



South Australians at war – transcript – OH 644/2

Interview with Mr Brent Aldridge recorded by Rob Linn at Oakbank, South Australia, on the 19th April 2002 for The State Library of South Australia South Australians at War Oral History Project 2002.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

[Tape ID comments]

Now, Brent, what's your full name?

Brent Edward Aldridge.

When were you born?

21st December 1952.

And whereabouts?

Born in Mount Pleasant Hospital. My parents were from Mount Torrens.

Who were your parents?

My father's name was Bruce Edward Aldridge. He died about five years ago. And my mother's name is Rhonda Joyce Aldridge. They lived in Mount Torrens all of their lives. My Mum now lives in Gumeracha after Dad passed away.

And what did your father do?

He was — as I was growing up he worked at the Amscol milk factory, and used to go out and pick up milk in the mornings from around the local farmers and then take them to Adelaide, and he was also involved in making cheese.

This was at the Amscol factory?



Yes, at Mount Torrens.

Mount Torrens, yes, that was very well known, of course. Farmer John's now.

Farmer John's, that's right.

Was it a pretty good place to grow up?

Well, it was good. We had a large family. I had six siblings, and all fairly close together, and in the '50s and early '60s you had a fairly free life. You could wander off for half a day in the hills and wouldn't have to worry about what was going to happen to you, basically. And everybody knew everybody. I mean, Mount Torrens had about a hundred and fifty people in it, I guess, so as kids it was a great life.

Who were your siblings, Brent?

My eldest sister, whose name is Leslie, Leslie Watkins she is now. My eldest brother's name is Stephen Aldridge, my next brother down is Scott — he recently died two years ago of cancer. Then there's me in the order, and then my brother Shane, my brother Russell, and my sister Kylie is the youngest.

Did your Dad serve in the Second World War at all, Brent?

He did time in Darwin. That's as far as he got. He was an only child and there was some — as I understand it, his mother didn't want him to go. I don't know whether or not that affected how far he went or what he did, but he worked as a driver for most of that up in the Northern Territory. He was there when the bombing was on.

And then in time you were educated at Mount Torrens School.

We all went to primary school at Mount Torrens. I went to high school at Oakbank for a year and then Birdwood, and I left there after Intermediate.

And I think you left school at sixteen —

Yes, I did.



— to work with the Seidel Brothers, that's S-E-I-D-E-L.

Yes, it is. I did, I think, six or eight weeks at the woollen mill at Lobethal, and then went and worked for Seidels after that for about three years.

Then for a short time to Western Australia?

Yes, a working holiday with a friend. We went over there. It was good — lots of work, lots of fun.

And in June 1975 you joined the Commonwealth Police.

That's right, the then Commonwealth Police. I was recruited here — sorry, here in Adelaide — but appointed to Canberra, so my start date was the 9th June 1975.

In a sense, Brent, what's a very brief overview of your service with the Federal Police, Commonwealth Police? Very briefly.

Very brief? Okay. I did — we worked in Canberra. I was there from 1975 to '85. The first four years or so were in the protection and security of buildings, government buildings, and in diplomatic personnel, like from other countries. I then worked in recruit training as a physical training instructor from about 1980 to '83, and then went to Cyprus for a year with the United Nations, Australian Police contingent, and to the United Nations. Came home in September of '84 and was promoted to Sergeant on transfer to Melbourne in February of '85 and I worked in the intelligence area there, was transferred again in 1988 to Adelaide and worked in an administrative role — again, more intelligence areas and fraud, and did a secondment to the Australian Securities Commission for a couple of years about in June of 1998.

In the first instance, let's deal with 1983 when you went to Cyprus, Brent.

Yes.

What did you find in Cyprus?



I guess it's interesting when you look at what later happened, I guess, when we went to Timor. But Cyprus, the UN contingent had been there since the early '60s, so we were the twentieth contingent, and at that point they were one-year postings. So it was fairly settled, for want of a better term, not very dramatic. Occasionally there'd be some protest meetings, rallies on the southern side of the border amongst the Greek Cypriots complaining about the Turkish Cypriots occupying their land, but generally speaking it was a humanitarian role and I was stationed for the majority of my tour in Nicosia, which is the capital. And one of our principal roles was the transfer of sick and injured people from the north, the Turkish Cypriot, to the hospital facilities on the southern side of Nicosia. So a lot of that was to do with children. There was prevalent in that society what's called thalassaemia, which is a blood disorder, which required frequent blood transfusions for these kids. So we went backwards and forwards across the border. Occasionally a shepherd would wander through the demilitarised zone and be picked up by the Turkish police and we'd go and get them and negotiate with them about the release of livestock and that type of thing. The Cypriots, of course, had their own police force, so the UN military was basically to separate the militaries of the north and the south, and our job was to deal with civilians within the demilitarised zone.

How did your parents respond to you going at that point?

I guess I'd been away one form or another since I was about seventeen — sixteen, seventeen years old, so by that time I was nearly thirty or over thirty, and it was just another parting, if you like. I'd been in Canberra for eight years or more by then, so it wasn't that difficult for them, and I guess they just saw it as a good opportunity for me to have a look at other parts of the world.

Do you think they ever perceived that there could be danger in the job, as such?

I guess that's probably true. I don't recall ever discussing it with them, but I mean, as I said, their son was a policeman, had been for some time, at that point there'd been the odd situation in Canberra and other places in the country, including the Hilton bombing and all those types of things, and the nature of policing is, I guess, dangerous, and you deal with that and I guess your parents do as well.



Did your father have any particular attitude towards international conflicts and Australians' involvement, that you recall?

Yes. My father was an interesting man — very quiet and polite man, (sound of birds) and we often had soldiers in the house when I was younger, on their way to Vietnam — or having come back, but most of them were on the way because they were trained at Woodside — and he would sit there and not say much through the whole conversations about the Army and going away to the war and like that. He actually was against it. He wasn't very impressed with the Americans, and he didn't say much but yes, he didn't think it was the right thing to do.

Was that unusual at the time, do you think?

I think it was. I mean, it was early in the war — well, it would have been, I guess, mid-late '60s. I think it might have been unusual, particularly in an environment — we were a small country town — and Woodside, in particular, was pro- — not pro-military, but because a lot of training was done there a lot of the town's resources and businesses relied on the military. And he never said much about it, but just from odd things — we had a conversation later that — yes, he didn't support it at all.

Was he a conservative, in a political sense?

I really don't know. He was a worker all his life. He didn't have much time for the Democratic Labour Party, I remember. But my father was a quiet man. I mean, he was very reserved, kept a lot of things to himself, and you rarely heard about political issues. It was only when I got older and you start talking to them, find out what he thought about a lot of things.

What about you when you joined the police? Did you have a — sort of a more conservative or more Labor Party orientation in your politics?

Not at that time. It wasn't until later that I developed an interest in politics, I guess. Living in Canberra it's all round you so you start to take a bit more notice. I was — my number came up in the very last of the National Service ballots, and I was quite prepared to go, but I guess I didn't know a lot about it, either — and yes, I guess I



would just have to say that I was a little bit disappointed when that was shut down, but in retrospect I'm very happy I didn't go — now, what I know now. I guess I — yes, I think I was apolitical, probably, until I got to Canberra, and then talked to people and saw how things worked and started to read more and study, so I probably didn't have a real point of view at all at that point.

