

# A New Way to Wage Peace:

## US Support to Operation *Stabilise*



INTERFET

USFET



Major Craig A. Collier, US Army

*East Timor represents the past, present and future of US Army operations. Worldwide deployments were a hallmark of 20th-century operations, and peacekeeping missions have dominated the past decade. In the coming years, support to coalitions may become the new paradigm as the US military leaves leadership roles to other countries. Collier reports on the Army's deployment in a surprising direction and its participation in successful multinational operations.*

**A**S THE UNITED STATES GROWS increasingly weary of taking the lead in peace operations, it may prefer providing discrete support to ally-led coalitions. For a small, succinct and inconspicuous mission, successful US support to the Australian-led Operation *Stabilise* could have a greater influence than its obscurity would otherwise indicate.

The island of Timor lies near the eastern end of the Malay Archipelago, roughly 350 miles north of Darwin, Australia. East Timor was a Portuguese colony for more than 400 years until the Portuguese dismantled their empire and abruptly left in mid-1975. Indonesia filled the vacuum, invading East Timor on 7 December 1975. Since then, the often-bloody and internationally ignored campaign has continued between independence-seeking guerrillas and the Indonesian military (TNI). In the 1990s international awareness began to grow as details of the conflict's more horrific atrocities reached Western news organizations. Indonesia faced mounting

international criticism and threats of economic sanctions for its uneven stewardship of East Timor.<sup>1</sup>

The conflict boiled over on 30 August 1999 after the results of a United Nations (UN)-sponsored referendum became public. The people of East Timor voted overwhelmingly to reject Indonesian rule in favor of independence. Supported by elements of the Indonesian army, local militia groups immediately began a rampage throughout East Timor. Unable to control the situation and with international pressure mounting, the Indonesian government reluctantly agreed to allow a UN-authorized force to enter East Timor.

On 15 September 1999 the UN authorized the creation of International Force-East Timor (INTERFET). Requesting support from other nations, Australia volunteered to take the lead and provide the bulk of the troops. INTERFET's mandate from UN Security Council Resolution 1264 was to restore peace and security in East Timor; protect and support the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), the

organization tasked with administering the referendum; and within force capabilities, provide humanitarian assistance.<sup>2</sup>

When the first Australian and coalition units arrived on 20 September, much of East Timor lay in smoldering ruins. News reports showed block after block of burned-out buildings in the capital, Dili. Most of the terrified populace had either retreated into the hills or been rounded up and sent across the border either into Indonesian-controlled West Timor or neighboring islands. The press frequently reported that as many as 300,000 people had fled East Timor—out of a population of 850,000—and that most of those who remained were in the hills starving, too scared of the militia to return to the cities. Rumors abounded of Balkan-style atrocities. As many as 30,000 were reported killed in the three-week rampage.<sup>3</sup>

## Forming US Forces INTERFET

On the same day that the UN authorized INTERFET, US President William J. Clinton established US Forces INTERFET (USFI). Clinton said that “a few hundred [personnel], in a clearly supportive capacity would deploy.”<sup>4</sup> The United States would provide logistics, intelligence, communications, civil affairs, and operations and planning augmentees for the INTERFET staff.<sup>5</sup>

Commander in Chief, US Forces Pacific, Admiral Dennis Blair directed the III Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) to establish a headquarters for USFI in Darwin.<sup>6</sup> Blair designated US Marine Brigadier General John G. Castellaw as commander, US Forces INTERFET. Most of Castellaw’s key staff members came with him from the III MEF, but all services provided individual augmentation.

The 613th Air Expeditionary Group, Pacific Air Forces, provided three C-130s. The US Navy initially supplied heavy-lift support, using helicopters from the amphibious ships USS *Belleau Wood* and USS *Peleliu*. The Army provided most of the intelligence and communications assets and all of the civil affairs support. All of the services provided individual planning expertise to INTERFET, most notably on the C2, C5, C6, Air Coordination Command and Naval Coordination Command staffs. More than 6,000 US forces personnel eventually participated in Operation *Stabilise*, with the majority assigned to the two Marine expeditionary

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(Above) Australian soldiers patrolling East Timor. (Left) INTERFET Commander Major General Peter Cosgrove speaking with Brazilian troops in East Timor.

