

A View from the Front

UN Military Hospital, Dili, East Timor. Dog Day. A poem about a day in the life of a military physician.¹

RKA Allen²



Figure 1: The author outside the Medical Officers' tent (covered in camouflage netting) with the RESUS Trelenberg to the left and the Dili Museum (mushroom) in the background.

As the United Nations military involvement in East Timor enters its second year, I submit this poem, which I wrote in East Timor last year as a Medical Officer working at the UN Military Hospital in Dili. Numerous other Reserve Officers from the RAAMC, RAAF and RAN Reserve, as well as Regular Officers, have served there by now. The Reservists were usually on five-week rotations from civilian life in Australia and each has a different story to tell. We were uprooted voluntarily from normal life to serve in a foreign land and were confronted with its own unique cultural, climatic, psychological and physical insults, all of which was compounded by the short duration of the "Tour of Duty".

In my small way I had felt a duty to help repay the East Timorese for the shameful expedience and pragmatism of our country during their twenty-five years of illegal Indonesian occupation, which had led to the systematic destruction of a sovereign people

under our noses.^{1,2} I was a small cog in a large machine and knew that this important epoch of their history was only a tiny part of a Portuguese colonial legacy that was nearly three hundred years old when Captain James Cook docked there for supplies after charting our east coast.^{3,4}

This was my first time in a "war-like" setting, which was relatively "quiet" in comparison to Vietnam and Rwanda but nevertheless presented a challenge to one's central nervous system and pituitary-adrenal axis. I was a little different in that I was a specialist physician (Thoracic and Sleep Disorders) and was there because I had worked in intensive care for many years part-time. I had been commissioned in 1988 and was initially posted to 2 Field Hospital, Brisbane. I had rejoined the Active Reserve in early 1999 and was a Lieutenant Colonel.

The medical teams consisted of an intensivist, surgeon, orthopaedic surgeon,

¹ Allen RKA. UN Military Hospital, Dili, East Timor. Dog Day. A poem about a day in the life of a military physician. *Aust Mil Med* 2001; 10(1), 15-19.

² LTCOL Roger Allen, RAAMC is a Consultant Thoracic and Sleep Physician based in Brisbane.

anaesthetist and tropical diseases/public health specialist, usually from different capital cities. Physicians were quite useful as most of the casualties of war are still "medical", a truth that still seems oddly lacking from the military consciousness. We all bonded together surprisingly well and there was much humour, a common feature of Australian soldiers. I thought the nursing officers were excellent.

On return to Australia, I believe most of us suffered a period of cultural and psychological readjustment and it would not surprise me if there were an increasingly common form of low-grade, post-traumatic stress disorder in soldiers, including medical and nursing staff, returning from service in East Timor.

Although this may seem strange in the androgynous world of military macho-men, my most treasured possession there was a little painted metal toy, Trevor the Traction Engine (viz. Thomas the Tank Engine) that my three year old son, Kennedy, had sent by mail and which sat proudly on my cardboard box "dresser" near my squeaky stretcher.

To some, war is a great adventure, not to be missed for anything. I think this immature attitude prevails even for many medical officers (perhaps bored with their wives and civilian medicine). However, I submit another attitude. As a Francophone/phile, may I commend the famous French author, pioneer aviator and military pilot, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry who was lost in a Lightning near Corsica in 1944 and whose works both for adults and children (eg. *The Little Prince*) have been a great source of pleasure for me. His works have been translated in many languages. In "Terre des hommes", he says:

"J'ai autrefois vécu des aventures: la création des lignes postales, la dissidence saharienne, L'Amérique du Sud... mais la guerre n'est point une aventure véritable, elle n'est qu'un ersatz d'aventure. L'aventure repose sur la richesse des liens qu'elle établit, des problèmes qu'elle pose, des créations qu'elle provoque. Il ne suffit pas, pour transformer en aventure le simple jeu de pile ou face, d'engager sur lui la vie et la mort. La guerre n'est pas une aventure. La guerre est une maladie. Comme le typhus."^{5,6}

Translation (Author's own):

"In another time I have lived adventures: the creation of aerial postal services, the disaffection of the Sahara, South America...but war is not really a true adventure. It is only a pseudo-adventure. Adventure rests on the richness of the bonds that it establishes, the problems that it presents, the creativity that it provokes. It is not enough to transform into an

adventure, the simple game of heads or tails, by pawning life and death as the stakes. War is not an adventure. War is a disease. Like typhus."

