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BALIBO: THE MASSACRE THAT WON'T GO AWAY

The largest loss of life ever sustained by the Australian media industry took place on October 16 1975 at the East Timor village of Balibo. Five journalists were killed by Indonesian troops. A sixth Australian journalist, who went looking for them, was later killed by Indonesian forces in the capital city Dili.

The massacre has been back in the news with the movie Balibo.

All the governments that had citizens involved in the deaths have refused to reveal all that they know. It has been difficult to get to the bottom of it because of the continued fear – in Dili and Canberra - of annoying the Indonesian military.



The Deaths

One of the 20th century's biggest wars - in terms of the per capita deaths - arose from the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor. The official date of the invasion is usually given as December 7. But five journalists knew the date as being October 16. They were killed before their story could get to the outside world.

In 1974, the Portuguese military rebelled and overthrew their government in Lisbon. The cost of fighting their African colonial wars was bankrupting the country and wrecking the military. The African colonies were put on the path to independence. Half a globe away, little thought was given to East Timor, one of the poorest parts of that empire. (In the 1960s I had been a member of the London-based Committee for the Freedom of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau chaired by Lord Tony Gifford QC – I don't recall any mention of East Timor!)

East Timor is in the middle of the island chain of Indonesia. Indonesia was worried that a flourishing democracy could create an incentive for parts of its own country also to seek independence.

Indonesia's aggressive intentions were endorsed by Australia. A continuous theme in Australian foreign policy since Suharto's 1965 military takeover was to keep on good terms with Indonesia and ignore its appalling human rights record.

Indonesia decided sometime in 1975 to invade East Timor. But it needed a pretext since an outright invasion would be contrary to international law. The internal situation was unstable because of the conflict between the various groups and so it thought that it could argue that the instability was flowing over to the western half of the island, which had been part of the former Dutch empire and was now part of Indonesia. Unfortunately for Indonesia by late 1975 it seemed that the instability was dying down as the new government gradually exerted its authority over the territory. The independent East Timor government was getting established. Indonesia had to act quickly to manufacture a justification for invasion.

The Australian media knew East Timor's fate was going to be the biggest story in the South Pacific since the 1965 military takeover in Indonesia (which overthrew Sukarno and resulted in the deaths of as many as one million people). Portugal had claimed East Timor since 1514 and so this was the end of the one of the world's oldest empires.

Television journalists Greg Shackleton, aged 29, Gary Cunningham 27, Tony Stewart 21, Brian Peters 24 and Malcolm Rennie 29, travelled to the western part of East Timor in the expectation of filming the Indonesian forces invade. Although all five were working for two Australian commercial television networks, only two of them were Australian: two were British and one was a New Zealander. Although young, they were highly regarded by their colleagues in the television profession.

A few days later, at dawn on October 16 1975, about 100 Indonesian commandoes and some pro-Indonesian East Timorese attacked the East Timorese defence force in Balibo. All five journalists were killed. They knew too much to be allowed to live.

A sixth journalist was also killed in controversial circumstances. Roger East, an Australian freelance journalist, went to Dili in November, to cover the invasion and find out what happened to the five journalists. He was the last journalist left in East Timor when the Indonesians invaded in force on December 7. On December 8 he was captured by Indonesian forces and shot dead, with his body being thrown into the water off the wharf; it was not seen again. Having killed five journalists and got away with it, the Indonesians had no reluctance in killing East.

THE DECEPTION

The Australian Government has always known more about Balibo than it has admitted. There was the problem that Australia was implicated in the Indonesian invasion from the outset. Gough Whitlam had advised President Suharto in two meetings in 1974 that Australia would not oppose an Indonesian takeover of East Timor. Thus, Indonesia sucked Australia deeper into the conspiracy. On October 13, Australian embassy officials in Jakarta were secretly briefed by an Indonesian official on the impending attack on October 16. This was an early warning to give

Australia enough time to prepare its response to any news it might get to hear about the invasion. It was too late for Australia to start protesting.

Incidentally, the British and New Zealand Governments also had an interest in the Balibo deaths since two of the journalists were British and one was a New Zealander. A representative of the British Embassy in Jakarta was present for the December 5 burial ceremony. But neither Government has expressed any eagerness to enquire about the fate of their citizens and have been willing for them to be described as "Australians" and so not a matter for their concern. As with Australia, they too evidently thought that East Timor was better off as part of Indonesia.

Some Australians knew about the Balibo deaths as soon as they occurred but they were not allowed to talk about them. The Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) is the largest and most important part of Australia's intelligence agencies. It grew out of Australia's collaboration with the US and UK in breaking the Axis codes in World War II, and thus reducing the duration of the war. This collaboration continued into the Cold War and the agencies monitored the communist world's electronic communications.

