

Balibo and the murder of journalists: The story won't go away

Keith Suter

The largest loss of life ever sustained by the Australian media industry took place on October 16 1975 at the East Timor village of Balibo. Five journalists were killed. All the governments that had citizens involved in the deaths have refused to reveal all that they know. This article is an account of what most likely happened, why the truth has been obscured for so long, how the truth is gradually coming to light thanks to the efforts of some journalists and non-governmental organizations, and what are the lessons of this saga for journalists in armed conflict.

One of the 20th century's biggest wars – in terms of the per capita deaths – arose from the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor. The official date of the invasion is usually given as December 7. But five journalists knew the date as being October 16. They were killed before their story could get to the outside world.¹

In 1974, the Portuguese military rebelled and overthrew their government in Lisbon. The cost of fighting their African colonial wars was bankrupting the country and wrecking the military. The African colonies were put on the path to independence. Half a globe away, little thought was given to East Timor, one of the poorest parts of that empire. The Portuguese wanted to get out as quickly as possible, even though little had been done to prepare the colony for independence.

East Timor was in the middle of the island chain of Indonesia. Indonesia was worried that a flourishing democracy could create an incentive for parts of its own country also to seek independence. On the other hand, if an independent East Timor collapsed, then this could create scope for the communist provision of aid and so East Timor could become the 'Cuba of the South Pacific'.

Indonesia's aggressive intentions were endorsed by Australia. Gough Whitlam's Labour Government also feared that East Timor could become a communist stronghold. Besides, a continuous theme in Australian foreign policy since Suharto's 1965 military takeover was to keep on good terms with Indonesia and ignore its appalling human rights record. Meanwhile, the United States had been driven out of Vietnam in April 1975 and so was also worried about the risk of another communist victory.

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

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

Television journalists Greg Shackleton, aged 29, Gary Cunningham 27, Tony Stewart 21, Brian Peters 24 and Malcolm Rennie 29, travelled to the western part of East Timor in the expectation

of filming the Indonesian forces invade. Although all five were working for two Australian commercial television networks, only two of them were Australian: two were British and one was a New Zealander. Although young, they were highly regarded by their colleagues in the television profession (which itself was less than two decades old).

A few days later, at dawn on 16 October 1975, about 100 Indonesian commandoes and some pro-Indonesian East Timorese attacked the East Timorese defence force (Fretilin) in Balibo. All five journalists were killed. There is continuing controversy over how they died.

The original Indonesian explanation was that they were killed in the crossfire between rival East Timorese Groups (the Indonesians could not of course admit that they were present inside East Timor). An East Timorese explanation was that they were killed by Indonesians during the fight. Other East Timorese explanations argued that they were executed after the Fretilin survivors had fled and the fighting had ceased: they knew too much to be allowed to live.

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

Deception and collusion

The Australian Government has always known more about Balibo than it has admitted. Its reluctance to admit all that it knew has three themes: conspiracy, intelligence and oversight.

First, there was the problem that Australia was implicated in the Indonesian invasion from the outset. Gough Whitlam had advised President Suharto in two meetings in 1974 that Australia would not oppose an Indonesian takeover of East Timor. Thus, Indonesia sucked Australia deeper into the conspiracy. On October 13, Australian embassy officials in Jakarta were secretly briefed by an Indonesian official on the impending attack on October 16. This was an early warning to give Australia enough time to prepare its response to any news it might get to hear about the invasion. It was too late for Australia to start protesting.

Incidentally, the British and New Zealand Governments also had an interest in the Balibo deaths since two of the journalists were British and one was a New Zealander. A representative of the British Embassy in Jakarta was present for the December 5 burial ceremony. But neither Government has expressed any eagerness to enquire about the fate of their citizens and both been willing for them to be described as 'Australians' and so not a matter for their concern. As with Australia, they too evidently thought that East Timor was better off as part of Indonesia. Next of kin have complained that the British Government has been slow to keep them informed of developments in 1975 and since.

Second, some Australians knew about the Balibo deaths as soon as they occurred but they were not allowed to talk about them. The Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) is the largest and most important part of Australia's intelligence agencies. It grew out of Australia's collaboration with the US and UK in breaking the Axis codes, and thus reducing the duration of the war. This collaboration continued into the Cold War and the agencies monitored the communist world's electronic communications. The intelligence thus gained was called Venona and it was so important that no politician was told about it (for fear that they could accidentally or deliberately reveal the extent of the espionage).

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

The only member of the Whitlam Government who had known of the DSD before entering office was the Defence Minister Bill Morrison (a former career diplomat). About 10 hours after the shooting, the permanent head of the Defence Department, Sir Arthur Tange, briefed the Minister on what had happened. Sir Arthur explained that the Government could not reveal what had been

learned about Balibo for fear of alerting the Indonesians to the accuracy of DSD's work. The Indonesians burnt the bodies. DSD listened to the military radio conversations about the bodies being turned into ashes.

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

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

Finally, there is the role of human error. Why were the journalists allowed to go to such a dangerous location to cover the story? No one emerges from this tragedy with much credit. The television companies had not advised the Australian Government of the travel plans for their journalists (who were not, in any case, in radio contact with the outside world). The Australian Embassy in Jakarta did not know the journalists were at Balibo. The Indonesians did not advise the Embassy on October 13 that the journalists were in the path of danger. The Australian Department of Civil Aviation had warned pilots about the dangers of flying into East Timor but had failed to warn the passengers.