Monotony is almost a sine qua non of war and this I found the most difficult to bear as back home I am a busy clinician constantly battling with my enemy, Time.

I dedicate this poem to my colleagues who



served with me. Most of all it is to my wife, Linda and our children who bore the pain of separation so keenly.

I have purposely submitted this poem to a military journal, as its readership should be familiar with the military allusions therein.

Figure 2: Australian soldiers securing the Egyptians' ward (tent) in a tropical afternoon downpour.

The poem is enclosed, unedited, at the author's request.

UN MILITARY HOSPITAL, DILI.

"DOG DAY"

Island of tents amid ravage and burn,
mushroom museum, strange-domed,
pragmatic blend of local and new,
heat and mid-morning sweat,
brain-thumping torpor.

Endless noise drowns
sparrows' familiar, busy cheep,
generators, air-conditioners,
trucks, the white Hum-V,
roaring machines that fog and choke
all vermin, pests
.....and man.

Tents white-smoked in modern DDT,
"It's safe they say",
the "Rat Catcher's" morning round.
The television's ceaseless babble,
moronic, canned laughter,
heat's weighty blast.
breath-taking,
in the damned "Rec. Tent".

I rise at daylight's cool glow of pinky-red,
A rooster crows,
(not allowed in Brisbane),
coconut palms' dark shadows in eastern sky.
I cannot sleep.
It's already hot.
Thoughts of home's sweet sounds....
....my love, doe-eyed,
the children's morning chatter,
the cup of tea and toast in bed.

The fogging's twice weekly,
0600 hrs,
"Fogging, Sir. Clear the tent!".
I flee.

The all-familiar roaring "fart" begins
to clear the insect world-
all-mocking,
white man's pyrrhic victory.
....Nature smiles.

The shower room;
steamy with the early morning heat,
two showers; fifty men,
two porcelain toilets too,
naked men, tight buttocks,
muscular and thin,
dark-skinned Portuguese
(our women drool),
these men who guard
our barbed-wire wall and tiny world.
Weapons rest on weapon rack,
incongruous in this peaceful no-mans land,
mighty leveler of man and rank,
floor, mud-wet from dirt and shoes,
shaving men, mirrors' grimace,
half-white faces,
razors' rattle on steel sinks,
a soup of soap and bristles.
The mindless hum of brushing teeth,

damned toilet's still engaged,
can see feet and trousers down.
"Morning, Sir", greetings half asleep,
and Sir grunts reply.
Men lined up for first morning's leak,
"Ease springs"
hold on;
long night's too long walk postponed,
quick shake, discretions flick,
boys 'glancing thought
....of other joys.

Breakfast 0600 hours,
Same again,
like a bloody nursing home.
Cereal in those small boxes,
memories of childhood's joys,
long-life milk,
morning's medication;
the daily "Doxy" pill;
that modern miracle,
malaria's scourge,
(the Philipinos say it stops the urge),
perhaps they're right,
It's dead out here.
The juice is only....
bugger me,
that UN grapefruit ,
German carton says "pamplemousse".
The UN ship is late,
cheaper rations now.
Paper plates and bowls,
Plastic "kfs",
cup and cordial again,
the same old milk and tea.
no bone china,
or silver spoons,
(I remember
our children's morning breakfast mess).
We've tried Egyptian bread,
they call "Ah eesh".
They're after us at seven.
Our bored taste-buds' wander lust;
it's not too bad.
Hurry up!
Hot tea, plastic spoon,
damned cup's too hot,
I burn my lips
TOET's at 0700,
For it's too damned hot near noon.

