

## Chapter 6 – Charlie Company

The chapter you are about to read is a chronological path taken by Charlie Company over Operation TANAGER. Please enjoy this chapter as the officers and soldiers of Charlie Company present our tour of East Timor.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> April**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April the Charlie Company advance party, consisting of the Company Executive Officer, Captain Warwick Jones, the Company Quarter Master Sergeant (CQ), Staff Sergeant Darren Fallo, the Signals Detachment Commander, Corporal Scott Graham and the Platoon and Section Commanders meet on the Battalion parade ground to be issued their United Nations accoutrements and to farewell family and friends. Four days earlier the Officer Commanding (OC) Charlie Company, Major Todd Berry had departed for East Timor with Bravo Company.

The advance party arrived in Dili on board the HMAS Jervis Bay on 24 April and was then transported to Port Hera for the night. In the early hours of ANZAC Day the advance party conducted a small but meaningful ANZAC Day service before heading off to Fort Aidabaleten, which was to be our home for the next six months.

Battalions before us had rotated their companies in a six week rotation. This rotation plan had its benefits; however, Charlie Company had always felt that to really get to know the locals and the local area we had to stay in the one place for the entire tour. This proved to be the correct approach because as time went by it was obvious to all that the local people had warmed to us; therefore, allowing us to detect changes in the local environment. In addition, the administrative burden of moving was alleviated, thus keeping the troops in a more homely frame of mind as they settled into their routines and dwellings.

### **28<sup>th</sup> April**

The main body of the company, under direction of the Company Sergeant Major (CSM) Warrant Officer Class Two Kenneth Lloyd, gathered at Tobruk Lines for some tearful farewells and final movement briefs. Family members that made their way to the airport were allowed to mingle with the soldiers for further farewells whilst the remainder cruised the terminal in search of food and last minute bargains.

On arrival in Darwin the company moved to Tin City for a couple of hours of rest. They were then herded towards Air Movement Section, Darwin and passed through the customs check and left for Dili by RAAF C130. The flight was uneventful lasting an hour and a half. A Brazilian security section loaded the company onto a convoy of trucks and cleared the road to Fort Aidabaleten. The coastal drive was interesting, the view along the coast is spectacular to say the least but the road is treacherous requiring the driver's 100% attention. All along the road the locals waved to the troops and local children ran out to the road asking for bonbon (sweets).

The company main body arrived at Fort Aidabaleten at 3 pm, and began a frantic change over with Bravo Company, 1RAR. This was done in an adhoc fashion as the main interest for 1RAR was getting on the trucks and going home, which was understandable.

### **1<sup>st</sup> May**

Late in the evening the company undertook its first Air Medical Evacuation (AME). A member of Civil Military Affairs (CMA), Sergeant Roberts, had cut his left hand badly whilst trying to cut a cable

tie off his pack. A landing zone was established in the Fort and a Blackhawk (SA70) arrived to evacuate him. Unfortunately, a second AME aircraft landed and blew 20m of the north wall over and damaged a hut roof 30m from the fort. Luckily the family living in the hut were not hurt.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> May**

Today a section from 7 Platoon (31B) left early for an over night security patrol 3km to the north of Aidabaleten. Just after lunch 31B called in a Casualty Evacuation (CASEVAC) for Corporal Mick Craig, who broke his leg whilst patrolling over very rocky terrain. The Peace Keeping Force air were originally tasked to conduct the AME for him, but after a short delay Blackhawks were sent to conduct the CASEVAC and take him to the hospital in Dili. The section second in command, Lance Corporal Dominic Edwards continued on with the task as the patrol commander. Subsequently, Mick Craig was repatriated home and shortly after Dominic Edwards was promoted to Corporal and took over the section.

These two evacuations so early in the tour gave the troops a great deal of confidence in the evacuation process. It also reinforced to everyone that the excellent training we had conducted in Australia was well worth it.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> May**

One of the bonuses of being a manoeuvre company was the task of Quick Reaction Force (QRF). As platoons rotated through this task, their anticipation of a call out was always on the rise. Today was the first QRF call out for the company. On short notice to move 8 Platoon, lead by Captain Jason Burnett and Sergeant Frank Carey, received the call to deploy to the border area in search of a sighting of up to 30 militia. Although no militia elements were identified, the deployment of the QRF proved to Battalion Headquarters that the company could deploy a large force to the field within 30 minutes.