As a youth did you look at the television footage on the Vietnam protests and that type of thing? Did you have any views on that at all?

No. I wasn't involved — I mean, I don't think I ever went to the city, you know? We didn't go. You might go down a Saturday night once a month or something, but we lived in the country and stayed in the country. Your life was there, your football, your mates, your entertainment, your girlfriends. It was there, basically. And I did a lot of time away when I worked on the drilling rig and I was out six weeks and back six weeks, and I didn't know a lot of people who were involved one way or the other. I mean, as I said, because we had these Army guys through the house, but I don't think I had a point of view at all, really. (coughs) Having said that, I remember once being on a train, the Indian Pacific — or it mightn't have been called that then — coming back from a trip to Kalgoorlie — in Kalgoorlie area with the drilling — and I met a returned soldier from Vietnam, and in the cabin that we were in, like the bar, there was also a lot of young people, and he was copping a bit of flak from them. And I'd been sitting talking to him for hours, so there was a few words exchanged. But that's probably the only incident I personally can recall where that — issues about the Vietnam War were sort of — where I was involved in the discussion about it. I don't remember feeling one way or other about it.

Did you equate going to Cyprus as an extension of Australia's involvement in a war like Vietnam, or did you see it as something completely different?

No. Because the Australians had been in Cyprus so long there was lots of information about what it was about, and you could speak to many people who had been there. So I didn't see it as a war zone, as such. I saw it as a peace-keeping role, and I guess that's what policemen do as opposed to the military, and that's what it was about. It was an opportunity to travel into the middle of the Mediterranean and see another culture and help a few people out. But it was a great opportunity to go



from there and travel through the Middle East and into Europe and all that sort of thing. There was a couple of incidents where you had to think about what you were doing. I had a — there was one Saturday afternoon, I remember, where I was the duty officer and there was a report of a fire in the buffer zone, and the buffer zone in Nicosia is in places only ten metres wide and in other places a couple of hundred metres. And Nicosia's an old city, so it has, within the old city walls, which were moats originally, and the city itself has been built up around that, and there was a fire in this moat area, if you like, dry grassland area. And I was the only one on so I drove in there and the Turkish Cypriot fire brigade were there, and our job was to investigate fires and — one of the jobs. So I looked round and found this what I'd call a 'fire stick', so a piece of wood with a cloth wrapped round one end and had been set alight, and that was obviously the centrepiece of this fire, which had been put out by the time I got there. So its proximity to the moat, to the wall, indicated that it must have come from the Turkish side because there was a good fifty or sixty metres to the Greek Cypriot side. So I had a short discussion, I remember, with the Turkish fire officer, asked him about where he thought the fire started and did he know anything about it, and he replied in English, and then I asked him another question and I heard this raised voice from about twenty metres away, I looked up and there was a Turkish officer, military officer, standing on top of the moat — on top of the wall. So the wall was about, probably, five metres high, I guess. And all of a sudden the fireman couldn't speak English any more. So I wandered down to talk to this Turkish officer. He had a young soldier with him with an M16, and I just said, 'Good afternoon' to the officer and asked him if he knew anything about the fire or his men knew anything about the fire, or where the source of the fire might have come from, to which he said no. And I thanked him and turned away, and heard him say something and heard the sound — quite distinctive sound — of an M16 being cocked, so I just stopped. And he said to me, 'Oh, and Sergeant,' and I turned around, and he said, 'You will pay me the respect of my rank.' So I snapped immediately to attention and saluted him and he returned the salute and I turned and walked away, which seemed to satisfy his ego or whatever it was he required. But that was a little bit scary because I was the only one there, and we were sort of out in the open a bit. There were the odd deaths while we were in Cyprus.

This was the twentieth contingent?



Yes. There was an incident where, as I said, in one point in Nicosia — well, several points, but this particular point the demilitarised zone is an old cobbled street wide, and on either side of it you will have a Turkish outpost and a Greek Cypriot outpost, and it appeared that the guys on the Greek Cypriot side had been verbally abusing the Turkish people on the other side, and one of them went a bit too far, made a comment about one of these guys' mothers, and he was shot through the centre of the forehead, one shot, and killed instantly, of course. There was an uproar. The Turkish apologised for the incident and claimed that it had been an accidental discharge, and they were all regretful for the whole incident. They were military matters and not necessarily police matters, but those things happened from time to time.

Brent, did you find that you had certain views of the racial tensions that were going on there, or did you have certain views yourself about how you saw those different races that you were dealing with?

I think what I saw was one side that was doing quite well in the circumstances, the Greek Cypriot side, financially and economically, because the vast majority of the UN was on the southern side. Northern Cyprus had only, I think, been recognized by Turkey itself. A lot of people wouldn't travel there — Europeans, and on the other hand you would get planeloads of people from Scandinavia, England and Germany, who would fly in to southern Cyprus and stay a week, and so they were actually doing quite well economically. So there was this huge divide in that regard, where a lot of the Greek Cypriots were doing quite well and a lot of the Turkish Cypriots were very poor people. There was the other side of it as well, is Cyprus is an unusual country in that, at the point it was given independence by Britain, about 1962 or whenever it is, the condition of — included the retention of two pieces of land in Cyprus by Britain, and they were referred to as 'British sovereign bases', and they remained — and still do — a part of Britain. And the Brits, of course, also helped in the formulation of the constitution in trying to deal with issues about population ratios. Say, eighty per cent of people in Cyprus were Greek Cypriots and twenty per cent were Turkish Cypriots, and they set the constitution up in such a way that those sort of things would be reflected in the constitution. For example, the President had to be a Greek Cypriot and the Vice-President should have been a Turkish Cypriot,



and those sort of things, as I understand, were reflected right through the public sector of Cyprus. What I did, I think — and there was lots of — once an allegation, so much as inference, is made by the Greek Cypriots in relation to the influence of the Americans in the war of 1974-75 — and I never knew much about it — I mean, our briefings before we left didn't talk about those sort of things, and it wasn't till after I left and read a book that, while in its own way was probably overstated, it made me realise that some what these people had inferred was may have in fact happened —
— —.

Brent, just for a minute, could you talk about the briefings you received prior to going?

It's twenty-odd years ago.

Yes, I just wonder if you have a memory of them.

I have a memory of being briefed by a military person, army officer, if I recall, in relation to the political situation there. I, as I recall, gained the impression that there was a, shall I say, a favouring of the Turkish military over the Greek military, or the Greek position, perhaps. Whether or not my recollection's accurate or other people would agree I don't know. There was — we would have had briefings from people who had recently returned in relation to conditions and what you could expect food-wise. But I mean, in retrospect, it was very well-organised. I won't say the Brits 'ran' the UN in Cyprus, but they certainly had a major influence, and because of the British sovereign base areas they had — I can't recall, somewhere between six and eight thousand troops on the island, both within and without, inside and outside, the UN — so you could know that because it was a British colony a lot of people spoke English. There were a lot of British-type institutions, if you like. Everything worked, the electricity worked, the banks were there, food was safe, magnificent climate and magnificent country, and it wasn't that difficult.

So just coming back to your view of the racial conflicts and your own view of the races. You talked about the President and Vice-President position.



