

Friends Do Not Forget

It's great to be here among you again and I've chosen to speak about one World War II saga of Timor and Australia and to ask your support in our nomination of Timor-Leste for the Companion of the Order of Australia. You of all people know the story, but let us just go over the facts.

During World War II Portugal and its territories including East Timor were neutral. In 1941 Australia sent two battalions and some support troops to the strategically important Timor environs: Gull Force, to be headquartered in Ambon, and Sparrow Force to Kupang in West Timor.

On 17th December 1941, almost 400 men of the Australian 2/2 Independent Company along with a few hundred Dutch troops landed in Dili, Portuguese Timor, against the wishes of the Portuguese authorities. Not long after landing, the 2/2 Independent Company was decimated by malaria.

During the night of 19 February 1942, thousands of Japanese invaded the island at Kupang and Dili, the same day as the bombing of Darwin.

The main body of Sparrow Force in West Timor surrendered in Feb 1942, leaving the 2/2 Independent Company in East Timor without higher command and fighting a rearguard action against the Japanese who increased their numbers in April or May with specially trained guerilla troops. The Australians were without radio contact with Australia for two months until April when they successfully used a radio they had made from items raided from the Japanese.

The 2/2 Company was reinforced by the 2/4 Independent Company in September 1942 bringing the number of Australians to about 700. The 2/2nd was evacuated to Australia in December 1942 while the 2/4 was withdrawn in January 1943.

That month the Japanese inserted their whole 48th Division, at least another 14,000 troops, bringing their number to around 20,000. The Japanese remained in control of Timor until the surrender on 15 August 1945.

There was widespread Japanese coercion and retaliation against the Timorese throughout the campaign by the bombing of villages, destruction of livestock, rape, and wholesale murder of the civilian population, resulting in the loss of 40 000 to 60 000 Timorese lives.

Sometimes the Japanese soldiers would come to a house and say they knew the Australians had been there because they said they could smell their boots, but the Timorese would say, "No, no Australians here." But later they would tell the Australians to leave their boots outside.

The testimony of the Australian troops who were there attests to the overwhelming support of the Timorese people as a whole, and of the "criados (creados)" in particular, the young Timorese men who led, fed, nursed, hid and warned them with loyalty and courage.

Retired Lieutenant Lance Collins spoke at an event in Sydney on Anzac Eve. At the end of his fine speech he said:

"In war, the best offer their own lives, the worst offer the lives of others. Anzac Day would, in my view, be more important, more meaningful and ultimately more valuable if Australians took the opportunity to scratch beneath the legends to where courage was matched by cowardice and fortitude by folly."

I was in East Timor recently and had the opportunity to visit the home of Moises Pedroso, who lives in Taibessi, near the old Portuguese radio station which was used as a prison by the Japanese during World War II. In the garden of Mr Pedroso's home is a grave, beautifully tended by him and his family, and in the grave are, I believe, the remains of two Australian soldiers, Warrant Officer Jeffery Willersdorf, aged 22 when he died, and Lance Corporal Hugo Pace, aged 32. These were two of the heroes of Rimau, that ultimately doomed attempt by 23 Australian soldiers to repeat their previous amazing feat of the Jaywick raid of 1943 where they infiltrated Singapore harbour and blew up 23,000 tons of Japanese shipping.

Most of the members of the Rimau raiding party were killed, but these two soldiers first sailed in a type of canoe from Singapore and were picked up by the Japanese on the island of Romang near Timor. They were taken to Dili and were tortured until they died.

I read about their remarkable story in "The Heroes of Rimau" where Tom Hall's 30 years of research was brought together to explain one of the episodes of the War distinctly marked by the folly of officialdom.

The book not only describes the courage and ingenuity of the Australian soldiers of the Jaywick and Rimau raids, but devotes a long chapter to covert work by the Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD) which took place on Timor after the departure of the main body of Australians of the 2/2nd and 2/4th Independent Companies. Through an almost unbelievable series of errors made by official ineptitude, 31 Australian soldiers lost their lives, the toll on Timorese locals being immeasurable.

Small parties of Australians and loyal Portuguese or Timorese were charged with the task of spying on the Japanese and relaying information to Australia. They were Special Units under the name of "Z Force" or "S Force". A signaller by the name of Sergeant Alfred Ellwood, aged 21, was among the first of these parties, but he was captured and tortured so badly that he agreed to transmit bogus messages for the Japanese. For nearly two years he not only endured the Japanese, but also the bovine stupidity of the SRD in Melbourne. As a trained signaller he knew that the omission of an authentication word in a message should have alerted authorities that he had been compromised. He omitted the word, but they ignored it. They then committed the unforgivable security breach of mentioning the names of other operatives in other groups in Timor. The messages often concerned food and equipment drops for the parties acting covertly in Timor, as well as plans for the insertion of other groups. With the Japanese fully apprised of all movements, they gladly received and used all Australian air force drops. Ellwood attempted to make the messages sent as "boring, banal and colourless as possible" in the hope that someone would question their value. He deliberately used ridiculous phrases and impossible coordinates, to raise a question mark in someone's mind.

Other similar groups were landed clandestinely but were compromised or wiped out from the start because of the Japanese upper hand. Captain Cashman, from the Cobra party, was also tortured into submission and like Ellwood, spent his time trying to alert SRD in Melbourne, but again, the missing authenticator word was ignored. Cashman too, attempted to locate drop zones in impossible places, like the middle of the ocean, but SRD merely passed the information to the RAAF where it was considered an error in transcription and corrected.

With these signals under Japanese control, nothing was secret about further reconnaissance parties landing, resulting in the immediate death or capture and torture of Australian soldiers.