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units/amphibious readiness groups that supported the mission. More than 230 US soldiers deployed to support Operation *Stabilise*, so at any time, about 70 percent of the ground forces in East Timor were Army.<sup>7</sup>

## From Australia to East Timor

On 1 October, after establishing the headquarters and while gathering the support forces in Darwin, USFI began to send INTERFET planning staff augmentees and other mission-essential personnel into East Timor. The primary concern throughout the operation was force protection. Dili remained tense despite the arrival of INTERFET forces because of continued TNI presence, hidden militia



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Journal do Exército

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members and skirmishes with Australians near the border. No one was really sure how the militia or the Indonesian army would respond to INTERFET. One militia leader boasted, “We East Timorese are thirsty for the blood of white people.”<sup>8</sup>

Castellaw designated Army Component Commander Colonel Randolph P. Strong as Commander of US Forces-East Timor (USFET), subordinate to USFI.<sup>9</sup> Strong and his staff deployed to Dili in mid-October. Most of the USFET staff came from Headquarters, US Army Pacific (USARPAC), with some augmentation from the other services. The USFI staff remained in Darwin.<sup>10</sup> Remaining US forces deployed to East Timor when force-protection conditions allowed.

**Intelligence support.** USFI provided 46 personnel to INTERFET for intelligence support. Six personnel operated Trojan Spirit II, which downlinked

classified information via satellite; eight others provided counterintelligence support and expertise; the rest were integrated into the INTERFET C2 staff.

US intelligence support personnel began to redeploy in mid-November, much earlier than originally planned. With the situation calming, INTERFET could assume US intelligence responsibilities. After demonstrating its reliability, the Australian Joint Intelligence Support System (JISS) replaced Trojan Spirit II in late November. The remainder of the intelligence support team redeployed after training their INTERFET counterparts.

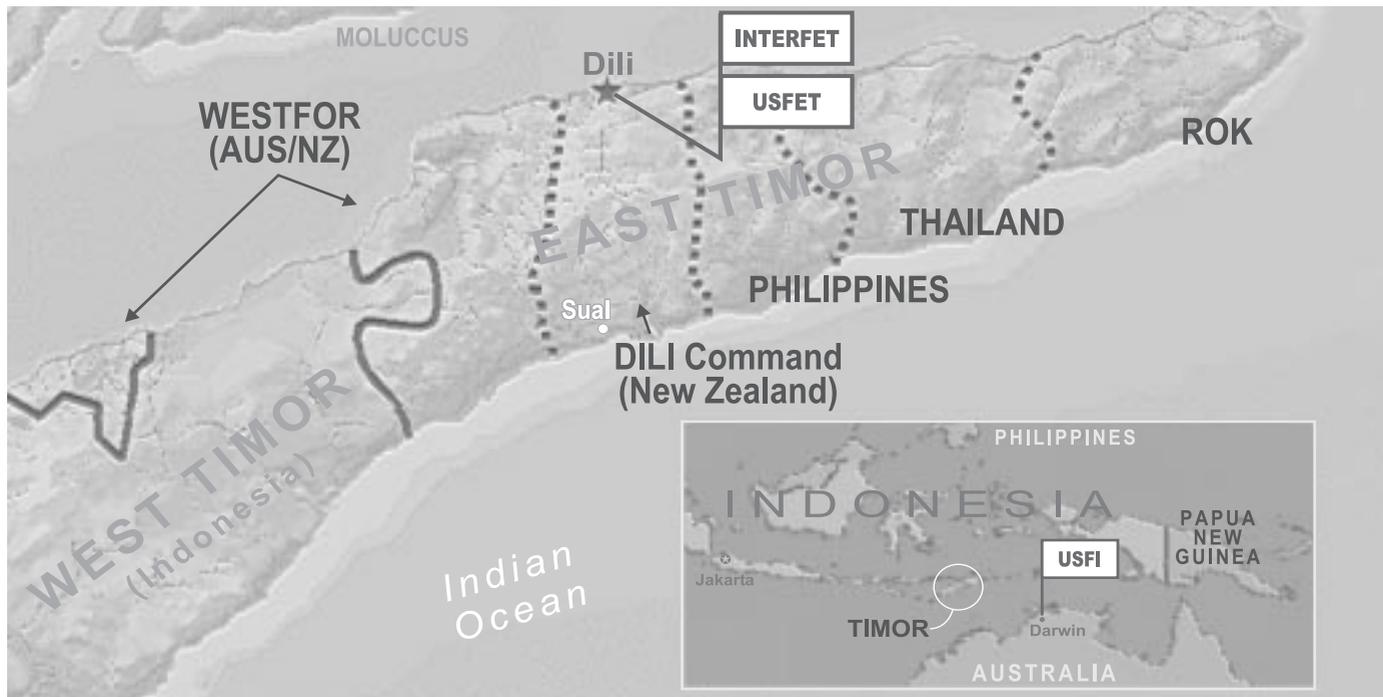
**Task Force *Thunderbird*.** The 11th Signal Brigade, Fort Huachuca, Arizona, provided long-haul voice- and data-communication support to INTERFET. The brigade studied the requirements and tailored a communications support package based on INTERFET needs.

