempts in this direction dashed our hopes of reaching the status of the previous Portuguese administration in Batugade. This was emphasised by the remarks of one lady of high standing who observed our attempts to dance and, shaking her head in disbelief, said, ‘At least the Portuguese could dance!’ Being polite guests, we never mentioned that we had unconfirmed suspicions that back in 1975 some Australians could also do the foxtrot.

The wedding celebrations went on very late into the night. We were still considered worthwhile around town and had to eat before everyone else. It wasn’t a big night for us because we were going to Dili in the morning. Batugade was no longer our home.

On our last morning in Batugade, we got up at 5.30. As usual, dogs, chickens and goats welcomed the sun. The trundling APCs were long gone, but a helicopter put in a beach landing to maintain the early morning racket to the very end. A good initiation for the new contingent.

With some reluctance, we climbed into our vehicles. Batugade was all theirs. Our East Timorese friends were quite emotional. Three were still in Dili on the English course and it looked like we would miss sharing a farewell with them. The others embraced us and we wished each other well.

For some reason, I thought they might have had enough of us, but I was mistaken. Before we left they presented us with a poem.

We then gave the townsfolk a friendly send-off and, after 10 circles of the village guard post and many waves, we were gone!
The monkeys of Timor, now rarely seen, had been discussed often during our mountain travels. As we passed the now well-known forested area where the old Kujang had careered backwards off the road, we stopped for another obstacle. The screech of five little monkeys greeted us as they stopped on the road in front of us before racing off into the trees. Another Timorese farewell of sorts.
Before we could leave the UN mission we had to make one last visit to the administration centre. Four months earlier we had chased down 11 vital signatures to complete our sign-in form. The checkout form required 13.

Before handing in our identity cards we had one last visit to make into the mountains behind Dili. We visited the dedicated Falantil containment area of Aileu, where the majority of the former Falantil guerrillas were stationed. The administrators were still actively seeking a role for the former mountain fighters. Talk of raising an independent East Timorese army was continuing.

Lorraine said that a few Falantil had been involved in the recent training courses conducted at Mosquito House. The Border Service would provide an opportunity for some of these men at a later time.

The town was 47 kilometres from Dili, straight up into the mountains, although the route was anything but straight. The drive in a new twin-cab utility took almost two hours. The environment was a little different from other mountain routes we had seen. Many of the higher peaks had dry, Australian-style bush and red dirt. The deep valleys in between were thick with palm trees. Coffee plants haphazardly littered the side of the road.

Aileu had a CivPol contingent to keep the peace. There were no signs of a PKF unit and I suspected that the Falantil had been given that role. The people we saw were an assortment of former fighters. Many were dressed in army fatigues as they wandered the streets with their rifles and other small arms. All
heavy weapons were still safely stored away in a secure warehouse, despite attempts some weeks earlier to regain control of the armoury.

The fatigues were new, showing no signs of having been worn in difficult circumstances. We encountered quite a few plain-clothed members as well; they weren’t hard to pick as they also walked the streets with weapons slung over their shoulders. They were a welcoming bunch and were eager to join in for any tourist snaps.

Two younger members were keen to show us their weapons. It was an unusual collection. One had an old Chinese SKS automatic weapon, with another holding an even older Czechoslovakian-made weapon. Throughout the years of their long struggle, the source of weapons for the Falantil had obviously been varied.

While visiting the market stalls, we saw an elderly uniformed gentleman carrying the strangest weapon I had ever seen. Our curiosity was too strong and we had to find out what it was. It turned out to be a version of the now famous pipe guns that many of the East Timorese possessed.

It was a homemade single-shot rifle. A long, steel barrel was attached to a hand-carved wooden stock, reminiscent of the wooden toy guns we made as kids. This one was far deadlier though and posed just as much risk to the user as to the intended target. The long barrel was just a metal pipe with a large plastic muzzle fitted at the end. The simple trigger system and firing hammer made it a dangerous device.

The visit to Aileu highlighted the political sensitivities of dealing with an organisation that had played a continuing role in the East Timorese struggle. For now, the Falantil were living in Aileu and were supposedly comfortable with their role. At the time, all peacekeeping activities were performed by foreign armed forces. The Falantil were restricted to the town site if they wished to retain their arms. Some of the plans to use the Falantil in the future were laudable, but a little ingenuity would be required to find an acceptable solution. It would be interesting to see how it developed.
We returned to Dili and prepared for the checkout process, which would take a few days. We visited everyone we knew and made our final reports. The biggest Border Service changes appeared to be in Mosquito House. The office was home for a large number of officers now. The building had almost suffered a catastrophe when the computers and airconditioners overloaded the old circuit boards. A complete electrical rebuild saved the day.

