

Chapter 15 – Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Intelligence

RECONNAISSANCE PLATOON

We were a mixture of Army Reserve and Regular Army and just that fact, at times, made it very interesting in the early stages. Our structure was different from most Battalion Reconnaissance Platoons, our manning being 1/43 and four dogs. After a few weeks in country and a bit of scrounging, conducted by the boys, a comfortable living area was erected, fondly referred to as the COMPOUND. Primarily, we conducted surveillance, reconnaissance and tracking tasks having 70% of the platoon qualified as Scout and Visual Trackers. The dogs proved their weight in gold as did the handlers, and Patrols were getting the reputations that they so deserved. There were a lot of characters in the platoon which made it what it was, a team of men who in its own unique way had become a family, each depending on the other.

63 Alpha

We deployed with much hope and yearning for a great adventure and to get some operational service under our belts. Once the patrols started they came quick and fast, with about four to five days down time in between the jobs, to tidy up the admin side and prepare for the next job. The patrol soon settled into a good routine of patrols and Initial Response Force (IRF) rotations. During the down time, the guys went out hard doing some PT to keep fit and kill the time back at Balibo. Dan Mathews thought of moving his bed space down to the gym - with the amount of time he spent down there he may as well! Speaking of bed spaces, Dave Miller didn't mind a bit of kip, telling us his sleeping 'waries'. Ron Gates and Rob White continued with their battle of the tent chess champ with Shane Hodgins joining in now and again. Ray Hastie kept his training up at the gym, he considered moving to the gym as well, but he'd have had to compete for space with Dan. The gym just wasn't big enough for the two. Craig McGrath continued to do the nerd thing with all the other Platoon nerds, although he did do well with the patrol video. Kevin Brown continued to take all the jibs about bacon and pigs, seems he was making the most of the opportunity and was doing a bit of recruiting! Anthony Plater attempted to keep all the boys in check, that is, when he wasn't stuck behind the computer doing all the paper work or hunting down the mail in search of footy videos.

Undoubtedly everyone from 63A in their own way, learned something about themselves during the tour, and has been touched by the locals and the way they welcomed us into the country.

63 Bravo

*Blessed are the peace makers for they are truly the sons of god
(New Testament Mathew chap. 5 verse 9)*

One can not see without eyes, one can not hear without ears, 'the battlefield, a place of deceptive blindness and deafening silence'. This was our task, to see and hear the things that others could not. Short range reconnaissance patrols, to observe, interdict and gather information in accordance with the Commanding Officer's intent. Looking around me I see the faces of the nine men that make up call sign 63 B one of four patrols that make up Reconnaissance Platoon. Nine men from different backgrounds, units and degrees of military experience, that only a couple of months prior had never seen or worked together before.

Upon settling in to the primitive accommodation, the patrol started battle preparation for its first task. AO Leghorn, a five-day patrol insertion and extraction by S70 Blackhawk. This would prove to be a testing time. The patrol came under command of MRECFOR, and to our disappointment the decision was made to split the patrol. Losing three members was hard to take, but ended up being a sound tactical move. The patrol now down to six carried on with the task at hand, with a newfound identity 63B continued with some difficult patrolling within the designated AO's.

63 Charlie

The first few patrols attempted to locate and photograph local markets and occurrences on the TCL. A large amount of information was gained by utilizing the Mick 'Rommel' Parent Observation Post SOP's. The value of having dogs accompany each patrol proved to be of benefit when our patrol located fresh TNI boot prints and followed the sign for 3 kilometres through pretty rough terrain and well used foot pads. The end result found us in a village with the person wearing the boots located in one of the huts.

The patrol adopted a local village and they adopted us so to speak. We were invited to this village to join in a celebration which we attended, and a good time was had by all. During our next patrol we were able to use two locals from the village as guides to show us old Falintil positions thus saving us a lot of unnecessary foot sloggng.

A contact by AUSBATT forces resulted in the patrol being placed in cutoff. This proved to be a highlight of the tour as a subsequent task two weeks later found the patrol tracking the suspected exile routes taken by the suspected militia, to the TCL and into West Timor.