Task Force (TF) *Thunderbird* was the largest US asset in East Timor and by far the most expensive to bring into theater. It arrived at Darwin Royal Australian Air Force Base in 12 C-5s and one C-17 in early October.<sup>11</sup> At the height of the operation, communicators had 57 pieces of rolling stock and 83 soldiers deployed at six locations throughout East Timor, with another 40 remaining in Darwin to provide communications support to USFI headquarters. Most of TF *Thunderbird*'s equipment deployed to East Timor from Australia by sea. Like other assets, TF *Thunderbird*'s elements often waited to move to their final locations while supported units made the necessary force-protection preparations.

The East Timor communication infrastructure, largely destroyed during the militia rampage, had to be rebuilt before TF *Thunderbird* could redeploy. The Australian government contracted the rebuilding of the communication system, with a planned completion date of 15 December 1999.

**The civil-military operations center.** Twelve soldiers from B Company, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, were the first US Army personnel to arrive in Darwin. Their mission was to establish a civil-military operations center (CMOC) in East Timor and then train INTERFET forces. The CMOC coordinated nongovernment, private voluntary and UN relief efforts with military operations.<sup>12</sup> Humanitarian-assistance organizations benefited greatly by having access to military helicopters. The CMOC's efforts helped INTERFET facilitate humanitarian assistance.

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able. Before deploying to Fort Bragg, the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion established the CMOC and handed off control in early November to 10 US Army Reserve soldiers from the 322d Civil Affairs Battalion, Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

All civil affairs soldiers had the additional mission of working themselves out of a job—that is, teaching and training foreign soldiers assigned to the CMOC. From the beginning the goal was to hand over civil-military operations to other INTERFET forces as soon as they could operate the CMOC.

**Heavy lift.** The only way to bring food and supplies into the difficult-to-reach interior was by truck or helicopter. INTERFET forces lacked vertical lift, so some of the most important US lift assets were medium- and heavy-lift helicopters. From early October through November the *Belleau Wood* and *Peleliu* took turns providing CH-46 Sea Knight and CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters.

Operation *Kitchen Sink* was a typical heavy-lift helicopter mission that showed Army assets supporting INTERFET. At one CMOC daily meeting, a representative from a relief organization requested assistance to transport kitchen utensils and other

supplies to Suai, a small border town on the south coast. He had only one truck with which to move 12,000 pounds of supplies across Timor’s spine. He estimated that getting the supplies to Suai would take at least two months, provided the monsoons did not wash out the dirt roads across the mountains. The 96th Civil Affairs Team at the CMOC referred him to the US Marine liaison officer from Dili, who coordinated with the *Peleliu* using communication equipment installed by TF *Thunderbird*. A few days later, two CH-53s moved the 12,000 pounds of supplies to Suai in one afternoon.

Replacing the *Peleliu* with another amphibious ship was simply too costly, so the US Pacific Command decided to contract the services, then tasked the US Navy to provide funding for heavy-lift helicopters.

Ironically, the Navy turned to the Army to administer the \$10-million contract. A contract representative from Army Materiel Command’s newly formed Logistics Civil Augmentation Program Support Unit arrived in East Timor in mid-November to begin coordinating with INTERFET. The prime contractor, DynCorp, agreed to provide two Russian



Concertina wire, sandbags and a makeshift guard post improved security at the US forces headquarters compound, but generally USFI relied on coalition partners for force protection.