#### **6<sup>th</sup> May**

Today saw the first sporting event of what was to become a Sunday ritual. Company Headquarters (CHQ) vs the Rest, in a game of indoor cricket played outside, was the match of the day. Lance Corporal Wilem Ross, who is a pretty good cricket player himself, umpired the game. The match was played at a cracking pace with CHQ fielding first and the CQ, Darren Fallo, getting a wicket with his first ball. He was then pestered around for a few balls, but knocked over the water jerries a few times during his allotted two overs. The "Rest" scored a combined total of about 25 runs. Corporal Dave Oliver did his bit to win the game for CHQ by smashing the loose balls over the mess on a few occasions much to the delight of the rest of his team. The game went into an uncertain period when Corporal Michael Jackson and Private Scott McNamara came to the crease. Corporal Michael Jackson crashed and burned losing about 30 runs for 10 gained. In the end, the match came down to CHQ surviving to win by 18 runs.

These sporting Sundays were not always played within the company. Challenges were sent out to the local East Timorese teams and late in the tour soccer was very popular with the Portuguese Battalion based to the north.

#### **7<sup>th</sup> May**

Today started with Callsign 31B calling up from Limanaro with a dubious report of a possible militia sighting. It appeared that a militia member was visiting his sister in the village and was spotted by some locals. This turned into approximately 10 militia in the village but when 31B investigated they only found limited sign and indicated that the sighting had been reported from an old woman. Captain Damien McMahon, OC 31, clarified her reliability by saying, "She's been chewing beetle nut - all day".

The calls went up the chain to Battalion Head Quarters (BHQ) who started giving the OC assets left, right and centre. Initially he was given two helicopters to conduct airborne command and control of the search area.

Next the OC was given Light Armoured Vehicles (LAV) a Recon Patrol and a dog tracker team, to follow up the sign that had been found. They were inserted directly to Limanaro by SA70, and went straight into the search area. Sergeant Mick Parent and his patrol followed up the footpad and found a wall of lantana and little else.

The LAVs stayed at Fort Aidabaleten that evening and provided extra security to the perimeter with their thermal imagery capability. At 11 pm the Battalion "stood to" until 1 am, which was when a predicted attack on a Battalion position was to have been conducted. Fortunately, this did not eventuate.

The 7<sup>th</sup> May was an example of the routine that was to occur time and time again for the company. That is, to react swiftly to sightings and intelligence reports. Not all deployments proved fruitful; however, the soldiers gained a great deal of experience on each deployment.

#### **14<sup>th</sup> May**

The first company operation was called, Operation VIGILINSIA and was designed to be a cordon and sweep through the villages of Peumate and Koilima in the east of the company's Area of Operation.

Captain Jason Burnett's Platoon (32), Lieutenant Cameron Smith's (33), Sergeant Marty Ryan (64C) and CHQ (-) left the company location at 2.30 am in Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) to travel to the start point for the operation. This group's job was to provide the outer cordon to the east and west of the main supply route (MSR) that runs through both villages as well as providing a roadblock on the southern approach. Captain Damien McMahon (31) and the CSM mounted on Infantry Mobility Vehicles and escorted by two LAV's, and elements of 64C moved via a northern route to a blocking position to the north of Peumate. Once the force was in position 31 swept south along the MSR to the southern block approximately 2km.

Although no suspect persons were found or equipment located it was a great learning experience for the company, especially Private Nigel Sargent the 32 Signaller who learned that senior citizens are referred to as elderly not senile. All reports from CMA indicated that the operation was well received by locals. The NUREP (local headman) expressed his thanks for us conducting the operation. The presence of Peace Keeping Forces gave the locals a feeling of greater security and they hope to see more of us in the future.

Meanwhile back at Fort Aidabaleten the Commanding Officer (CO) Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Sengelman, had decided to drop in for breakfast only to find Sergeant Anthony 'Ned' Kelly holding the fort. The OC had left him behind with a few guys from CHQ for the security of the fort. At breakfast Corporal Peter Richards sat with the CO and chatted for a while, after an hour the CO passed on the new maps of the Area of Operations (AO) and briefed Ned on the changes. Later that evening and into the next day when referring to the CO's Concept of Operations brief, Ned was heard to say 'I felt like a mental midget'.

#### **18<sup>th</sup> May**

Sergeant Eric Lewis' section had a most interesting shoot out today. Not with the militia, but with a buffalo. Whilst they were patrolling in the Atabai Forest region a very large buffalo attacked Private Simon Robinson from behind sending him flying to the ground. If not for the accurate shooting provided by Lance Corporal Dan Tolley and Private Lindsay Clark things could have been much worse. At the end of the day the buffalo lost and the company had a nickname. The 'Buffalo Soldiers' had the Battalion's first kill since Vietnam. Eventually, the company Landing Zone at the new fort was named Landing Zone (LZ) Buffalo.

