

AUSTRALIA'S GUERRILLA WAR ON TIMOR



WORDS KARL JAMES

In 1942 Japanese forces invaded much of Asia and the Pacific. Deep behind enemy lines, a small force of Australian soldiers held the line to delay and frustrate the attackers

In the night air of a Timorese mountain hideout, a group of bearded Australians watched anxiously as Corporal Jack Sargeant began tapping out a signal in Morse code.

Two months earlier, on 20 February 1942, the Japanese had invaded Dutch Timor, and most of the island's Australian and Dutch defenders were overwhelmed and captured. In Portuguese Timor, the Australians of the 2/2nd Independent Company had fallen back into the mountains overlooking Dili. They were reached in early March by some Australians and a few Dutch troops, who had escaped from Dutch Timor on foot. Among this group was Captain George Parker, Sargeant and signaller Lance Corporal John Donovan. They began working with the independent company's signalmen Max 'Joe' Loveless and Keith Richards to build a radio capable of communicating with Darwin. Loveless had been a radio technician in Hobart before the war, and his knowledge marked him out as the team's 'No. 1 man'.

Shortly after work began, an exhausted Dutch sergeant arrived with a broken receiver set he had carried for more than 60 kilometres (37 miles) across the rugged country. Loveless used components from this set, another discarded set and a transmitter set seized in an earlier raid as the basis for his radio.

Their tools were primitive, and virtually everything had to be done by guesswork, even poring through a Portuguese radio manual to determine the colour codes of resistors and condensers. Coils were wound around lengths of bamboo. To charge the batteries for the set, a generator was taken from an abandoned car: it was rigged to a series of wooden wheels

Recolourisations: Marina Amaral

Australian 'guerrilla' Lieutenant Gerry McKenzie in Timor

“FORCE INTACT. STILL FIGHTING. BADLY NEED BOOTS, MONEY QUININE, TOMMY GUN AMMUNITION.’ THIS WAS THE FIRST NEWS ANYONE IN AUSTRALIA HAD RECEIVED FROM SPARROW FORCE SINCE THE JAPANESE HAD LANDED ON TIMOR 59 DAYS EARLIER”

A still from Damien Parer's film Men of Timor shows the burning of Mindello, a "pro-Japanese" Timorese village



The leaders of Sparrow Force and the 2/2nd Independent Company. Major Bernard Callinan is second from the right

and finally to a master wheel with wooden handles that had to be cranked by hand. Local Timorese did the cranking. Loveless completed a transmitter in late March, but it failed to work.

Australian patrols, meanwhile, continued sourcing potentially useful components. A battery charger previously buried by the Australians was recovered in a daring night raid under the nose of Japanese sentries. Loveless began working on a second transmitter, twice as big as the first, built into an 18-litre (four-gallon) kerosene tin. It was his 'masterpiece'. When they tested it, the signallers could hear Darwin on the receiver, but the transmitter failed. Unrelenting, Loveless decided to hook his powerful transmitter to a weak existing set that had a range of only about 48 kilometres (30 miles). To do this he needed more batteries, and these were recovered by patrols. Then the petrol for the battery charger began to run out. A raid was conducted into Japanese-occupied Dili to steal tins of kerosene and diesel oil, and these kept the battery charger running once the petrol finished.

Unsuccessful transmission attempts were made during the second and third weeks of April. Finally, on 19 April, Darwin acknowledged. The signallers celebrated by smoking a tin of tobacco they had been saving for weeks, and christened their set 'Winnie the war-winner', after British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

They tried again the following day. Parker, Loveless, Richards and Donovan clustered around Sargeant, who tapped out his signal in Morse code. Darwin acknowledged but demanded proof of their identity. By chance, an officer in Darwin remembered meeting a signaller who had been sent to Timor and also remembered the name of the signaller's wife

and their home address. Amazingly, it was Sargeant whom the officer had met. Questions and answers in Morse went back and forth between the Northern Territory and Timor:

"Do you know Jack Sargeant?"

"Yes, he's with us."

"What rank, and answer immediately?"

"Corporal."

"Is he there? Bring him to the transmitter.

What's your wife's name, Jack?"

"Kathleen."

Once Darwin was satisfied, Sargeant signalled, "Force intact. Still fighting. Badly need boots money quinine tommy gun ammunition." This was the first news anyone in Australia had received from Sparrow Force since the Japanese had landed on Timor 59 days earlier.