***In most cases the supported unit welcomed the US perspective and immediately improved security. However, several times supported units believed their security was adequate and that US personnel were being too rigorous. This disconnect required diplomacy, but foreign contingents understood that failure to provide adequate force protection would delay US support. In every case the host unit complied with requirements, and US forces moved in.***

MI-26 Halo helicopters and two MI-8 Hip medium-lift helicopters. A new section of runway apron was built at Dili's Komoro Airport to accommodate the huge MI-26s. The MI-8s arrived first, with the MI-26s on station by mid-December. All four aircraft supported INTERFET missions from December 1999 through the end of February 2000.<sup>13</sup>

**Force protection.** In any deployment, balancing force-protection requirements with mission needs is unavoidable and sometimes contradictory. Operating in a supporting role as part of a coalition further complicates the issues. Other armies may not share US force-protection concerns. The contingents supporting Operation *Stabilise* were no exception.<sup>14</sup>

Protecting US forces meant ensuring that USFI had rock-solid measures in place, but establishing the appropriate level of force protection at ransacked and vandalized compounds took time.<sup>15</sup> Until USFI had proper security, INTERFET staff augmentees worked in Dili but slept aboard US Navy ships anchored in Dili Harbor. By mid-October the main US compounds had adequate force protection in

place, allowing US assets to stay permanently.<sup>16</sup>

Every nation involved in Operation *Stabilise* had different standards for force protection. Even within a nation's armed forces the standards varied from service to service and unit to unit. US measures for force protection were usually significantly more stringent than others.<sup>17</sup>

Before Americans could work at these locations, a USFI team inspected and certified them for force protection. The USFI team met with the supported officer in charge, reviewed the entire defense plan and explained what measures needed to be established. The team verified that the necessary corrections were in place before US personnel moved in. Castellaw decided which compounds met US force-protection standards before US assets deployed to East Timor.

Most often the supported unit had some force-protection measures already in place, but they were not considered adequate to protect US forces. In most cases the supported unit welcomed the US perspective and immediately improved security. However, several times supported units believed their security was adequate and that US personnel were being too rigorous. This disconnect required diplomacy, but foreign contingents understood that failure to provide adequate force protection would delay US support. In every case the host unit complied with requirements, and US forces moved in.

Sometimes various forces simply agreed to disagree. For example, after the monsoon's first rain season, backed-up sewers and drains flooded the INTERFET-run outdoor dining facility. The USFET preventive medicine noncommissioned officer recommended that US personnel return to meals, ready to eat, until several measures ensured that food preparation complied with US sanitary standards. The decision saved US personnel from the gastrointestinal illnesses that plagued other contingents.

The USFI established familiar force-protection procedures. For example, any US citizen deploying to East Timor wore Ranger body armor or a flak vest; USFI monitored the movement of all personnel; and all vehicles carried communication equipment. Also, all US military personnel brought extra malaria pills, carried mosquito netting and wore permethrin-impregnated uniforms. Through these efforts—and good fortune—only one US soldier contracted a vector-borne disease. However, from 20 September 1999 to 1 April 2000, INTERFET and UN forces suffered 191 cases of malaria and 324 cases of dengue fever.<sup>18</sup>



The terrain and climate of East Timor made transportation a challenge and provided a breeding ground for disease. (*Inset*) A giant MI-26 (note the man standing below the nose), one of four contract helicopters USFI provided for INTERFET. The heavy-lift helicopter contract was funded by the US Navy and administered by the US Army. The US prime contractor subcontracted Russian-built helicopters flown by former Warsaw Pact pilots to support an Australian-led coalition.

COL Randy Strong, US Army



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**Unique, limited support.** USFI was at the end of a long line of communication, brought only essential personnel, and supported missions planned largely by Australia and other INTERFET contingents. US forces were clearly members of the supporting cast—without a sector or area of responsibility of their own. In this environment, establishing a good working relationship with INTERFET was critical. Castellaw established rapport by assigning US liaisons to key INTERFET staff sections, which benefited both INTERFET and USFI. INTERFET received expertise and a visible sign of US commitment, and liaisons kept USFI informed of upcoming missions.

Because of limited assets, USFI often coordinated with INTERFET for logistic requirements, particularly transportation. Visiting dignitaries usually required additional transportation and security. Since INTERFET also had limited assets, missions to support and dignitaries to entertain, meeting those requirements was not easy.<sup>19</sup> Keeping a small

footprint required innovation and flexibility to do more with less. For example, the J2 and J6 performed the additional duties of watch officer and public affairs officer.<sup>20</sup>

**“Mil-to-mil” engagement.** USARPAC conducts 35 joint and combined command post and field training exercises annually as part of its Expanded Relations Program (ERP). Most of them involve one or more members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. In fact, at the same time Operation *Stabilise* began, so did *CROCODILE ‘99*, a combined Australian-US exercise. These exercises train US soldiers and strengthen the relationship between the United States and its allies.<sup>21</sup>

A useful byproduct of these exercises is the interaction among the services. Within a three-year tour, soldiers often find themselves working with the same sailors, airmen and Marines with whom they worked in earlier exercises. In fact, many personnel involved in Operation *Stabilise* had worked with familiar members from sister services in one or

TF *Thunderbird*, based at the ravaged Dili University compound, provided critical secure and nonsecure voice and data communications to both INTERFET HQ and US forces. TF *Thunderbird* made up almost half of US personnel deployed to East Timor.



