

A UNMISET Case Study

by **BG (Ret) Eric Tan Huck Gim**

Abstract:

This essay presents a case study of BG (Ret) Eric Tan Huck Gim's experience serving in the United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor. It illustrates that all components large and small make valuable contributions to a peacekeeping mission, especially when their efforts are complementary and well-integrated. Tactical success on the ground not only gives confidence to the local population, but can also influence decisions by the international community, ensuring that resources continue to be made available for the mission to achieve its assigned tasks.

Keywords: Coalition Warfare; East Timor; Operations Other Than War; Peacekeeping

INTRODUCTION

Are contributions directly proportionate to the size and sophistication of the military component of a peacekeeping force (PKF)? Do regional partners play a larger role in peacekeeping simply because they have more to gain? Or lose? To try and answer some of these questions, this essay presents a case study of BG (Ret) Eric Tan Huck Gim's experience serving in a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission.

MG Eric Tan Huck Gim served as Peacekeeping Force Commander, United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET) from August 2002 to August 2003. The PKF comprised more than 3,300 armed peacekeepers from 26 Troop Contributing Nations (TCN) and almost 100 unarmed Military Observers. This was the first time a Singaporean General commanded a UN PKF. The PKF was mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1410, dated 17 May 2002, had the role of protecting Timor-Leste from external threats (paragraph 2(c): To Contribute to the Maintenance of the External and Internal Security of East Timor) and was a Chapter VII mission (paragraph 6).

The PKF defined its Centre of Gravity (COG) as "the Trust and Confidence of the people of Timor-Leste. It is important that we retain and build this." This essay describes how a significant external security menace that shook this COG was neutralized by a concerted PKF operation, supported by the military from a neighboring nation, with a major role played by one small state.

THE SITUATION IN TIMOR-LESTE AND UNMISET IN EARLY 2003

In early 2003, Timor-Leste was the newest nation in the world. There were high hopes from both the international community and the Timorese people for peace and development. It was a success story for the UN. The local government was in place, but the police were still being established by the UN and the newly-formed local military did not have the means to protect the country from external aggression. Indonesia was doing all it could to be a good neighbor and its armed forces worked well with the PKF. The population of one million were largely subsistence farmers living in isolated rural villages and greatly dependent on favorable weather to ensure their survival.

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) was one of the TCNs and contributed an infantry company, which operated as part of THAIBATT with responsibility for half of the border between West Timor and Timor-Leste—AUSBATT having responsibility for the other half. SAF further contributed an aviation group of four UH1H helicopters, located within Sector West, which was the HQ for the border area.¹ AUSBATT and THAIBATT reported to Sector West, which in turn reported to PKF HQ in the capital Dili. Although SAF had been sending officers and other specialized teams such as medical personnel to UN missions since 1989 (United Nations Transition Assistance Group),² its contribution to UNMISSET was Singapore's first armed peacekeeping mission.

The culture in UNMISSET PKF, established in part by the Force Commander, was that there were to be no distinctions between large or small TCNs, and large or small components. All components had been sent to ensure peace and security, and brought differing but complementary capabilities with them. At the individual level, the internal message was similar: there was no such thing as a good or bad peacekeeper to start with. All personnel had been handpicked by their home country, simply because there was too much at stake—if any nation sent less than their best, they will be risking their reputation, jeopardizing the overall outcome of the mission and undermining support from the home population. With these precepts in mind, individuals and commanders were motivated to behave along common lines of mutual respect, patience and

tolerance for one another (especially because not all peacekeepers used English as their first language and thus needed more time to articulate their views and share their ideas), and overcame differences in military doctrine and terminology to ensure maximum integration of efforts.

A significant external security menace that shook this COG was neutralized by a concerted PKF operation, supported by the military from a neighboring nation, with a major role played by one small state.

From late 2002 to early 2003, reports of groups terrorizing the villages between the border and Dili grew in number. All-in-all, there were probably three separate groups that had infiltrated across the border and crept into their former villages to settle old scores dating back to the 1999 referendum.³ In at least two of these incidents, villagers had been killed or wounded by gunfire or bladed weapons. Although the PKF and United Nations Police (UNPOL) responded, the difficult terrain and ability of these groups to disperse into the dense vegetation wearing civilian clothes denied them success. As a result, the local population in the affected areas were too terrified to go about their daily lives: children were kept away from school for fear of being abducted and crops were neglected as none of the villagers dared leave their homes to tend them. There was a general mood of insecurity and despondency, and the local leaders, anxious for the well-being of their people, were clamoring for some positive action by the UN. There were also reports that 30 such groups were preparing to come over from West Timor to carry out similar destabilizing actions. These groups were made up of former militia and other East Timorese who did not want their erstwhile countrymen to enjoy the dividends of peace and independence.



MG Tan Huck Gim, Force Commander of UNMISSET Peacekeeping Force, shaking hands with incoming Force Commander, LG Khairuddin Mat Yusof, at the Change of Command Parade held on 29 August 2003 at the Peacekeeping Force (PKF) HQ in Timor-Leste.

The PKF decisively dealt with this threat and, since March 2003, there have not been any further incidents of armed groups coming over from West Timor.

