

Balibo 45 years on — and it still stinks of cover-up and collusion

Today marks 45 years since five Australian journalists were murdered in East Timor. Yet questions about who knew what and when still remain.

Clinton Fernandes – *Crikey* – 16 October 2020

<https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/10/16/balibo-45-years-on/>



Indonesian troops at the house in which the Balibo Five sheltered before being killed (Image: AAP/National Archives of Australia)

Today marks 45 years since five Australian journalists were murdered in East Timor. Reporter Greg Shackleton, sound recordist Tony Stewart and cameraman Cary Cunningham worked for Channel 7. Reporter Malcolm Rennie and cameraman Brian Peters worked for Channel 9. They were all in their 20s. The two crews arrived in Timor separately but linked up at the small village of Balibo near the western border with Indonesia.

In October 1975 the Indonesian military was conducting a terror campaign against Portuguese Timor, as it was then called. Its aim was to capture small enclaves just inside East Timor, mount small offensive actions from them, and make the Timorese position untenable.

Its actions would generate atrocities that could be falsely attributed to pro-independence East Timorese forces. Indonesia would then be able to portray its invasion as merely restoring order. It regarded the presence of any foreign journalist as a “hurdle to be got over”, as the British ambassador to Indonesia reported, because “the only limitation on clandestine activity now appears to be its exposure”.

The five Australians would have exposed the Indonesian military’s lie.

Indonesian special forces captured them on the morning of October 16 and killed them in cold blood. They dressed the corpses in military uniforms, placed guns beside them, and took photographs of them in an attempt to portray them as legitimate targets.

A NSW coronial inquest in 2007 disclosed an Australian Signals Directorate intelligence intercept in which Indonesian forces reported that “the bodies” of the five Australians had “been reduced to ashes”.

Indonesian strategists gave detailed advance warning of their military operations to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. The Australian government has admitted that it knew the Indonesians would attack Balibo but not that the journalists were there.

In her Walkley Award-winning book, *Circle of Silence*, Shirley Shackleton says that her husband Greg “did not expect to be deliberately harmed because of Prime Minister Whitlam’s greatly lauded friendship with the Indonesian President”. That was a reasonable expectation in those heady days of “batik diplomacy” between Whitlam and Suharto.

A former Australian ambassador has written that an Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) officer informed him about the murders the next day. But what did ASIS know beforehand? Could the journalists have been warned not to go to Balibo? Serious questions remain about an ongoing coverup.

I have sought answers to this question in the archival record. In a case at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT), ASIS first claimed that to even confirm or deny the existence of ASIS records about Portuguese Timor in 1975 would “cause damage to the security, defence or international relations of the Commonwealth”.

It later admitted it possessed such records but insisted on continuing non-disclosure. Attorney-General Christian Porter issued a public interest certificate allowing ASIS to make its case in secret. A public interest Certificate is self-executing; the AAT has no choice but to hold a secret hearing, preventing me from testing ASIS’ claims fully under cross-examination.

The extent of ASIS’ foreknowledge remains a secret. It will take a political decision by a future Australian government to come clean and declassify the records.

What happened to the East Timorese? We know that the Indonesian high command was so concerned about a negative international reaction that they halted their operations.

But the Australian government maintained a public silence for five weeks. Indonesia took this non-reaction as a green light; it understood it could treat the East Timorese as it wished. And that is precisely what it did.

East Timor suffered a death toll of 31% of the population, perhaps the largest loss of life relative to the total population since the Holocaust. Apparently this covering up isn’t contrary to the “public interest”.