11th Signal Brigade

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more exercises. This experience reduced the time needed to integrate staffs.

In addition, as part of the ERP, Australia and Singapore regularly exchange officers with US units. Five Australian signal officers involved in Operation *Stabilise* were alumni of this program.<sup>22</sup> One extraordinary example of the value of these exchanges involved TF *Thunderbird*. Australian Army Major John Wilson, a former exchange officer with the 11th Signal Brigade, served as a signal officer with Australia's Land Component Headquarters during Operation *Stabilise*. He was able to match Australian requirements precisely with US capabilities. "I could tell you what we needed right down to the bumper number on the vehicles," he claimed.<sup>23</sup>

**Redeployment strategy.** Before all US assets deployed to East Timor, Castellaw began devising a redeployment strategy. Fortunately, even as early as October, the situation in East Timor appeared to be improving. The Indonesian army began to evacuate its forces, and when unrepentant militia stood and fought, they lost to INTERFET ground forces in lopsided border skirmishes. The timetable for

completing the mission was actually pushed forward. Based on INTERFET's goal to complete the peace enforcement by 15 January 2000, Castellaw's goal for the redeployment of US assets was 15 December 1999.<sup>24</sup>

The ambitious time line forced USFI to define the end state quickly and begin executing actions necessary to meet the target date. The key step was determining when US support would no longer be required. The supporting US role made it easier for USFI to plan and execute its exit strategy.<sup>25</sup> Castellaw based redeployment time lines on successfully setting up commercial alternatives, training replacement forces and knowing US support was no longer required.

Castellaw briefed INTERFET Commander Major General Peter Cosgrove on the redeployment plan.<sup>26</sup> Cosgrove supported the plan and ensured Australian communication contractors stuck to their time line, which was crucial to TF *Thunderbird*'s redeploying on schedule. US forces redeployed as the mission and available sea- and airlift allowed.

The last major US Army element to leave East Timor was TF *Thunderbird*, which remained until

most of the commercial communication system was up and running. Except for three officers left behind on the INTERFET staff, the last 50 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines redeployed to Darwin on 17 December. The mission was successful, with no embarrassing incidents or US casualties.

The US effort in East Timor validated the concept of focused US support as a subordinate command in successful multinational peace operations. Establishing a joint headquarters helped US forces translate national commitment into the right troop-to-task support. Although it is difficult to quantify the benefit of combined exercises and officer exchanges, these opportunities smooth operations with allies when crises arise. The ubiquitous US concern with force protection can be reconciled within a coalition without putting US forces at unnecessary risk. Finally, a supporting US role helps establish exit criteria and the early redeployment of US forces.

***More than 6,000 US forces personnel eventually participated in Operation Stabilise, with the majority assigned to the two Marine expeditionary units/amphibious readiness groups that supported the mission. More than 230 US soldiers deployed to support Operation Stabilise, so at any time, about 70 percent of the ground forces in East Timor were Army.***

During Operation *Stabilise*, US participation was meager in comparison to the 8,000 personnel sent by the other INTERFET forces, yet US assets were significant force multipliers. US support—communications, intelligence, civil affairs, heavy lift and planning expertise—is typical of the unique and important assets that many US allies lack and the kind that will most likely be requested in future operations. **MR**

#### NOTES

1. US Department of Defense, "East Timor," *INTERFET Handbook* (October 1999), 36-37.

2. UN Security Council Resolution 1264, para 3, available online at <[www.un.org/peace/etimor/docs/9936481E.htm](http://www.un.org/peace/etimor/docs/9936481E.htm)>.

3. The reports of those killed by the militia were exaggerated. Although the militia committed some gruesome atrocities, at the end of November 1999, just under 700 bodies had been discovered. Reports of thousands of starving Timorese also appear overblown.

4. "Remarks made by US President William J. Clinton upon departure from Auckland, New Zealand," available online at <[www.fas.org/mad/dod-101/ops/docs99/990914-timor-wh1.htm](http://www.fas.org/mad/dod-101/ops/docs99/990914-timor-wh1.htm)>.

5. *US Forces INTERFET After Action Report* (USFI AAR), Part I, "Executive Overview" (11 February 2000), 1. Part II contains the detailed individual lessons learned.