I think the interesting part about — not only the local conditions — the interesting thing about Cyprus was that it appeared to me to be the home of the representatives of all manner of countries in their dealings with the Middle East. I met some people at — well, for example, we went to a cocktail evening at a British armoured troop at which there was, in full uniform, a British general, a Russian general, an East German general, a Greek general, Americans wandering round in their suits that worked for the Embassy. I, at the same function, met two interesting gentlemen who claimed to be the representatives of the company Lever and Kitchen, and were travelling salesmen throughout the Middle East.

Unilever.

Unilever? Yes. (pause) Could be Unilever, yes. But I gained the impression they were doing other things. And there was all — there were a lot of places you didn't go, couldn't go, there was a lot of talk about spy 'planes being launched out of Cyprus, there was talk and rumours of electronic surveillance in the mountains, and I think when you look at Cyprus's location and what was happening in the world at the time, then I think that it was — it was a listening post for the West as to what was happening in the Middle East. And there was this — I mean, we went, for example, one morning there was this sort of dull thud that you get when a large explosion, and stick your head outside the door, and the local Syrian travel agency had been blown up. There was a — I think he was also a Syrian found in the gutter two kilometres from the airport in the year we left, '84. There was an Israeli, several Israelis, killed on a boat in [Larnaca] Harbour. When you went to — — —.

Which harbour, sorry?

[Larnaca].

[Larnaca].

When you went — and we did have the opportunity to go to — I went to Israel twice. The first time — and this, I guess, is when you start to see how systems work and the uncertainty of some of these things — I was flying with several other people from Cyprus in a UN Fokker aircraft into Jerusalem Airport in Israel, which at that time



was closed, then put on a bus and sent up through the northern border into Lebanon to play tennis. We spent the weekend in Lebanon and then bussed it back out again and flew home, and it was a tennis competition between two UN missions, one in Cyprus and one in Lebanon. As you took off from Cyprus, within a very short period of time there were two Israeli jet fighters, one on each wing, that flew us all the way into Jerusalem. It's about ninety miles. And whenever you went, as we did later, overnight on a car carrier — boat — there would have been at least twenty plain-clothes Israeli persons, males, on that boat, checking cars that had been loaded in Cyprus. It was just a whole different environment. You'd go to a bar on a Saturday night and speak to Phalangist Lebanese. There was just all these people coming and going in Cyprus from all over the area.

As an Australian, did that give you an appreciation of your own country, or international affairs?

Oh, certainly international affairs. And it was that, I think, that experience that sparked my interest later when I went to Melbourne and worked in the politically-motivated violence area in the intelligence unit. But it was — yes, and it certainly sparked an interest. It was interesting.

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[But it was — yes, and it certainly sparked an interest. It was interesting.] I met, at the Australian High Commission, two Palestinian females who were studying in Cyprus because, according to them, they, because they were Palestinian, couldn't or weren't allowed to go to university in Israel. So I guess you're brought up with a point of view — or, sorry, you develop a point of view from newspapers, books — and then, when you are there, then you see — I won't say what really happens, but you also get an appreciation of other sides of arguments as well. I have a personal view that — and it's always surprised me that Cyprus is still part of a UN peace-keeping mission. It must be now forty years they've been there. I would say that — and this is a personal point of view — that the cost of maintaining a border from a military standpoint between northern and southern Cyprus would be so large that it would probably bankrupt whoever tried to do it if it was the Greeks, for example. And I just think that, from time to time, when the mandate is due for renewal, that



— it may be coincidental, but there's all of a sudden some protests that haven't been seen for six months, and sometimes people have been killed. A couple of years ago a Greek Cypriot was killed trying to pull a Turkish flag down in the DMZ, but it just appears to me that it's economically advantageous to an element of the Cypriot community to have the UN remain.

Could we go back to what we were talking about earlier, your perceptions and how they were changed by what you saw?

I think that what the main influence, the main change, was that it seemed to me that Cyprus, as a small country, was being influenced by the interests of larger countries. The presence and ongoing presence of the British sovereign bases, the Greek Cypriots were supportive — or were being supported in some ways, financial ways, by the Soviet Union, both mainland Greece and Turkey are members of NATO, but mainland Turkey was seen as pro-Right, and there was all these other people from the Middle East conducting their business in Cyprus. And it seemed to me that, in a lot of ways, the Cyprus problem was not aided by these other influences.

**When you came back to Australia, did you take some time to readjust to — —
—?**

Absolutely. They had a wonderful custom in Cyprus, whose weather is very similar to Adelaide's — in reverse, of course — that everything would shut at two in the afternoon and start again about four or five o'clock, which included the UN, except if you were on afternoon shift, for example. So every day you'd have a sleep. And it took me a good twelve months to get out of the habit. That was one of the main things I remember. The other thing was that, when I first arrived back in Sydney Airport, I was — not overwhelmed, but certainly surprised by the pace of Australian motorists and traffic and movement compared to what I'd been used to. There's no doubt that you appreciate the opportunities in your own country a lot more when you've been away and you've seen how other people live. And not so much the Cypriots, although, as I said before, in my view the northern, Turkish Cypriots don't have a lot of opportunity, but when you go to places like Egypt and Thailand and heaps of other countries then you really appreciate the opportunities that we have in this country. And I know why some people will say, 'Well, it's not equal,' and it's not,



but the opportunities certainly are far greater in this country for people to make a reasonable life for themselves than a lot of other countries.

In a sense, Brent, do you feel that you had a type of personal transformation in Cyprus?

I think it certainly opened my eyes to influences on a global basis, if you like, as opposed to national. Yes. And it made me then start to, I guess — when I pick up a newspaper now, and that started when I came back, where you'd look at where the article was coming from — for example, which newspaper it was — and then start to think about self-interest and who was reporting it and those types of things. And I guess it's also about this time you start to realise that people who win wars are the 'good guys' and the people who lose wars are 'criminals'. And there are atrocities committed in many instances by the good guys that go — are not dealt with, and that was, I think — probably that recognition was roughly about the same time as well.

Coming back to Australia, Brent, you go through a sequence of work with the Commonwealth Police from diplomatic areas, including intelligence. Now, that intelligence training, was that something that came to you as a necessity after what you experienced?

I'd just like to — just if I can comment on one issue. It's a funny thing. The Commonwealth Police became the Australian Federal Police in 1979, and yet I still talk to people who refer to it as the Commonwealth Police. When I came back I worked in what we call 'on the street' in Canberra in a policing role that most people would recognize, being road traffic areas and assaults and that type of thing. I was offered a promotion to sergeant level, but as a condition of that there was a transfer to Melbourne. I guess when I came back — because you were away a year and a bit — things change, people change, my friends, some of them had transferred out, some of them had a different lifestyle. I guess you do change your thinking a bit as well. So I saw that as an opportunity — as much as I liked Canberra and the people in it, people I worked with — that it was probably the only chance I would get in the short term to be promoted. And so I took the opportunity and went to Melbourne. Again there, for a short time, I worked in the uniform area doing the same types of



work that I had done earlier in the diplomatic security area, and then went into the intelligence area. I can't recall how that came about, whether or not they told me to go or I asked to go. But the area which I worked in was of great interest to me: it was the politically-motivated violence area. I guess because of Cyprus I had a better understanding of what was possible, and you then start to realise the influences in your own society that are coming from outside and not necessarily from government but from immigrants — and particularly that time that the ongoing problems in Yugoslavia between the Serbs and the Croats, when it was still Yugoslavia, and the influence that they had on certain groups within the Australian community; the relationship between the Turks and the Armenians, where the Turkish Consulate was blown up by Armenians from Sydney in Melbourne — I can't remember exactly now what year it was, but while I was working in that area. So it was — I enjoyed it immensely. It was interesting also that I guess the change in attitude within police forces over the years. I mean, I had access to records that were twenty and thirty years old, and just to sit and read some of those, and understand the growth, I guess, in the Australian Police, in the attitude to elements that were — what shall we say? — a little bit out of the ordinary. And the other area of responsibility I had was for people who were mentally unstable, all those 'phone calls end up in our area, and that was interesting as well, because it was the first time that I had — well, on a larger scale — to come in contact with people who were struggling with reality for all sorts of reasons, and that was interesting as well, I enjoyed that.