A dark year

The year 1942 was one of the darkest for Australia. Alongside Britain and Commonwealth countries, Australian forces had been at war

with Germany since 1939 and later Italy. Australians served in the Mediterranean and North Africa, in the air war against Germany and at sea. Japan's entry into the war on 7 December 1941, however, changed Australia's war. It was no longer a distant conflict. The Japanese advanced rapidly through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific. During 1942, the Japanese occupied parts of Australia's mandated territory in New Guinea; Singapore fell; Darwin and northern Australia came under repeated attack. Japanese submarines attacked Sydney Harbour and Newcastle, on Australia's east coast. Many people feared a Japanese invasion of the Australian mainland.

During these dark months early in the year, from January to March, the Japanese had also overwhelmed the small Australian forces in Rabaul, New Britain, on Ambon, Dutch Timor and Java in the Dutch East Indies. Those not killed or executed became prisoners of war. The same fate was feared to have befallen Sparrow Force and the 2/2nd Independent Company in Portuguese Timor. Nothing had been heard from them for two months. But once 'Winnie the war-winner' made contact with Australia in late April, arrangements were made to regularly resupply the survivors of Sparrow Force.

Built around the Australian 2/40th Battalion with the 2/2nd Independent Company and supporting units, Sparrow Force was sent to Timor to reinforce the small Dutch garrison in December 1941. Sparrow Force arrived in Koepang (Kupang), in Dutch Timor, on 12 December 1941. Several days later, and despite protests from the territory's authorities, who optimistically thought the Japanese would observe Portugal's neutrality, the 2/2nd

Independent Company and some Dutch troops were sent to Dili in Portuguese Timor, the eastern half of the island.

The Australian and Dutch force defending Timor was small and under-equipped. Sparrow Force received some reinforcements in January and February 1942, but these were too few and too late. Japanese aircraft had been bombing Timor since January and had destroyed most of the aircraft from the single Royal Australian Air Force squadron defending the island. On 19 February the remaining aircraft were withdrawn to Australia, and the Japanese invaded Koepang the next day. Despite fierce resistance, the Australian and Dutch forces were overwhelmed. Most of Sparrow Force, more than 1,100 men, surrendered on 23 February. Those who did not surrender made their way through the mountains to join up with the 2/2nd Independent Company. The Japanese also invaded Portuguese Timor, and the independent company withdrew into the mountains overlooking Dili.

Timorese help

Following the Japanese invasion, as Private Marvyn 'Doc' Wheatley recalled, the Australians were initially "not game to go have a crack" at the Japanese, being "too few" and scattered among different villages. They had to live off the Timorese, said Wheatley, and this close support – even friendship – between the Australians and Timorese

Inset, right: An Australian sniper 'in action', Portuguese Timor, 12 December 1942

Below: Australian 'guerrillas' pose for war correspondent Damien Parer in the typical type of country in which they were fighting, Portuguese Timor, 12 December 1942

"THEY WERE SO GOOD, THE CREADOS, THEY RISKED THEIR LIVES ALL THE TIME FOR US, IT SHAMED YOU REALLY"

was one of the defining characteristics of the campaign. The Timorese provided food, shelter, ponies to carry heavy equipment, and information. The Australians paid for what they could, but once their money was exhausted they issued promissory notes.

Young Timorese boys assisted the Australians as 'creados', or helpers, carrying soldiers' non-military equipment and acting as guides. One soldier later remarked, "They were so good, the creados, they risked their lives all the time for us, it shamed you really." It is not too much to say that the Australian guerrillas were able to operate only because of the Timorese. "The people we are living with are natives and they have been wonderful to us," wrote an Australian lieutenant to his parents. "They are great friends to the Aussies and nearly all of us have a boy to carry our packs... they are invaluable guides, philosophers and friends here. My little boy has been in action with me and his name is Cris-mo, he reckons he will come back to Aussie with me after the war."

Harassment and sabotage

After a series of small encounters, by mid-March the company's remaining platoons had redeployed across the southern half of Portuguese Timor. Despite being hungry and wasted with malaria, and with their boots becoming mere remnants of leather, surrender was "never an option" an officer later commented. Parry believed he and his mates accepted their lot: "We're stuck here, we're going to stay here... we had a job to do." He did not recall ever discussing surrendering.

Although there was later a mid-year suggestion to withdraw the force, American General Douglas MacArthur, the supreme commander of the Allied forces in the South West Pacific Area, wanted the Australians to remain. He felt "the retention of these forces at Timor will greatly facilitate offensive action when the necessary means are at hand. These forces should not be withdrawn under existing circumstances. Rather it is believed that they should remain and execute their present missions of harassment and sabotage."

