



Corporal Gaunt and Private Shane Van Duren on Exercise Trisetia in Indonesia – just six months before 3RAR faced off against Indonesian soldiers in East Timor.



Map of East Timor signed by Private Shan Van Duren and his section comrades. Department of Public Information, Canberra, Australia, May 1999.

WE COULDN'T SAY WHERE WE WERE OR WHAT WE WERE DOING OR WHERE WE THOUGHT WE MIGHT BE GOING

MORE ARSE THAN CLASS

TIMOR AND BEYOND

When things went bad in East Timor in 1999, Australia was ready to react. Given the scale of the operation, the reaction was relatively swift – though, listening to the media, who wanted everything done 'yesterday', one might be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

One has to remember that nothing on this scale had been attempted by the Australian Defence Force since Vietnam. We also went in as an Australian-led multinational force – although we had UN sanction, it was not a UN mission – which was also a unique experience for what was essentially a peacetime defence force depleted by ever-tightening annual budgets. The Army in particular was the poor cousin at the budget table at that time. None of this big-picture stuff meant much to the guys on the ground, however. They, as usual, were the mushrooms – kept in the dark and fed bullshit.

As a rifleman with 3RAR, Shane Van Duren was one of the soldiers on the bottom rung of the ladder, expected to hit the ground running, but with little solid info on what was actually going on. But then, for he and his colleagues, that was nothing new.

WORDS SHANE VAN DUREN AND BRIAN HARTIGAN
PICS VAN DUREN COLLECTION

Before INTERFET – International Force East Timor – came Operation Spitfire, the repositioning of forces in Australia's north, ready for the push across the Timor Sea to who-knew-what. Shane Van Duren takes up the story...

We hadn't deployed for a very long time. No one knew what the fuck was going on.

About half way through Op Spitfire, anyone who was married was told they could have one, monitored conversation with their wives while our lieutenant sat beside us and listened. We couldn't say where we were or what we were doing or where we thought we might be going.

Our wives had a better idea than we did anyway, just from watching the news.

We had other ways of letting the girls know where we were, of course – you only had to use your bankcard at the post office and they knew exactly where you were.

We weren't allowed to wear our uniforms around the place, or anything that could

identify who we were or what unit we were from. It was all pretty hush hush – but, of course, we didn't give a shit.

We trained during the day and went to the movies or something at night. Someone organised stuff to keep us occupied, but we really had no idea what was going on.

It seemed to us that the commanders were so far out of their depth – one minute we were going, then we weren't, then we were going with batons and shields, next minute we were going to leave our weapons on the C130 and only pull them out if shots were exchanged because, technically, we weren't allowed to have them.

There were all kinds of changes to the situation, and various ways to try and get around every change. I don't know where the changes were coming from – politicians or military command or where. I don't know who was making the decisions – or [after a laugh] who was trying to counter those decisions, but our situation changed so often there was no point trying to worry about it anymore. 'We'll just go when we go' was the attitude.

It went on for about a month – actually just short of earning the Australian Service Medal by about a day, I think.

Anyway, we eventually landed in Dili. It wasn't until we actually got there that we started working with other services – even other corps. The first time I ever rode on an ASLAV was in Timor.

'Nice body armour you guys have,' I said to them. 'It'd be nice if we had it outside the carrier too!'

We had the old Vietnam-era stuff. Before we ended Operation Spitfire, the Chief of Defence came to visit us and asked how we felt and what we thought about operations.

'Sir, when are we going to see some of the modern equipment coming into the system – particularly the new ballistic body armour and boots?' I asked him. He actually had no idea we didn't have it already, but, he said, 'I'll make sure we get that to you before you land' – which gave us the first real indication we were actually going!

They did get us the American stuff – about two weeks after we had landed – just after we were sure we weren't going to get shot!



Before we went in, we were told we could be engaged by up to two battalions of Indonesians – in fact, we were told a lot of things before we went in, little of which proved correct.

