

Chapter 3 – Battalion Headquarters

The Advance Party arrived in Balibo on 17 April 2001. During the next two weeks the rest of the Headquarters staff arrived in country and the official handover from 1 RAR occurred. During the handover period all the different elements of BHQ conducted orientation and final briefs. Members of BHQ settled into life in the fort. BHQ was located in a 18th Century Portuguese Fort overlooking the township of Balibo. Within the fort there were the different components which make BHQ work (S1 – administration, S2 – intelligence, S3 – operations, S4 – logistics, etc) as well as the accommodation areas.

The orientation for the S3 Cell was running smoothly, the staff had watched in awe as members of 1 RAR operations staff conducted a Priority Two casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) without blinking and marvelled at the ease with which the necessary reports and returns were submitted to HQ Sector West. The initial confusion brought about by B Coy replacing D Coy 1 RAR was overcome by the instigation of 'the penguin'. 4 RAR Signals Platoon had a penguin as its mascot which 1 RAR took a shine to and later the East Timorese people, much to Commanding Officer (CO) 4 RAR disliking, and the Sig's joy, all the 4 RAR callsigns during the relief in place were prefixed by Penguin.

It was decided to conduct an orientation flight in the S-70 Blackhawks. The flight was to take in the major townships and an overall awareness of the Area of Operations (AO). The unit's Adjutant Captain Richard Niessl represented the S3 cell and ensured that the flight would go down in the annals as memorable. During one landing Richard decided to help out the Aircraft's Loadmaster by opening the side door. Unfortunately the door contains two handles, the first is the normal door opening device, the second the emergency door release. The look of shock on the Loadmaster's face as the door was blown 15m away has been recorded as the first missed photo opportunity of the deployment. The horrified look on the Adjutant's face was the second. Needless to say, once the search for the door had been completed and the door was safely on Sergeant Bob Chandler's knee, the aircraft returned to Balibo and the mission was aborted.

Once 1 RAR had departed, the S3 cell commenced a series of renovations that were to become contagious throughout the fort. Firstly, Military Graphical Information (MGI) produced a new battle map the size of Tasmania, then the Command Post (CP) was rearranged to "increase the situational awareness" cried the Adjutant. "The CP is now as accessible as the M4 during rush hour" was the mumbled reply from Sergeant Tony Foster, S3 Air Cell. The S6 Captain Travis Faure successfully implemented Battle Command Support System (BCSS) to the Australian Battalion (AUSBATT).

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the fort the renovation bug had caught. Most days when people weren't working they were trying (with various degrees of success) to improve their living accommodation. Some tents, like those housing Corporal Hamish Goetz, organised building supplies through the Engineers and spent weekend after weekend improving their lot.

Security Section became known as the work party section. Any odd jobs around the area that required doing, were completed by these guys. It became a common sight to see Privates Jamie Chambers and Cameron Buck running from their gun piquet to help out Lance Corporal Stewart 'Blackie' Black on his latest building project. Blackie was responsible for the establishment of the outdoor area adjacent to the CP, including outdoor setting and the makeshift gymnasium at the front of the fort.

During this renovation period the CO decided to also change around some of his staff officers. The Armoured OC Major Mick Hanna, became the Battalion operations officer (OC Current

Operations). Major Rick Moore (previously the operations officer) became the OC Future Operations. Meanwhile, Major Chris Wallis (previously OC Future Operations) became the Liaison Officer located at the District Operations Centre (DOC) in Maliana, later to be replaced by Captain Antonio Pagan. This was to become a trend, and kept the staff officers constantly on their toes.

Accommodation in the fort was basic. Large green tents covered the interior of the fort walls and at first glance it was hard to recognise the work areas from the accommodation. Most of the accommodation areas underwent renovations after the Battalion's arrival in country as everybody tried to create that little piece of home. A feat hampered by the necessity to sleep inside mozzie domes. Life in the fort could never be described as dull, boring at times but never dull. The days tended to start early and finish late, most people in the fort worked odd hours so there was always a steady stream of people coming in as others were getting up. Every second day the members of BHQ were treated to a visit by the Preventative Medicine guys with the ever-popular 'fogger'. The arrival of the fogger normally signalled three things: 1. There is now no chance of extra sleep. 2. It is time for morning tea at the CP and 3. Captain Pagan will wake up.