DEALING WITH ARMED GROUPS: THE ATABAE CONTACT, FEBRUARY 2003

24 February 2003, at about 1245 hrs. An armed group tried to stop a truck and later managed to stop a microlet bus on the east-west coastal road from Batugade border crossing point to the capital Dili, at a point about 2 km south of Atabae (in Bobonaro District).⁴ The group wanted food and cigarettes. One passenger of the bus was killed when the group fired on the microlet as the driver sped through them, and four others were injured, one of whom later died. The PKF immediately cordoned off the area and caught the group three days later.

The same day, 24 February 2003, 1255 hrs. Elements of Fiji Company deployed at the Forward Operating Base (FOB) near the small town of Atabae arrived at the incident site and began looking for the group. This company was part of the Australian Combat Battalion Groups

(AUSBATT), who had responsibility for security in the Bobonaro District and that part of the border with West Timor. AUSBATT deployed its 30-man Quick Reaction Force from Maliana to the incident area by about 1330 hrs and its peacekeepers in Armored Personnel Carriers together with tracker dogs joined in the search. Fiji Company deployed additional elements to blocking positions on the south bank of the Loes River, the boundary between AUSBATT and the Portuguese battalion (PORBATT) responsible for neighboring Liquica District. AUSBATT sent two other companies (the battalion had a total of four) to reinforce the cordon, while PORBATT elements deployed at blocking and observation positions along the northern and eastern banks of the Loes River. By 1730 hrs, PKF had over 300 peacekeepers manning an effective ring of surveillance around an area more than 25 by 20 km. On the very same afternoon as the attack, the haystack had been defined and the search for the needle begun.

24, 25 and 26 February 2003. Light Observation Helicopters (LOHs) and mobile teams reinforced with tracking dogs combed the area without pause. PKF HQ had alerted the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) via their HQs in Bali and their troops were watching their side of the border, in case the group tried to sneak back into West Timor.⁵

On the very same afternoon as the attack, the haystack had been defined and the search for the needle begun.

27 February 2003, 1000 hrs. Media representatives were briefed at the Fiji Company FOB in Atabae on the progress of the search, so as to keep the public informed. Commanding Officer AUSBATT, who was directly commanding the operations in the field, joined the press conference. He gave a thorough briefing and assurance that every inch of the cordoned area would be searched until the group was found.

Before returning to Dili, the media were shown the site where the bus was shot at.

The same day, 27 February 2003, just before 1800 hrs. “Contact! The Fijians found the group!” After establishing that no peacekeeper had been hurt, more details were obtained. The Fijian peacekeepers had skillfully tracked the group from a farm where corn was reported stolen (the armed group was badly in need of food), found them in their LUP (Lay Up Position—a location used to pass the night, often with sentries at key points), challenged them,⁶ were shot at, returned fire, and gave chase. One member of the armed group was wounded in the hip and brought into custody, becoming a source of valuable information regarding his own as well as other groups. Also, in their haste to escape the Fijians, all of the group’s equipment and personal belongings had been left behind in the LUP. Among those belongings was a patrol diary, diligently kept by one of the members. This became another crucial source of information.

The next day, 28 February 2003. The Fijian Peacekeepers returned to make a more thorough search of the LUP, and found a body. This member of the group had been shot in the exchange of fire the previous day, made his way to an ambush position (knowing that the peacekeepers would sweep the area) and prepared his SKS-equivalent assault rifle with a full magazine of ten rounds and a hand grenade for his last stand. Fortunately, he died of his wounds before he could inflict any damage. He did not even have time to undo the strings used to prevent his grenade pin from being accidentally pulled out while travelling in the thick jungle. Because he fell backwards into the thick foliage, the peacekeepers did not spot him the previous day when they gave chase to the remaining members of his



Grenade found next to the body, with securing string still intact

group. His clothing and weapons indicated that he was probably one of the more senior members of the group.

A close examination of the LUP showed how cleverly it was sited, with an observation post overlooking the very approach the Fijians had taken the day before. This testified to the strong tactical field-craft of the Fijian peacekeepers—not only in tracking down and locating the group, but also in approaching, challenging, exchanging fire, and pursuing them without any casualties on their part. In accordance with standard procedures, an After Action Board of Inquiry was held to record the actions of the peacekeepers, so that there would no doubt they had acted well within the Rules of Engagement (ROE). The Force Commander sent a letter to the Fijian Chief of Defense Force, to congratulate him on the sterling performance of his troops.

The patrol diary and wounded member of the armed group (his initials are DDJ, aged 40), provided a good picture of the group and its activities. Having recruited some younger Timorese into their group, DDJ and his other former militia colleagues (he was wearing a

T-shirt bearing the name of a notorious militia group at the time of his capture, and confessed that he was part of a militia group in the past) left Atambua (West Timor) on 13 February and sneaked into Timor-Leste to carry out armed robbery and extort money from family members. Their final destination was Gleno (a town in Ermera District), some 30 km from where they were found. The patrol diary revealed that they only managed to get past the PKF sentries at the border after two days of patiently waiting for a suitably dark and rainy night. The diary went on to explain their difficulties in evading the PKF search and obtaining food and water, despite having brought along civilian clothes and toiletries so they could move amongst the locals. DDJ gave information about the identities of the other eight members of his group. Aged 35 to 50, all were formerly from Ermera District, except one who was previously from Dili. Most were known only by their first names, which made it difficult for the police to carry out further investigations. According to DDJ, the group had come across the border with three long-barreled firearms and two Rakitans (home-made pipe guns, one of which was recovered at the LUP).

