

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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CHAPTER FOUR

Love in the nick of time

In the days leading up to the ballot, activists had been discussing what the likely outcomes would be. There was little doubt that the ballot — despite the intimidation and other forms of Indonesian interference — would deliver a resounding victory to the East Timorese claim to independence. All activists were sure about that. The question was, what would happen immediately afterwards? Opinion was divided on this point.¹

Some warned that the Indonesian authorities would never allow a pro-independence result to stand: they would repeat the events of 1975 by expelling foreign observers and killing the leaders of the pro-independence campaign. Max Lane and Jon Lamb, from the group Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASINET), were convinced that the military would try to reverse the ballot results. Many other activists shared their view, believing that a massive reign of terror in East Timor was highly likely in the absence of a significant popular reaction in Western countries. Not all activists believed this prediction; a large number felt that a clear-cut vote for independence would be too hard to overturn. They assumed that Indonesia did not

possess either the audacity or the political clout required to carry out a Carthaginian solution.

These discussions were not occurring for purely speculative or conversational reasons. They were a basis for future action. In particular, activists were trying to settle a practical question in the short term: what should they do, in Australia and elsewhere, on the weekend that the ballot results were to be announced? Since they couldn't agree on whether a crackdown would occur in East Timor, they decided to hold an event with a flexible theme. If there was no crackdown, the event would be a celebration. If there was a crackdown, the event would become a protest and would try to activate the broader community.

A concert was organised for the night before the announcement by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and Sydney's Harbourside Brasserie. The 'Big Drum-up for East Timor' was to feature musicians such as Deva Permana, the Indonesian percussionist, and the band, Night Flight to Venus. According to Phil Davey, an organiser with the CFMEU, money from the concert would enable East Timorese communities to hang on until Christmas.

The ballot results were announced the next morning. As expected, the outcome was a decisive rejection of the autonomy proposal. The East Timorese wanted independence, and had made their wishes clear. Activists in Australia and overseas were jubilant. But joy soon turned to fear, then despair, and finally rage as the Indonesian military began to implement a plan to reverse the result. By Sunday, most UNAMET offices had come under attack and were being forced to close down. Australia

commenced *Operation Spitfire*, evacuating UNAMET staff, journalists, and foreign observers to Darwin. The evacuation allowed Indonesia to act without foreign witnesses, permitting it to manoeuvre without restrictions.

The Australian public was outraged at what it saw, and demanded an immediate deployment of troops. Kerry Myers, letters editor at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, noted that the public response 'was quite overwhelming:

Readers were shocked, angered, saddened, appalled by the terrible, terrible story. But what was almost palpable was the frustration and impotence expressed by so many. Correspondents wanted something, anything, done to relieve the suffering they were exposed to through daily news reports from Dili. And there appeared nothing much they could do at all. Letters attacked the government, specifically the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, for what the writers saw as hand-wringing inaction ... And as the week wore on there was the chilling realisation that there was to be no rescue for the East Timorese.²

Downer later recalled that 'people were ringing up, crying over the phone, we had more calls on that issue than I've ever had in my life on anything'.³

The public was doing much more than 'ringing up' and 'crying over the phone'; the union movement swung into action, dramatically increasing the pressure on the government.

In Sydney, the first serious protest action occurred on

Monday, 6 September, when activists in the international solidarity movement and several hundred trade unionists protested outside the Sydney office of Garuda airlines. They demanded the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and the insertion of a peacekeeping force. At the conclusion of this protest, the ASIET representatives suggested that a broad organising committee be set up urgently with the aim of holding a mass public rally on Saturday, 11 September. Steve Dixon, an experienced organiser with the CFMEU, and Tony Vicente, another CFMEU organiser with strong ties to the Portuguese and Timorese communities in Sydney, agreed immediately, and offered to hold the meeting at the union's office in the city.

The meeting took place that evening. It was attended by approximately 60 people representing many interested groups: the Australia East Timor Association, ASIET, various trade unions, church groups, and others. Everyone present recognised that the 11 September protest was critical, and agreed to work around the clock to make it as large and uncompromising as possible. As ASIET's Jon Lamb later said, 'We just went all out to build September 11 and it exploded from there'.⁴ Steve Dixon vowed to 'have somebody handing out leaflets at every street corner in Sydney'.