Was the training very intense for that type of work?

No. The Federal Police at that time — I don't know whether they still do, but I would think so — would run courses and you'd start with the basic intelligence course talking about terminologies, talking about how to analyse and collate types of information and draw inferences from it and then test your own hypotheses and then, if you were comfortable with it, then you'd report to senior management and in some cases ministerials. But as you went along you were trained, and there was — I mean, I think, if I was to think about it now I'd probably done four or five intelligence courses of growing complexity. And in a lot of ways, as things change and priorities change, then you start looking at different areas and develop skills as



you go, whether it's about politically-motivated violence, whether it's about narcotics trafficking, whether it's about money laundering, whether it's about fraud. So you just — whatever came your way you just picked the skills up, I guess, as you went. It was a lot to do with experience.

Brent, what about your own family and your siblings after you came home from Cyprus? Were they intent on questioning you at all about what you'd gone through and what you'd experienced?

No, not that I recall. I guess it was one of those things we didn't talk about a lot. I mean, policing, by its nature, is — in my view now — an insular sub-group within the community, for various reasons. In my own case, I developed very early a view that, if you went out, say, socially and people knew what you did for a living, well, there was all sorts of issues about that. And then — and what happens, I think, to a lot of guys and girls, that they actually retreat within the police community, and their friends are all police officers, and they live the culture socially as well as at work. That's not always true; I mean, some people can move quite freely mentally between one and the other, but in my case it was — work was not something you really talked about outside of work, and therefore I — there may have been things I talked about with my family, but in most cases not.

Moving onto the next stage, then, you were in Melbourne. What's your career path from that point on until the time that you actually took a redundancy package?

I stayed in Melbourne from February '85 and did most of that in the intelligence area, politically motivated violence, until I was transferred — applied for, and was given, a transfer to Adelaide in September of '85 into an administrative area, including — there was a role for an Employee Relations Officer, which was sort of go-between the management and the troops. (coughs) I went again back into an intelligence area, where we worked on a major protracted drug operation for some time, over a year. From there I went into the fraud area, but not for very long — a couple of months — and then was seconded in '92, I think, to the Australian Securities Commission, as it was then called, which has the responsibility of dealing with corporate offences and corporate crime, and did two years there in their



Adelaide office, and enjoyed that immensely, learned a lot there about corporate offences and the business world in general. And then, at the end of that secondment, went back into what is called ‘target development’, which is an area of intelligence where you look and try and identify trends and individuals who are involved in criminal activity and putting that up for investigation — and also assisting operational people in the intelligence area. And I did that as a team leader of four very talented people up until I got out in June of ’98.

Tell me, did you feel almost estranged from society (laughs) when you left, in a way, having done it for so long?

I think it’s one of the reasons I actually decided to get out. I just said — I referred earlier about this potential to become isolated and insular because of your occupation. And some years earlier I had made a decision, I think when I was in Melbourne, that I actually didn’t want to spend my off hours with police officers, that I didn’t want to sit and talk to people about things they’d done. And there’s an attitude in certain elements of the police force that is very negative about society in general, and it wears you down. So, by the time I think I got to the point — I mean, I was glad when I came home in ’88. I think if I hadn’t come home I probably would have got out of the job then, because I had made this conscious decision not to socialise with police officers. And when I came home I was back for the first time in whatever it was, twelve, fourteen years, in a family environment, so it was a matter then of rebuilding those relationships, and that kept me going for another ten years. But I’d had enough by the time I got the opportunity in ’98 to get out. I’d just gone the twenty-three years and I thought, ‘No, I can’t do this any more.’

Brent, you just mentioned something I’d like to explore more, that police had negative attitudes about society in general, the Federal Police, people anyway that you mixed with. What do you mean by that?

That’s a generalisation. Not all of them, but some of them. When you deal with people, and in ninety per cent of the cases in an environment that is stressful, that there is a probability of a criminal offence, anti-social behaviour, and you do it day in, day out, then you start to develop — some people develop — an attitude that is very negative towards society and individuals within it, because you spend your



whole life dealing with people when you see the worst of them every day. And some people who society itself holds out as the leaders in various fields and you see them on the other side. And I guess the potential for humanity to damage other individuals is — you never lose, I don't think, surprise — or you probably do, you're not surprised any longer — but it's certainly not healthy when you see what people can do to one another and it just gets you down in the end — well, in my case. Some people go through forty years and love it, but not me.

There was a type of cynicism, in effect, about people generally?

Oh yes, absolutely.

Now, after you left in June '98, you had odd employment for a couple of years — — —?

I'd done some study in financial planning issues and financial markets and stuff when I was at the ASC, and that was an area that interested me. And so I didn't do anything for a while, six months or more, then I got a job for a short time (sound of passing car) with a financial planner — as it was called, 'para-planner' — so I talked to people about whatever it is, what they want to do, and looking at budgets and all that. That didn't work out, and I left there November, December of 1999, and then in February of 2000 I bought a cleaning round, something completely different, and spent a year cleaning people's houses. And I found that kept me fit and you didn't really have to think a lot about other issues.

You were still living in South Australia at that time?

Oh yes, living right here.

Tell me, what led you to respond to the advertisement in July 2000 for former Federal Police?

For East Timor. I had along my way had — I don't know, developed, shall I say, compassion, I guess, for the people of East Timor because of what I'd read and because of what I understood had happened to them in '74, '75, and the television



programs in relation to things that had been done to these people over the years, and I just thought, 'Well, it's an opportunity to give these people a hand.'

What was your view, Brent, about how they'd been treated?

I am of the view that they had been treated shabbily by successive Australian governments and other governments, and that the opportunity arose in '74 for them to be independent, and in my view they turned to the country that in some ways sets itself up as the 'Great Democracy' in South-East Asia, Australia, and requesting help, and for various reasons, whatever, various influences, that call for assistance was not heeded. And I just think that we, in some ways, owe these people. And if you go back further to the Second World War, where East Timor was a colony of Portugal, and Australian and English troops were put on the island to slow the advance of the Japanese, and — depending on who you talk to and what you read, but in retaliation for that assistance it's possible that somewhere between ten and twenty thousand East Timorese were killed in retaliation by the Japanese. And yet, when they asked us for help in '74, we turned our back on them. So when that opportunity came up to put in for it, I thought, 'Well, I want to go. I want to go and give them a hand if I can.'

Have you spoken to other Federal Police who'd been out there, prior to making your decision?