6. ADM Dennis Blair decided not to stand up a joint task force (JTF) because of the US supporting role. Instead of JTF *East Timor*, the US effort became known as US Forces INTERFET (USFI). For a discussion of how that decision affected the mission, see the USFI AAR, Part I.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Ron Moreau and Jeffrey Barthelet, "Marching Into a Trap," *Newsweek* (22 September 1999), available online at <[www.newsweek.com/nw-srv/printed/int/asia/ovin0313\\_1.htm](http://www.newsweek.com/nw-srv/printed/int/asia/ovin0313_1.htm)>.

9. COL Randolph P. Strong, a signal officer with previous contingency operations experience in Bosnia, is also Commander, 516th Signal Brigade and Deputy Chief of Staff, Information Management (DCSIM), USARPAC, Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

10. Both BG John Castellaw and COL Strong arrived with a core of Marines and soldiers who had worked together at their home stations. On the ground, and as the mission's size and scope clarified, each commander augmented his staff with subject matter experts. Strong's J2, J3, J4 and J6 staff included US Army officers from USARPAC. The J1, camp commandant, operations noncommissioned officer (NCO) and Marine expeditionary unit (MEU) liaison officers were Marines; the preventive medicine NCO was Navy; and the Catholic chaplain was Air Force.

11. Bill McPherson, "The East Timor Tapes: An Interview with Colonel Randolph P. Strong, commander, US Forces East Timor (October-December 1999)" *Pacific Voice* (Special Edition, Spring 2000), 15.

12. US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-23, *Peace Operations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, December 1994), 40.

13. James Folk and LTC Andy Smith, "A LOGCAP Success in East Timor," *Army Logistician*, July-August 2000, available online at <[www.almc.army.mil/alog/julaug00/ms566.htm](http://www.almc.army.mil/alog/julaug00/ms566.htm)>. This issue contains a special section devoted to East Timor,

particularly contracted support.

14. To some, US insistence on adequate force protection before moving in was, to paraphrase one INTERFET officer, "beneath the world's only superpower." The US interest in force protection substantially improved everyone's security but may have cost some credibility by insisting on better force-protection conditions than our coalition partners thought necessary.

15. "DoD News Briefing" (12 September 1999), available online at <[www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/docs99/t09141999\\_trfg-914.htm](http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/docs99/t09141999_trfg-914.htm)>.

16. Most US forces lived and worked in the "cultural section" downtown Dili. USFET headquarters was the former home of the labor ministry, while TF *Thunderbird* shared the partially destroyed Dili University compound with an Australian topographic unit.

17. During the height of US support to Operation *Stabilise*, the United States provided personnel in five towns in East Timor. Within Dili, USFI supported INTERFET at six locations. Within the "Dili Precinct" (a guarded and patrolled area of about five square blocks located in the city center), US personnel worked and lived at six compounds. US forces coordinated force-protection requirements with Australian, New Zealand, Thai, Brazilian, Filipino and British forces.

18. "Malaria, Dengue Take Toll on Troops," *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia) available online at <[www.theage.com.au/breaking/0004/03/A46759-2000\\_apr3.html](http://www.theage.com.au/breaking/0004/03/A46759-2000_apr3.html)>.

19. During one memorable discussion while coordinating for two US senators' visits, an exasperated Australian army major in the INTERFET visitor's coordination cell asked me a series of questions on the US legislative branch: "How many congressmen do you have?" "How many senators?" I was mildly impressed that he took such an interest until his last question: "And how many of them intend to visit us?"

20. USFET entertained many dignitaries, including six generals, three ambassadors and several other officials, so public affairs became a significant additional duty.

21. "Expanded Relations Program," available online at <[www.usarpac.army.mil/docs/expan.htm](http://www.usarpac.army.mil/docs/expan.htm)>.

22. Robert K. Ackerman, "U.S. Forces Provide Deployable Communications to East Timor," *Signal*, April 2000, 45.

23. Dennis Steele, "End State," *Army Magazine*, available online at <[www.ausa.org/army/magazine/steele3feb00.html](http://www.ausa.org/army/magazine/steele3feb00.html)>.

24. In October, MG Cosgrove told his staff that the target date for changing the flag from INTERFET to the UN Transitional Administration-East Timor (UNTAET); that is, when the mission could change from peace enforcement to nationbuilding, was 15 January 2000.

25. USFI AAR, Part I, 25.

26. Mission Analysis/Redeployment Briefing given to Cosgrove in Dili on 11 November 1999.

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