




Federal Agent Janine Scott on duty at the Vehicle Check Point setup near Hera, a few kilometres east of Dili in 2006.
Photo courtesy of Department of Defence.



UN era ends in capable hands

The AFP returns home after a 13-year contribution to the United Nations effort in Timor-Leste.



It is just like any homecoming. Happy. The eight AFP members traverse the airport corridors in Darwin and grace each new space with beaming smiles. Officially, they arrive home as the last members of the AFP's United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) Contingents 13–14.

They also represent the last of more than 800 AFP members who have served under the UN flag in Timor-Leste since June 1999. IDG Superintendent Peter Kuhnke formally receives them and they pause briefly for the keepsake photograph. The smiles break again – and with good cause.

They have made their contribution to history – the birth and nurturing of a new country no less. Timor-Leste in 2013 still faces many challenges but is now stable. Law and order has blossomed into flourishing

communities. The future does look bright and there is every reason to be happy.

But that wasn't always the case. Timor-Leste in 1999 was facing a much more difficult time. UN Resolution 1246 in 1999 promised to finally resolve Timor-Leste's history of Portuguese colonisation and Indonesian rule from 1975.

An agreement was signed on 5 May, 1999, between Indonesia and Portugal, which made possible a 'popular consultation'. The agreement would give the Timorese a choice to accept or reject a special autonomy within the Republic of Indonesia. Thus, the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) was established in June 1999 to oversee the 30 August ballot and the transition period after the vote.



Federal agents Geoff Hazel, left, Dave Savage and John Tanti arrive in Timor-Leste with the United Nations Mission in East Timor in June 1999.



Australian and New Zealand police at the Gleno headquarters in Ermera region.

Unfortunately, Resolution 1246 in effect also reignited the very tensions that had led to civil war in 1974 when Portugal withdrew from the country. In the wake of the announcement, pro-integration militias began a campaign of violence, looting and arson throughout the country.

In response to the growing instability, Indonesia agreed to international assistance to restore peace and security in Timor-Leste. On 12 September, 1999, Security Council Resolution 1264 authorised the multinational International Force East Timor (INTERFET).

But in that space between June and September 1999, UNAMET was it.

“It was one of the toughest jobs I have ever done,” says retired AFP Superintendent Geoff Hazel.

Mr Hazel had previously served for eight years in the Australian Army as an infantry soldier, including two tours of Vietnam. This included service with the renowned Australian Army Training Team–Vietnam. His AFP service at that point included two deployments to Cyprus and a UN deployment to Mozambique. Then as a Superintendent in 1999 he deployed to Timor-Leste.

“I had to call on every bit of experience from two tours of Vietnam and all of my police experience. I don’t think I have ever been as stretched as much as I was in East Timor,” he says.

Into Timor-Leste

Mr Hazel deployed at the end of June 1999 with the last of 50 unarmed AFP members. He was appointed UN Civilian Police Commander for the Ermera Region about one hour’s drive inland from Dili. The UN District headquarters was established at Gleno, the Indonesian Administrative centre for Ermera.

He says the decision to deploy unarmed did attract some criticism at the time but only two of the 50 AFP members said their preference was to be armed. “Let’s be honest, we would have taken side-arms and a side-arm in a machine gun fight doesn’t work.” He stresses that being unarmed gave them an opportunity to negotiate, rather than appearing as a threat.

Mr Hazel says the tension was evident from the time they arrived. The militia had only this one chance to affect the outcome of the ballot and they embarked

on a campaign of intimidation. The AFP mission was to advise the Indonesian police and protect the ballot boxes. But the electoral teams quickly came to look to the police for security as the only military were equally unarmed liaison officers.

Electoral teams generally consisted of two UN volunteers and a UN police officer. All were trained in the electoral processes. Each team also had local Timorese staff such as drivers and electoral assistants.

“Every time we went to a new village, District headquarters would get a letter or a message saying ‘you come here again and you die’. Every time we went to an area we would get the message within 48 hours.” The police response was to go back to the village the very next day and for the following couple of days to show a presence and in this way seek to overcome much of the intimidation. Mr Hazel says the intimidation was worse for the defenceless Timorese.

“We had one bloke who came in three times to report that he had been beaten up, and he had the bruises to prove it.” The local man said ‘when they asked me who I am going to vote for I would tell them I am going to vote for independence’.

The police advised him to say he was going to vote for special autonomy and then vote for whoever he wanted on election day.

“Oh no, if they find out I voted against what I said they will kill me later,” the man said. He didn’t understand that the 30 August vote would be conducted as a secret ballot, or even how a secret ballot was conducted.

“Once we started getting that message out, the number of attacks on individuals went down. It didn’t go away altogether and the militia was definitely out there.