We also had some interesting incidents on the border with unnecessary exposure from thugs on the other side, and a bit of a run in with TNI. The patrol conducted themselves very professionally which ensured sound relationships with the TNI were maintained.

63 Delta

The experiences that we all leave East Timor with are from a mixture of patrolling on the TCL and also the conduct of humanitarian aid to the local community. When we first arrived in East Timor, the majority of the patrol was shocked to see the damage that the local infrastructure had absorbed, and during our time here we have witnessed many of the locals rebuilding towns, farms and their lives. The interaction that we have had with some of the villages has made the deployment worthwhile. On one of our patrols we conducted a six day observation post 1000 metres above the village of Sassa. The patrol over watched both the TCL and the village twenty-four hours a day for that six days in some of the most spectacular scenery that we have encountered. We were extracted at night by a S-70A Blackhawk, in howling winds gusting up to 60 knots, high above the cloud base, in pitch darkness, on a landing point smaller than the airframe itself, and surrounded by cliffs. The rotors seemed extremely close to our heads and on return to Balibo the Blackhawk crew confessed that it was the closest they have ever come to beheading a patrol. I think we will all remember that extraction for a long time.

63 Echo

The patrol was formed halfway through the tour, from 63Alpha and Bravo, to meet the growing requirement for surveillance and IRF commitments by the platoon. With a couple of days to sort out the SOP's of the new patrol, it was straight back out to the border for Echo. The patrol quickly formed its own identity within the platoon and a solid routine of going to the beach at Batugade at 'the special spot' between each patrol was looked forward to by all. Ray's cooking skills came in quite handy as well. Some of the more memorable things were: Kevin Brown managing to fall over at least 3 times in every patrol, Tony Robinson waking up in the morning on the wrong side of the night harbour location (and letting everyone know it), Alistair Cooke with his unending optimism and good humour (and Craig McGrath disagreeing anyway), Brent Robson on his own and Ray Hastie still smiling away at some

private joke none of us ever knew about (and still don't).

All in all we think that the people of East Timor are better off for having encountered 63 Echo, even if they don't understand our humour or our Tetum!

63 Foxtro

63F was created from the best 63C and 63D had to offer. The patrol took this task in its stride and in no time we were ready and on our first job. Things were going well until Military Working Dog (MWD) 'Tyson' unleashed his plot to kill the patrol commander, while demonstrating that he could use the 40mm weapon system as instructed by the patrol. Our next job started with us being told to "get on the helo" and not much else. Members were heard saying "Where the *@#% are we going??" and "is this for real?" Next thing we know we are landing (somewhere) and told to secure the helo as it shut down. By this stage we were aware of the notional 'crash'. We strongly believe looking back that this was all a conspiracy on the Aviator's behalf, in order to get us ready for the real one later in the deployment. By this stage our platoon sergeant had taken over the role of patrol commander. The first patrol was to conduct an observation post. The next patrol was to be a regular patrol led by the platoon commander. We got as far as the insertion point when our pilot decided to do a bit of gardening using the rotor blades, and see how hard you can put a helo down without breaking it in two. We can't blame him though, apparently, and I quote: "It's hard to see trees with Ninox on".

MWD Teams

All members of the MWD section were looking forward to our deployment, the first of its kind since Vietnam. MWD Hansi had some minor surgery back in Australia and required an Elizabethan collar. Laurie Orth refused to let her be seen in public 'with a bucket on her head' and the collar was removed for Anzac Day. In the early weeks we also managed some patrols with Delta Company, which turned out one too many for MWD Morgan who fell off a bridge while crossing it, nearly taking Dave Towerton with him.

Mid June gave us a real chance to silence our critics and give the Battalion a big win, if only MWD Shay and Rod Cannan had been inserted with the Recon Patrol which had found some sign.

July saw Mick Pimm and MWD Tyson arrive, replacing Bob Jennings who was preparing for his retirement. MWD Tyson was obviously chosen for this tour because of his high standard of weapon handling skills which soon became evident. 63E also discovered that MWD Butch had a bad habit of moving into people's sleeping positions whilst they were on piquet.