There were a lot of Indonesians in the area who, I think, were prepared to go toe-to-toe with us – at least that was the impression I got when they were pointing guns at me. But I think they also had it in the back of their minds that there was an American Marines' ship off the coast. The Marines never got involved because it didn't escalate, but I think it probably didn't escalate because they were there.

I am aware now that Marines were there, but I wasn't at the time. We were walking around like we were king shit. We even walked into an Indonesian battalion position like we owned the place. We were like, 'yeah, shoot us and see what happens'.

It was all bluff, of course. We weren't really that confident, and we probably would have been slaughtered. We didn't even have a grenade between us and, with only 120 rounds each, hell, that wasn't even enough for every Indonesian if we got them first time every shot. It's kinda funny looking back on it – but I still get this stress rash.

When we took out the first night patrol, we went to an Indonesian position.

We had night vision – in fact that was a great advantage that saved our asses time and time again. The fact that we could see at night and aim at night, and that they were scared of the night, really gave us an ability to actively patrol and own the night.

We did most of our work at night and we were lucky to get four hours sleep because of it. We rotated from ready-reaction, to guard, to patrolling and back to ready reaction. It was during ready reaction when we slept – unless we got reacted, which happened a lot.

Anyway, when we landed in Dili we patrolled up to the UNAMET compound and secured that. We went through that Indonesian position. And then we came back through the same position just to be cocky! And, as we walked past the sentry, we said 'selamat malam' – good evening. He didn't know who the fuck it was – it was pitch black for him. But he had all these little red laser dots on the back of his head.

As we were coming back through their position, there were a whole lot of them coming out of a building at the top of the position, wearing a combination of Indonesian uniforms and civilian clothes, and they were carrying SSD15 – standard-issue Indonesian rifles – but not all of them were in full uniform.

Our section commander put us out into extended line in case there was a contact. We were within 100m when they started yelling and fanning out and pointing their weapons and went to 'instant'.

I was number one scout. I jumped into a drainage ditch – not the smartest place to be, looking back on it, being a perfect fire-lane and all – and my plan was to take out the street light that we were passing under at that particular moment, to give us the Ninnox advantage.

But, our platoon commander decided to run, which was probably a good idea, and we all followed. We were flat out running

like a bunch of scaredie cats, but it worked – none of us got shot.

We probably had a responsibility to challenge them, though. They were either a bunch of Indonesians dressed as militia or militia coming out of an Indonesian barracks – either way, they were suss.

I heard about a lot of other standoffs with other sections, too.

On one patrol, they had a bunch of Indonesians pointing weapons at them over a wall. There was a LAV with the Aussies, but it backed off when it had a rocket pointed at it. The infantry had an interpreter with them, but that wasn't working out very well either. The Indonesians went to instant. It was quite tense until the Aussies gave the Indonesian commander a look through a Ninnox, and he could see that each of his men had a laser dot on his forehead. That was enough to diffuse the situation!

And that's how close we came to war with Indonesia.

A lot of shit like that happened. We were lucky – very lucky. But it was definitely more arse than class.

A few weeks later, I had a couple of rounds pass close to me at a vehicle check point – I think it was in Maliana. We weren't even wearing helmets or anything by this stage.

There was a porno magazine in the gun pit, so I was 'reading'. Then this guy on top of a hill – way outside the effective range of his weapon – fired in our general direction, within a couple of metres of us. I thought, 'fucking arsehole' – the first time I'm alone, there's a porno in the pit, and he couldn't even wait a couple of minutes!

I just lay down and called in a compass bearing on him. I heard on the radio that a couple of other guys called in bearings too, so we got a pretty good triangulation on him, and they also had a heading on which way he was leaving.

I heard a single shot, probably from one of our snipers, and I thought, 'Yeah! Interrupt me, would you?'