“There were supposedly about 2500 members of the militia in our area. I think at least 1500 militia actually voted for independence. They were in the militia because it was the safe thing to do. They didn’t actually believe in what they were doing.”

Ballot day

On 30 August, 1999, more than 98 per cent of registered Timor-Leste voters went to the polls. They decided by an overwhelming 78.5 per cent to 21.5 per cent to reject the proposed autonomy and begin a process of transition towards independence.

Regional areas reported large turnouts at polling stations even before the polls were opened. "It was just euphoria," Mr Hazel says. "That is the only way to describe it. On ballot day at 6am everybody was there waiting to vote."

But the result sparked renewed outrage among the militia. A local Timorese man from Mr Hazel's team was killed during the violence. He says the courage of the Timorese people to turn up was remarkable. But he also says the courage shown by the AFP and the UN police is often not fully known.

He says Peter Watt was attacked on polling day at Gleno and stood in the doorway of a polling station to protect international volunteers and local employees seeking safe haven inside. He stood in the door while the militia fired handguns into the wall beside him.

He cites the case of Federal Agent Chris Meagher and a New Zealand police officer who saw a group of civilians being attacked by armed militia. "Chris picked up a chair and the Kiwi picked up a table," Mr Hazel says. "They charged into the militia and chased them away, saving a number of civilians from, at the very minimum, serious injury." He says Federal Agent Chris Cooper stayed with the local electoral staff until they were evacuated safely to Dili after the poll.

"The biggest one," he says, "is Phil Hunter. He went to a separate polling station that was completely surrounded by militia – and I mean jam-packed around it.

"He forced his way through the crowd of armed militia, and brought out each ballot box and each member of the international and local staff and got them into a vehicle and ensured they got away. The last person he brought out was wounded in the process and died later."

The significance of the AFP contribution to UNAMET was universally applauded. Ultimately, the AFP members of UNAMET were awarded the Australian Group Bravery Citation. The then Justice Minister, Amanda Vanstone, officially highlighted the pivotal role played by the AFP as among the first people deployed into Timor-Leste.

"It was in fact, only the unarmed civilian police, mostly Australian, and led by an Australian, who refused to give up when others were ready to leave East Timor. They stood between armed militia and the defenceless people of East Timor. Without that group and their willingness, or determination, to hold on in a

desperate and dangerous situation, the United Nations may have in fact withdrawn," Ms Vanstone said.

Independence

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste gained independence on 20 May, 2002. The AFP has continued to support Timor-Leste through a variety of different missions and operations. Many of those times have been marked by instability and violence. Still, the reward for the AFP now is that Timor-Leste's institutions, particularly the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL), is reaching a new-found self-reliance and self-determination.

National Manager Crime Operations Steve Lancaster deployed twice to Timor-Leste during Operation Serene in 2006 and Operation Comity in 2008. He says both deployments were during difficult times. Yet the development and progress being made by the PNTL was obvious when comparing their responses to the two separate crises.

AFP Operation Serene deployed on 28 May at the request of the Timor-Leste Government to assist the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with restoring law and order. Violence, protests and shootings had escalated following the dismissal of 600 Timor-Leste soldiers in April. Clashes turned increasingly violent between the army and the dismissed soldiers. The violence culminated in the death of nine PNTL officers on 25 May, 2006, who were being escorted to safe haven at the PNTL Headquarters under the UN flag. While the instability was largely confined to Dili in 2006, the PNTL had clearly lost control of the situation.

Assistant Commissioner Lancaster deployed as Commander Operation Serene with a six-member AFP Scoping and Advisory Mission – less than four days after the deployment of the ADF under its Operation Astute. They were followed the next day by another 45 police in the main contingent.

It was an extremely complex operating environment and a dangerous situation. The ADF had deployed at the invitation of the Timor-Leste Government. Even so, the pre-existing UN mission was in place while the Security Council considered a new UN mission. Other bilateral arrangements were in place with Portugal, Malaysia and New Zealand. The international presence also needed to work closely with the Timor-Leste

Federal Agent Nigel Phair works with the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste in 2005.



Government to ensure that any action was consistent with its wishes.

“The coordination of the international assistance was a very complex challenge,” Assistant Commissioner Lancaster says. “Very quickly we deployed several waves of Australian police from different state and territory police services to build up the policing capacity to 200 members.

“We immediately recognised that we had to restore the community’s confidence in the police and work very quickly with the military to transition from the state of lawlessness to a stable and law-abiding society.”

Comprehensive command-and-control training between law enforcement and the military had not yet been fully developed in Australia. However, lessons were being drawn from other missions such as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. Even so, adding to the complexity, the two organisations did not fully understand each other’s capabilities and ability to respond to such a complex and multidimensional operating environment.