FORCE PROTECTION ELEMENT (FPE)

FPE operated on a staggered rotation system. This was to ensure that, on the arrival of any given Battalion Group, at least half of the operators had at least three months experience and were familiar with the AO and the 'state of normalcy' within it. This knowledge was achieved by maintaining consistent and comprehensive contact with the communities and personalities who could reasonably be expected to exert influence. So it was when 4 RAR Battalion Group entered the fray.

The 4 RAR Bn Group RS&I organisations were well prepared for deployment and after a few minor technical glitches, the FPE metamorphosed from 1 RAR to 4RAR methodologies which, at the time, were most dissimilar. The transition was however, seamless in that the support from FPE remained constant and significant results were achieved.

FPE had detachments (Dets) located at Batugade, Maliana and Bobonaro with the HQ co-located with 4 RAR Bn Gp HQ at Balibo. From a headquarter perspective, the Dets conducted commendable operations leading up to the elections. The secure environment into which the queues of polling East Timorese filed, was due in no small part, to the long days and nights of effort maintained by all for many weeks without break. This tiring rhythm of operations however, ensured that time flew by.

The team developed a strong bond and a sense of humour, without which the stresses and responsibilities could have easily overwhelmed us all. Those of us who were in East Timor for the second or third time could see the developments made by the remarkable local people in the short period since INTERFET. The secure environment that allowed this progress was due, in no small part, to the efforts of the FPE.

A Postcard from Balibo, August 2001

The brochure promised friendly and courteous service. It promised wonderful accommodation in an authentic Portuguese Fortress. Enjoy the rustic surroundings and lap up the ambience, it said. Enjoy the cool refreshing mountain lifestyle and recline in a comfortable chair to observe the locals conducting their traditional lives.

Balibo was this and more. The views to the west were magnificent. As the red sun sinks into the blue of the ocean, one was reminded of the al fresco cafes of Greece, the coffee shops of the rugged Turkish coast. If only we weren't working a 16 hour day.

Our day up in FPE HQ started by trying to decipher the reporting from the outlying Dets. This always provided entertainment. Lateral thought had been promoted as beneficial in an operator and this thought process had often manifested itself as literary exercises, which were verging on the unintelligible. Hours of debate and discussion were had by all, as the ensuing huddle of 'learned ones' pondered the intricacies of the 'Det Manuscripts'. Like so many Rabbis debating the Tora, often rudimentary consensus was the only indication that, perhaps, the intent of the scroll had been comprehended and the free world remained safe.

Following our joyous literary interlude, we would chat with our many friends on the busy Balibo social circuit. Down to the markets to speak with the bloke who tried to burn Manuel Soares' house. Chat to the bloke who reckons he saw smugglers landing weapons on the beach, then off to liaise with the CIVPOL (UN Police organisation) to confirm that Manuel Soares' house didn't actually burn down at all, but rather Manuel Soares had held a BBQ and because Manuel Soares (no no...not that Manuel Soares...another Manuel Soares who looks the same because he is married to Lucia Tavares the other cousin of the *other* Manuel Soares from Los Paulos) wasn't invited, got angry and kicked Manuel's Chook. (or....just maybe, tried to burn his house down)

Meanwhile, our Admin Sergeant, managed to steal, coerce, buy or manufacture all the little bits and pieces required to keep the whole operation running smoothly and effectively. She developed the Balibo Tupperware and Coffee group, a group of concerned locals who discussed various environmental topics on a regular basis and she also contributed to the successful stay of many of the visitors to our digs.

Because our resort often had vacancies, the Dets did their utmost by referring many guests to our salubrious surroundings. This provided hours of entertainment and often our guests were reluctant to leave. And who, really, could blame them. The guest accommodation had all the facilities, lighting, a table, a bevy of chairs and even a bed. The replacement spa is still under construction, the original having been stolen by the Batugade Det, along with the HQ aircon (well our big fan anyway!).