Accommodation was broken up in the usual way. Apart from Security Section (who had their own tent) people who worked together generally didn't live together. Some notable addresses include Security Section with their parquet floor and homemade furniture. The 'Pit' (the Sergeant accommodation tent), famous for its homemade entertainment unit and movie nights. The 'resort' (Captains accommodation) famous for the amount of noise it is possible for two captains and a movie to make. Of course all of these pale into obscurity at the view afforded to the Battalion CO, Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Sengelman and the Executive Officer (XO), Major Brian Campbell. Magnificent is an understatement, the view extends all the way to the sea and the sunsets were spectacular.

The mood in the fort was generally light and everyone got on well, and although the jokes tended to run thick and fast through the accommodation areas, everyone was totally committed to their tasks, carrying them out with the utmost professionalism and dedication.

One of the favourite pastimes in the fort was predicting how long a parcel would take to arrive from home. The mail came in most days and was generally a fair mixture of official mail and personal parcels. The amount of personal parcels that a member received directly affected their social standing within the fort. Many friendships were based on what lollies and junk food arrived from home, except in the S4 cell. Captain Erica Collins constantly teased her two young lieutenants by stacking her parcels in a (large) pile in the corner of the CP. Fortunately, the staff in the CP witnessed early in the tour the results of sampling these offerings and Lieutenant Matt Burke and Michael Byrne waited patiently with the rest of the CP staff until offered (this happened twice during the six months).

The accommodation at the Balibo Fort was sorted out before the captains had arrived. The SNCOs and WO2s had grabbed the accommodation closest to the CP, fair enough, as they were the duty officers. Then the Majors had grabbed the next accommodation available. After that as it is a fairly big hill you are forced to walk up. What the SNCOs and Majors failed to observe on the dash for accommodation, was that the furthest place from the CP had million dollar views. This location was occupied by the captains.

Not only did they hold the best accommodation area, but through the brilliance of (and perhaps spare time of) Captains Mountford and Pagan, they also developed an in-house theatre. With the set up complete, they were good to go for the six-month stint in country. In order to diversify our lives with other than work, movies and work, we started the hour of power. Each day Captains Collins, Ellul, Faure, Grills, Mountford, Niessl and Pagan, devoted an hour of the day to the endless pursuit of getting stronger, bigger, trimmer; whichever. The results have been varied with the big achievers being the Adjutant, Captain Richard Niessl, and the Assistant Operations Officer, Captain Antonio 'Banderas' Pagan. Richard went on an eating program not seen since a Nigerian won an all you can eat at McDonalds, and put on an astonishing 8-9kg. On the other hand, Tony ended up losing the equivalent weight of ten average East Timorese villagers.

The toughest assignment involved Captain Trav Faure. During a single communications incident, his troop managed to lose the last couple of entries in the working log (thanks to SIG "Rebuild"

Parkinson). So what kind of information would be contained in the odd?... say 8500 entries. Needless to say that presenting this to 'Niner' at the daily conference would not be pleasing. In order to minimize damage to himself and his seating companions, Trav, along with Captains Collins and Ellul, wore flak jackets to orders. It looked a little odd until Trav read out his news to Niner. This turned out to be very effective, as Niner, in an attempt to stop chuckling, simply asked the S6 to brief him later. Trav was unusually quiet for a couple of days and we didn't ask, in case Niner happened to be near by.

The CO was bored one evening and decided to go for a walk. The only problem was that he doesn't like the dark so he took Captains Collins, "what's that ringing sound?", Ellul, Grills and Niessl with him. This proved to be uneventful with no militia seen. It was good experience on the NVG's though and the captains did sleep well the next night.

