



Main: 2RAR await a lift.
Left: The author displays captured 'weapons'.



'The Maggots' enjoy R&R – the author third from the right, seated.

SECOND CHANCES

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MAGGOTS HOLD THE LINE

East Timor was only my second ever 'real' callout. The first happened in 1998. Operation Brancard saw the mighty 12 Platoon – 'The Dirty Dozen' – D Coy, 2RAR, deploy to RAAF Base Darwin, with elements of 4 Field Battery, ready to conduct a services-assisted evacuation of Australian citizens from Indonesia. Like so many previous callouts for the longer-serving members of the platoon, Op Brancard resulted in the Dirty Dozen returning to Townsville when the weekend was over and the RAAF had returned to work. We had no stories to tell from that first outing other than of sneaking into town in PT gear for some beers in downtown Darwin (yes Brady, I knew where you were!).



Tense moments during an exchange of fire



Maggot on radio picket



A break from the rain

of soldiers that were not yet old enough to deploy. They must have been heartbroken but, as it has turned out, they've had plenty of opportunities to deploy since, to many different theatres around the world.

Finally we got the word, 2RAR was deploying on operations!!!

We were issued our orders for opening fire (OFOF) and rules of engagement (ROE) cards and flew to Darwin.

I thought I had carried some heavy packs before, but this was ridiculous. We had to help each other to stand up and sit down and, if you fell over, you had to take your pack off and sit it upright before trying to regain your feet.

We had packed our mortar tubes in trunks for transport to Darwin but, we were told, we would have to unpack them there and carry them onto the plane – yet more weight to carry.

and no intelligence predicting an attack on the airport. Our Support Company guide simply turned to me and said, "Just another fuckin' UD, boss. There have been heaps." Unauthorised discharges were to be a real issue on this deployment. Great, I thought, come on operations only to get shot by some idiot who only learnt how to use his personal weapon in Darwin before he got on the plane.

Once we made it to our overnighting area, we went into a defensive harbour, received defence-plan orders and got some rest. We would be moving out the next morning to a destination unknown at this stage.

When morning arrived, I was sent to an orders group at BHQ (battalion headquarters). Mortar Platoon would be attached to Alpha Company as an extra rifle platoon for an air-mobile operation to Baucau airfield in the east of the country.

IT WAS AN AMAZING FEELING LIFTING OFF FROM KOMORO AIRFIELD, TACTICALLY LOADED INTO AN S70 BLACKHAWK, WITH ALL OF A COMPANY SPREAD ACROSS A FLEET OF THE HELICOPTERS, FLYING OUT TO SEA AND LOOKING BACK AT DILI ABLAZE



Wanton destruction at Baucau



Afternoon siesta

So, when 2RAR went into lockdown in September 1999 for a battalion callout, I thought it might be Op Brancard revisited. Then the media coverage really started to intensify. Coverage of the failing UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor) and the escalating violence, particularly in Dili, looked serious. Suddenly, there was a real feeling that the whole battalion might actually be going somewhere.

Trouble was, 1RAR was the on-line battalion for another 36-48 hours, so, if the balloon went up, we were sure they would go before we did.

As time passed and preparations for deployment continued, there were plenty of rumours flying around about which battalion would actually get to deploy should the word be given. It goes without saying, we wanted it!

News stories depicted a worsening situation in Timor, including footage of unarmed Australian Defence Force and Australian Federal Police members dragging people over razor wire into their compound for protection, before even they were forced to evacuate, leaving many East Timorese behind to an uncertain fate.

There was a genuine and building sense of anticipation that a significant deployment was in the wind – one that would involve not just a battalion group, but a significant portion of the brigade and probably support assets from the Navy and the RAAF as well.

As a junior platoon commander, my sense of anticipation was accompanied by a real sense of uncertainty – has the training we developed and delivered been good enough for the platoon – were we ready, not just to fight, but to deliver the best indirect-fire support to the rest of the battalion we possibly could – had the endless administrative checks conducted by platoon and company staff been enough to allow the soldiers to go overseas for an unknown period without worrying about their families' welfare and wellbeing back in Australia?

The gravity of the situation became even weightier when commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Mick Slater spoke to all his young officers, me included, in the officers mess. He explained what he required of us before departing and while we were on deployment. One task he gave us, which has really stuck in my mind ever since, was to prepare a draft letter to a soldier's family, telling them their son had been killed on

operations. The once excited 'subbies' were suddenly quiet and a few knowing glances were exchanged between us – 'we are going, and it might not be good'.

We knew that the biggest threat that lay ahead of us was the first 72 hours in country, when we were still establishing a foothold. Respite would be at a premium and mistakes that could endanger lives would be more likely. This is why we had trained so hard on countless exercises up to this point. What those exercises had told us, however, was that even in familiar country, with an 'acting' opposing force, accidents do happen and people do make mistakes.