#### **24<sup>th</sup> May**

At this point Charlie Company was informed that it would be taking over the Fort at Marko. Captain Damien McMahon and Sergeant 'Spike' Agnew conducted the initial reconnaissance and the next day Lieutenant Cameron Smith, Sergeant John Caran and their platoon commenced the defence work on

the new fort. Defensive wiring tasks are exhausting at the best of times and the men did a great job.

Life at Aidabaleten had become an effective routine of two week rotations. A defence platoon that conducted Fort Aidabaleten security, held the Bn QRF responsibility and conducted local patrols around the town itself. A patrol platoon conducted patrols around the Atabai area of the Charlie Company AO and the third platoon at Marko maintained security at Fort Marko and conducted patrols of the Cailaco area.

#### **1<sup>st</sup> June**

Throughout our time in Timor the members of the company have had some fantastic experiences; unfortunately, today was not one of them. A local venga bus in the center of town killed a young boy by the name of Augusto De Costa. He was about eight years old and as is the custom of the kids over here he was playing in the street, probably with his mates, when the venga bus hit him, killing him instantly. Lance Corporal Dan Tolley was patrolling the town with his team when the incident occurred. The team moved to the local police station because the driver had handed himself in to the local Civilian police.

The mood of the locals was calm yet very quiet as was to be expected. All vehicles moving through the area were told to slow down and were informed of what had happened. This did not stop some drivers from driving too fast through the town, as is the norm in East Timor. The locals put a blanket over the little boy's body and within minutes flowers had been placed around it as well. The boy's mother was nearby and was obviously very upset. The town was still grieving the loss of a young woman who had been killed in the market grenade attack the previous day. This accident really put a veil of silence over the locals.

This vehicle accident and the grenade attack at the markets once again reminded us of the dangers that are always present.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> June**

There have been a few changes at the fort, including the change over of catering staff. Corporal Ben Roberts arrived and immediately made some sweeping changes to the catering support, which were appreciated. The weather decided to take a turn for the worse today and restart the wet season. It poured down just before lunch and continued on and off for the rest of the day.

#### **12<sup>th</sup> June**

Today, Major Todd Berry led a composite force including APC, LAV, Recon, MRECFOR, as well as members of Alpha, Charlie and Delta Company on a Bn QRF task called Operation RIVERTON after a large number of Displaced Persons came across the border and a category one militia was arrested. With assistance of the Force Protection Element (FPE) and Mission Information Support Team (MIST) the company deployed to an area close to the border. The company cordoned off the village, and then a MIST team went in with a loud hailer and called for all militia to identify themselves. In all, 38 militia handed themselves in.

This was a very successful operation, which was to be the catalyst for the company. Charlie Company once again enhanced its reputation as being able to react at short notice to large scale tasks.

#### **14<sup>th</sup> June**

The Army Band Kapooka along with a troupe of dancing girls arrived today. The band has been touring the area performing for Australian soldiers. But as luck would have it the Battalion had its first contact. As the company was showing its hospitality the call that every one had been waiting for came over the radio. The QRF (33) was placed on 15 minutes notice to move. A section from Alpha Company had just had the Battalion's first contact with 5 militia whilst on patrol in the southern part of their AO. 33 deployed into the AO by Blackhawks to provide a blocking force on the Tactical Coordination Line (TCL).

Just when things seemed to be settling down 31 was also deployed into the Alpha Company AO in response to the helicopter sighting of eight persons on the TCL. This left the fort to be defended by CHQ as well as keeping the band and dancers entertained. Corporal Anthony De-Fraime Murphy gave the band members and dancers a tour of tower one and an explanation of the job the soldiers do manning the tower. Corporal De-Fraime Murphy showed them the equipment used at night. Those left in the fort settled in for a long night, as this was the first time the platoons had deployed as a result of a contact with the militia.

## **18<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> June**

### **Operation ALBATROSS**

This operation involved most of the company group. The company was deployed to the TCL to occupy aggressive harbours. The purpose of this operation was to provide a safe trading environment for the West Timorese/East Timorese to trade close to the TCL. As it happened the Indonesian Army closed the markets down after allowing limited trading on the first day and then closed the markets down completely.

On return to Fort Aidabaleten the company enjoyed a soccer match against the Portuguese company that had been assisting in fort security while we had been away. They had been left under the supervision of Ned Kelly and Private Renato 'Congo' Goncalves (who was promoted to Corporal for the week). Private Goncalves is of Timorese descent and speaks good Tetum and Portuguese so with rank on his sleeve he acted as an interpreter.