In true Captain's style there was a 'hundred days to go' party. We put up balloons and watched a movie. The chief cook was Captain Collins who baked some wonderful brownies care of Mrs White Wings which were wonderful (Couldn't fit any more W's in the last sentence).

One of the most controversial incidents on record, was the famous Trav Faure 'mefloquin rage' episode, affectionately known as 'la explosion'. Trav, normally a calm and tolerant officer, one particular evening got very aggravated by the noise coming from the captains tent. Especially the guitar work of none other than, "el jefe". No matter who you were, where you were the night before, or what you were doing at that particular moment, everyone copped a bit of shrapnel. Not even the Padre was safe that night.

All too soon the first people departed on Recreational Out of Country Leave (ROCL) this was the beginning of what became known as 'the dark days'. Days filled with people frantically counting the days to their own ROCL and the poor souls who had just returned staring blankly ahead as they remembered the good times that they had.

For all, ROCL was a well deserved break and greatly appreciated, except for Corporal Chris Kirby, whose wife had had the forethought to organise a family camping holiday for his ROCL period. Chris spent the first four days of his ROCL sleeping on a stretcher and eating tinned food.

"mai kolia Tetum" (lets speak Tetum)

About a month into the deployment, the CO, through the watchful guidance of Major Moor, tasked Captain Pagan to develop and conduct an intensive in-country Tetum (the local East Timorese language) course. The self-proclaimed 'LINGO' or battalion language officer, speaking Tetum, Portuguese and Spanish (amongst others), had to put his money where his mouth was. With the help of the ADF School of Languages and several other battalion linguists, Captain Pagan (known by the students as 'el jefe' or 'ulun boot' (the boss)) developed a very difficult and intensive one-week course.

Over the next two months 4 intensive language courses, of about 16 students each, were conducted in Balibo. The students were drawn from all over the Area of Operations, with sub-units nominating several members for each course. The pre-requisites for panelling were a keen interest and natural aptitude for learning the language. As a whole, the students did extremely well, effectively having conducted approximately a third of the full-time (3 month) Tetum language course at LANGS, in just over a week.

The language skills the students gained were found to be invaluable, especially during the election period. The ability to carry out basic conversation, or just able to listen and understand, went a long way to establishing the trust and confidence of the East Timorese people.... our centre of gravity.

The tight religious circle was finally broken when Captian Ian Langford replaced Richard Niessl as the Adjutant and moved into The Resort. Ian brought with him the experience of the front line and served as a timely reminder for the headquarters to remain customer focused.

"you can't say that on television...."

"What time is the 8 o'clock conference on?" and "Who writes the CMA sitrep" have been some of many memorable quotes from WO2 Paul Schwizler during his time as a Watch-keeper in the CP. His

achievements, however, have been overshadowed by an occurrence in the S1 (administration) cell. Sergeant Karl Hans, the Battalion Personnel Sergeant, was frantically trying to reach someone on the phone in regards to a personnel issue. For two hours he constantly tried the number to no avail. Totally frustrated he asked Sergeant Mick Hall to try the number for him, the entire orderly room burst into laughter as he read out the number to Mick. Private Smith, nearly in tears, told Karl that that was his own number he had been trying for two hours! When order was finally restored, a downcast Karl lifted his handset and dialled the correct number, it answered on the third ring. Karl was reported to have asked Smithy to check his 'Notice Lotes' for e-mail.