Sleep deprivation and fatigue were ever-present features of activist life during this crucial week. Many people worked non-stop, setting up campaigning stalls in as many places as possible and handing out leaflets in preparation for the 11 September rally. The funds for these activities were largely supplied by the

CFMEU, which was the largest and best-funded group in the movement. Amnesty International organised a vigil at the Martin Place amphitheatre. Churches were also mobilising their congregations. Every night that week, a public mass was held outside the United Nations offices on York Street. All the while, public awareness was building as a result of the saturation coverage the issue was getting in the mainstream media.

On 8 September, a very sizeable rally was held in the city. Approximately 4000 workers, mainly CFMEU members at building sites in the city, walked off the job and attended this rally. The CFMEU was joined by a number of other unions. Garbage workers — with the full support of Randwick Council — refused to pick up garbage from the Indonesian consulate. Printing workers refused to handle paper products made in Indonesia. The Australian Nurses Federation declared its support for all the continuing actions and announced that it had placed several of its members on stand-by to go to East Timor if required. There was no shortage of volunteers in the nursing community for this task.

The Australian Education Union had urged public schools to observe two minutes' silence at midday on Tuesday, 7 September. It increased the tempo of its campaign, propelled by the years of activism of some of its members. The NSW and ACT Independent Education Union resolved to support the CFMEU and other unions in their actions. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) prevented the loading of cargo on all Indonesia-bound ships. The *Bunga Teratia III* was delayed in Port Botany until its owner agreed not to transport 16 cargo

containers bound for Indonesia. In Newcastle, the *Cape Horn* was prevented from loading produce bound for Indonesia. In Brisbane, the *Chekiang* was not allowed to leave until 30 containers headed for Indonesia were unloaded. In Melbourne, \$22 million worth of products were left stranded. In Adelaide, the MUA took 20 containers to a warehouse and declared that they wouldn't be released until East Timor was free. The International Transport Workers Federation called on its 500 affiliates around the world to follow the MUA's example and 'organise appropriate protest action against Indonesian commercial interests including air and sea traffic coming from or bound for Indonesian ports and airports'.

At a special ACTU meeting, unions were urged to place bans on all Indonesian government and commercial interests in Australia. In Melbourne, rank-and-file anger had taken the union leadership by surprise; Leigh Hubbard, secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, said that 'a lot of these members are ahead of the leadership on this one'. At Melbourne airport, passengers travelling to Indonesia were prevented from boarding a Garuda Airlines flight due to depart at 11.00 a.m. Their path had been blocked by construction workers at the airport terminal, who gave them leaflets which apologised for the blockade but explained why it was taking place. Subsequently, the CFMEU's Victorian leadership signalled its intention to take similar action against other Garuda flights until the violence in East Timor ended. It also informed Qantas that it would oppose any attempt to take on displaced Garuda passengers.

The Australian Services Union declared that it was also imposing bans on Garuda Airlines. The Transport Workers Union banned the loading of all Indonesian-bound freight at Melbourne airport. This occurred despite threats from employers. For instance, Qantas staff in Melbourne were warned that they could be prosecuted under the Workplace Relations Act and the Trade Practices Act if they refused to handle or delayed the handling of Garuda freight. Staff responded by intensifying their actions.

Defiance was spreading throughout the union movement. The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, which also represents postal workers, imposed national bans on all mail, telecommunication services, and fault repairs to the Indonesian consulate and to Indonesian businesses. The Australian Workers Union stepped up the pressure, telling BP, Caltex and Shell not to order Indonesian oil because its members would refuse to process it. This was significant because of the union's strategic location: one-third of Australia's crude oil imports came from Indonesia. The Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia agreed to support any campaign to stop the violence. It called for all state and federal instrumentalities, including the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games and the Sydney Paralympic Organising Committee, and all companies manufacturing in Indonesia, to suspend production contracts immediately.

The Greens were a highly visible part of the campaign. Their support attracted the approval of many previously apolitical people, who were also full of praise for the union movement's

work. This response in the broader community was rapid, but it did not arise spontaneously. Activists were tapping into a wellspring of support created by more than 24 years of grassroots activism. A large cross-section of the public was showing its support for the East Timorese. I observed members of the NSW Police Service in civilian attire attending evening vigils in the city along with their families. Some of them were posted to The Rocks local area command, and had been policing the demonstrators a few hours earlier.