No, not prior to making the decision, because as I recall the first advertisement that I saw was in probably July of '99 or July 2000, and I became aware that another member who had got out at the same time as I did had in fact been, was there, and I started to make a few enquiries and found out that yes, they were, have previously had taken a few ex-members. And from this advertisement and from talking to the people in Canberra there was a possibility that because of certain workloads predicted for the next year that they would need some more people. So I did then speak to people who had been — sorry, a *person* who had been — who remained a serving member, and he had some idea of some of the conditions. (coughs) So yes, it wasn't till we got to Canberra that we were more fully briefed on what was happening.



But you didn't answer the advertisement blindly. You had background on it from a personal point of view.

Yes. I had a look at it and I just thought, well — and it is a personal point of view. I just think that this country, because of its governments — and not government of either side, but successive governments — that we owe these people a bit, and the opportunity existed, came up, to help out — well, that's what I wanted to do there.

Did you know any East Timorese?

No. No. I think that I'd over the years, in Canberra and Melbourne, heard Ramos Jota talking from time to time, but not personally, didn't know any.

Did you see it as an extension of the Cyprus work?

I guess the only extension or continuity, I guess, was the fact that it was a UN mission. It was twenty years between — almost twenty years between them. I didn't really relate it to Cyprus in any way, except that it was a UN mission and the other had been a UN mission. So, as it turned out, the UN had changed significantly from what I recalled of it. And of course we're talking a total different sort of mission where, in Cyprus, the Cypriots had their own police forces; in Timor they didn't and the UN, and the civilian police in the UN, *were* the police force. And of course the conditions, physical conditions and infrastructures and accommodation and food and water and health were vastly different from what Cyprus was like.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B: TAPE 2 SIDE A

[Tape ID comments] So, Brent, you see the advertisement, you respond to it and you apply, what's the next thing?

Oh, it all went very quiet for a while, and then in February, I think, of 2001 I got a 'phone call from the Federal Police asking if I was still interested. I said yes, and then we went through a whole process of medicals and very comprehensive medical and vaccinations and the like for all sorts of tropical conditions. And that was all cleared up and I received instructions that I was to go to Canberra, to be there May 20th, was the date, and from there we were taken into a sort of — it was a caravan



park, actually, they'd booked out fifty-odd rooms — and were issued with all our gear, had briefings from (loud sound of magpies singing) the military, from doctors — medical officers, psychologists, people who'd been there and people who'd worked for the UN in other places, people from other what's called NGOs, non-government organisations — like CARE and World Vision and all these people are what's called NGOs — and that was over the next nine or ten days. And then we left Canberra, I think, 28th or 29th of May, flew to Darwin and were then sworn in to the UN in their offices in Darwin, stayed overnight — — —.

At that point I guess I should make an observation. What happens is that Australian police officers — in the East Timor contingent or 'detachments', as they're called, there was at that time — and mine, which was the 6th Detachment — two phases: they were sending approximately a hundred police officers and fifty of them had been sent two weeks earlier. So we were on the second part of the 6th Detachment. About sixty-five members were Australian Federal Police officers or former Australian Federal Police officers, and the other thirty-five were made up of the state police forces, who would send somewhere between one or two and — I'm sorry, two — and six or eight members to make up that other thirty-five people. We, as I said, had the second half of the 6th Detachment, so a lot of guys were already there, and then we followed them in a fortnight later. We went, as I said, to Darwin, and it's at that point when you're basically sworn into the UN that the Australian Federal Police and the Australian government then has no control over what you do. So the UN — you're then working for the UN, and the UN makes its decisions as to your deployment, where you go, what areas in Timor, *et cetera*.

So that, although you were employed by the Federal Police you were, in fact, a member of a UN force distinct from Australia.

(sound of rustling papers) Correct. The Australian taxpayer, the Australian Federal Police, pays the wages, but you are a member of the United Nations civilian[?] police force, and you come under their direct control.

Now, at the briefings you were given in Darwin, were you told the story of what had already occurred in East Timor?



The briefings we had in Canberra?

Canberra.

There was (pause) — when you say ‘what occurred’, what had happened with previous contingents?

Yes.

We were aware — and I think obviously made aware at some of those briefings — about what had happened in the first instance, as far as policing was concerned. What a lot of Australians don’t realise, because what they see on television is the military in September of ’99, December of ’99, but the Australian Federal Police had been in East Timor from about, I think, March of ’99 as observers for the independence vote and, as in most UN situations, they were unarmed and their job was to observe the build-up to the independence vote and to liaise, as I understand it, with the local police officers in relation to peace-keeping issues and safety of UN personnel and the like. So they were there after the vote and all the trouble in September of ’99, and some of them saw some very upsetting things and were in very dangerous situations. There is, I think, now probably recognized and confirmed as true that at one point, when the whole of the UN personnel were back in Dili, and there were thousands of East Timorese took refuge in the UN compound, that there was an attempt to withdraw the UN personnel from East Timor. And my understanding is that those Australian police officers took a vote and presented an argument to the effect and stated that they would not be leaving without taking the East Timorese with them.

Is that hearsay, or did you get that word of mouth?

I’ve actually never spoken to anybody who was there at that time, but there is a reference to it, I think, from Amanda Vanstone; there is a book called *A dirty little war* where it’s referred to, where the journalist was actually there; and I haven’t spoken to the people — I have spoken to one person that was on that contingent, and I understand that that is true, that they refused to go.



After the briefings, then, Brent, did you have any misgivings about going?

I never thought, 'Well, I'm not going,' but in all fairness to the Federal Police they, right up till the end, said, 'Right, if anybody wants to pull the pin you can, and it won't reflect on you or anything.' They were very good. There is a big difference over that twenty year period between Cyprus and East Timorese in the way that the police force dealt with these people, and they were very open, I thought, and very honest and describing the things that would happen, could happen, and what conditions were like. And I found that what they told us about the conditions was spot on. When they said, you know, the food was going to be a problem, or this was going to happen, or 'You'll find the UN very frustrating — you'll have trouble with some of the work ethic and culture of other countries', it was all true. And it was quite impressive the way that they did that, and they had some — the people from their Psych[ological] Services who were, again, very open and very honest about all sorts of things. But at no point did I say 'I'm not going' or think to myself 'I don't want to go'. So it was never really a consideration for me not to go.

Had you been there before?

No. No, I'd never been there.

So environmentally it was going to be a completely new experience.

Yes. I mean, other than, I think, a twenty-four hour turnaround in Thailand twenty years earlier, I'd never been to the tropics — sub-tropics in this case — and never been to Darwin. It's one of the few places in the country that I hadn't been to. I once did a week in Cairns, I think. So even that aspect I wasn't familiar with. But no, I don't think there was any point where I said, 'No, I'm not going to go.'

Brent, could you describe in some detail for me now the process you go through in getting to Timor, and what happens after that?

Okay. So you have the training, the ten days in Canberra where you get to meet everybody and you get briefings on all sorts of issues. And then we went from there, as I said, to Darwin. And we went round to the UN headquarters where we were



basically sworn in and signed up, and issued with some funds — what's called a 'mission subsistence allowance', MSA — because basically you've got to fend for yourself. You pay your own rent, you buy your own food and all that sort of thing. The only thing the UN actually supplies is — well, other than uniforms and the like, but they [were] Federal Police uniforms, sorry, provided by the Federal Police — then the only thing the UN actually provides is water, drinking water. So, having done that, we go back to the hotel, into your UN uniform next morning, and we were on a 'plane, a South African Air Force Hercules, from Darwin Airport into Timor with all our gear, although some of the gear got left behind. (laughter) Because they couldn't fit it on the aeroplane.