After the contact. Timorese leaders expressed gratitude for the actions of UNMISSET. A few days later, PKF were told by TNI that they had arrested the remaining six members of this armed group as they attempted to cross back into West Timor. This group, at least, would no longer terrorize their fellow Timorese.

Since the destruction of this group, no other armed incursion from West Timor has ever been reported. Those waiting to cross over had received the clear message that they would be hunted down.

THE OUTCOME

Whilst the most immediate outcome of this operation against armed groups was the restoration of confidence among the local population, the more strategic outcome was a pause in the downsizing of PKF UNMISSET. Because it was already a success story, the Security Council had been preparing to downsize the mission and leave Timor-Leste to its own devices. The emergence of armed groups caused great concern amongst Timorese leaders and those in UNMISSET that such downsizing would mean much reduced resources to maintain security along the border.⁷

When the photographs and reports were sent to the Security Council, it persuaded those that had trivialized the armed group incidents as isolated cases of banditry to view them as what they actually were: the first of many organized groups of trained and armed East Timorese coming across the border, determined to negate the peace gains that Timor-Leste and the UN had collectively amassed.

This pause in downsizing ensured sufficient PKF elements remained in the border area to deter further incursions.

This led to the Security Council issuing Resolution 1473 on 4 April 2003 which “Decides that the schedule for the downsizing of the military component of UNMISSET for the period up until December 2003 will be adjusted in line with the letter of 28 March 2003 from the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations to the members of the Security Council; and, accordingly, that two battalions will be retained within regions adjoining the Tactical Coordination Line during this period, together with associated force elements, including mobility; and that the number of military peacekeepers will reduce to 1,750 more

gradually than was foreseen in resolution 1410 (2002)” (paragraph 2). This pause in downsizing ensured sufficient PKF elements remained in the border area to deter further incursions.

CONCLUSION

This case study illustrates that all components large and small make valuable contributions to a peacekeeping mission, especially when their efforts are complementary and well integrated. When dealing with cross-border threats, it is essential that clear operating processes between military forces at each side of the border are in place and kept updated. Finally, tactical success on the ground not only gives confidence to the local population to go about their routine activities, but can also influence decisions by the international community, ensuring that resources continue to be made available for the mission to achieve its assigned tasks. 🌐

Although most of these people eventually returned to Timor-Leste, there were still an estimated 30,000 East Timorese in West Timor during 2003. The ex-militia within this residue formed armed groups and came across the border in late 2002 to early 2003 to take revenge on those who had voted for independence.

4. A microlet is an Indonesian-type minibus or van that carries paid passengers along an established route. The route plied by this particular microlet was the Dili-Border road that hugs the northern coastline of Timor-Leste.
5. Tentara Nasional Indonesia, the military of Indonesia.
6. Although UNMISSET’s ROE were robust enough to allow the peacekeepers to engage without issuing a challenge, the Fijians decided to give the group the benefit of the doubt.
7. At that time, the local military was far from ready to fill the gaps created by a downsized PKF.

ENDNOTES

1. The border between Timor-Leste and West Timor (the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur) stretches largely unmarked over almost 120 km from one coastline to the other. During UNMISSET, this area was the Tactical Coordination Line (TCL) established between the UN and the Indonesian military. It traversed rugged terrain and was extremely porous. Although several regulated crossing-points were established, the population on both sides crossed wherever they wished.
2. The UN Transition Assistance Group (1989-1990) was established to ensure the early independence of Namibia through free and fair elections.
3. In late 1999, Indonesia granted a referendum for East Timorese to decide whether to remain with Indonesia but have autonomy, or to become independent. An overwhelming majority voted for independence, which led to violence by pro-autonomy East Timorese, many of whom were armed ex-militia. The UN sanctioned an Australian-led intervention force that restored law and order, but in the meantime, the ex-militia had forced more than 200,000 East Timorese over to West Timor.



BG (Ret) Eric Tan Huck Gim is an Artillery Officer and has served the SAF for 32 years. Before retiring as Commandant SAFTI-MI in October 2005, he led in a major review of SAF officer education, the first since the Institute was formed in 1995. Another highlight of BG Tan's military career was serving as Peacekeeping Force Commander of the UN Mission in Support of East Timor (UNMISET). From August 2002 to August 2003, he commanded a multinational force of 3,300 peacekeepers from 26 nations to ensure peace in Timor-Leste. Following a crisis in 2006, he rejoined the UN in Timor-Leste for another year, this time in the civilian capacity of Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, responsible for Security Sector Reform and Rule of Law. The second most senior individual in the mission, BG Tan supervised the multinational UN police force of 1,700, restored security across the country amidst tense political elections and reconstituted the local police force.