The OC was often busy with kilograms of staff work. It seems that whenever she mentioned anything of relevance to anybody, even remotely connected to the decision making process, she was obliged to produce a feature length presentation. I believe that Russell Crowe was being lured to play commander for the Bobonaro Det in the new presentation "ALL QUIET ON THE BOBONARO FRONT.....HONEST....., Sir"

Bobonaro remained one of the more interesting areas of 4 RAR's AO. There was a significant spate of reporting and inquiries from Balibo residents with relatives in the Bobonaro district. This reporting related to a proposed railway from the town of Bobonaro to somewhere, possibly Dili. Exhaustive investigation and research concluded that this information was a result of a Det member's well-intentioned inquiries into public health. It was revealed that he was, in fact, asking the whereabouts of

the Moscow railway station, and how much for a taxi to the Eiffel Tower. He did, however, manage to cash in on this linguistic faux paux by selling tickets on the inaugural rail service between Bobonaro and Paris.

Similarly, the Bobonaro Det commander scoured the county-side, pursuing any lead, had taken any risk, and asked the hardest of questions in his quest to find any evidence ofold motorcycles from the Portuguese epoch. He was unsuccessful but his dedication was to be commended. The Bobonaro Det Linguist provided valuable insight into the goings on in Bobonaro and had a driving record which, according to the few who survived the experience, put him in the upper echelons of the international rally circuit. He could, it was reported, drive the landrover from Bobonaro to Batugade in 14 minutes flat, at an average of 783.5 KPH, all that whilst swinging the gear stick over his head.

Batugade Det were housed in the Tahiti Palms beach resort. It was difficult to report any goings on from their location. When inquiries were made regarding their recent activities, the activities co-ordinator suggested that they may be doing one of the four wheel drive tours or perhaps preparing for the evening's Brazilian theme night. We at HQ were aware however, that much sterling service was conducted at Junction Point Alpha (we suspected this was a nightclub or similar, as they seemed to regularly meet the most interesting of people there).

Maliana Det also seemed to conduct its best work on the social circuit. It is reliably reported that they were in the process of producing a sort of Michelin Guide, tentatively titled 'Great Eating Houses of the Maliana District'. The Det commander (with his dear love for children) appeared to spend much time being the playground monitor. The streets of Maliana were significantly cleaner after their arrival.

MILITARY GRAPHICAL INFORMATION (MGI) CELL

4RAR was the first Australian Battalion to bring an MGI capability into Op TANAGER. The work for MGI started six months before the deployment, as information was gathered and briefing products prepared to assist in the preparation of the deployment as well as producing products for the pre deployment exercises.

The first job for MGI once it arrived in country was to find a location within Balibo in which to set up shop. It didn't take long for Corporal Hamish Goetz to locate a small-unused room that became the MGI hut. It was in here that the majority of the equipment was set up and MGI was open for business. Hamish also set up a small 'shop front' within the RS&I cell so he was able to provide direct support to BHQ while the rest of the team was supporting the other elements in Balibo.

The initial task for MGI was updating the maps of the AO because the standard East Timor mapping that we had, contained many inaccuracies, which caused dramas for the men on the ground. By working with the sections we were able to update the maps and distribute the information to all the companies, this was an ongoing task which lasted the entire tour.

Once RS&I realised the capabilities of MGI the tasking came thick and fast and the nights were getting late. Hamish had to relocate Sapper Phil 'Simo' Simpson into RS&I to keep up with the workload. With another operator was the need for more computers in the office, and with the need for more computers came the need for more work space and so the MGI take over of the RS&I office commenced.

While Hamish and Simo were working up in the fort, Sapper Tony Birthisel and Private Ewan 'Will' Williams were keeping busy in the hut. As the illustrator Tony was responsible for taking and collecting the photos for the battalion book, creating graphics to go with various reports and creating multimedia presentations. Will was responsible for creating and updating the battalion web page and providing technical support for the cell's computer system. Once Canberra took control of the unit's web page Will was shipped off to become part of Charlie Coy where he was able to fulfil his duties as a rifleman as well as giving people advice on what computer to purchase once they returned home.