What sort of gear?

Oh, the gear was good! We had a great array — I mean, full uniforms, a big blue box — it all came in a big blue box, big blue plastic box about six hundred deep, nine hundred long, yes, and about four or five hundred high. In it was stoves, so we would call them — we'd probably use metho or fuel here, but they're a sort of camping arrangement, metal, made of aluminium — and in it you have a — it opens up and you have a little gas burner — sorry, liquid fuel burner — couple of metal saucepans without lids, a teapot, a little pot for cooking water in, so that's your cooking utensils. Compasses, mapholders, torches, straps — 'extendable jockey straps', as they called them — sleeping bags, tent — 'moszkie dome', as they became known — individual. What else was there now? A whole tray of medicines and Doxycycline, which is a broad-spectrum antibiotic. You were meant to take one of those a day, so we had six months' supply of that. Anti-fungal creams, certain types of gas masks that deal with asbestos and dust and that type of thing because, in the earlier tours, they were involved in some of that process when the buildings were burnt and recovering bodies and the like. Just about everything you could think of was in there. And so that all went with us. (sound of aeroplane)

When we — for those people who haven't been in a Hercules, they're very big and they're very noisy, but they're also very safe. And so we flew out of Darwin and then (sound of crossing the room, closing sliding door) it's about five hundred and fifty kilometres to the northern side of East Timor, which is where Dili is. It takes, if I



remember rightly, two hours to get there in a Hercules — and a half, perhaps — and when we landed on the ground we flew in over Dili, and you could see that some of the buildings were damaged. And then, when we touched down, it was sort of beginning of their dry season, so it was a bit like — it just reminded me of actually Cairns or one of those places where it's quite warm and a little bit humid then, compared to here. But, you know, palm trees and the like. We went from there into accommodation which was — in Dili — which was a series of demountable huts that some enterprising Australians had put up and turned into a hotel and it was not too bad — little room to yourself, air conditioned, and the food was provided.

We then went from there to what's called the 'United Nations induction training'. So we've had (sound of motor vehicle) the Australian Police conducting its training sessions, and then when we got to Timor the UN wanted to do (sound of closing door) their own. So it was a Saturday we went in, and then for the next five or six days we had training in the UN systems by various UN personnel. The firearms instructor was a guy from Singapore. The driving instructor was a guy from Iraq. (sound of motor vehicle resumes) The legal adviser was a guy from Trinidad and Tobago with a Canadian accent. So there was all these people who were working for the UN who came in and told us about various aspects.

We then, on the Thursday, we all received our postings and I went with six other people to a place called Maliana in what's known as the Bobonaro District. It's on the far western end of East Timor, it's up against the West Timor border. It is the same area that is the area responsibility of the Australian military, and it's called the PKF, peace-keeping force, and the New Zealand military. So it's the very western end of East Timor, so it's up against the West/East Timor border. And the Australian military have responsibility for an area from the northern coast to two-thirds of the way to the southern coast, and the Kiwis have the rest. We drove from Dili to Maliana, which is the major town in the Bobonaro District, and that took us some four hours. And the road — I mean, this is one of the things they told us before we left: 'The roads are bad and the drivers are bad', and it's true. The roads are — East Timor is a very mountainous country, and the roads have been built along the coastline, cut out of the cliffs, and they're not very well repaired in some cases, but they are bitumen. And because it's a tropical climate there's little washouts and the



like when it rains. So we got into Maliana just after dark, having gone through two Australian military checkpoints, and on arrival then you start to realise that yes, this is East Timor and this is what it's going to be like. The accommodation that we had in Maliana was a former Indonesian military accommodation, what's known as 'the compound', and the electricity was provided by a generator which had been purchased by our predecessor. It ran in the evenings. Maliana had power two out of three days, and so on the third day you'd run the generator. Cement floors, stone and plaster walls, and it was at this place that you would see — you would come to realise later on, and was everywhere — was that before the Indonesians left, that they started to burn and destroy those things that they had put in place. Because there was one area of this compound which had been burnt out, and all the roof damaged and the walls damaged, and I understand that there had actually been a greater area that had been damaged but some of the repairs had been done by the earlier contingents.

So we got in there, it was quite warm at night — I mean, Maliana's at about eight hundred fifty metres above sea level — and the next morning we all went in and sort of introduced ourselves around and we started to work immediately, completing paperwork again — completing paperwork about pays and days off. Okay, so the deal was that you didn't get days off. You worked seven days a week. But you would get what were called 'CTOs' — community time off — so every six weeks you'd get a week. Every month, my apologies, every month you'd get six days. So those sort of things. And then we just went to work. And we worked in the new Maliana police station. When we got there there was police officers from Zambia, Ghana, China — Republic of China — America, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the boss was a guy from Namibia. So all these people, all different cultures, all different expectations, I guess.

Had you expected that, Brent?

You knew that there were a lot of people there from different countries. There had, reportedly, been a move to actually put whole contingents into one area, so that the Australians, in this example, would probably be put into Maliana, and there was a hundred of us. But what actually happened was that there was six of us went on the



second detachment, there was fourteen of us all up out of about sixty police officers from all over the world. My only experience in dealing with, or working with people — I hadn't any. I mean, Cyprus there was all Australians, and when I was there the Swedish police and nobody else. So I hadn't — you knew, but having not any experience with it you don't know what to expect, I guess. And you were, I guess, advised before you left that, as I said before, that there are different levels of work ethic amongst different police forces and, I guess, individuals, and that was part of the challenge originally. There are cultural issues. Australians generally, and perhaps policemen more so, are up-front, they're not shy, they're not backwards in coming forwards, and we found out very early that that was a bit affronting to some people from — — —. Well, for example, we would go in the morning, we would normally be the first ones there, we would normally be on time, we'd be on time, and there'd be half a dozen people standing out the front of the building having a chat. It was expected that you would shake hands with every one of them, every morning, say 'G'day and how're you going, what have you been doing?' and then you'd go in to work. After a while it wore a bit thin and you'd just keep on walking, and they saw that as offensive because you wouldn't stop and ask how their mothers were doing that morning. So these sorts of issues. And people sitting around some of the afternoon not working, or you'd go out on patrol and the only people that were doing anything would be our people, Australians. Those sorts of things, it used to be — you went through a point where you knew that this was going to happen, or you'd been told, then you'd get frustrated about it, but in the end I think the majority just said, 'Well, we'll do what we have to do and you do what you do.' And you sort of work round it, basically.

Was there any overt friction at times?