As the time for handover of the on-line battalion responsibilities from 1RAR to 2RAR drew closer, it was becoming more and more apparent that an Australian Force would be deploying to East Timor to help restore law and order in the vacuum being left by the departing Indonesian authorities. In preparation, orders had been given for a deployment and the order of battle had been finalised. It looked like 2RAR might indeed be going – including some lucky 1RAR soldiers that we needed to get our battalion up to full strength. We would, however, have to leave behind a handful

We spent about four hours waiting in Darwin for the next plane to take us to Dili. It was a surreal feeling to be watching footage of Dili burning and scenes of locals fleeing, with the Indonesian military appearing to stand by doing nothing. Then there was some footage of Major General Cosgrove, the divisional commander, and elements of the SAS getting off a plane at Komoro Airfield to conduct a handover with Indonesian authorities.

This was the last TV I saw until I returned to Australia at the start of 2000.

When we finally got onto the plane in Darwin, I thought – this is it, I am going on operations.

I really didn't expect to find people shooting at us when we got off the plane, but how wrong I was. When Mortar Platoon hit the tarmac, we were met by a Support Company guide and were taken to an area where we were to spend the night, before moving out first thing in the morning on a task yet to be issued.

Halfway across to the area, though, we heard our first gunshot. Following the lead of the people around us, we acted like it was normal and no cause for concern – after all, there was no significant opposing force

This airfield was important to the ongoing success of INTERFET, as it was the only airfield rated to handle the larger aircraft that would be required to move more and more equipment and supplies to East Timor before the shipping supply lines could be established.

It was an amazing feeling lifting off from Komoro Airfield, tactically loaded into an S70 Blackhawk, with all of A Company spread across a fleet of the helicopters, flying out to sea and looking back at Dili ablaze. If this is what Dili looks like, we all wondered, what awaits us at Baucau?

When we landed, what we were confronted with was a snapshot of the mentality of those who had previously governed the East Timorese people. The Indonesian troops had just finished a wrecking rampage that left a fleet of UN Land Rover Discovery's totally destroyed and the airport control tower infrastructure severely damaged. But, what really stuck in mine and my soldiers' minds was finding a helpless, scrawny dog, with its tail ripped off, hung and left to die. We couldn't just leave the poor thing there, so Corporal Davo took it upon himself to rescue it. Since 2RAR Mortar Platoon are known as the 'Maggots', our new mascot was duly christened Maggot.

Our Ninon night-vision equipment was relatively new to us at this point and the time we spent around the airfield was used to better refine its use and understand its capabilities. This was a great piece of equipment that really did turn night into day for us.

We spent a few days around that airfield and patrolled its 'lunar landscape'. Then, one day, out of the blue, a C130 landed and we saw the majority of A Coy climb aboard. I thought this was pretty strange because I had not been told that anyone would be going anywhere. And, there were no troops getting off the plane to replace the ones leaving. I went across to where CHQ (company headquarters) had been, to find only the signals detachment left there with some scant details about a plane that would be landing at some time later that day to pick the rest of us up and we better be ready to get on it. Thanks Major 'Dick' – nothing like keeping us informed.

I just hoped the water we had left would last for the unknown duration we might be left here, because there was none to be won locally that we didn't suspect the Indonesians had contaminated.





Vehicle checkpoint



Maggot takes a rest



Maggot plays chess



On patrol with APC support

Eventually, elements of 3RAR's mortar platoon arrived in ASLAVs to maintain the INTERFET presence in Baucau, and a RAAF C130 landed to take us back to Komoro in Dili.

So, we all got on the plane – Maggot included – to return to Dili and await new orders.

We were no more than about five hours back at Dili when orders for a battalion deployment to the border came through. 2RAR would deploy by air and road to secure the Balibo region – and this time, the Maggots were taking and deploying our tubes. We were to be allocated a position behind an old fort that would serve as BHO for several months to come.

By this stage, Maggot was a seasoned air traveller – he didn't vomit in Davo's shirt this time! Davo stowed him there to avoid the ire of zealous loadmasters.

On the trip to Balibo and on arrival, the thing that struck us all was the fact there appeared to be no one at all left in the town nor in the smaller villages we flew over on the way in. Everyone was gone. This really was a strange sensation, especially for anyone who has travelled in an Asian country before, where there are always people everywhere, especially children. We hoped that this situation would soon change and the people would return now that the Aussies had arrived.

Setting up the mortar line proved difficult. The ground consisted of loose rocks covering loose rocks over a bed of loose rocks. So, we prepared the base as if we were on mud or sand, and managed to do this in reasonably good time. Shortly after, we had the remainder of our ammunition dropped off at our position – the Maggots were ready for whatever lay ahead.