INTELLIGENCE CELL

Those of us in the darkened caverns of Headquarters, sheltered within the stones of a centuries old fort, realised the 'soft' position we held. No having to 'slog it' up dirty great yarmers, or endure the

blistering heat of the day. Instead, the members of the Combat Information Centre fought a different battle. The battle to dig deep within the mounds of information being collected by the soldiers in the field and try to understand the enemy's mind. There was never any doubt that there were men out there, willing, wishing to inflict damage on the Peace Keepers, and it was ever our job to discover the who, what, where, when, how and why of their intent.

After arrival in country, all seemed to go relatively smoothly. The transition into the actual operation required no drastic changes, apart from certain obvious differences, such as, "where the heck am I sleeping?" Daily routine was planned to allow for shift changes, but instead just became one long drag from sun-up 'til generally long after sundown. Days flew by, not marked by their usual titles of Monday, Tuesday etc, but rather by 'which conference' was planned for each evening.

Time on operations seemed to go through a transitional phase warp of sorts. The hours dragged, but the weeks flew by. The first of the government issue 'care packages' arrived, while the second or even third wave of goodies boxes arrived from loved ones at home, including one consisting of nothing but coat hangers for one thoroughly appreciative individual. Harmless attempts at livening up the nightly Infosums (Information Summary) by the inclusion of clean humour, while initially appreciated, were soon frowned upon by those in higher headquarters (personally, I blame the Mefloquine). Sergeant Les 'The Lizard Hunter' Mitchell entertained all with his remarkably accurate impressions of the resident 'Puc-yoo' Geckos (so called for their distinctive and loud mating call). However, while the rest of us laughed uproariously, he always maintained a straight face during the performance, and often later stomped out of the cell muttering under his breath.

Lieutenant Tobi Horton (aka Tobi Wan Kenobi) was renowned for following the 'Way of the Sword'. This was demonstrated by his ability to produce (at least) one knife, often a large Tanto blade, in the blink of an eye, and his belief that a knife can be utilised in any situation from sharpening a pencil, to picking out a splinter, giving a manicure, or pacifying 'gobby' soldiers. His 'mature approach' and 'well timed humour' whilst meeting time critical operational requirements, was renowned. So much so, that the outgoing and incoming Sector West Commanders learnt his name very quickly. Boy, it was quiet when he was on leave, the grey man he will never be.

The daily grind was interspersed with frequent periods of frantic activity as Major 'Ooh a Bee' Moor, came up with yet another devilishly cunning plan to thwart the evil foe, whoever it might be that week. Requests for information regarding the background of 'the bloke who drives the yellow truck on Sundays', and 'the current business interests of that bloke who used to be in command of the group that once patrolled around these parts', were fired up to higher headquarters where inexplicably, as is often the case, they just seemed to disappear. Shortly afterwards, members of the cell disappeared on leave back home, but only to return on a short-lived high that annoyed everybody else nearby, until inevitably followed up by the post-ROCL blues, which delighted everybody nearby. But then, the big push was on. The month we'd all been waiting for, August, the election period; if it was going to happen, it'd happen now. Captain Grills predicted at least one major incident would occur prior to the elections, Lieutenant Horton said "No, it'll happen after we leave", while Sergeant Simon 'The Rock' Corby assured all that "Something will happen, some time, some where". All in all, we had our bases pretty covered. On the day, all was quiet, and confidently stated in the evening brief, "As predicted"

In the end, the Intelligence was by definition, a success. Its members were cool (*thanks to both the air conditioning and their groovy hair styles*), courageous (*you should try promising the CO to have a product ready for him to hand over to the Sector Commander in thirty minutes, when it still hasn't been printed yet and takes 25 minutes to print, not to mention getting it down the hill to Batugade*), adroit (*by managing to accomplish the same*), patient (*waiting that 25 minutes*), imperturbable (*still managing to fit in a quick rumba around the CP when an Infosum is due out in two minutes*), discreet (*managing to avoid being around when the Captains got 'volunteered' to join in on the Sandakan Death March aka CO's patrol*), and of course trustworthy (*just look at those angelic faces, need we say more?*). In the words of Lyndon Baines Johnson "If two men agree on everything, you may be certain that (only) one is doing the thinking."