Oh yes. Very early in the piece — I tried to keep it quiet — it was a Sunday and there was one other Australian on with me and it was a Sunday afternoon, and some guys from other countries, and they flatly refused to go out and do a patrol with us on mobile patrol, driving round Maliana. And then they just sat there all day. So I had a word with the station commander and just said, 'Well, tell me' — because the next day we were all dragged in and told that you had to actually, when you were on patrol, you had to take a person from another country with you. If you couldn't,



well, the Australians couldn't travel round together and the Ghanaians shouldn't travel together and the like. This was supposed to be about sharing experience, which was fair enough. So when this situation arose the next day, as it was — we were given that pep-talk on a Saturday and this situation arose on Sunday, where we offered to take people, invited them to come with us and they declined. So I said to the boss the next — not the big boss, but the station commander — the next day, I said, 'Well, this is my situation. You said to us yesterday, Saturday, "Mix, mingle, share the experience." That's fine. What do I do when they decline the experience?' And I was hoping, just keeping it all low-key but to bring to his attention that if he saw two of us driving round in the car, well, this might be the reason why. Well, the whole thing blew up. I was on an afternoon shift, I had a word with him in the morning and went into work and was told to report to the District Commander. And when I walked in the door the three guys that I'd been working with the day before and had declined to go out on patrol were sitting there. And the District Commander, I think, started by saying, 'There's been an accusation made that you people are not working.' (laughs) It all blew up in my face. So there was those issues. There was other instances where, perhaps, the differences in work ethic were brought up and as a result of those there were complaints of racial discrimination. Oh, sorry, that's not the term. The term is 'breach of human rights'. So there was a couple of those while we were there — not necessarily to do with Australians, but it is just if you disagreed with someone and had words with them about being an hour late for work or going home at lunchtime and not coming back, then there was a breach of human rights. So that was a little bit challenging to deal with as well.

I was fortunate, in my view, that after about six weeks myself and a young guy from Tasmania, Tasmanian Police, were transferred up into the mountains to a place called Lolo-Toi.

Just say that again?

Lolo-Toi.

Lolo-Toi.



Lolo-Toi. It's spelt — well, it depends which map you're reading — L-O-L-O-T-O-I or O-E. So this place is right up against the border and up in the mountains. It's only about forty kilometres from Maliana, but it's a two-hour trip because the roads are so bad. And in that environment, when we got there, there was two guys from Nepal in the police, police officers, and two East Timorese. Part of the — a big part of the UN mandate, as far as policing was concerned — was to conduct policing operations and to train East Timorese. So the training for the East Timorese was done in Dili and then they would be sent out to the regions and ongoing training would be done in the regions. So this was a small, mountainous village, and what is called a village — and I should explain this in case you get confused later on — that in East Timor, in particular areas in them — are not always the same. You have what's called sub-villages — three of them, normally — that then make up a village, and the village has a name, but when you go looking for it on the map you may not be able to find it because it actually refers to the area. We had responsibility for about five thousand people in twenty-one sub-villages, in a very mountainous region. We were fortunate, or I was fortunate, we were there in the dry season, so therefore you could get out to these places.

Very little trouble in that area. The major concern, the major initiative during my tour, was the upcoming general election, which was held on the 30th August 2001. So a lot of the work we did was — — —. (end of tape)

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A: TAPE 2 SIDE B

[in that area. The major concern, the major initiative during my tour, was the upcoming general election, which was held on the 30th August 2001. So a lot of the work we did was] working with the Electoral Commission people in assisting them to do their education programs for the East Timorese. The East Timorese — every village, I think, without exception, that we went to regularly — they all had the same concern. Concerns. Three of them. Who would protect their villages when they went to vote? Who would protect them while they were on the road to and from the voting site? And who would protect them while they were actually at the voting site? Some of these people walked three hours to get to the polling booth. Their concern — and it was consistent throughout the whole of the area in which I worked —



appears to have been based in what happened to them leading up to and during the independence vote, where they were intimidated, to say the least, on the actual voting day, where they would be assaulted going to and from the polling station, where it was permitted for the what was called 'pro-autonomy' — so the people who wanted to stay within Indonesia — for them to sing and dance and wave their banners around and basically intimidate people at polling sites, and some of the houses in those instances had been burnt and damaged leading up to and during that independence vote, so these people were very concerned that that wasn't going to happen to them again. And we did our best to convince them that nothing was going to happen, that they would be safe. There was special legislation passed by the, at that point, the UNTAET — so the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor — that created offences in relation to polling sites. Many of East Timorese in rural areas carry what we would call machetes, what they call *katanas* [?], and I mean it is not unusual to see a two year-old with their own knife and/or sharp implement. They're referred to colloquially as 'agricultural implements', and they are in fact used for that, for cutting down whether it be plants like tapioca, the type of plant that they eat, and/or coconuts if they're available, whatever. So it is kind of the culture. We did a lot of work to try and convince them that on the day they should leave their gardening implements at home, because they are a considerable weapon when they're used by people who've carried them all their lives, and I think it was that day — the election day — that I really started to develop, what shall I say, a respect for these people. It doesn't mean I didn't have it before, but when you see what they went through to ensure that they all had their say, it was quite mind-boggling. For example, a lot of these people had only ever voted once before, in the independence election. They'd never voted in the General Assembly type situation because, as you know, they were four hundred years a colony of Portugal, who appointed its leaders, and certainly not under the Indonesians were they given much opportunity either. So the vote was voluntary, and on the day, the 30th August, ninety-six per cent of eligible voters turned up to vote. And some of these people, as I said before, had to walk three hours to get there, so they left at two o'clock in the morning to make sure they got their spot, and then when it was all over turned around and walked all the way home again. In one of the polling sites in my area — we only had three — of two hundred and eighty



people who were eligible to vote only six didn't turn up, and it turned out it was because they were too old to make the trip. It was really quite humbling to see how serious these people were about having their say in their independence, and it was good. The whole thing went fairly quietly.

We went out the night before. I'd split the police officers into three areas, and we were to provide security for the ballot papers, the ballot boxes and the Electoral Commission people. The UN Electoral Commission people had trained East Timorese to assist in the ballot process, so in my case we went out to a place called Gildipil[?], which was within a kilometre of the West Timor border, and escorted the personnel and all the ballot papers and all the equipment in the afternoon of the 29th and settled that all down. The New Zealand peace-keeping force was in my area of responsibility. A decision had been made, basically by the Australian PKF and the New Zealand PKF, that they would not have a physical, visible presence during the election. The East Timorese were quite concerned about that, and they wanted to know where the military was going to be and were they going to be on the road and who was going to protect them. But the conscious decision was made, as I understand it, not to have a visible military presence, as a way of demonstrating to the people of East Timor that the military, in a democracy, didn't probably have a place in elections. So we got in, as I said, in the afternoon of the 29th, secured all the ballot papers and boxes and set up, with the help of the East Timorese, what we would call queues or markers so that these people could know where to go and what to do in the morning.

I, and many others, anticipated there may have been a problem with getting these people to vote in the time that they had been allotted. They were given one day, and in some other UN examples in other countries they actually had three days for elections because of the same issues — travel times and numbers. As it turned out, the Electoral Commission people got it right and we were wrong, in that the next morning I was up at four o'clock. There were already a hundred people lined up ready to vote and the polling stations didn't open till seven. And after a slow start, while the electoral people, the East Timorese, got used to the system and the idea of it, and all the persons who were there — oh, that's not quite right. We'd suggested to the East Timorese, the village leaders, that their concern about their villages and



who would look after them while ninety per cent of the adult population was voting was that they should perhaps think about sending some of the older people first and leaving the younger people behind and then they could swap over. It appeared in the village that I was in, Gildipil, that that had happened. The younger people didn't roll up until about eleven-thirty in the morning. But the polling booths were open between seven and four, and everyone at my site had voted by twelve-thirty. And it was a common theme right through the area, Bobinaro. We of course kept the polling booth open till four o'clock. The East Timorese, some of them couldn't understand why we would do that — (laughs) they wanted to shut it down and go home, pack everything up and get it finished, but we pointed out to them that these were the hours and that's what would happen. So that's what happened. I don't think, as I said, in my case, not one person turned up after twelve-thirty to vote. They'd all voted. And then, at four it was closed and a lot of paperwork and cross-checking and sealing them in boxes and bags, and we didn't actually get out of the polling site until five-forty, if I remember rightly.