DSD was monitoring Indonesian military activities. It listened in to the Indonesian attack on Balibo. At 6.45am (East Timor time) on October 16 it heard the military report on the dead white men. This evidently shocked DSD, which had assumed that the journalists were being protected.

The only member of the Whitlam Government who had known of the DSD before entering office was the Defence Minister Bill Morrison (a former career diplomat). About 10 hours after the shooting, the permanent head of the Defence Department, Sir Arthur Tange, briefed the Minister on what had happened. Sir Arthur explained that the Government could not reveal what had been learned about Balibo for fear of alerting the Indonesians to the accuracy of DSD's work. The Indonesians burnt the bodies. DSD listened to the military radio conversations about the bodies being turned into ashes.

It would be only a matter of time before the next of kin and their employers would start wondering why they were not hearing from them. On October 20, the Jakarta media carried reports about the deaths of the journalists. These reports were "open source" and so on that basis the Australian Government could advise the next of kin that it had just learned about the deaths. On October 21, the Australian Foreign Minister, Don Willesee (himself the father of three distinguished journalists) advised the Senate that the Government was concerned about the fate of the "missing" journalists. We now know that Willesee had known for four days that the journalists were not so much "missing" as dead.

On November 12, nearly a month after the killings, the Indonesians handed over to the Australian Embassy in Jakarta a box containing charred human bone fragments, some camera gear, notebooks and papers belonging to the journalists. The human remains were put into a single coffin and on December 5 buried in a Jakarta ceremony in small ceremony.

Australia's attention was not on East Timor in any case. The Whitlam Government had been the most eventful government in recent Australian history. The Opposition parties that controlled the Senate used their numbers to block the provision of finance to the Government and so the country was gripped by its worst ever constitutional crisis with the Government teetering towards bankruptcy. Eventually, the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, intervened on November 11 by sacking the Whitlam Government and installing the Opposition leader Malcolm Fraser as caretaker prime minister until a fresh election could be held. Fraser won that election in December and became prime minister in his own right.

Meanwhile, the Indonesians and Australian diplomats hoped that the military campaign would be over quickly and so the fate of East Timor and the journalists would soon be forgotten.

✓ THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH

But the Balibo story has refused to go away. First, the overall East Timor story did not go away. The Indonesian and Australian Governments expected a quick Indonesian victory. But instead the people of East Timor fought back - at a considerable cost to themselves. Their tenacity was rewarded in 2002, when an independent East Timor became a member of the United Nations. Ironically, Jose Ramos Horta, who was then the world's youngest foreign minister in the short-lived self-proclaimed 1975 government was back as foreign Minister in 2002. The protracted East Timor struggle attracted a search for "angles" and one of them was the fate of the journalists.

Second the next of kin (particularly Greg Shackleton's widow Shirley, Wilhelmina "Minna" Rennie Malcolm's mother, and Maureen Tolfree Brian Peters' sister) have all been relentless in seeking what happened. Parts of the Australian media have also been relentless in keeping the issue alive. As can be expected, they have not received much encouragement from the Australian Government (irrespective of which party was in power).

Third, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have maintained a close interest in the Balibo killings. The NGOs include the Australian Section of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) (I am the NSW Chair). In October 1997, we convened a colloquium at the University of New South Wales, to which relatives of all the victims were able to meet each for the first time.

Bit by bit the truth has emerged. There has been no dramatic flood, just a persistent trickle. In 1995, responding to continued public pressure, on the 20th anniversary of the killings, the then Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans asked government lawyer Tom Sherman QC to

investigate the deaths. He did not have the power to compel witnesses to give evidence and some potential East Timorese witnesses did not give evidence because they feared retribution against them or their families. By the time the Sherman Report appeared, there had been a change of government and the new Howard Government was not interested in pursuing the issue.

Sherman thought he had produced a "preliminary" report but the new Government regarded it as the final one and left it at that. But still more evidence trickled into the Australian media so that the Howard Government was obliged to ask him to produce a second report. East Timor's slow progress towards independence in the late 1990s and Suharto's removal from power in Indonesia meant that the Australian Government was under fresh pressure to publish its documents on the events in 1974-6 - though these documents do not reveal much of Balibo because they are not the security intercepts.

Another development has been the ICJ's innovative use of the New South Wales state coroner's office. Arising out of the ICJ's work, the family of NSW-citizen Brian Peters have reported Brian Peters as missing, believed dead. The NSW police, as with all such disappearances, have referred the matter to the NSW Coroner. A coronial enquiry has more teeth than any of the previous Australian ones to obtain evidence under oath from Australians.

To conclude: the truth may come out in the end. It may take some decades but at least it does eventually filter out.

Keith Suter