The soccer match was played in the fort car park. Several players on both teams ended up losing bark from their hands, back and knees as national pride was on the line. The Portuguese attack was very skilful, but despite soccer not being the Australian national game the boys toughened up and put on a great effort to keep the Portuguese goal less in the first half. In the second half it looked as if we had been given lessons in ball control and flair. Both teams ducked, dipped, dived, chipped, swerved and bled for their Army, country and personal pride but the score remained nil all at full time. We couldn't believe it; the boys had achieved a moral victory by keeping a very skilful European soccer side to a draw. After the Portuguese Battalion (PORBATT) CSM had stopped shaking with rage he saw the funny side of things and relaxed enough to enjoy an excellent lunch from Corporal Ben Roberts.

Later in the tour the company visited the PORBATT HQ for the rematch. Unfortunately, with an under strength side the company went down 9-2.

## **23<sup>rd</sup> June**

Today was fairly quiet and little happened with the exception of the showing of movies. Private Babich supplied the movie this week, from the supply of pirate copies purchased in Balibo, paying about \$A4.00 per movie. The problem is that if you pay \$A4.00 for a movie you get what you pay for. Sometimes ending up with just images and no sound as was the case with the copy. So the crowd halved in size with the rest promptly going off to bed.

## **27<sup>th</sup> June**

Today Mr Keith Payne, VC visited the company. Mr Payne enjoyed a presentation by Private Sean Burton. At the end of the brief Mr Payne said that he thought the brief had been very good and had covered just about everything he could think of. He then joined the soldiers for lunch and had a chat to Private Stevens from the Engineers and Lance Corporal Scott Fischer from 32. Unfortunately, Mr Payne only had about an hour with the company so after renewing old acquaintances with Captain Jones, Mr Payne moved on and visited other members of the Battalion. Mr Payne is one of only three surviving VC winners; those who met Mr Payne were privileged indeed.

### 5<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> July

On the 8<sup>th</sup> July the company finally relocated to the new fort. With air conditioning in the mess and recreation rooms, the company members were suitably impressed. Visits to the company continued to occur on a regular basis. As already mentioned Mr Keith Payne VC dropped in on the 27<sup>th</sup> June. Other visitors throughout July included: the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Army – Warrant Officer Brian Boughton, Land Commander – Major General Peter Abigail, Regimental Sergeant Major Land Command – Warrant Officer Class One Steve Griffiths, Commander Sector West - Brigadier Dick Wilson and Commander Australian Theatre – Air Commodore Treloar.

These visits provided an opportunity for company members to talk to senior officers in a relaxed environment. On most occasions the company brief was given to the visitor by one of the Private soldiers. This is an excellent way to show the maturity, intelligence and professionalism of all ranks from the Battalion to senior members of the Australian Defence Force. The advanced skill sets that the soldiers displayed to all that visited should leave first class impressions with them.

### 20<sup>th</sup> July

Corporal 'Gomer' Graham (who was promoted earlier in the tour) finally got the satellite television up and running. We now had Western Australian local channel seven and nine along with the ABC and SBS.

### 26<sup>th</sup> -27<sup>th</sup> July

Another day and another deployment. Lieutenant Cameron Smith was deployed to Sector West as part of the Commander Sector West's rehearsal. This contingency is in place to support the New Zealand Battalion (NZBATT) that shares Sector West with our Battalion. Major Todd Berry and the unit Adjutant, Captain Richard Niessl deployed to Sector West Headquarters whilst the platoon went to the aid of the Kiwis. This deployment went very well. It was an opportunity to work with other nations and to see another part of the country. The Kiwi area of operations is a lot more tropical and their unit consists of Fijians, Singaporeans, Irish and Nepalese.

### 7<sup>th</sup> August

#### Operation TITAN II

Operation TITAN II was a large-scale deployment of Charlie Company, mounted in Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), along the TCL. Delta Company also provided a platoon to assist. The aim was to show the locals that we can patrol in large numbers anywhere along the border. There were some highs and lows with this operation.

One of the highs was the use of illumination. Both 84mm and 40mm illumination was fired throughout the night. The photos taken by Private Sean Burton were spectacular.

History had shown the need for detailed planning prior to firing. If you were not careful the illumination round could burn down local houses, as had happened previously.