At Sydney's international airport, Garuda's check-in desk became the site of protests and blockades. High school and university students walked out of classes and marched to Sydney Town Hall. Many workers held emergency meetings and then walked off the job to join them. At building sites around Sydney, CFMEU organisers accompanied by East Timorese speakers addressed workers and told them about the major rally the next day. Building workers voted to charge themselves a \$5 minimum levy in support of the cause.

The major rally on Saturday, 11 September was held at the Archibold Fountain at Hyde Park. It was attended by approximately 15,000 people. ASIET's Max Lane chaired the rally. Years before he had been forced to leave the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for translating the works of banned Indonesian writer Pramodeya Ananta Toer. Now his uncompromising speech received massive crowd support. The rally turned into a march through Sydney's central business district. While I have seen my fair share of rallies, I observed something very unusual at this one: members of the public were

coming *out* of the shops to join the procession. The 15,000 marchers were drawing more and more people carrying shopping bags. These newcomers joined in the chanting and began handing over their loose change to rally marshals.

It is difficult to estimate how many people ultimately marched through Sydney that afternoon. From one of my predetermined observation points in Park Street, I was able to count in groups of about one hundred — an easy task, because at that point people move in rows of seven to ten.⁵ I stopped counting when the figure exceeded 20,000, although thousands of people were still to pass that point. Perhaps 30,000 people eventually took part, but the figure may be slightly higher.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of these demonstrations is that they increased in size from a few hundred at the start of the week to more than 30,000 by the end of the week in Sydney alone. The forward trajectory of protest was replicated in other cities around Australia. These protests had the quality of deep anger and frustration, as the Howard government's policy of support for the Indonesian military was finally exposed. Public demonstrations were escalating into even larger and angrier rallies, and had begun attracting the fury of the trade unions. Confronted by this kind of anger, the government was finally forced to abandon its defence of the Indonesian military.

Recognising for the first time the precariousness of its own position in the electorate, the government finally did what it could have done months before — ensure that the US exerted pressure on Indonesia to allow peacekeepers in. The problem was that, for the whole of 1999, the government had lobbied to

keep peacekeepers *out*. It now worked frantically to allow international forces to enter East Timor in order to prevent a political crisis in Australia. Contrary to Howard and Downer's earlier claims, repeated even recently when asked why peacekeepers weren't sent in before the ballot, it took only four days of diplomatic pressure for Indonesia to agree to foreign troops.

On Tuesday, 7 September, when the burning of Dili was already underway, the government first began to seriously consider the prospect of an international force in East Timor. To that end, it established an East Timor policy unit within Australian Defence Headquarters. The policy unit's role was to provide political-military guidance and policy support to the Minister for Defence and the Defence executive. The speed with which it was set up is best illustrated by the fact that it did not even have a room of its own to meet in; it was set up in a temporary conference room, and required external infrastructure to function. Formal Defence planning for Australian involvement in an international force began the next day. It would be known as *Operation Warden*.

That week, federal cabinet had been meeting in Melbourne. Panic had begun to take hold; some sections of the public were starting to question the US alliance, and the protests were increasing in intensity and number. The Australian ambassador to the UN, Penny Wensley, was instructed to lobby members of the Security Council. Howard held four telephone conversations with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan during the course of the week, each more desperate than the one

before. Defence minister John Moore was trying to get through to General Wiranto, but Wiranto would not take his calls. Moore did manage to telephone the US defense secretary, William Cohen, but Cohen could give him no assurance of US involvement.

Only Canada, New Zealand, Britain, Thailand, and Malaysia appeared to show varying degrees of willingness to offer their troops for a peacekeeping mission. Howard telephoned US president Clinton, all the while calling publicly for US 'boots on the ground'. Downer made similar calls on international television networks. The real need, however, was for US diplomatic clout to force Indonesia to permit a peacekeeping force. A peace-enforcement mission was necessary to prevent further killings, deportations, and the destruction of the productive base of East Timorese society, but Australia knew that its military could accomplish the task if it could land in East Timor without having to shoot its way in. It would certainly be able to defeat the militia. The challenge was to ensure that the TNI stopped backing them.