BATTALION COMMUNICATIONS TROOP (BCT)

The advance party consisted of Sergeant Chris Leon, Corporal Mick Glass, Corporal Steve Medforth, Corporal Eric Schneider, Signalmen Jeremy Thuell, Adam Lehane, Mathew Croker, and Russell Witherow. They briefly joined the old Troop along with Warrant Officer Clinton Yensch. Their handover was conducted in a smooth and efficient manner and was completed shortly after the Australian Army's One-Hundredth Birthday on 1 March. The new troop was soon taken on a communication reconnaissance near the western village of Motaain. It was during this journey that Steve Medforth discovered the benefits of deploying at the end of the wet season rather than the start, as the group set off on foot after Steve managed to entrench the 6 x 6 Troop vehicle in a decent size bog. It was the first and last time Steve got bogged and the last time he listened to advice from a boss.

As the wet season drew to a close, the new Troop reformed to its original membership. The main body consisted of Captain Rob Curtin as the new officer in charge, Sergeant Colin Quaife as the new detachment commander, with Sergeant Carol Milland, Corporal Fearn, Signalmen Fakan, Jarvis, Murray and Wilson as the other Troop members. With little in the way of spare sleeping spaces, Corporal Schneider's team deployed to the Everest Feature freeing up room at Fatuklaren for the remainder of the Troop.

The hand-over period was made memorable by two activities. The first, was a reconnaissance of the high features surrounding the village of Sassa in the foothills of the Everest Feature. An early insertion by Huey left Captain Stokes, the outgoing officer in charge, Captain Curtin, Sergeant Quaife, and Signalmen Witherow and Wilson battling lantana and other thick vegetation for the remainder of the day. With the extraction time approaching the decision was made to move to the alternate landing zone within the confines of the village. The locals were extremely friendly, and seemed somewhat bemused by the presence of five RASigs members so far from the safety and comfort of Balibo.

Signalman Jim Goat had joined the BCT during the previous wet season. Although Jim was clearly different it was apparent that Jim had unique skills that would make life easier for all members of the Detachment. The arrival of the advance party saw a new friendship develop between Jim and Eric, and before long the two were inseparable, with one always following the other. Whether the CO noticed this behaviour and assumed more was going on, or was intolerant of other aspects of Jim's character is open to speculation. In the end however, he made it clear that Jim could no longer be a member of the Battalion Group and was to be relieved of his position within the BCT immediately. The responsibility of informing the Troop of the CO's decision fell to Rob Curtin and undoubtedly proved to be one of the harder tasks he was required to perform during his deployment. Despite the fact that the news of Jim's departure was met with sorrow, Eric did the honourable thing and walked Jim down to his new post in a village half-way between Balibo and Fatuklaren. Ever vigilant, the now retired Signalman Jim Goat was still seen by Troop members in their daily resupply trips to Balibo.

Fatuklaren- Retrans Two

The Detachment site at Fatuklaren was first sited by Lieutenant Michael Thomas late 1999 and has been occupied by members of the BCT ever since. The feature is an exposed ridgeline, which at 2800 feet offers excellent communications properties for the western sector of the area of operations. The Detachment site was manned by 11 members of the Troop and had a platoon from Alpha Company in location. From small beginnings Retrans 2 grew into a well structured position with developments by the engineers making the site the envy of other Battalion positions.

Life at Fatuklaren was not too dissimilar to any other area within the area of operations. For the members of Alpha Company, there were posts to be manned, and patrols to be conducted and it was one of several areas that they were likely to serve during their time in East Timor. For the BCT Detachment members, it was home for six months. As a result changes were made in a matter of days as Detachment members added their own character to the living and working areas. One member who was particularly keen on the development of the site was Eric Schneider. Many of the Troop believe