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

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

The search for the truth

But the Balibo story has refused to go away. First, the overall East Timor story did not go away. The Indonesian and Australian Governments expected a quick Indonesian victory. But instead the people of East Timor fought back – at a considerable cost to themselves. Their tenacity was rewarded in 2002, when an independent East Timor became the 191st member of the United Nations. Ironically, Jose Ramos Horta, who was then the world's youngest foreign minister in the short-lived self-proclaimed 1975 Fretilin government was back as foreign Minister in 2002. The East Timor struggle attracted a search for 'angles' and one of them was the fate of the journalists.

Second the next of kin (particularly Greg Shackleton's widow Shirley, Wilhelmina 'Minna' Rennie Malcolm's mother, and Maureen Tolfree Brian Peters' sister) have been relentless in seeking what happened. Parts of the Australian media have also been relentless in keeping the issue alive, particularly Jill Jolliffe, a freelance journalist, and Hamish McDonald of The Sydney Morning Herald; Jolliffe was the last journalist to leave East Timor in 1975 and McDonald was in Jakarta that year. As can be expected, they have not received much encouragement from the Australian Government (irrespective of which party was in power).

Third, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have maintained a close interest in the Balibo killings. The NGOs include the British Catholic Institute of International Relations, the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group and the Australian Section of the International Commission of

Jurists (ICJ). In October 1997, the ICJ convened a colloquium at the University of New South Wales, to which relatives of all the victims were able to meet each for the first time. This reviewed the state of the information to date.

Bit by bit the truth has emerged. There has been no dramatic flood, just a persistent trickle. In 1995, responding to continued public pressure, on the 20th anniversary of the killings, the Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans asked government lawyer Tom Sherman QC to investigate the deaths. He did not have the power to compel witnesses to give evidence and some potential East Timorese witnesses did not give evidence because they feared retribution against them or their families. By the time the Sherman Report appeared,² there had been a change of government and the new Howard Government was not interested in pursuing the issue. Sherman thought he had produced a 'preliminary' report but the new Government regarded it as the final one and left it at that. But still more evidence trickled into the Australian media so that the Howard Government was obliged to ask him to produce a second report.³ East Timor's slow progress towards independence in the late 1990s and Suharto's removal from power in Indonesia meant that the Australian Government was under fresh pressure to publish its documents on the events in 1974-64 – though these documents do not reveal much of Balibo because they are not the security intercepts.

Adding to the embarrassment of the Indonesian and Australian Governments was that at least two officers who were fairly junior in 1975 had moved up the career ladder and both became generals: Benny Murdani and Yunus Yosfiah. The latter was the Minister for Information in the Indonesian Government around the time of the Sherman investigations. They were unrepentant for their roles and no action has been taken against them.

The most recent development has been the ICJ's innovative use of the New South Wales state coroner's office. Arising out of the ICJ's work, the family of NSW-citizen Brian Peters have reported Brian Peters as missing, believed dead. The NSW police, as with all such disappearances, have referred the matter to the NSW Coroner. As at writing, Counsel have been appointed to assist with the enquiry. The big difference now is that a coronial enquiry has more teeth than any of the previous Australian ones to obtain evidence under oath from Australians.

Lessons to be learnt

First, 1975 showed the need for training journalists in how to survive in wartime, such as those provided in the UK by AKE Ltd and Centurion Risk Assessment Services Ltd.

Second, there is a need for a government to show that it does care about the fate of its journalists. For example, in February 2002 Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pipes was kidnapped and killed in Pakistan. The US was adamant that Pakistan find the killers and punish them. This determination has been lacking among the Australian, British and New Zealand governments.

Third, there is a need for companies to show that they do care about their journalists overseas. The late Katherine Graham recalled her in her memoirs the problem of dealing with dictators, ironically Suharto's predecessor Sukarno:

'I also had my first encounter of many with a reporter's getting into trouble with a dictator in a foreign country, usually over the reporter's freedom to report. In this case it was Bob McCabe, who represented Newsweek in Hong Kong. He had actually been jailed in Indonesia, and I talked to George Ball in the State Department, who promised to keep on top of the matter and, indeed, did make a statement to President Sukarno. This was the first of a series of battles with dictators – which go on to this day – in which it is always important to let the political leaders know that the organization and its executives personally stand behind the reporters.'⁵

Fourth, there is the difference between the way that Balibo television crews had no way of transmitting their story direct into the networks and today's instant reporting. The pace of technological change in this context has been amazing. Their invasion coverage would today go out live around the world on CCN or the BBC. Jose Ramos Horta left them on October 14 (and probably saved his life), taking their preliminary film to Dili for dispatch to Australia. The film was being shown as a news item after they themselves had been killed.

Finally, the truth comes out in the end. It may take some decades, but at least it does eventually filter out.

Notes

1. For an introduction, see: Desmond Ball and Hamish McDonald *Deaths in Balibo Lies* in Canberra, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000; James Dunn *The Balibo Incident in Perspective*, Sydney: Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, 1995; Jill Jolliffe *Cover-Up: The Inside Story of the Balibo Five*, Melbourne: Scribe, 2001.

2. Tom Sherman *Report on the Deaths of Australian-based Journalists in East Timor in 1975*, Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996.

3. Tom Sherman *Second Report on the Deaths of Australian-based Journalists in East Timor in 1975*, Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1999.

4. Wendy Way (Editor) *Australia and the Indonesian Incorporation of Portuguese Timor 1974-1976*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000.

5. Katharine Graham *Personal History*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997, p 352.

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