Portuguese Timor's rugged terrain was ideal for guerrilla warfare. "Although they at times cursed the rough terrain," recalled Ray Parry, a then-17-year-old private who had enlisted in the army underage, "if it wasn't for the mountains we [wouldn't have] lasted too long." Major Bernard Callinan, the company's commander, wrote, "Ground of itself was not important. The main object was to kill, and our best method of killing was by sharp harassing actions." The skilful guerrilla campaign waged on Timor by the 2/2nd Independent Company and Sparrow Force has since been widely lauded.



AUSTRALIAN INDEPENDENT COMPANIES & COMMANDO SQUADRONS

TO COUNTER THE FORMIDABLE JAPANESE INVASION, AUSTRALIAN FORCES ORGANISED SMALL, SPECIALISED UNITS TO STRIKE FROM BEHIND THE LINES

In 1940 the British Army formed commando units to raid, sabotage and gather information from German-occupied Europe. A small British military mission was sent to Australia to establish similar units in the Australian Army. The first of eight Australian independent companies was raised in 1941.

Little was known in Australia about independent companies or commando units and their organisation, equipment, or operations beyond what Chief of the Australian General Staff Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee described as some form of "cloak and dagger gang".

Recruits for these new units were trained in irregular and guerrilla warfare, demolitions, advanced field craft, map reading and signals work. The training syllabus was directed at developing individual initiative, resourcefulness and physical fitness.

Commanded by a major, each company consisted of 17 officers and 256 other ranks and were organised with engineer, signals and medical sections, with three platoons each containing three sections. When compared to an infantry battalion, independent companies had a higher ratio of officers to men. This allowed for each sub-unit or detachment to operate under an officer's command even when deployed away from the main company.

Weapons were another difference. Independent companies were armed with rifles, sub-machine

and light machine guns, with a small number of sniper rifles and 2-inch (50.8mm) mortars. The heavy weapons found in infantry battalions, such as Vickers medium machine guns and 3-inch (81mm) mortars, were absent from the independent companies. Unlike the infantry, the task of the independent company was not to engage in pitched battles, nor was it to win ground. Instead it was to exploit the enemy's weak points by attacking their headquarters, communication centres and supply routes.

In 1943 the companies were redesignated cavalry (commando) squadrons, later just commando squadrons. Four additional commando squadrons were established during 1944.

From the tragic loss of No. 1 Independent Company – captured by the Japanese, most of whom died when the Japanese ship the *Montevideo Maru* was sunk by an American submarine in July 1942 – to the celebrated story of the bearded men of the independent companies on Timor, these units were involved in myriad wartime experiences. It was in the vastness of New Guinea's jungles that the independent companies came into their own, thinly deployed on the flanks of the main force, carrying out reconnaissance, conducting raids and harassing the Japanese. By the war's end in 1945 the commando squadrons were in action in New Guinea, Bougainville and Borneo.



Above: An Australian patrol moves through lightly wooded country in Timor's mountainous interior

Below: An Australian soldier and his creolo, 9 December 1942



Below: The actions of individual Timorese, with the support of Timorese communities, was vital to sustaining the Australians in their guerrilla war in Portuguese Timor



Charles Bush, *Ambush at Numamogue, Timor, 1946*

"IT WAS IN THE VASTNESS OF NEW GUINEA'S JUNGLES THAT THE INDEPENDENT COMPANIES CAME INTO THEIR OWN"





Some of Sparrow Force's signals personnel with their creados

SPECIAL OPERATIONS AUSTRALIA

OTHER AUSTRALIAN ORGANISATIONS CONDUCTED COVERT OPERATIONS IN JAPANESE-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES DURING WWII

In addition to the Australian independent companies, several other Australian units and wartime organisations during World War II were established to conduct 'special operations'. The best-known Australian commandos were the 'M' and 'Z' Special Units. These were administrative units for Australian soldiers serving with the Allied Intelligence Bureau.

The bureau was established in mid 1942 to control and coordinate the different intelligence organisations operating in the Pacific. It consisted