The 'rogue elements' line was always a charade, and Australian planners knew it. The US secretary of defense later confirmed that Australia did not at any time request a contribution of combat troops from the United States.⁶ Logistic and other non-combat troops would suffice. But the public call for 'boots on the ground' did have an important symbolic reason: the presence of US soldiers would be an unmistakable signal to Indonesia that the game was finally up. As a senior US diplomat with direct knowledge of the situation later said,

Australian policy-makers 'were desperately anxious for visible US government involvement, to add the sole-superpower's political credibility to their effort'.

Policy-makers were alarmed that the Australian public was starting to ask why the US response was so feeble. They were contrasting this with the promptness that always characterised Australian military deployments in support of US objectives. Public support for the US alliance might begin to decline. There was already considerable bitterness and dismay at US reluctance to respond to Australia's requests.

The earlier US stance was based on its calculation that it 'must put its relationship with Indonesia, a mineral-rich nation of more than 200 million people, ahead of its concern over the political fate of East Timor, a tiny impoverished territory of 800,000 people that is seeking independence.'⁷

However, once it realised that the alliance was in jeopardy, the Clinton administration acted swiftly. As a senior official said, 'We don't have a dog running in the East Timor race, but we have a very big dog running down there called Australia and we have to support it.'⁸ The Australian government insisted strongly, and at the highest levels, that it was time for the United States to demonstrate its appreciation for Australia's numerous contributions to US-led operations around the world. This argument, and the need to prevent a growing Australian resentment towards the US alliance, was convincing. At very senior levels of the US government, the overriding policy concern was how to design an appropriate response to Australian requests.

The US's previous reluctance to get involved had, of course,

been caused by none other than Australia, which had lobbied for peacekeepers to be kept *out*. It had even dissuaded assistant secretary of state Stanley Roth to that end. Now, however, senior US officials were getting involved. The alarm had been raised in Situation Awareness Rooms in the US capital as soon as the post-ballot violence began. Personnel in these rooms are known as watch-keepers. They work in shifts around the clock to monitor geo-political events everywhere in the world. These watch-keepers and intelligence specialists began to provide detailed briefings about the extent of the violence.

Two presidential directives were supposed to guide the actions of US planners. One was Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 25, which sets guidelines and conditions for the involvement of US troops in international operations. Another was PDD 56, which outlines the doctrinal basis for complex contingency operations. So urgently was the action taken that neither of these directives were used. US policy-makers were mobilising as quickly as possible, with no time to invoke these policies. One of the participants later described the situation as 'ad hoc decision-making via a flurry of phone calls by senior policy officials who [hadn't] previously been immersed in the specifics of the crisis under consideration'.

US military planners did not have the opportunity to provide extensive background information to the policy discussions. Because the assistant secretary of state was away from Washington D.C. when the crisis occurred, lower-ranking members of the East Asia-Pacific section and the International Operations (IO) peacekeeping office were tasked to respond to

the under-secretary for political affairs. The deputy national security advisor, James Steinberg, was tasked by his boss, Sandy Berger, to coordinate the strategic effort. The National Security Council's East Asia section lacked staff with long-standing Indonesia expertise.

However, in a sense this was not a serious drawback, because the main concern was to terminate the Indonesian military's operations. Once that was accomplished, a peacekeeping force would still be required to prevent further loss of life, and the Australian-led force would be able to cope. Complex analytical expertise was not necessary. For US planners, there was no detailed examination of the impact this would have on US-Indonesia relations; the main focus was the preservation of the alliance with Australia. It was assumed that the Indonesian military would be angered but would give in without any threat to longer-term US interests in Indonesia.

Portugal's prime minister, Antonio Guterres, telephoned president Clinton, saying that Portuguese troops would be pulled out of Kosovo if a peacekeeping force were not deployed to East Timor. Portugal prevented sixteen US Military flights from departing its airbase in the Azores. For US strategic planners, a really significant source of pressure was the US Congress, where many senators and representatives were urging immediate action. All the years of lobbying undertaken by US activists was paying off. Pro-East Timor members of Congress were able to harness the support of a majority of their fellow congressmen. US senators Leahy and Feingold proposed legislation to bar US support for international financial-

institution assistance to Indonesia. Their bill failed in the final days of the legislative session, but the Clinton administration was haunted by the prospect of its success for several weeks later.