"Squad line up!"
We face a wall,
Glary, mocking white,
the morning, tropic sun.
Webbing's heavy, hot,
sleeves rolled down,
sweat runs down my face
rifles' check, mag off,
strip, safe,
crisp "click, click", mag on.

No UD's, thank God.

Ward round 0730 hours
Throng of doctors,
Uniformed, unclinical cams,
And the nurses too.
Patients lie in rows on beds,
hapless victims of Fate's cruel and funny
hand.

A quiet sly joke about bed 3...
the ward round starts,
a cruel distraction,
Tight T-shirt,
nurse's round comeliness
?Wonder-Bra?
quick daydream of lurid thoughts,
and forbidden fruit.

Finished at 0800.
Now the wait to fill the void.
Intensive care has none,
But its cool "aircon" beckons,
sweet temptress,
But alas it has no sun
Windowless like Hades' gloom.
I choose the heat and sky,
and a morning cup of tea,
My email's sent in time,
the world wide wait,
that wonder web has crashed again.
Theatre has a gunshot case,
Excitement in the surgeons' eyes.
Those simple souls,
boys' sandpit days again.
These lucky ones can fill a sweaty hour.
Sweat cools in theatre,
quaint world of gas
and blood and mystery.
White clumsy overboots,
cool blue theatre tops,
Bonny paper hats with cams below.
Self-mocking farce,
Adults' dress-up.
I have another cup of tea.

Lunch at 1230 hours.
Same routine,
Plastic, paper plates and tools.
A nap at 1400,
too hot to read.
My mozzie dome a tomb of heat
...no breeze.
Wind drops, more heat and sweat,
They say a fan is good inside.
I awake half drugged at 1530 hours.
another cup of tea.
Some do the airport walk,
8 "k" of fun,
an hour's walk through dust and heat,
breaks the drudgery of time,
then back with the setting sun.

A shower,
but still feel sweat's ooze.
Dinner at 1800
It's not for food
but friendship's chatter and repartee;

some fun.

Sleeves down, Rid on, with gun.
more plastic and paper plates,
destined for the local tip's
sad scavengers;
East Timor's newest sons.

The 1900 ward round,
Many have been discharged, thank God.
We retire to the "Specialists' Tent"
A brew, a chat, mozzie coils,
muffled chats on mobile phones,
"It's home".
"Good God it's 8pm!
Time for bed!" says one.
Jokes about "the nursing home".
I leave the tent.
One of Egypt's sons says "hello".
He teaches me more Arabic.
"Es salaem alekum".

The Southern Cross climbs in the southern
sky,
above shadowed hills behind.
For a moment Australia wells up inside,
Scorpio's above in "winters" night,
rising from the east,
its curling tail,
beckons my spirit home,

I retire for bed.
a shower again,
"two minute's the limit!"
..at least the water's cool.
Late night shower,
no morning rush.
Nocturnal shave,
All's quiet now,
They're asleep.
Off to bed, the same routine,
Spray inside the mozzie dome,
my Steyr beside, check "safe".
Torch and glasses off,
I stink of "Rid",
dreams fly home,
frequent wakes from squeaking turns,
these bloody Army beds.
Sweat runs down my chest,
sheet and pillow salty damp.
Hope it's quiet tonight...
I drift off to sleep.

References:

1. Taudevin L. *East Timor - too little too late*. Sydney: Duffey and Snellgrove; 1999.
2. Labourdette J-F. *Histoire du Portugal*. Paris: Fayard; 2000.
3. Ramos-Horta J. *La saga du Timor-Oriental. (Prix Nobel de la Paix 96)*. Lausanne: Favre; 1997'
4. Hough R. *Captain James Cook, a biography*. London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1994: 159
5. Saint-Exupéry AMR. *Terre des hommes*. Paris: Gallimard; 1939:76.
6. Estang L. Saint-Exupéry par lui-même. *Collections microcosme. Ecrivains de toujours*. Paris; 1956:82.