It would be all right further down the track because the East Timorese appeared to have an aversion to the airconditioning. They were used to the humidity and preferred to leave the windows open. The airconditioning was there for the internationals.

The basic customs import compliance systems seemed to be developing well. Our Nepalese friend could hold his head up proudly. He had developed a cell of East Timorese officers who were effectively working this part of the service on their own. He was definitely achieving his bit towards one of the prime goals of the UNTAET mission.

The wharf was improving every day. The members of the second Kiwi contingent were an active and hardworking group. In between visits and reports, we kept up our efforts to obtain the 13 signatures.

The new administration huts behind the UN building meant that the old school used as the UN compound could be returned to its previous role. Although it was all functional now with everything together, the large old shady trees and the remnants of the park had been torn down. A newly installed large fence secured the new compound and the rear of UNTAET headquarters.

Our last two nights were spent sharing a few beers. We wandered the streets and Rick found his old friends at the ocean markets. There was still some concern among them about how long the UN would keep the Indonesians out. The young men were keen to know if Australia would continue to help.

Some things hadn’t changed. The floating hotel was still gently swaying on its mooring near the fish markets. The dried
fish stand was still on the nose. The city power went off at odd times and, on our last night, so did the lights of UNTAET headquarters.

Traffic was heavier. More coffee shops and food vendors had appeared and the ethnic Chinese traders had built a few general stores that sold just about everything. The small business economy was picking up, but it seemed to rely mostly on the patronage of the internationals.

Beer and cigarettes were still plentiful in the markets and smuggled goods could still be found in abundance. We had been formulating another plan to attack the Nunura market problem. Dealing directly with the crossing and all the associated issues at that time was too difficult. We knew that the majority of goods eventually ended up in Dili. The trucks that had started arriving to pick up the goods from the ant trains were being financed from a number of Dili warehouses. The porters who crossed the river were simply the legs for larger entrepreneurs.

The solution appeared to be to deal with the collection points in Dili. Once they were identified and taxed as per other imports, or closed, then the commercial aspect of the crossing at Nunura would whither, as would the security issue. Implementing this plan would be someone else’s role now.

The most pleasing thing at the Dili markets was that fresh food was becoming more available to the people living in Dili. There were definitely more families on the street during the weekends.

The best moment for us in the final days was a visit to the academy where the English courses were conducted. We tracked down our three officers from Batugade. They were as delighted to see us as we were to see them. No hard feelings remained. We told them that we hoped to be able to help them again somehow in the future.

Our final farewell at Mosquito House was even more low-key. If we had expected a big farewell from our employers, we would have been disappointed. Departures were a fact of life in the UN. Many people come and go during a mission and departures are commonplace.
The regular UN workers move often between aid missions, often comparing the benefits of one with another. This was summed up for me when I heard one clerk say: ‘Kosovo was a much nicer mission. They let you go to Vienna every fortnight!’

The important thing we all had to remember was that we were in East Timor to assist the locals with their needs. Our own needs were well catered for and should not be considered as the reason for our presence there.

I can only say that our contingent put their heart and soul into the job, as did the Border Service staff. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t point out that many people within the UN do a magnificent job in very trying conditions. Some of the people in the various aid agencies would qualify as saints.

Interfet and then the follow-up Peacekeeping Force did all the hard yards first and those we worked with were of the highest calibre.

Some of the businesspeople from Darwin and beyond were the vital props to get the rebuilding process going. Without food and supplies, little would have been achieved.

We could see from the outset that our task was going to be a long-term one. We were sent there to get it rolling. In hindsight, the task proved far more daunting than we had initially considered and I would suggest that we were fortunate to be able to even begin interim operations at the land border with West Timor. The full move to a civilian Border Service is going to be a long haul.

In East Timor, UNTAET was charged with trying to create a country from ashes. The UN has had many difficult tasks since its inception and I am sure this was not one of its easiest.

As one of our friends on the English course said as we departed, ‘Please don’t forget East Timor!’

The old commandos from World War II didn’t forget their friends in 50-odd years. We shouldn’t either!
Epilogue

Since our departure

Monday, 20 May 2002 was a big day for the East Timorese. After 32 exhausting months, they finally had their independence vote for a second time.