Among US strategic planners, only the joint chiefs of staff argued against the deployment of US troops. They were wary because of their long-standing reluctance to involve US troops in operations short of open warfare. The service chiefs also argued that Australia could do the job on its own because the militia were hardly an effective fighting force. Furthermore, they argued, the Australian Defence Force was well-trained and suitably equipped to deal with any military opposition that it might encounter in East Timor.

However, the civilian planners understood the symbolism of even a token presence of US troops: it would send a clear message to the Indonesian military that the time to end its operations had arrived. Therefore, very frank discussions were held between senior civilian and military leaders, resulting in a firm decision to contribute US troops to a peacekeeping force. A total of about 200 communications, intelligence, and transport specialists were committed, along with logistic and transport assets. While the US said publicly that its contribution was vital, informed sources with direct involvement in the planning later acknowledged that the US contribution was, in fact, quite marginal. After the initial publicity, this contribution was scaled back and eventually withdrawn.

The US ensured that its message to the Indonesian military was delivered in person — Admiral Dennis Blair, commander-

in-chief of the US forces in the Pacific, met General Wiranto in Jakarta on 8 September 1999. Blair did not disclose precisely what he told Wiranto, but undersecretary of state Thomas Pickering testified before Congress the next day that Wiranto had been informed of the US's decision to suspend its military ties with Indonesia.⁹ The Clinton cabinet openly demonstrated its determination to impose order in East Timor. Its official pronouncements on the East Timor situation therefore carried a hint of menace towards Indonesia. Defence secretary William Cohen warned that 'the international community has a number of levers we can pull on. There are serious economic consequences to be sure'. State Department spokesman James Rubin also reminded his audience that:

Indonesia's relations with the international community, including the United States, are at risk here ... we do spend tens of millions of dollars on economic development directly with the Indonesian Government and, obviously, the Indonesian government receives substantial billions of dollars in support pursuant to an agreement with the International Monetary Fund. The International Monetary Fund has indicated it is closely monitoring the situation in East Timor.¹⁰

The US leadership ensured that its messages went to the right address — directly to the Indonesian military leadership. Senior US officials began to impose deadlines on the sanctions, which were explained unambiguously to the Indonesian authorities. The chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General

Hugh Shelton, telephoned Wiranto several times during the week after the announcement of the referendum result. Jakarta remained adamant past the first deadline, triggering a suspension of all US military assistance.

In the morning before he boarded Air Force One to attend an APEC summit in Auckland, president Clinton warned that

if Indonesia does not end the violence, it must invite — *it must invite* — the international community to assist in restoring security ... it would be a pity if the Indonesian recovery were crashed by this.¹¹

Later, in a refueling stop in Hawaii, Clinton was briefed on the East Timor situation by Admiral Dennis Blair, who was fresh from his meeting with General Wiranto. Then, while on the final leg of his flight to Auckland, Clinton issued his strongest statement yet: 'It is clear the Indonesian military is aiding and abetting the militia violence ... This is simply unacceptable.'

Howard was out of step even as the US's warnings were becoming unmistakable. When Clinton announced that he had 'ordered the suspension of all programs of military cooperation with Indonesia, effective immediately', Howard was saying that he'd 'rather them [the US] publicly offer some troops and keep the military ties, quite frankly'. He went on to say, 'I would like to see the Americans doing more, and I would have liked to have seen that more by now'.¹² The morning before he met president Clinton in Auckland, Howard was still saying 'We don't yet have a full-blooded American participation'.¹³ Bill Clinton was

irritated by Howard's public complaints, and expressed his annoyance when the two met in Auckland at the APEC meeting. Howard was chastened; he immediately ditched all talk of 'boots on the ground' and praised the US fulsomely:

I want to make it very clear that we regard the American contribution that has been made as very effective. The American support is very effective, it is very welcome, and I am in no way critical of the contribution that the Americans are making. It is very valuable indeed, and it is being provided to the complete satisfaction of the Australian Defence Force.¹⁴

Despite this private embarrassment, the coincidental timing of the APEC meeting in Auckland was extremely fortunate for Howard. It allowed him to lobby its member states' leaders and other key players.

