

through the blinding glare and stop the escape. Some made it out, to the detriment of the other target as the entire troop expended ammunition into the only one remaining.

With the news of each shoot getting out, visitors became the norm and increased in numbers. The crew commanders thought selling tickets might be a good idea, as new faces would be constantly jumping in and saying, "yes I am next". We were just waiting for the local kids to catch on and join the end of the line. Bang Bang Mister? Having visitors did have their advantages though with some of the boys getting a chance to shoot from the door gun in a Blackhawk. The experience was lost on some who complained about the amount of sand that came into the aircraft upon landing and take off.

David Johnston also experienced *first hand* how hot a minimi barrel can get, the resulting blister the size of a tennis ball. The lengths he went to for a puff on the Magic Whistle amazed us. We were concerned that the three whistles that Veg gave Johnno may have got him addicted.

### The Locals

One of the highlights of our tour to East Timor was meeting the local people. The advantage that we had over other soldiers in the AUSBATT AO was evident in our ability to go anywhere in the AO. Added to that was the fact that our vehicles received a huge response from the people, especially the children. Wherever we went in East Timor we inevitably found children, or in most cases they found us. They were everywhere. East Timorese kids love armoured vehicles and they would run from their houses in an effort to get in a short wave as we drove past.

It was noticed that a brief wave from an armoured crewman brought about a raft of different emotions. Most kids simply returned our gestures; some would even shy to the attention and turn away. Others would go into a mad little dance as though they had just won something. Whatever the response, it was disproportionate to the effort required to wave, and we always tried to do so. Russell 'Iceman' Hamblin even pioneered research into the double-handed wave. The response was immediate and just spectacular; it would cause fits of laughter not only in the children but the others around and bring huge smiles to us as well. Such little effort brought huge rewards.

The impact of not waving was evident during Shadow Force operations (where we cammed up, and acted as an outside force). We were told we could not wave to the locals. This almost brought on mutiny in the ranks and the response from the locals varied from confusion to down right hatred. One woman waved her baby's hand at Sergeant Adams' crew. When they didn't wave back, her reaction was explosive. It really illustrated the very emotional nature of these people. As far as we were concerned, any deception value achieved by Shadow Force was to the detriment of the overall Battalion mission. In the village of Memo, it took the Troop weeks to get the people's trust back. During Shadow Force operations most of the crews chose to retreat into our capolas thus avoiding eye contact and therefore lessening the effect of not waving.

Upon stopping at a village the children would generally be the first to approach us. The cries of bon bon (lollies) mister or aqua (water) usually followed. A few choice Tetum phrases can assist immeasurably in trying to avoid a "handout" culture. On such occasions requests for lollies was often met with a flurry of punches from an unimpressed sibling or even the offenders being chased away by an angry grown up.

The life style of the people in East Timor was obviously far different to the life of modern convenience that we take for granted in Australia. The people will walk for miles just to tend a crop or to a water source. It was not unusual, to see seven year old children caring for a younger member of their family or a five-year old walking by themselves in the middle of nowhere. The incredible part was how they spoke confidently to us Aussies who showed up in large, noisy armoured vehicles. We were strangers with guns, yet they knew us as friends. It was a gratifying experience, and a tribute to the soldiers who were in Timor before us.

Some villages became favourites and places we would visit in some spare time or make part of our task. People remembered who we were and friendships developed as we would hand out photographs

of previous visits or special ones taken on the spot with a polaroid. This proved a huge hit and won instant friendship for Bradley Latimer, the owner of the camera. If you had photographs like Russ Hamblin always did you would be mobbed and inevitably disappear under the crowd of people.

Another chance to get amongst the local people presented itself in the form of cinema nights. Corporal Kevin 'Sloppy' Heslop, Iceman, Troopers William Woods and Jason Lane became regulars at these nights in Balibo where CMA would erect a screen on the village roundabout and put on cartoons followed by a feature film. The night would commence at around 7pm and go as late as 11pm. On every occasion hundreds of children and even their families would attend. These nights allowed us to mingle with our small friends and added the bonus of extra Tetum training or just getting away from the rest of the Troop and army life. Living so closely together was fairly draining at times, so movie nights with the smiles and laughter of a local child were the recipe to get us back on top of life again.

During the later half of our tour the addition of an ASLAV for 'security' provided a much needed seating platform and brew point. We would like to think that those friends we often sat with, who had walked many kilometres just to get to Balibo, enjoyed the movies as much as we did. The security we provided for these nights reflects that bringing a smile to these people can be such an easy task.

Our ability to travel across the country has allowed us to meet hundreds if not thousands of people and in particular the smiling children. Most of us probably have a story to tell of some little kid somewhere that captured our interest. Maybe it was their smile, their looks or even their attitude, but there was something that made them stick out from the crowd and gave us a memory. To leave this country with only the money means going home half as rich. It truly is the land of the little people.

## Conclusion

With the election phase peacefully completed our attention slowly shifted towards our return to Australia. Preparations were made to ensure our replacements hit the ground running with task worthy vehicles, maps and inside information on our favourite villages and the best views. With the Wet Season coming we did not envy the task that the A Sqn boys had in front of them, memories of the muddy goat tracks that greeted us on arrival present vehicle challenges and lessons in patience.

It is not lost on the V32 Troop that C Sqn 2 Cavalry Regiment has now witnessed two historical events in the tumultuous life of this country. During our time here the Troop has embraced and been embraced by these wonderful people. The kids especially, melt your heart and consistently remind you that the job we are doing here is one we should be proud of. The transformation observed by all since our involvement two years ago, is a credit to the Australian servicemen and women as well as a reflection on how tough, proud and resilient these people really are. We know that we will have a long and prosperous involvement in the future of East Timor with many possibly returning again.

Our thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Sengelman and the men of 4RAR as well as the many other soldiers like us that formed the Battalion Group. Everyone was required to work together in order to achieve all that was. Many a lasting friendship has been formed in our six months and we have certainly learnt a lot working within the 'UN Machine'.



*V32A. Sergeant Adams Trooper Woods & Trooper Byrne churn up the Namuru river on a patrol to Aidabasalala.*



**MATES OF MONSTA.**

*The blokes from 2 Cav, and 2<sup>nd</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> Light Horse who were mates with Corporal Jones pay their respects on the anniversary of his death.*



**V32A**

*Ironically, 24 hrs after V32A is recovered by MI 26, the Troop provides assistance to 5 Arm in the form of the fitters vehicle 38A.*



**V32 TROOP GROUP IN THE COMPOUND AT BALIBO.**

*Absent are Sergeant Florian who was not yet in country, and Private Mark 'Doc' Vegera, who was conducting first aid on a civilian casualty.*