Our snipers didn't get too many opportunities, but they did get a few – and a few that weren't authorised. One of our snipers certainly told me he took out a couple of militia, but he never got cleared.

We eventually moved to Oecussi. We landed by chopper at Passabe and secured the airfield and then patrolled out to our respective areas.

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Private Michael Walton

Our section went to a small little village about as far away from headquarters as anybody could get.

There was no one there.

We took it seriously at first, but then we started sleeping in the huts and stuff. It was great. We made our own mango wine and walked around in sarongs. It really was Lord of the Flies up there.

Eventually a few people came back – mostly kids – orphans.

They were good people. We'd come back from patrol and there'd be mangoes and coconuts and other fruit left outside our huts for us.

The school had been run down but we ran maths classes in it anyway. We also had one guy who could speak Bahasa – so he ran English classes. That wasn't so much initiative as boredom, but that was the Australian way. We were there and we did our best for those kids.

There was one kid kept hanging around me. I think his dad fell on him – that's how he didn't get shot. I felt sorry for the kid.

A few houses got burned down when we were there and we'd go patrol and secure the area, but the militia generally left us alone. We had the guns and carried ourselves well. Big ugly guys with guns usually get left alone. We deliberately tried to look angry anyway, which wasn't hard for us infantry. Treat people like shit for long enough and angry comes naturally.

But Timor generally was a nice place and the people were lovely, peace-loving people. It was an easy place to police.

Actually, my grandfather was over in that area in the '40s. He was a funny old coot – in one mail delivery he sent me a big tub of Bundaberg sugar! I thought he must be going crazy or something. Then he sent me a big tub of dried apricots! What the hell? But then, in a letter delivered a few days later, he sent me the recipe for jungle juice using sugar and apricots!

He was about the only person I could talk to when I came home. He understood. He told me not to stress – he said he copped a hard time when he got home, from the WWI vets, who probably copped a hard time from the Boer War vets. He gave a hard time to the Vietnam vets – everyone forgot the Korean vets – and, he said, you'll probably cop a hard time too. But, he said, in time they'll find a thing common for your generation and in the end you'll get looked after, so just persevere.



B Company 3RAR 10 August 1998 – Private Shane Van Duren far right, rear rank



That advice has got me through to where I am today.

There have been times where I've found it hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Timor was not a war that was thought of as being hard combat, but people forget that a couple of guys did get shot in Timor and a couple died. And others killed themselves when they got home.

I've been asked do I ever regret joining the Army in the first place? That's a complex question with no easy answer.

Would my life be better if I stayed a civilian and got civilian qualifications – yes, I'd probably be working in a much more comfortable position earning a lot more money. But here I am, 34 and studying my first year at university – something I probably should have done when I was in my 20s. But when I was in my 20s I was at the School of Infantry learning to be an assault pioneer.

'What the fuck is that?' people ask me.

On the other hand, it would be very hard for me to look some of those little kids in Timor in the eyes and say 'you weren't worth it'. I couldn't do that. Even though my own wife and son left me when I was over there – they had everything they needed – a nice little house in the suburbs, looked after, school. That little kid in Timor, the one whose dead father lying on top of him

saved his life – I couldn't say it wasn't worth my own sacrifice for that little kid.

You know, all people are good people if they're treated well and they have the things they need to survive. Desperation is the cause of most evil. People are generally happy just to live, farm, eat with their family, enjoy their children. Timor was no different – they just never had the opportunity.

Coming home, after seeing what we saw over there, was probably the hardest part. A lot of veterans say that when they get back to shopping malls and that kind of thing, they don't feel comfortable – they've lost a sense of belonging. Being in a shopping mall, which is basically the essence of capitalism, really takes veterans aback. But when you've been in a war zone, where the people have nothing and live a very basic existence, the fundamentals of human life are really put in perspective.

When the chips are down, that's when human nature is at its most powerful, so, coming back to a capitalist society is very confronting. Some people never get used to that.