The Indonesian military could read the writing on the wall. In a visit to Dili on 11 September, Wiranto acknowledged as much when he said, 'We cannot rule out the possibility of accelerating the arrival of the peace-keeping force'.¹⁵ This ambiguous response was a retreat from his previously strident opposition to peacekeepers, but it was not enough. Therefore, in an emergency debate in the UN Security Council on 12 September 1999, US envoy Richard Holbrooke finally warned Indonesia that it faced 'the point of no return in international relations' if it did not accept an international peacekeeping force.¹⁶

Indonesia's resistance ended within hours. On 12 September 1999, Habibie and Wiranto emerged from a special cabinet

meeting. Before the television cameras and microphones of the assembled international media, Habibie announced that his government had decided to allow a UN force into East Timor. Wiranto's presence beside Habibie sent a clear signal that the TNI had agreed to support the decision. Indonesia's capitulation came only two days before the second deadline imposed by US legislation that would have banned US support for economic assistance to Indonesia. This ban would have required the US to vote against the economic rescue-package needed by Indonesia, which therefore had to yield and 'invite' peacekeepers in. It made a last-ditch attempt to exclude Australia by seeking to determine the composition of the force, but this was quickly resolved by the US's public insistence that Indonesia 'not be able to say who is in or not in the force and what the structure of the force would be'.¹⁷

In addition to lobbying the Americans frantically, the Australian government hastened to do what it had resisted doing months before: organise the deployment of troops. Such was their haste (and ignorance) that Australian strategic planners initially named the peacekeeping force IFET — International Force East Timor. When it was then pointed out to them that IFET was an acronym for the International Federation for East Timor — a global coalition of activists and groups who had campaigned for East Timorese independence for years — the acronym was changed to INTERFET.

SCRAMBLING TO ACT

For reasons of space, I will provide only a few examples among many of the rushed planning for the peacekeeping mission.

They demonstrate that the original plan was to evacuate observers, not to deploy troops.

Feeding the Troops

Australian troops were originally not supposed to spend more than a few hours in East Timor. They were to fly in, pick up foreigners and selected East Timorese, and fly out. No plans had therefore been made to provide them with the fresh food required for a sustained deployment. Once it became clear that public outrage had forced the government to execute a peace enforcement operation, ADF logisticians scrambled to provide the force with fresh food.

On the morning of Monday, 20 September 1999, when Australian troops were already landing in Dili, a senior soldier named Tony Feeney received a phone call at his workplace in Singleton, New South Wales. Feeney was the Senior Inspector Foodstuffs for the army, with 17 years' experience in logistics. He was told that he was required to fly to Darwin on Friday, 24 September to organise the catering arrangements for the troops, who were deploying without fresh food. An hour later, he received another phone call, telling him he would have to leave as early as Wednesday, 22 September. Less than an hour later, he received another phone call, telling him he would have to leave the very next day, on Tuesday, 21 September. A few minutes later, he received one more phone call, telling him he would have to leave that afternoon. A car was arriving to pick him up. He was to go to Sydney and fly from there to Darwin. He was to stay in Darwin until he organised the fresh-food supplies for the

entire contingent, which comprised thousands of soldiers.

Clearly, planners were scrambling to accomplish the new mission. Feeney farewelled his wife and his boss, and packed as best he could. He arrived in Darwin on Tuesday morning. Once in Darwin, he went directly to the Joint Logistics Unit, where he found a spare office and got himself a phone line. He immediately began negotiating with suppliers for fresh food supplies. The unit that normally dealt with local suppliers had already left for Darwin in the mad dash, so there was no specialist military logistician at the port of Darwin who could set up the contracts required for such a large operation.

Feeney obtained all fruit, vegetables, and bread from Darwin-based grocers and bakeries. The rest was obtained from suppliers in Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne. A supplier known as Albatross Marine had a standing offer with the Department of Defence in the Northern Territory. Due to the severe time constraints, Feeney was never able to put the contract through the normal tendering process. Instead, he and his team made amendments to the pre-existing standing offer and sent it to the relevant authorities at the Darwin Naval Base to get it signed. But the whole operation — peacekeeping rather than evacuation — was so unexpected that Albatross Marine didn't have the finances required to buy what was needed. It joined forces with a West Australian-based company called Sealanes, which had enough money. Sealanes and Albatross Marine set up a new company, called Albatross Timor, for the specific purpose of fulfilling the forces' requirements.