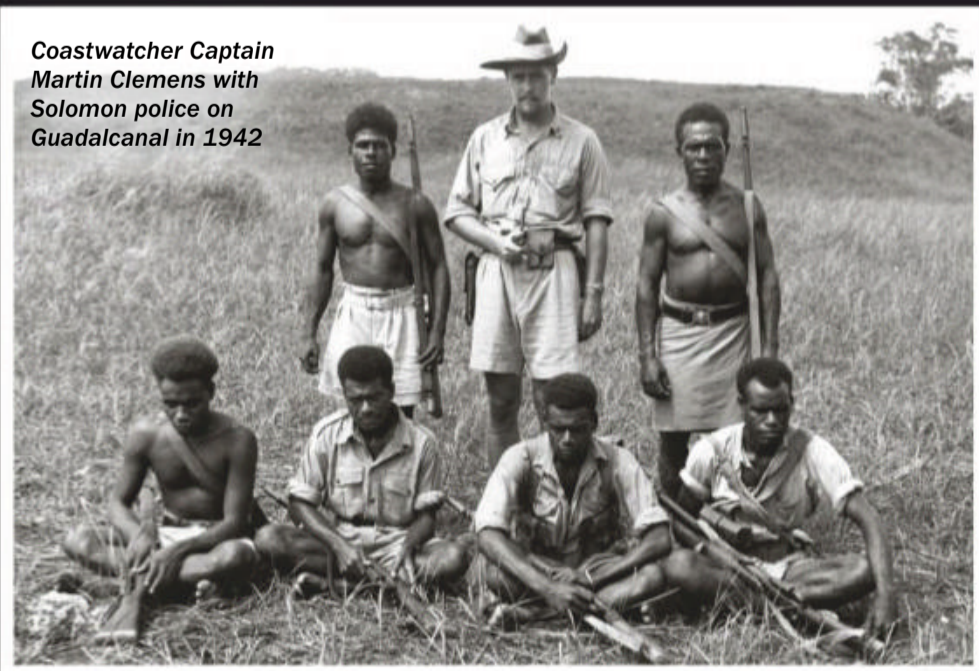
of various sections, including what became Special Operations Australia (SOA), an organisation also known by its cover name of the 'Services Reconnaissance Department', and the Coast-watchers' organisation.

Consisting mainly of Australians, SOA also included Britons, New Zealanders, Canadians and South Africans, as well as recruiting the local people of the Pacific islands and Asia. Members of SOA received advanced training in weapons handling, explosives and demolition.

They parachuted, dived and became experienced canoeists. They also studied Morse code and regional languages.

From 1943, small parties were inserted from the sea by American submarines or small ships, or covertly dropped by parachute from aircraft into Japanese-controlled territory to gather intelligence and harass the enemy. SOA trained thousands of local guerrilla fighters and conducted more than 80 operations in New Guinea, Timor, Borneo, the Philippines and Indochina.

Coastwatcher Captain Martin Clemens with Solomon police on Guadalcanal in 1942



Members of 'M' Special Unit alongside New Guineans, 1945



During April, the Japanese pushed further inland, and the Australians responded with more intense skirmishes, ambushing Japanese vehicles on mountainside roads and conducting hit-and-run raids. In one action on 25 April, five Australians waylaid a truck carrying soldiers near Villa Maria. The Australians claimed 12 Japanese killed, eight credited to Private Wheatley. A pre-war kangaroo shooter, the Western Australian was one of seven brothers who served in the forces. He was a fierce marksman who was later celebrated in the press for having "knocked off" 47 Japanese on Timor, with 25 certainties. His record was 12 shots for 12 Japanese dead in 15 minutes. Wheatley masterminded several successful ambushes of Japanese vehicle convoys.

Each action, however, came at a cost. During one ambush, Private Jack Sheehan, a pre-war gold miner and heavyweight boxer from Western Australia, had fired on the Japanese at close range with his Thompson sub-machine gun. Between eight and ten Japanese were thought to have died. Sheehan afterwards remarked to Wheatley, "I'll never be the same. I felt I was cutting those Japs in two – it was murder."

The Australians honed their guerrilla tactics over time and through experience. The 2/2nd Independent Company's sub-units, sometimes just a few men, would hit the Japanese hard and quickly, before making a rapid retreat. The company reported, "It will be observed that the policy of ambush patrols is to hit the enemy hard, quickly and often – then retire. As our men know well the country they select to work in, and the Japanese dislike leaving roads, their getaways are usually fast and free from pursuit. The reason this policy is insisted on by Company HQ is because, as

"I'LL NEVER BE THE SAME. I FELT I WAS CUTTING THOSE JAPS IN TWO – IT WAS MURDER"

there is no method of transporting casualties, it is considered better to kill a relatively small number of enemy with no loss to ourselves rather than to engage in a longer action which would entail the risk of casualties." This policy was to prove very effective.

On 24 September, two platoons from 2/2nd Independent Company ambushed a 35-strong Japanese column along the Maubisse-Ainaro road, near Numamogue. The Australians opened fire with their Bren light machine guns and rifles as the enemy crossed a bridge. Panic ensued among the Japanese, with many killed and wounded. After a short, sharp attack, the Australians kept snipping at the surviving Japanese for several hours before withdrawing.

Lieutenant David Dexter, a young, aggressive leader who in the future would command the

The wireless set 'