

Blood sacrifice at Balibo: Australia as a 'party principal'

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No analysis of the international dimensions of East Timor's independence campaign would be complete without a discussion of the deaths, and aftermath, of five foreign journalists killed in East Timor on 16th October 1975. Known ever since as the Balibo Five, Channel Seven's Gary Cunningham, Greg Shackleton and Anthony Stewart, and Channel Nine's Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie have become part of Australian folklore. The Indonesian military killed them soon after they arrived in East Timor. Less than a month later, General Yoga Sugama, the head of Indonesia's Intelligence Coordinating Body (BAKIN) told the Australian Ambassador that the journalists had died in the heat of battle; the house in which they were located had been a command post for the East Timorese resistance, and it had come under a mortar barrage. Although there appeared to be relatively minor damage to the house as indicated in a photograph published by the Indonesian press, General Yoga insisted that the cause of their deaths was mortar damage. Those who doubted this should stand inside a similar style of house when mortars came through the roof, he said, adding that any speculation that they had been captured and killed was quite wrong, and based only on FRETILIN propaganda (NAA: A10463, 801113/1115, i).

The Ambassador reported that the Indonesians were 'very sensitive to accusations in Australia of Indonesian involvement in the killings' and that 'the Javanese have like the Chinese that mixture of sensitivity, pride, arrogance and inwards lookingness which can lead to a retreat into their shells and to avoid facing or to ignore the attitude of another country if it suits them to do so. I suspect they may have reached this point in relation to the journalist issue and that the truth of this incident may never be established' (NAA: A10463, 801/13/11/5, i).

In any case, he said, the 'agreed consensus' in Australian foreign policy circles was that the Australian Government:

would need to act to contain the damage to the long term Australian/Indonesian relationship and to limit the recrudescence of latent hostility towards Indonesia in the Australian community. Despite the very hostile media reaction to Indonesia's actions which is no doubt influenced by the Balibo affair, I believe this should still be our approach... [Our] relations with Indonesia ... will continue to be very important to us long after the Timor issue has been settled (NAA: A10463, 801/13/11/1, xvii).

The Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs later wrote:

We should accept that incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia seems fast becoming an accomplished fact. Australia should not resist this trend and, indeed, should accept it as probably now the best solution. Otherwise we should have a running sore in the region poisoning relations between ourselves and the Indonesians for years to come... We should continue to remain as detached as we can from the Portuguese Timor problem and avoid becoming a party principal (NAA: A1838, 3038/10/1/2, iii).

Indeed, the maxim 'we are not a party principal' became a shibboleth of Australian foreign policy. Although the Ambassador believed that 'the truth of this incident may never be established', some relatives of the journalists and other people committed to East Timor's right to self-determination pursued the truth relentlessly. In doing so, they ensured that East Timor became a running sore and that Australia could not avoid becoming a party principal.

After the defeat of the conventional East Timorese resistance in the late 1970s, it is possible that Australian foreign policymakers may have been able to ride out the public's opposition to Indonesia's takeover in 1975. But the blood sacrifice of the Balibo Five – along with Indonesia's denials and Australia's prevarications – ensured a durable set of circumstances in which awkward questions about

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Australian diplomacy could be posed. Without an effective international solidarity network, East Timor could otherwise have gone the way of the West Papuans or the South Moluccans – just another group of reluctant Indonesians.

There were other foreign journalists present in East Timor at the time: a Portuguese television crew (RTP) had been at Balibo in the afternoon of 15th October 1975 (the day before the attack), but left for Maliana to get a different ‘take’. Had they stayed, this article may well have been about the ‘Balibo Eight’. Australian journalists Jill Jolliffe, Tony Maniaty and Rick Collins were also in East Timor. Veteran war correspondent Roger East arrived soon after to set up the East Timor News Agency. Jose Ramos-Horta, who requested him to come to East Timor, later wrote that East was:

driven by a profound sense of mission... I had told Roger about my idea of setting up a news agency, to be called East Timor News Agency or simply ETNA. I viewed such an agency as an indispensable instrument of the struggle, especially since ANTARA, the Indonesian news agency, was flooding the world with misinformation and outright lies about the situation in East Timor... To launch ETNA, I worked out a simple scheme: I arranged an exclusive interview for Roger with six FRETILIN soldiers who had been in Balibo and actually witnessed the fall of the town and the killing of the five Australian newsmen by Indonesian troops. No other journalist had such a privilege, and Roger scooped everybody else. The next day, his bylines were featured front-page in most Australian newspapers, and ETNA began to be quoted.

The Reuters boss in Sydney fired an angry telex to his stringer in Dili for missing the story! The stringer justified her failure with the charge that ETNA was a semi-official agency for FRETILIN. Within days, newspapers that had already commissioned Roger to work for them send telexes terminating his contract. Reuters mounted a campaign to discredit Roger and our agency. I remember seeing Roger visibly hurt by this setback, particularly since the back-stabbing was carried out by a fellow journalist (Ramos-Horta 1987,100-101).

The Indonesian military executed him on Dili wharf in front of more than 100 witnesses on (most likely) 8th December 1975. Australian diplomats protected the Indonesian military from the consequences of its actions. They said their ‘immediate diplomatic problem and task’ was ‘to do what we can to reduce the pressure on the Indonesians’ (NAA: A1838, 906/30/14/3, ii). Successive governments acted to shield the Indonesian military from criticism in Australia. Under Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, Australia became the only Western country to give legal recognition to the Indonesian annexation. After the Santa Cruz massacre in November 1991, then-Foreign Minister Gareth Evans ordered the removal of more than 100 wooden crosses – placed as a sign of mourning – from the lawn in front of the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra. The Keating government ensured that Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas received the award of the Order of Australia in 1995. Not to be outdone, Tim Fischer, Deputy Prime Minister in the Howard Government, said that Indonesian President Suharto was ‘perhaps the world’s greatest figure in the latter half of the 20th century’ (Lague 1996).

Activists kept up the pressure, and the fate of the Balibo Five remained an important mobilising tool because of the ongoing secrecy surrounding their deaths. In 1995, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans signalled his intention to move from the Senate to the House of Representatives by contesting the seat of Holt, Victoria, in elections that were due before May 1996. One of his opponents would be Jim Aubrey from the Australian Democrats, a long-time East Timor activist. Although Holt is a safe Labor seat, it had a small but energetic East Timorese community, and Senator Evans would have to mount a strong campaign to maintain the winning margin of the retiring member, Michael Duffy. As if to clear the decks, he announced an inquiry into the Balibo killings by Tom Sherman, a former Australian government solicitor. Sherman delivered his findings in 1996. He endorsed the crossfire or accidental death scenario by concluding that the killings probably occurred in circumstances of continuing fighting. Sherman’s conclusions relied heavily on the testimony of one witness from Lisbon (L1). It bore a striking resemblance to the version put forward in 1975 in a statement by a pro-Indonesian fighter.

That statement was later disavowed by its signatory, who revealed that it had been written by Indonesians who had forced him to sign it. L1’s evidence was at odds with a range of other testimonies from 1975 onwards. Andrew McNaughtan, an Australian medical practitioner and activist, travelled to Portugal and tried to track down the mysterious L1. It was in the course of looking for L1 that he was introduced to Lorenzo Hornai, a commander of pro-Indonesian forces. Hornai informed McNaughtan that Indonesian military personnel had planned to kill the journalists so that they could not inform the world

about the terror and destabilisation campaign. McNaughtan wrote a devastating critique of the Sherman Report. The journalist Hamish McDonald pointed out other problems, such as Sherman's claim that he had read all the relevant intelligence files on Balibo in one day, and his reticence when it came to examining the conduct of Australian diplomats.

The 1996 elections resulted in a defeat for the Australian Labor Party. Controversially, the new Foreign Minister Alexander Downer asked Mr Sherman to mount a second investigation. In 1999, Sherman once again reported that the journalists had been killed in circumstances of continuing fighting. But the case would not die. In December 2000, Brian Peters' sister, Maureen Tolfree, made a formal complaint about the killing at the NSW Coroner's Court. In June 2005, NSW Coroner John Abernethy accepted her legal team's argument that Peters' death came within the court's jurisdiction. He announced an inquest before he retired, and the inquest was therefore conducted by Deputy Coroner Dorelle Pinch.

The inquest began in February 2007. Sixty-six witnesses were listed, including a dozen East Timorese who had originally fought on the Indonesian side. The Deputy Coroner found that the journalists could not have been and were not mistaken for combatants. In addition, they clearly identified themselves as Australians and as journalists. They were unarmed and dressed in civilian clothes. They all had their hands raised in the universally recognised gesture of surrender. They died from wounds sustained when they were 'shot and/or stabbed deliberately, and not in the heat of battle, by members of the Indonesian Special Forces, including Christoforus da Silva and Captain Yunus Yosfiah on the orders of Captain Yosfiah, to prevent [them] from revealing that Indonesian Special Forces had participated in the attack on Balibo' (NSW Coroner 2007).

The five corpses were dressed in military uniforms, guns placed beside them, and photographs taken in an attempt to portray them as legitimate targets. The inquest concluded that there was 'strong circumstantial evidence that [the orders to kill them] emanated from the Head of the Indonesian Special Forces, Major-General Benny Murdani to Colonel Dading Kalbuadi, Special Forces Group Commander in Timor, and then to Captain Yosfiah' (NSW Coroner 2007). Since the killings were associated with, and occurred in the context of, an international conflict, the coroner referred the case to federal authorities for possible war crimes prosecutions. On 20 November 2014 the Australian Federal Police said, during Senate estimates, that they had terminated their investigation principally on jurisdictional grounds, but: 'there is no doubt in the minds of the AFP investigators and the AFP generally that an unlawful killing occurred with respect to these five Australian journalists.'

A number of Australian intelligence records have also been declassified. They show that in 1975 President Suharto resisted his military commanders' urgings of overt military action, preferring an undeclared overland intervention along the border regions. He authorised a plan to capture small enclaves just inside East Timor in order to nibble away at FRETILIN from them. The first of these enclaves would be established around the strategic town of Maliana. It was hoped that this strategy would demoralise FRETILIN, make its position untenable and terrify the population into acquiescing in an Indonesian takeover. The operation would be undeclared – Indonesia wanted to deny it was involved. If the Balibo Five had obtained film footage of Indonesia's military campaign and conveyed it to the outside world, the cover story would have been blown.

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.' It was a reasonable expectation in those heady days of 'batik diplomacy' between Whitlam and Suharto. The journalists wanted to report on conditions in East Timor and, as Shackleton writes, 'depending on who was staging the attacks on the border, they might get to break the biggest news report of their lives.'

Australian intelligence reported that the Indonesian high command was very alarmed at the killing of the five foreign journalists. Worried about the international diplomatic consequences, they called a halt to the military operation. Their concern about a negative international reaction, combined with their own logistical problems and the onset of the wet season, led to nearly five weeks of inactivity as they waited to see what the reaction would be. But there was no adverse reaction from Australia, Britain or New Zealand. This was the real 'green light'. The lack of international condemnation at the killing of five foreign journalists meant that the Indonesian military could treat the East Timorese as they wished. And that is what they did. The consequences for the East Timorese people were horrific. They died in large numbers, often in appalling ways.

The Balibo Five were not the last journalists to die at the hands of the Indonesian military. Roger East, as mentioned earlier, was executed on Dili wharf six weeks later. Sander Thoenes of the Financial Times was murdered on 21 September 1999, one day after the International Force – East Timor (InterFET) landed. The last journalist to be killed was, in fact, an Indonesian, Agus Muliawan, a 26-year-old man who worked for Tokyo-based Asia Press International. The leader of the unit that killed him had trained alongside Australian troops in the early 1990s.

Journalists played a crucial role in East Timor's freedom struggle. And the blood sacrifice of the Balibo Five ensured that Australia remained a party principal to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. As Manuel da Silva, a FRETILIN soldier who was one of the last to leave Balibo on 16 October 1975 told the coronial inquest: 'The reason why I came to be a witness was that I believe that the journalists are martyrs for East Timor and I believe they are East Timorese as well' (NSW Coroner 2007). East Timor's current media laws restricting the freedom of journalists provide a revealing insight, for those who choose to see it, into the nature of the independence that has been achieved.

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