Patrols were now starting to get to areas where communications were proving difficult. RSO (regimental signals officer) Jim had his work cut out coming up with a communications plan that would serve the battalion across the diverse, mostly mountainous nature of our area of operations. The terrain also made the MFCs (mobile fire controllers) earn their

keep when they went out on patrol with the rifle companies.

After a number of days manning the mortar line, and watching Yoni do 100 push-ups, followed by 99 push-ups, followed by 98 push-ups and so on down to one, it was decided that the mortars would not be required after all. So, the 'line' was no longer and we became a rifle platoon once again.

It worked out that we would be used as an extra rifle platoon as required by various companies of the battalion. Platoon headquarters, headed up by Captain Dick, ably assisted by Chev and Duke, provided an extra communications relay when the battalion patrol master could be convinced that BHO had enough people to man the CP at night without them.

One of the first tasks we received as a rifle platoon was to go into an area where the SAS had very recently had a contact near Aidabasala. It was an area that intel suggested had been a stronghold for the militia and, given its proximity to the border, an easy route of egress along the adjacent river bed and, the fact that this area had more people who had remained behind than any other area we had been to so far, we thought they were probably right.

To provide sufficient coverage in Aidabasala itself, we established section posts in the three naturally occurring sections of the village, with PHQ and the middle section occupying the school, which would later be the site of a grenade attack on Australian troops.

Despite the sense of unease in the town, we sited our positions such that we were still afforded the best force protection possible, while still maintaining a friendly presence for better interaction and integration. The school offered good visibility when anyone approached, especially at night with the night vision equipment.

After spending a number of days in the village and conducting numerous patrols of the area, the locals began to trust us more and more and we had a real sense that we were providing them the assurance they needed to start getting things back to normal and possibly spread the word

to others that it was safe to return. The Maggots would spend a lot of time in various villages during the deployment but none quite had the same feeling of unease as Aidabasala and, as such, we made sure the patrolling was aggressive enough to deter attacks. When I returned to Aidabasala in my second deployment to Timor in 2001 the feeling of unease was no longer there and the village had a completely different character.

During the next two months, leading up to Christmas, Mortar Platoon was kept very busy with very little time for rest between patrols. We would return to Balibo for a night to re-supply, have a shower if we were lucky, maybe a fresh feed, receive orders and deploy again with the next rifle company the next day.

Mail was also starting to filter through and it was so good to get news from home. We were also able to make a five-minute phone call from time to time, which was fantastic, yet hard at the same time because five minutes usually raced by and left so many things unsaid.

Usually, during my 'rest' nights in Balibo, the company XO, Captain Paul would take the opportunity to stick me in the battalion CP (command post) for a shift, so he could have a rest. He thought that was fair because I was the 'lucky' one out patrolling and not stuck at BHO! It was, however, a good opportunity to catch up on battalion news, and work out where my mates were from the marks on the battle map. And, to sit in a real chair for a bit!

Then, just before Christmas, Support Company was told we would be getting a rotation through the Dili R&R Centre, where we would get a beer ration and a chance to have a real shower. The boys were over the moon and couldn't wait.

When we returned to Dili, we couldn't believe the changes that had occurred in such a short time. There were so many different forces there from around the world, making up INTERFET. Many local people had returned to Dili and the city was starting to bustle again. So much so, little kids were trying to sell us pirated DVDs.



A lift arrives

Our time in the Dili R&R centre drew to a close, but not without incident – I won't go into that here, though.

My time in Timor was also drawing to a close as I had been informed that my scheduled posting order for the start of 2000 would still take effect, and I had to hand over the duties of the mortar line officer to Lieutenant Jim, who was coming from A Company.

All in all, my first deployment had given me great exposure as a young officer to the workings of a battalion group on deployment, whether we operated in the role of mortar platoon or as an additional rifle platoon. I also saw the various company headquarters in action. It was very clear to me that some people had great difficulty adapting their barracks

leadership styles, honed over years of never deploying, to the field. Others, on the other hand, had wonderfully adaptive leadership styles that could get the most out of their men regardless of the situation presented to them.

For me it was definitely a positive, life-changing experience that allowed me to understand, first hand, the devastation that an unstable government or a breakdown in the rule of law can cause. It exposed me to some shocking things that occurred on a collective level that I never thought could be possible in modern society. But, it also showed me the true nature of the human spirit in the individual.

The East Timorese are a beautiful race of people who have not been given a chance to stand on their own two feet for

a long time, and they continue to face an uphill battle for the opportunities the rest of us take for granted.

After this first deployment, I learnt how to speak their native language, Tetum, and returned as a member of the 4RAR Battalion Group in 2001, during the UN-supervised elections. But that's another story.

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