On a sad note, the OC took a turn for the worse in the back of his APC. Corporal Dave Oliver probably thought that the OC was playing a practical joke. Unfortunately, it was no joke and with some help from the CSM and Corporal Robert Woosnam, the OC was driven straight to an LZ where he was taken to Dili hospital. Subsequently, he was transferred to Darwin for further tests. Captain Damien McMahon assumed command of the operation which was completed successfully.

### 11<sup>th</sup> August

With the OC away having his tests Captain Warwick Jones stood in as the OC. He immediately placed Captain Damien McMahon in as the executive officer. Damien was not too happy about that because he hates to be away from his platoon. Regardless, it is good experience to step up every now and again. Lieutenant Cameron Smith also deployed his three sections into the field under command

of the Section second in commands' (2IC's). Lance Corporals Daniel Kelly, Daven Jones and David McKechnie headed off to patrol local villages whilst their section commanders Corporals Henry Maranon, Travis Ingleby and Chris Forestier went down to Alpha company to do a reconnaissance for a future task to occupy Alpha company positions, whilst they have a dining in night.

#### **16<sup>th</sup> August**

News arrived today that Major Berry would not be returning to the company. Whilst the tests in Darwin revealed nothing, it was felt that the best thing to do was head back to Sydney for some more detailed tests. So Major Berry returned to Holsworthy and took up the helm as OC Rear Details.

As a result Major Chris Wallis has marched into the company. And with little fanfare was leading a Company mounted, Battalion operation three days later.

#### **18<sup>th</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> August**

##### **Operation PAVEWAY/NEUTRALISE**

Long Tan Day was also day one of Operation PAVEWAY which in turn rolled into Operation NEUTRALISE. Over the next nine days Charlie Company mounted in APCs manoeuvred all over the Area of Operations (AO). This was done to show the East Timorese that we will be able to secure the area for the up and coming elections. If frequent flier points were available for APC travel then the soldiers of Charlie Company would have earned a round the world ticket.

#### **28<sup>th</sup> August**

The company deployed forward today in order to be prepared for the Election Day and any trouble that may occur due to the results. The build up to the Election saw many thousands of people out on the street in support of their local party. The local feeling is that the Fretlin party will win convincingly.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> September**

The 2 RAR final recon party arrived today and were very keen to see as much as they could of the AO. At the same time 3 RAR were conducting their initial recon. Both groups were very impressed with the living standards at Fort Aidabaleten. On a more disturbing note is the situation where we now have three more people in hospital in Dili and Private Scott McCormack back in Australia with a damaged tendon in his finger. Lieutenant Cameron Smith, Corporal Peter Richards and Private Adam Green are in Dili enjoying six days convalescence leave after treatment to their injuries.

#### **10<sup>th</sup> September**

The results of the election have been slowly released since Election Day. As was expected the Fretlin party won easily. This was good news for the two East Timorese Defence Force (ETDF) members that had been working and living with us for the last month. Both of them had served many years in the armed wing of Fretlin, called Falantil, before it became the ETDF.

With six weeks remaining in the tour, we were all reminded today of the dangers when driving on the roads. Sadly, a Fijian soldier was killed in a vehicle accident involving a truck rolling over in the NZBATT AO. Many more Fijians were severely injured and were lucky to survive.

#### **11<sup>th</sup> September**

Although the events of today did not occur in East Timor it is worth recording for future readers of this chapter that a terrorist attack was carried out in America today. Four jet airliners were hijacked with two of them being flown into the World Trade Centre in New York. One was flown into the Pentagon and another crashed into farmland outside Washington. Those company members not on piquet have been mesmerised by the footage being shown to a stunned worldwide audience.



### 1<sup>st</sup> October

As the company rolled into October the preparation for the return trip to Australia commenced, starting with the sea containers being transported to Port Hera. Inside the containers we placed our trunks and some company stores. So the feeling was that our leaving is just around the corner.

### 25<sup>th</sup> October

The advance party left for Port Hera today; it had been six months since they were last there. At Port Hera the advance party caught up with their trunks and started the cleaning and inspection process. The rest of the company will arrive on 29<sup>th</sup> October and depart for Darwin, Australia on 2<sup>nd</sup> November for the first leg of their journey home.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> November

The big day for most of us as we return to Sydney and reunite with loved ones. It is anticipated this will be a day of great emotion. Family, friends and relatives assisted greatly with numerous parcels and letters, we thank you very much. The company will spend the next ten days cleaning and accounting for all of its equipment before commencing a well-deserved two month break extending over Christmas.



*Private Goncalves and Private Parker act as forward scouts for Corporal Coventry as Patrol 31C patrols the streets of Maliana during OPERATION NEUTRALISE.*