Xanana Gusmao was now the first President of Timor-Leste (East Timor). After much discussion and heartache, Gusmao had realised that the majority of East Timorese did not share his desire for the leadership role to be assumed by someone other than him. He put himself forward as a presidential candidate and in April 2002, the people of Timor-Leste voted overwhelmingly for him as the man to shape their immediate future.

Prior to the first independence vote in 1999, Gusmao was a guerrilla leader. In 1998, the CNRT had been created to lead the fight for freedom. The arrival of UNTAET saw the ascent of the CNRT to a de facto governing council role to provide guidance and advice to the UN administration.

In 2001, Gusmao along with others recognised that the CNRT should no longer dominate politics and he oversaw its dissolution. At the time, Gusmao expressed the view that the CNRT members were the first freedom fighters in history to voluntarily relinquish government, something of which the East Timorese should be justly proud.

At the end of 2004, many of the issues raised in this book remain unresolved. It will take a concerted effort to ensure that the redevelopment of Timor-Leste does not stagnate. Financial and technical aid is still a necessity — the country is still the poorest in the region.
UNTAET closed up shop and officially departed during May and June 2002. The administration is now in the hands of the East Timorese. The Border Service now reports to an elected government.

After independence in 2002, a large international contingent still existed within Timor-Leste. UN soldiers and police remained to ensure continuing security despite efforts by the UN and member countries of the PKF to hand control of some districts to the East Timorese police.

The UN passed a resolution that led to the formation of the United Nations Mission of Support East Timor (UNMISET). This mission replaced UNTAET and allowed for the continuation of the PKF and an International Civilian Police among other things. It was recognised that an interim security force was still required.

UNMISET was designed initially to expire in May 2004, two years after independence, however, a decision was taken to extend it until 20 May 2005.

Unfortunately, by 2003, Afghanistan and then Iraq had become the new focus for many members of the world community. As UNTAET had wound down, Australia set the end of 2003 as the date to halve the size of its force in East Timor, although the head of the UN, Kofi Annan, called for a slow down in the withdrawal of military assistance from the country.

On the morning of 19 August 2003, the East Timorese people were shaken, as were others throughout the world, by the news that Sergio Vieira de Mello had been killed in the terrorist bombing of the UN headquarters in Iraq. de Mello had served as the Head of Mission in East Timor from the dark days of 1999 until nationhood was achieved in 2002. His death was greatly mourned by the many East Timorese who had benefited from his enormous efforts and those who had witnessed his genuine compassion during what had been one of his toughest assignments.

In early 2004, there were 350 Australian soldiers still in East Timor. On 20 May 2004 (the second anniversary of independence), the Australian contingent was reduced again, in
line with the requirements of UNMISET. The UN Security Council now maintains, through UNMISET, a force totalling 58 civilian advisers, 157 civilian police advisers, 42 military liaison officers, 310 soldiers and an international response force of 125.

Australia now has 100 soldiers in East Timor compared with more than 5,000 at the height of the previous missions.

The aim of this second phase of UNMISET was to replace the military focus of the UN mission with a greater effort placed on developing systems of justice and public administration.

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Aid agencies still operate to provide many of the basic necessities of life. The East Timorese are still trying to improve infrastructure that, five years after September 1999, is yet to be fully repaired — never mind developed to an acceptable standard for the future. Many old wounds are festering.

Gusmao was frustrated and lashed out at the Government. He was quoted on 29 November 2002 as saying that despite independence in May 2002, ‘We are more dependent than ever.’

December 2002 saw violent riots in which certain sections of East Timorese society demonstrated their grievances with those who sought to help them. This was a major step up from the ‘almost riot’ we had witnessed. The violence resulted in deaths among the protesters.

The year of 2003 was only five days old when gunmen murdered four villagers in Laubonu and Tiarelelo, two remote villages south-west of Dili. Witnesses alleged that the attackers shouted: ‘We are coming back for you!’ Some believed the Militia also had a hand in the December riots. The East Timorese feared that their worst nightmares could still come true.

Further evidence surfaced during 2003 that security was still a major concern for the general population. February and March were particularly difficult months and there were a number of attacks on villages attributed to former militia members that resulted in deaths. On 6 March 2003, Australian peacekeepers were forced into a confrontation with a violent
gang, which firmly demonstrated that a strong military presence was still required to keep the peace.