“This was one of the key challenges facing the mission and one of the lessons learned was that we needed to improve the interoperability between the Australian military and police to better respond to this type of regional assistance mission,” Assistant Commissioner

Lancaster says.

“As a result of that deployment the AFP established an international senior command course and we also undertake high levels of training, planning and liaison with the military, which has built upon those lessons learned in 2006.”

Operation Comity was the AFP response to Timor-Leste in 2008, which was established after the rebel attacks against Timor-Leste

President Dr Jose Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao. Assistant Commissioner Lancaster says the difference was in this instance the AFP deployed as a precautionary and preventative capacity.

“Unlike 2006, there was a sense of stability and law enforcement capacity,” he says. “Even though this followed the shooting attack on Ramos-Horta – the feeling and the level of unrest was a completely different situation to 2006.

“After the complete disorder, the level of mayhem and the danger that existed in 2006; to see another critical incident occur but managed in a completely different way and to see the PNTL and UN mission respond so effectively, demonstrated to me that the planning and the transitioning and the UN really were being effective.”

Maturity

Superintendent Karen Newett is ideally situated to view the development and the maturity of the PNTL. Superintendent Newett deployed to Timor-Leste in the second AFP contingent in 1999. She deployed again in 2000 where she was also involved in recruiting local Timorese into the PNTL. Superintendent Newett also has the distinction of being the last Australian AFP Contingent Commander to UNMIT.

Like Assistant Commissioner Lancaster, she says there is no comparison between her first deployment and her last.

“When I arrived there,” she says, “a lot of buildings and shops were destroyed. There weren’t any shops then. There were buildings burning when I arrived and the army was patrolling and a lot of people were trying to stay away from the streets. That has totally changed now.”

It is the traffic most people notice. Superintendent Newett says the only vehicles on the roads in 1999 were military or UN vehicles. She says Dili now bustles with all kinds of commerce.

“There is traffic congestion – that is something you wouldn’t have imagined all that time ago. In the city centre there is a large number of shops that have been built.

“There are a lot of restaurants. They have mainly catered for the international sector, the UN workers



Dr Ramos-Horta.

and other international aid workers. So I don't know how they will go after they leave in 2013, but business is thriving."

She says it's the perfect metaphor for the development of the nation and its confidence in its law enforcement capability. It is the maturity of the PNTL that is paving the way for progress.

"It shows that people have a lot more confidence in the police and the Timor-Leste Government. They are willing to invest their money and develop their businesses and houses in the city itself without fear that something is going to happen to them."

Superintendent Newett says the PNTL shows clear evidence of the sophisticated organisational processes needed for effective policing.

"One of the signs is that they have open and transparent selection processes for their officers and lower ranks. When I was there toward the end of 2012 they had an officer selection committee. The committee comprised a UN staff member, a senior member of the PNTL and a senior member of government.

"They ran a series of interviews and tests to promote people within the organisation. This is a big improvement for any police force. A transparent police service like that is moving forward."

Superintendent Newett also points to the UN and PNTL's Joint Development Plan as a milestone in sophisticated governance. The plan maps out the direction of the PNTL for the next five years. It was initiated and progressed by senior members of the UN, the PNTL and the Timor-Leste Government. Essentially, it will shape the PNTL in the years following the UN era.

"If you don't have a direction it is hard to develop. It is important that you get a sense of solidarity in the PNTL," Superintendent Newett says. "Especially with communications, it's a huge issue. It's okay in Dili, but if the telephone system goes down you can't get word to outpost areas like Maliana or Baucau. That is where it can break down and it makes it more difficult to run the organisation."

Life-changing

The UN presence in Timor-Leste has obviously had a life-changing impact on its 1.1 million people. Even so,

"There were buildings burning when I arrived and the army was patrolling and a lot of people were trying to stay away from the streets."



Signs of life: business is booming in Dili.



A Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste officer in 2012 with an AFP advisor.



End of an era: the final AFP members arrive home from the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste.

the experience of serving in Timor-Leste has also left its mark on those who have served there.

Mr Hazel says his deployment was “extremely rewarding”.

“History was made,” he says. “So I was a little part of a group that made history and that is a pretty good feeling to have. That history allowed a country to become independent. To be part of that really does give you a sense of achievement.”

Assistant Commissioner Lancaster says the experience was enjoyable and ultimately deeply rewarding despite being a hard slog and at times quite dangerous.

“It always felt like this is really difficult – but I look back upon the experience and I feel like it is one of the highlights of my career so far.

“There was an excessive amount of cooperation and flexibility. People really put themselves out there

for the greater cause and to make sure the people of Timor-Leste got back on their feet again.”

Superintendent Newett says the opportunity to be at the birth of the PNTL and then return home at the end of the UN era was a personal and professional reward.

“I think over the next few years the PNTL will move forward in leaps and bounds,” she says.

“We are leaving it in capable hands.”