

Restoring peace

in Timor-Leste

Like the Solomon Islands deployments, other QPS officers were selected to travel to East Timor as members of UNAMET (United Nations Assistance Mission—East Timor)—the ‘blue beret’ team. They were part of an international group of police and military personnel who had taken over from INTERFET (International Force—East Timor) headed by Major General Peter Cosgrove.

Senior Sergeant Stephen Angus was selected to lead police in the Cova Lima District of Timor-Leste. Senior Sergeant Angus said he saw little of the capital city Dili, instead travelling immediately to East Timor’s provinces to assist with policing efforts.



Clockwise from top: The Mabusi Valley in the Cova Lima District marks the highest point in East Timor; Senior Sergeant Stephen Angus answers questions for a local radio station; Local villagers lend a hand at a Suai Village river crossing, Cova Lima District.

Background: Rice paddies near Suai Village.

I arrived in Timor-Leste in July 2007, and was appointed District Commander of the Cova Lima District by the United Nations Police Commissioner Rodolfo Tor. The district is in the south of the country on the border with West Timor which is occupied by the Indonesians. I remained in this position until my return to Australia in February 2008.

I was and remain deeply humbled by the experience to serve as a police officer in a foreign country and grateful for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience other cultures and personalities.

One of the things I remember most of the experience is working with fellow police officers from around the world and their strong desire to serve the community. At times the experience was challenging but it was certainly rewarding and it showed that regardless of race, ethnicity or religion police officers from all over the world have the same desire to protect and serve the community.

Our experience as police in the district was inherently different to that in Dili where much of the social structures had broken down. Police officers were regarded highly and our focus was to adopt a proactive approach—in other words, ‘community policing’.

We were even able to deal effectively with Alfredo Reinado and his armed militia who frequented the area as the district was designated as a cantonment area. Reinado was later killed in Dili attempting to assassinate East Timorese President José Ramos-Horta.

Working relations with the local Policia Nationale Timor-Leste (PNTL) were excellent. We were invited to attend weddings and funerals and other social functions, thus witnessing the Timorese culture first hand. The Timorese have a strong belief in the family unit and are not dissimilar to us in that they like a laugh and a joke and enjoy a beer as well.

The capital of the district Suai where we were stationed was the site of a massacre in 1999 where militants killed the priests and burned down the local church after killing most of the congregation. The hardship of everyday living in Timor-Leste makes you appreciate that we truly live in a lucky country.

Our police presence was there to provide security and protect life and property. There were constant threats by differing political parties to attack opposing sub-districts and villages. We had to deal with killings, exhumations, riots and large scale civil disturbances.

January 2008 was particularly busy with large scale fighting between the villagers of Kunain and Matai. Fourteen houses were burnt to the ground in Matai and large numbers of refugees were

displaced. We worked closely with the community and aid organisations until peace was restored and refugees were found accommodation.

It was personally gratifying to be able to help the people of Timor-Leste in the capacity of a police officer by preventing violence and restoring and maintaining peace and order.

Travelling throughout the district was also a highly treasured experience. During 2007 I visited Tilomar, the site of a memorial for New Zealand soldiers killed during the incursion of militia into the area. The fact that high ranking UN officials, and New Zealand and Australian politicians and soldiers also visited to pay their respects made it a more moving experience.

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