Unemployment in the nation of 760,000 is still a huge issue. Although often quoted as 50 per cent, many suggest it is still above 70 per cent throughout the country.

During celebrations to mark the first anniversary of full independence on 19 May 2003, Gusmao once again voiced his concern about the state of nation. During a speech at the Governor’s Palace, he was quoted as saying: ‘There are no prospects for employment of our youth and the conditions of our legal and [government] infrastructure [do] not attract investors.’

During those same anniversary celebrations a former Falantil freedom fighter cut a forlorn figure, dressed in his old military uniform to highlight his demands for a job. A once proud man with no foreseeable role in a modern military force.

At the time of independence, the Border Service of East Timor had developed into an organisation employing approximately 250 people. Cancio D’Oliveira was the senior East Timorese officer within the service.

Many overseas contingents had provided assistance during the early days after September 1999 and some had been honoured for their service by their individual governments. It was notable that in May 2002 the Border Service struck a medal for all East Timorese officers who had served during the first few years of development. As mentioned in this book, the newly employed officers were proud of their developmental role within their own country and I am sure they were ecstatic to receive some official recognition.

There were some significant changes to the initial set-up of the Border Service. During the later part of 2002, there were moves to remove the immigration functions. This separation of roles occurred and, during 2003, the proposed Border Police began civilian police patrols in the border region.

It is still a time of frustration for many people living near the border. In February 2002, Indonesia and East Timor signed
Since our departure 255

agreements aimed at easing relations, but such agreements take time to filter through to the daily lives of people living in the border regions.

Free-trade zones and freedom of movement for families straddling the land border with West Timor and the Oecussi enclave are still some time from formalisation. Such policies cannot be implemented until the security of people living a village lifestyle near the remote areas of the border can be assured.

Border issues that people thought could be solved quickly in 2000 still linger. In April 2003, the TNI military administrator in Atambua made a decision to close the illegal market operating on the riverbank near Nunura. The market was closed for a security reassessment and promptly reopened.

The UN investigations into the 1999 atrocities continued into late 2002 and, despite many claims that the inquiries were a whitewash, one senior Indonesian TNI officer was convicted of failing to provide adequate security when at least 15 East Timorese were massacred while seeking safe haven in Bishop Belo’s church. During 2003, Indonesia conducted an ‘atrocities tribunal’ to investigate the allegations against senior militia leaders. Many countries, including Timor-Leste, the US and Australia, expressed disappointment at the results of the investigations.

In April 2001, there were still 100,000 people living as displaced people in West Timor. More than three years later, tens of thousands of those people remain in the camps. Some may never return as they were aligned with the militia and did not want independence from Indonesia. Others still can’t go home. It appears that the refugee crisis will be a continuing source of tension, with one Indonesian official indicating in August 2003 that many refugees were awaiting new elections in East Timor before they would consider returning home. The International Organisation for Migration, Timor-Leste and Indonesia are still working together to establish why the refugees won’t or can’t go home.
In September 2002, Timor-Leste was admitted to the UN as the 191st member and took its place in the world. During 2003, it also applied to join UNESCO and its membership was ratified in June that year.

In 2002, the East Timorese identified tourism as a potential source of income for the immediate future. In May 2003, the US and Australia (as well as others) issued security travel warnings for Timor-Leste. The effect on travel was immediate and, on 14 July 2003, during an address to an International Peace Conference in Australia, Foreign Minister Jose Ramos-Horta called on Australia to lift the security advice claiming it damaged Timor-Leste’s economic growth. He added that he believed Timor-Leste was safer than the US and Australia at the time.

The ability of Timor-Leste to gain independent wealth for its people is a major hurdle to overcome. Throughout 2002, the Government was forced to join the business of international relations as it attempted to gain control of the rich oil and gas reserves to its south.

In March 2003, Timor-Leste and Australia negotiated the Timor Joint Development Treaty. East Timor gained the rights to 90 per cent of the oil and gas in the Timor Sea. The estimated value of these fields is $6 billion. This treaty was an interim measure and dealt with the reserves closest to Timor.

Australia and Timor-Leste discussed the potentially richer Greater Sunrise gas fields during September and October 2003. Much of this area is closer to East Timor than to Australia, however, there is dispute about where boundaries should be drawn. Timor-Leste is seeking rights to exclusive access; Australia has expressed its intention to claim 80 per cent of the reserves. The estimated value of these reserves is $30 billion.