At war's end SRD received messages like this from the Japanese:

"Thanks for your assistance this long while. Hope to see you again. But until then wish you good health. Nippon Army."

I quote from Tom Hall's book:

“When the whole story began to emerge from Ellwood’s and Cashman’s candid statements and frank operational reports submitted to SRD on October 23 and 24, 1945, it was obvious that if the facts became public, heads would roll – not the heads of the rank and file, but those of various directors of military intelligence, highly placed SRD personnel and indeed, General Blamey himself. The only alternative was to keep the truth about Timor under wraps.”^a

The hurried War Crimes trial in Darwin which dealt with the torture meted out to these Australians was made totally ineffectual by the directive of General Blamey that “no member of Z Special Unit will be used as a witness”. The trial was farcical. Undue haste and lack of witnesses on Blamey’s orders resulted in only three convictions and the sentences handed down were for between one and three months’ detention. Even the Japanese were mystified, one questioning whether he had misheard “three months” instead of “three years”.

The keen desire to cover up this appalling saga of dereliction of duty is illustrated by the quiet dispatch into civilian life of both Ellwood and Cashman, whose experiences should at least have had a military enquiry. Other men in other arenas in the same War were brought to book for far less serious actions. A Major Charles Cousens was accused of treason for ending his torture by cooperating in Japanese propaganda and the publicity given to one who used an RAAF aeroplane to supply grog to some Americans far surpassed that which surrounded Ellwood and Cashman. That successive covert Australian operations could have been compromised so badly over a two year period, and then covered-up so well, is extraordinary to say the least.

What is the relationship between the Z and S Special Forces cases between 1943 and 1945 and the tale of the Australians and the Timorese in 1942? To what extent has the silence enveloping the 1942 story been influenced by the official folly of the subsequent three years of the war, the blame for which goes to the highest levels of command? The common elements in the stories are courage, cowardice, fortitude and folly. The unbroken threads linking them are silence and secrecy, the preservation of reputations, cunning calculation and rampant self-interest.

We know that between 40,000 and 60,000 Timorese died during that time. Jim Dunn explains how this figure is arrived at:

“The census of 1947 showed that the population of the colony had declined from 472 221 in 1930 (the year of the previous census) to 433 412. From these figures it has often been estimated that 40 000 Timorese died as a result of the war, but the real figure must have been much higher, probably more than half as high again, even if a minimum natural growth rate is taken into account.”^a

How many of those lives were lost in 1942, and how many in the subsequent three years when all the bungling was going on?

I had heard a comment from a friend in Timor that the only thing that Rufino Alves Correia wants is a medal. Rufino is one of the famous creados of the Australian soldiers. He looked after Lt Tom Nisbett, nursing him when sick, carrying his kit, pointing out best hiding places and vantage points. Paddy Kenneally was loyal to Rufino over the past many years, often visiting him and sending money to him via others.

As Paddy’s coffin was lowered into his grave on March 6 this year I thought, “Why can’t the whole nation get a medal?” and I considered the famous precedent, that of Britain giving Malta the George Cross during World War II for the courage and bravery of the Maltese.

I am convinced that ideas ripen when their time is right, and the time for this idea has well and truly come. Since coming up with this idea I have heard of other similar ventures which seek to tell this story in different ways, e.g. someone is mounting a photography exhibition in Melbourne, someone else has submitted the suggestion that those Portuguese and Timorese who worked with “Z Force” and S Force” receive a medal, and we heard recently that the Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels of Papua-New Guinea will have a medal struck for them.

It's as though the Australian psyche has grasped that something must be done to open up this portion of our history and to bring us to that point of acknowledgement that is necessary for the truth to be told.

I don't know whether there is a connection between the conspiracy to cover up the gross failures of SRD in the last years of the War and the silence that has enveloped the 1942 Timor campaign, but I suspect that it is all part of the mix.

Subsequent events of the last few decades, of course, have made the telling of the story of the Timorese loyalty to us somewhat dangerous. After all, if it was commonly known that so many people died for having chosen to protect the Australians, in contrast to the situation in West Timor where the locals quite easily told the Japanese of the Australians whereabouts, it would have been far more difficult to sit back and do nothing for 24 years while the people agonised under Indonesia. It would certainly have been a bit more tricky to secure the great swathes of rich Timorese property in the Timor Sea that we have managed so well to do.

What I do know is that between December 1941 and August 1945 a small group of people suffered enormously for supporting a few hundred Australians and that this unique story is still largely unknown.

There are two reasons that we are running the campaign for an Award for Timor-Leste. One of these is for the story of Timor in World War II to be told.

- Our people need to hear that at least 40,000 people died as a direct result of their friendship to Australian soldiers.
- They need to hear that no other nation on earth has done such a thing for us.
- They need to know that Timor, a neutral colony of a neutral nation lost about as many civilians in a War in which they had no part as did Britain, one of the main protagonists.
- Our children need to hear these stories at school and at home.
- It should be in the Curriculum.
- It should be on television.
- We should urge each other to keep a promise that was made in the midst of all the killing: "Your friends do not forget you." It should be far more prominent in the War Memorial than it is.
- It should be in Hansard that our National Parliament stood with heads bowed in memory of the men, women and children whose animals were killed, whose crops were smashed and who themselves were butchered because they wouldn't do in the Australians.

Friends, join with us to tell this story loud and clear across our land. Get as many people as you can to sign the petition and tell them the story and ask them to pass it on.

Susan Connelly RSJ

¹ Turner, Michele 1992 *Telling East Timor: Personal Testimonies 1942-1992*

² Silver, L.R. (1990) *The Heroes of Rimau*. Rozelle, Sally Milner Publishing.

³ Dunn, J. (1983). *Timor: A people betrayed*. Milton: The Jacaranda Press.