We'd arranged to meet the other Electoral Commission officers and the other police officers from the two other sites at a particular point about five kilometres from where I was, because the ballot papers had to be in Maliana in the counting house before midnight. We had discussed and talked about the possibility of getting a helicopter to come and pick up the ballot papers, but that was not an option. And the roads in the mountains at night, particularly if the fog comes in, are really quite treacherous. So we, in convoy, travelled from this area back into Maliana at night in the mountains, and were there by about eight-thirty, offloaded ballot boxes to the relevant persons, and then stayed that night in Maliana and we retired, and we were happy it was all finished. And then we headed back up into the mountains again the next day.

After the election, it seemed to me — and I think, from talking to a lot of other people — that the place went very quiet. There was very little happening, other than isolated incidents. There were some troubles in Dili, which had been there, but I — and on second-hand information, I must say, because I didn't work there — but there was quite often what they referred to as 'gang-related violence'. We made it an effort — it was an effort — but we made sure that we went back out to the villages



and all the sub-villages within the next two days after the election to thank all the villagers and all their leaders for their assistance and their behaviour and whatever through the whole thing. That went down fairly well. And basically it was fairly — and then, after that, the focus went more onto training, which we hadn't had a lot of opportunity to do because of the build-up to the election, and then start looking at other issues in the villages like famine and medical services and all that, because East Timor is a very poor country. In the area that I was in, ninety-five per cent of them were subsistence farmers. There is no work, or very little work. What a lot of people don't appreciate, I think, is that there are some East Timorese who are worse off under the current regime than they were under the Indonesian regime, where they may have had work with the Indonesians in administrative roles. So not everyone is happy with what's happened. There is a lot of underlying, residual animosity between those people who did well under the Indonesians, and that's a whole other subject, but the cultural way of dealing with grievances and crime in East Timor is a whole lot different than what we're used to.

Do you mean aggressive?

No. It's interesting, and it's a fantastic subject. And I need to stop and have a drink, if I can. (break in recording)

About this idea of how they deal with situations in East Timor in the mountain regions. Could you just enlarge on that for us?

It's basically a traditional justice system, as opposed to a legal system as we would understand it. It comes, I don't know, perhaps from history and from the fact that these issues have got to be dealt with quickly and the court systems haven't always been in place, and the ones they have now have got a long way to go before they would be recognizable in Australia. So if a wrong is inflicted on someone, be it an assault, a theft of livestock, that type of thing — or in fact most offences that we would have in this country — then the person who is the victim will complain to the local village leader, who will then call on the kin of the person who's the alleged offender, and in many cases whole families turn up to these meetings. And they'll sit, and the person who is the victim will make his allegation. In many cases the offender, unlike in this country and other countries, will admit without too much



encouragement to having done what he's been accused of. And then this settlement process, or reconciliation process, is one about where the person who's committed the offence, who's done the wrong, will apologise, make an apology, and then there will be an issue of compensation of a financial nature. And that's the way that the vast majority of issues were dealt with in my area up in the mountains in East Timor. And it seemed on the surface that it was a satisfactory system, in that, once the apology had been made, once the compensation had been set, then it appeared that everybody forgot about it and got on with their lives. I spent considerable time at Lolo-Toi speaking with a Polish-born Catholic priest who explained to me often about the local culture and the way things were done. He was of the view that, because the country is so poor, because housing is not readily available, that part of this culture and part of this settlement process resulted from the fact that people lived in very close proximity, that you might have ten or twelve people in a room, and that this was the way in which the culture could hold itself together and everyone get along with each other, because they were literally in each other's pockets, and by accepting the apology and the compensation and then forgiving and forgetting was how the culture managed to maintain its balance. And that's the way it worked for the majority of people up in the mountains.

Brent, how did you, as an Australian, and other Australians, get on with the villagers of East Timor?

I think notwithstanding what I said earlier about my view in relation to the treatment of the East Timorese by successive Australian governments, there is a — and I think it's not particularly understood by a lot of people, and I heard another reference to it the other day by a journalist — that, in my view, that Australia as a country is not highly-regarded by the East Timorese. They see Portugal as being their greatest supporter right through the troubles and — again, this is a little-known fact — that Australia remains the only country that officially recognized the annexation of East Timor by Indonesia. And quite rightly, in my view, the East Timorese have very long memories in relation to some of the dealings with them by Australian governments. However, because of the work done by the Australian military after the independence vote, and because of the work done by the Australian police, and it has been my experience, that individual relationships



between East Timorese and Australians in their policing are very strong. It was — regularly we were told by East Timorese that, if they had their choice, then it was the Australians that they would work with, because I think, generally speaking, the Australian people, Australian police officers are open and equitable, which wasn't always the case, and they appreciated that. And we treated them with a lot of respect as fellow police officers, and didn't sort of patronise them or whatever. So individually, I think, Australians are highly-regarded by individual East Timorese.

And they certainly see Australia as their neighbour, and if you speak to young people, then they, for example, do not understand why, but they do accept, that Portuguese, for example, has been determined as the official language of East Timor. They have told me that this is the way of the old people — and I think they refer then to the Fretilin people — and they said 'When it comes to our turn, then it will be changed.' So I think — yes. They understand. There are a lot of East Timorese living in Australia, so a lot of people in East Timor have relatives in Australia and probably understand the Australian lifestyle and know a fair bit about our country. Australia is, in fact, providing scholarships and aid programs to help educate East Timorese — there was something like ninety, as I understand it, last year. They were brought to Australia and educated with a view to helping the East Timorese look after themselves.

Brent, I know from our discussion that you didn't face any conflict situations in a military sense, but I also have gathered that, after your return to Australia, that there have been many things that your time in East Timor has made you ponder. Would that be fair?

Yes, it is. I mean, it's — and more than the Cyprus example — this one is where you really appreciate your own country, because East Timor is one of the poorest countries in the world. Things like medical aid and sanitation and health, food, employment opportunities, opportunities for development of the individual as well as the country are very — there are very few opportunities for these people. They have, as most people would know, will soon perhaps get the royalties from the Timor Sea gas and fuel projects, but they have a small — estimated to be about thirty million dollars' worth a year — export coffee industry, which they have little



or no control over, and it's difficult to see where the money's going to come from for these people to develop their country in the way it should be. They have massive infrastructure problems. On the exit of the Indonesians things like hospitals, schools, electricity plants were destroyed, and all those things have to be rebuilt. I think what it has taught me is that we're, again, fortunate to live in this country and where we're given a lot of opportunities, and it has given me a great deal of respect for the East Timorese people and their perseverance and their courage.

Thank you very much, Brent.

END OF INTERVIEW.