In May 2004, Australia and East Timor were still negotiating the maritime borders to attempt to define ownership of the Timor Sea oil reserves. Many within East Timor regarded Australia’s hard-nosed negotiating stance as representing a colonial mentality. Some students who were at the centre of pre-independence demonstrations in 1999, now demonstrated against Australia’s stance in the border dispute.
President Gusmao and East Timor’s Prime Minister, Dr Mari Alkatiri, dubbed Australia’s negotiating position as not generous. Ramos Horta called East Timor’s sniping at Australia over the oil rights counterproductive and called for calm. This issue will go on for many years.

Border relations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste improved considerably in 2004 when the two countries reached agreement on the definition of their shared border. In July, Ramos Horta attended the Association of South–East Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting in Jakarta as an invited guest. The agreement between the two countries was officially signed during the visit. At the completion of the meeting, Timor-Leste was invited to join ASEAN.
Glossary

UNITED NATIONS

BCU — Border Control Unit
Commanding and training authority of BSET. UNTAET staff and international officers only. (To be disbanded on independence.)

BSET — Border Service of East Timor
East Timorese Border Service created by UNTAET. Includes Customs, Immigration and Quarantine. East Timorese officers only.

CivPol — Civilian Police
United Nations Civilian Police Force made up of international police officers from numerous UN member countries. Initially tasked to perform all police functions, then to develop and train local officers and withdraw.

Controller (Border Service)
A traditional Customs term for the highest position within the organisation. (Replaced in Australia with the term CEO.)

Interfet — International Force East Timor
International armed force led by Australia to secure East Timor during and immediately after the post-election militia rampage in September 1999. Replaced by United Nations Peacekeeping Force when UNTAET was created.

IOM — International Organisation for Migration
UN-sponsored migration organisation dealing with the development of international migration programs and other trans-border migration issues. Also assists refugee placements and returns with UNHCR.
PKF — Peace Keeping Force
United Nations international force to maintain security in a mission country. Countries supply units as a ‘fully supported whole’. They are commanded centrally by the UN Force Commander, however, they operate their own support structures and work as country-specific units with allocated tasks within the PKF mission. (This is unlike CivPol, in which officers are placed individually within the police force.)

UNAMET — United Nations Assistance Mission in East Timor
The UN organisation created to conduct and oversee the September 1999 independence poll in East Timor.

UNHCR — United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UN organisation for international refugee issues.

UNMO — United Nations Military Observer
Unarmed military observers who ‘police the war zone’. They are uniformed officers from UN member countries who referee reported incidents between opposing forces and liaise with each side to maintain peaceful communication and to address issues of concern to either force.

INDONESIAN
ABRI — Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia
Former name for the armed forces of Indonesia. Changed to TNI when POLRI was placed outside direct military command.

CNRT — Council of Timorese Resistance

POLRI — Polisi Republik Indonesia
Indonesian National Police Force.

Polisi
A police officer or the police. Local police who work for POLRI.

Rupiah — Indonesian Currency
One Australian dollar equals approximately 4,500–5,000 rupiah.

TNI— Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Army National Indonesia)
The national defence force of Indonesia.
MILITARY
APC — Armoured Personnel Carrier
An armoured steel-tracked military vehicle designed for fast deployment of troops. Used by the Australian Defence Force.

Humvee
A low, wide-bodied army patrol vehicle.

LAV — Light Armoured Vehicle
An eight-wheeled armoured military vehicle designed for fast deployment of troops. Used by the Australian Defence Force.

COLLOQUIAL
Chitty
Small piece of paper. The piece of paper that authorises the procurement of goods within a UN mission.

Donga
A transportable self-contained hut. Usually used in mining camps and transferred on trucks as one complete unit.

Kobe Hut
An easy-to-assemble prefabricated room for administration or residential purposes. Developed after the Kobe earthquake disaster in Japan.
PANDANUS BOOKS
Pandanus Books was established in 2001 within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) at The Australian National University. Concentrating on Asia and the Pacific, Pandanus Books embraces a variety of genres and has particular strength in the areas of biography, memoir, fiction and poetry. As a result of Pandanus’ position within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the list includes high-quality scholarly texts, several of which are aimed at a general readership. Since its inception, Pandanus Books has developed into an editorially independent publishing enterprise with an imaginative list of titles and high-quality production values.

THE SULLIVAN’S CREEK SERIES
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