
In 2000 I was posted to East Timor primarily as the Principal's Representative (Project Manager) for an Australian Army Project to build new Headquarters and accommodation facilities for Australian troops involved in the security and peace keeping operations within the country. The project was valued at $20M and spread from Dili on the north coast to Suai in the southwest to Lautem in the northeast. Due to delays in the start of the project I was assigned additional duties as the Senior Combat Engineer (Infrastructure), which involved maintaining all of the internal roads, water supply, and the power grid (such that it was). To action any requirements to the infrastructure I had ‘Troops to Task’, 1 x Troop of Bangladesh Engineers (32 Trades & Labour), 1 x Troop Indian Plant Operators (25 men, Trucks & Dozers etc) for works on the Main Service Route (MSR) which was the coast road from Dili to Batugade and inland. The road then continued over the coastal range through Balibo and into the Maliana Valley where I used a Royal Australian Engineer Squadron for in-country works. It should be noted that the MSR is over 400 km and an 8-hour, non-stop, drive from Dili to Suai. If that wasn’t enough, I also had facility responsibilities in ‘the enclave’ in West Timor at Pante Macassar (Oecusse, Ambeno Province). Portuguese UN force administer that area but had no Engineer Support so it was me.

Once the project started I was able to combine my two assignments as each day I travelled extensively around the Area of Operations (AO). The AO was the area were we operated in maintaining the peace because that was where the Indonesian backed Militia were most active. We were fully armed throughout this as the UN had declared Timor a Chapter 7 operation, which meant that it was a declared war zone. We had orders to return fire with ‘lethal force’ if attacked.

I physically worked out of the Australian National Command Element’s Headquarters (ASNCE) in Dili as part of United Nations Transition Administration in East Timor (UNTAET).

The construction sites were spread around the country central to the Militia activities in places like; Macassar, Aidabeleten, Batugade, Balibo, Tonabibi, Maliana, Mako, Lepo, and Bobonaro. You would have to look at a map to appreciate the range of my travels and even then it would be difficult to appreciate the terrain and condition of the roads.

We were there to deal with the security of the emerging nation and the facilities that we were building would be handed over to the ET Army (who we were training) once we withdrew. We also escorted and provided protection for other UN organisations dealing in i.e. Health, Education, Food supplies, Accommodation etc.

A Day in My Life (Normal Day): Army Officer:

- 0530  PT for 40 mins (may sometimes be swapped for weapons training)
- 0630  Shower and dress for breakfast
- 0700  Open office & check for overnight updates
- 0715  Daily security briefing and my report to the CO and staff.
- 0800  Return to office start daily routine and action correspondence
- 0900  In my vehicle to tour Water Plant or Power Station (Sewage Treatment Plant was being replaced by UN Contractors)
- 1200 – 1300  Back to ASNCE for lunch
- 1300  Summarise morning tour and deal with admin etc.
• 1500  Teleconference with Contractors on site via satellite phone
• 1630  Plan the next day if travelling to Maliana or other areas (refuel the vehicle, rations [food & water, ammunition, clean my carbine and pistol], check Sat Phone, pick up radio and check, check latest security brief for the area I’m going to, arrange meeting times with Army and Government Officials)
• 1730 – 1800  Go to diner
• 1800 – 2000  Bar open (2 hours for 2 drinks per man per day)
• 2000  Rec Room for Satellite TV (supplied by Telstra)
• 2030  Bed in an ATCO demountable hut (six rooms to a hut)

That would be a normal day but nothing was normal in ET.

**Travel Day in East Timor:**

• 0400  Up, shower, dress, pick up early breakfast, and load the Land Cruiser (can’t load the night before ‘cause all vehicles are kept at the ready if needed overnight and often were)
• 0500  Radio for approval to move and advise destination that we have left.
• 0505  Start the 3-hour drive to Aidabeleten (first Check Point) stopping at Luqcia to talk with Bangladesh Troops. On to Macassa to check the site is clear (locals would move in once they knew it was a Government site to try and claim compensation) and then Aidabeleten where Contractors would be working. Inspect site and activities (site diary, construction programme [ahead or behind], any Militia action [they would occasionally come around and fire a few shots at the civilian contractors but the temporary Aidabeleten Army Camp was just next door and would have troops on full alert to respond [nobody ever got hurt])
• 0930  Pass thro through Aidabeleten Check Point for Batugade about 1 hour away.
• 1030  Refuel at Batugade, morning tea
• 1100  Pass through Check Point 2 and turn inland and up the ranges to Fort Balibo.
• 1145  Check in at Fort Balibo and visit the Area Commander (Lieutenant Colonel). Brief him on our trip and Project progress, get up to date security brief and hope the he invites us for lunch (us being that I was travelling with one of my Lieutenants [a young Civil Engineer])
• 1300  Pass through Check Point 3, down the mountain to Check Point 4 at the Maliana River Bridge. This is the closest point we would come to the disputed border between West and East and is a heavily defended strong point. This is where I got 2 bullet holes in my Land Cruiser on a return trip. Didn’t know about it until the sentry at Balibo told me when I passed through. This is a place where you drive as fast as the roads will let you to avoid being a target.
• 1400  Pass through Tonabibi Base Camp and Check Point 5 (where one of the new camp sites will go). Stop to talk with Engineer Troops and security briefing.
• 1500  Check Maliana site of proposed camp for squatters. This site was farmed after we bought it and the UN upheld the squatter’s rights (whatever they were) so we had to find another site, which we did on a later trip and paid 100 bags of rice and 20 goats for. The UN also negotiated this and the site turned out to be an old Indonesian Barracks so we had doubts the people we paid actually owned the land.
• 1530  Stop at Maliana Base Camp for updates and afternoon tea. Tour of Water Treatment Plant and visit the Governor of Bobonaro Provence (goodwill).