Albatross Timor provided the food supplies even though the contract had not been signed. In fact, the contract wasn't signed until four weeks after the deliveries began. The Royal Australian Navy vessel that was supposed to transport the rations wasn't able to do so because it, too, was hurrying to fulfil other aspects of the peacekeeping mission. The rations were therefore dispatched on a merchant vessel that could carry containers. It was not until 23 days after the troops first landed that the first ship carrying fresh food left Darwin. The point here is not that the mission was larger than planned, or that there were unexpected things that planners had to cope with. Such a scenario would be unremarkable, because unexpected things occur in all military operations. Rather, the point is that the plan was never to send in a peacekeeping force at all. It was to evacuate observers so that the Indonesian troops could act without foreign witnesses. The experience of numerous participants confirms this.

Combat Engineers

The 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment's planning for Operation Warden began on Saturday 11 September 1999 — only when the Auckland APEC meeting was occurring and nationwide protests had scared the Howard government. The commanding officer of the unit issued orders to prepare for deployment to East Timor only on Monday, 13 September 1999. The regiment's senior soldier Kevin Vann later recalled that, even at this late stage, there had been no executive order from brigade headquarters for the regiment to deploy.

Flak Jackets and Transport Ships

The Australian Defence Force, not expecting to have to arrange for a peacekeeping force, had to borrow 4000 flak jackets from the United States. In addition, the head of the military's support command, Major General Mueller, testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade that the demand for items that weren't in its catalogue had 'been very, very significant' and 'led to a very significant surge in local procurement activity, initially in Darwin and subsequently amongst procurement officers at the Defence National Storage and Distribution Centre in Sydney'. According to Mueller, there was also 'some central procurement action surge on the part of the Army Equipment Management Agency'. The military's troop transport ships, the 8450 tonne *Manoora* and *Kanimbla*, would have been able to transport troops and heavy vehicles, but these were not refitted in time and so were not operational until the year after.

Doctrine

That the original plan had nothing to do with peacekeeping was confirmed when military logisticians later reviewed the operation. Lieutenant-Colonel Susan Smith wrote that 'the ADF effectively went into East Timor without the benefit of a military doctrine explaining how coalition operations would be performed. There was no apparent template for operations in concert with regional nations despite decades worth of regional engagement'. The chief of the Defence Force himself acknowledged 'that a gap existed in Australia's doctrinal

thinking'.¹⁸ According to Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, this situation arose because the Australian military has always 'remained firmly focused on operations with great powers and traditional allies'.¹⁹

The Performance Audit

When the Australian National Audit Office later conducted a performance audit into the management of the deployment, it concluded that the Department of Defence 'could not provide evidence that formal planning for [a multilateral operation] began until later in 1999 ... The nature and size of the ADF involvement in East Timor were not known until shortly before deployment'. This is because 'there was no government strategic requirement for the ADF to be able to form or lead an international peace-keeping coalition force'.²⁰ According to information submitted by the Department of Defence to the Audit Office,

the actual nature and size of the military operations to be undertaken were not clear until shortly before deployment. The number, size and force capability to be provided, and the support required, by the non-Australian troop contributing nations were not known until after the deployment had started.

The Post Operations Report

On return, INTERFET conducted a post-operations report that described the problems encountered by military planners: there

was 'almost a reverse planning sequence where the tactical and operational levels were forced to plan with limited strategic guidance.'²¹ In the final week before the deployment, 'the strategic circumstances were such that the execution date was uncertain and continually delayed'. The 'logistic effort ... was limited by the lack of specialist equipment, particularly container handling, water purification and distribution equipment, and mobile refrigeration'.

The vice-chief of the Defence Force, Air Marshal Doug Riding, was dispatched on an emergency trip through South-East Asia from 14 to 18 September to solicit troop contributions from regional forces. A study later found that this trip 'occurred in a vacuum'. The UN Security Council met in the evening and early morning of 14–15 September 1999, and Riding was in Malaysia when the relevant Security Council resolution was agreed to. Thus, 'it was not at all clear what form the command structure of INTERFET would take'. More strategic guidance was not forthcoming until as late as 17 September (only three days before troops went in), when the interdepartmental East Timor Policy Group was established in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Much is now made of the government's decision on 11 March 1999 to raise another brigade to what it called 'high alert'. The fact is that this brigade was an already existing formation that was told to be prepared to move on 28 days' notice. It was not a new brigade and it was not placed anywhere near high alert. Furthermore, elections were scheduled throughout Indonesia in June that year, and there was a possibility of

Australian and other nationals needing to be evacuated in case of unmanageable electoral violence.