I spoke to a guy the other day who said he never felt comfortable in Australia since Timor. Now he's in Iraq as a mercenary and he feels at home there.

The psyche is a very complex thing. It could be that that guy is only comfortable

in an insecure situation. In fact, many of us infantry types feel like our purpose in life is to bring security to places that are insecure.

Here, in Australia, in today's society, I'm a swinging dick with nothing to do. I don't serve a purpose. I don't feel comfortable here because I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

I can't really change jobs that easily. Nor can I change my mindset that easily.

I've been trained by very powerful training establishments that have been developed over hundred of years – over the course of human history.

Military training is a very refined art, and they teach us to think a certain way and behave a certain way, to look a certain way and to do certain things – instinctively. Commanders need troops who are predictable.

We are also conditioned not to shoot unless we or someone we are meant to protect is in immediate danger. We are conditioned to use minimum force – something many police would do well to learn, because I think Australian's deserve the same kind of treatment we, as soldiers, afford foreigners.

Yes, I think we are conditioned – or brainwashed – but we are conditioned to be good and to treat people well – things that don't come naturally to many people.

We are conditioned to treat injured people in priority of how badly they are injured, regardless of whether they are your own soldiers or they are enemy. We are brainwashed to be solid professionals.

I think a lot of people have a perception that I have been 'brainwashed' and that I can't think for myself, that I'm just a dumb grunt. Unfortunately, that runs right through the society I live in – and it's not fair.

The irony of it is, when I was in the French Foreign Legion, if I walked into a room, an old person would give up his chair out of respect for a Legionnaire. That would never happen to an Australian soldier.

In fact, walking home on Anzac Day one year, a bunch of young guys wanted to bash me just because I was wearing a uniform.

Yes, I joined the French Foreign Legion and worked with Russian, German, Belgian, English and others from a lot of different backgrounds – even Mujahidin. But, I'm proud to say that, in Australia, I worked with probably the most professional military in the world.

The whole time I was in the Legion they told us we had to obey the customs de la gere – the rules of war – and the conventions international, but they never once trained us in what those customs or conventions were. Australia, on the other hand, taught us what they were and

regularly exercised us in how to apply them.

In the Royal Australian Infantry Corps, I worked with good men whose hearts were generally in the right place. Sure, there were some thugs – there will always be some thugs – but, in Australia, we have a majority of good men, conditioned to act that way.

The Legion, on the other hand, was full of thugs with very few good men.

In Timor, the people cried when we left. They begged us to stay. They didn't want another army to police their country.

Who would you rather maintain security in your country? Would you rather American soldiers come to your country to enforce peace or would you rather Australian soldiers? It sure as hell wouldn't be the French Foreign Legion, though – I can assure you of that.

As a soldier, I feel you get very little respect here in Australia, except maybe on Anzac Day.

There's very little 'Oh, you are an

Australian soldier – you are a professional – we'd like to have you in our organisation.

Many of us can prove that we are capable and intelligent. For example, I'm doing a degree in political science here at the Australian National University and got a credit on my last essay. I'm studying – I'm learning – I'm capable.

If I tell people I'm doing a degree at ANU, I get respect, automatically. But if I tell them I was a rifleman in an infantry battalion, a lot of people just shut off or walk away.

At the end of the day, though, there's no denying we generally do a good job and, yes, sometimes it's more arse than class – but until we lose, you can't say we fucked up.

Sure, we've had our arses kicked a few times, but we're still speaking English, aren't we?

Sorry, what was the question again? he says with a laugh.

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Privates Gantt, Sepulveda and Van Duren on R&R in Dili

PEOPLE FORGET THAT A COUPLE OF GUYS DID GET SHOT IN TIMOR AND A COUPLE DIED. AND OTHERS KILLED THEMSELVES WHEN THEY GOT HOME



5 of 1997/98 Basic Parachute Course
– Private Shane Van Duren standing 12 from left.