Photo opportunities occurred on numerous occasions during the tour. One of the most famous photo opportunities was the look on the Operations Officer's (S3) face during an Australian Light Armoured Vehicle (ASLAV) recovery. Two ASLAV callsigns had become stuck when a portion of road they were travelling on gave way. The ASLAV recovery vehicle had no place to secure itself in order to drag the other vehicles out, the only two options for recovery were airlift or build a new road. The airlift option was decided on and a MI-26 (very large Russian built helicopter) was brought down from Dili to do the job. A MI-26 can lift 15 tonne, an ASLAV weighs approx 13.5 tonne, in theory this should have been an easy job. Imagine the S3's look of triumph when the MI-26 first lifted the LAV, picture the look of horror and dismay when the LAV was slammed into the side of a hill, dragged to the summit and subsequently flown to Tonobibi. The pilot had not allowed enough clearance for the ASLAV and had failed to gain enough height prior to flying over the hill. The photos and video of an ASLAV hitting the hill and being 'skull' dragged to the summit through trees and rocks are amazing. Unfortunately no photos exist of the S3's face. Ironically, the second ASLAV was lifted out without incident.

Fortunately for the Battalion Group no-one was seriously hurt during the deployment, though there have been reports of a certain Warrant Officer from BHQ who was transported to the UN Hospital in Dili for treatment of his 'boils'. Luckily for the member he has six weeks to recover before he has to sit for the duration of the flight back to Sydney.

Time passed quickly during the deployment. With the first elements of 2 RAR arriving in country on 10 October 2001 thoughts turned towards home. Although those at home were never far from the thoughts of the soldiers deployed, the big questions were asked. Has this deployment changed me, my partner, my children? What effect is this going to have on the relationship? How much money do I have and what do I do with it? These questions were also applicable to the single members of the Battalion and their interaction with friends and family on their return.

Signal Platoon

Since the dawn of time signal platoons in infantry battalions have been manned by infantry soldiers. 4 RAR deployed with a signal platoon completely manned by members of the Royal Australian Corps of Signals (RASIGS). We were the leading authority on any type of equipment that had more than one button, flashing lights and wires hanging off it including computers, satellites, global positioning systems and combat net radio. There was nothing on the planet that we couldn't work out how to operate.

Signal Platoon 4 RAR was made up of various detachments that worked in specialised fields with the one main focus, Swift and Sure communications. Platoon Headquarters was responsible for the communications management of the whole AO and the administration of the platoon.

Re-transmission Detachment (Retrans) was a mission essential detachment that was situated on a feature over 1700m above sea level. It provided the means for any of the battalion assets to communicate from anywhere in the AO. This detachment maintained 15 links for the whole of AUSBATT and when required could also provide a link to our traditional allies, the New Zealanders, on the southern coast of East Timor and consisted of two to three signallers.

Information Systems Detachment (IS Det) was a new type of detachment that provided computer support to the Battalion Group. With the reliance on computers increasing with the advancement of

technology, these combat geeks provided the necessary support and advice to ensure members had hotmail and internet access no matter where they were. They monitored and maintained numerous systems that included classified and unrestricted networks. The detachment was made up of a corporal, lance corporal and signaller.

The troop consisted of another four company detachments that provided the link from companies to BHQ and company internal communications. These three man dets consisted of a corporal and two signallers.



BHQ outside the fort entrance



Sergeant Chandler impressing locals with his sling shot skills

Sapper Tant making paper planes



Major Moor, Lance Corporal Rigney and Captain Pagan enjoying a local 'capuccino'

Security Section preparing for a patrol



The Chief Clerk, Warrant Officer Green, and RSM, Warrant Officer Lambert, leading a Headquarters patrol up the 'garden path'



Stahwarts from Headquarters after a local patrol

Front row left to right:
Signaller Crnickshank, Corporal Karanglanis,
Signaller Stellmacher, Signaller Sharp,
Lance Corporal Parkinson, Sergeant Fisher,
Corporal Moy

Back row left to right:
Sergeant Filer, Corporal Hendry, Corporal Brooks,
Signaller Southern, Corporal Dole,
Signaller Strickland, Private Murray, Captain
Fauré (the Boss)

Centre:
Feathers McGraw





Warrant Officer Potter providing the nightly entertainment to the village of Balibo from the walls of the fort



Warrant Officer Green entertaining the kids outside the church



Sapper Birtzel caught in the middle of entertainers from the Australian Army Band during their visit