The Post Operations Report puts this in perspective: as a consequence of the move to 28 days' notice, 80 new riflemen were posted to one of the major units in the brigade. This resulted in 'deficiencies [which] profoundly affected [our] readiness and ultimately our capability on deployment'. It 'gave commanders little confidence in [these] soldier's abilities'. In fact, when the unit deployed to East Timor, these soldiers were withdrawn to the rear echelon and not used. In the hasty atmosphere preceding *Operation Warden*, this unit 'was offered new .50 calibre machine guns in mid September but declined due to lack of training time, confidence in the weapon system, etc'.

Language training

The Post Operations Report concluded that, for some of the major units, no language training packages 'were made available through the system for possible operations in East Timor at any stage during 1999'. To the contrary — 'there was an active policy of suppressing access to information ... This policy militated against having colloquial linguists and a culturally aware [unit] for deployment as part of INTERFET'.

AS EASY AS IT GETS

As it turned out, of course, the militia were little more than a creation of the Indonesian military. They were no match for a professional fighting force. Damien Kingsbury, an academic who led an observer team to East Timor, wrote that the militia were

a gutless gang of thugs who rarely had any idea of what it was they were actually doing ... should a proper, disciplined and genuinely neutral police or military force enter the territory, the violence would disappear almost immediately.²²

Kingsbury's assessment was confirmed by numerous studies conducted by the Australian Defence Force after the operation had concluded.²³ These post-operations reports make it clear that, while the dangers were very real, particularly to the East Timorese, they could be dealt with decisively once an international peacekeeping force was sent in without opposition from the Indonesian military.

According to the military logistician Lieutenant-Colonel Susan Smith, the

risks attendant on this concept of operation would have been magnified if the East Timorese militia had mounted any serious opposition to INTERFET. As it turned out ... the logistic system was not tested by a tempo of operations that called for high levels of ammunition usage or other combat supplies.

Smith notes that 'the rump of the ADF's deployable logistic capability had difficulty meeting the Army's requirements'. The problem was coped with by 'stripping other parts of the ADF to meet the deficiencies: a short-term option that was available because the tempo of operation permitted the situation to be managed in this way'. As the chief of the Defence Force confirmed, the force 'was not presented with the stresses and

demands of sustained combat.²⁴ Such opposition as it faced was overcome rapidly: 'The first Aitarak militia member was detained on the first night of the INTERFET deployment. By the next morning there were three and by the end of D+1 there were 16 with numbers increasing daily'. The official assessment of Brigadier J. Wilkinson in his presentation to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade was that, in some respects, for an overseas war-like logistic support operation, the logistics support to the ADF's deployments to East Timor was 'as easy as it gets'.²⁵

Given that almost 80 per cent of the population voted for independence, the militias received no sustenance from the people; and an intelligence failure at the tactical level was next to impossible. The government's constant obfuscation of this basic fact served to take the pressure off the Indonesian military; its statements had the effect of providing diplomatic cover to the architects of the state-sponsored terror campaign. Of course, we know from a few leaked transcripts that, throughout 1999, the Howard government ensured that its diplomats worked energetically to prevent a peacekeeping force from entering East Timor. These leaks are how we know what was really going on, because the government was concealing all this from the public.

It is important to dispel illusions about how and why the troops were sent in. They were not sent in because of the goodwill of the Australian government, but because of massive protests that increased rapidly in both size and fury. Protests such as these, which threaten even more serious action, are

significant to politicians, because they signal deep and wide support within the broader community that has been created over many years.

The Indonesian military forcibly deported tens of thousands of East Timorese to West Timor and elsewhere in Indonesia within two weeks. In another two weeks, it would have ethnically cleansed more than half of the population of East Timor. This campaign would have resulted in the decimation of the productive base of East Timorese society and the annihilation of almost the entire leadership of the national liberation movement. The Howard government's plans fitted in with this strategy by removing foreign witnesses. Instead, the government was forced to turn against an ally it had supported even after the victory of the independence forces had been announced. As for the Indonesian military, it was compelled to retreat before it could accomplish its task. It did not do so because it feared the Australian military but because it was certain to suffer international isolation as its allies — particularly Australia and the United States — were being subjected to massive public pressure.

The next chapter examines the contemporary situation in the wake of the independence of East Timor.