THE UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN EAST TIMOR

By Lisa Lim

On 18 Sep 99, the Republic of Singapore Navy’s Landing Ship Tank (LST), the RSS Excellence, the first of the three LSTs committed to the United Nations (UN) authorised International Force in East Timor (INTERFET), set sail from Singapore for Darwin, Australia - the staging area for the Australian-led multi-national force.

Our commitments to the UN’s efforts in East Timor marked a new dimension in Singapore’s contribution to international peace and security. As Dr Tony Tan, DPM and Defence Minister, explained during the sending-off ceremony for members of the SAF platoon of peacekeepers on 19 May 01:

“East Timor is in our region and what happens there has an impact on the rest of the region and on our own security. There is a limit to what Singapore can do on our own to shape the course of events elsewhere in the region, but we can work with like-minded countries to enhance regional peace and security.”

Today, SAF combat peacekeepers continue to serve under the UN Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET), the successor mission to UNTAET, following the independence of the country. In Oct 02, Singapore will take on an expanded role in UNMISET by sending a 160-strong company of peacekeepers. This will be the first time NSFs and operationally ready National Servicemen (NSmen) are taking part as armed peacekeepers. Also for the first time, an SAF officer has been appointed the Force Commander of a UN peacekeeping force. Major-General Tan Huck Gim, former Commander of the 9th Singapore Division, is in command of the military components of UNMISET.

Singapore’s contributions to the UN efforts in East Timor marked a few firsts for the SAF - the first time female SAF personnel have participated in a peacekeeping mission; the first time NSFs and NSmen are being deployed as combat peacekeepers and the first time an SAF officer has been appointed a UN peacekeeping force commander.

Our participation in UN missions reflects our country’s strong support for the UN and the role the UN plays in maintaining international peace and security. It also demonstrates the operational readiness of the SAF. Since 1989, more than 1,200 SAF and other Singaporean personnel have participated in UN missions. Currently, the SAF is also involved in the UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNKOM) and UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE).

Most importantly however, the professional manner in which the SAF has conducted itself in such missions demonstrates our ability to perform and develop from the infant citizen’s army of 1967 to an operationally ready force. The first National Service recruits called up in 1967 – the first ever deployment of SAF soldiers as combat peacekeepers in a UN mission. The duties of these 60 or so SAF soldiers included patrolling, manning checkpoints, protecting vital installations and maintaining peace and security in their designated sector. In addition, the Singapore Police Force sent 145 police officers over the term of UNTAET as part of the UN civilian police contingent.

On 23 Feb 2000, the phased pullout of INTERFET was completed. The responsibility for the security of East Timor was transferred to the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) Peacekeeping Force. On the contribution of the SAF to INTERFET, MAJ-GEN Peter Cosgrove, Commander, INTERFET had this to say:

“Every day you are here, every minute that you’re working at your job, you are helping some people by your presence and by your professional skills.” - MAJ-GEN Peter Cosgrove, Commander, INTERFET, on the SAF in East Timor.

Singapore continued to take part in the next phase - UNTAET. About 330 SAF personnel in all were sent, including medical personnel, staff officers and armed peacekeepers. The SAF platoon of peacekeepers was sent in May 01 – the first ever deployment of SAF soldiers as combat peacekeepers in a UN mission. The duties of these 60 or so SAF soldiers included patrolling, manning checkpoints, protecting vital installations and maintaining peace and security in their designated sector. In addition, the Singapore Police Force sent 145 police officers over the term of UNTAET as part of the UN civilian police contingent.

For queries, please call the writer at Tel. 6768 3934 Fax. 6768 4455. Edited by Maj (Ret) Kuldip Singh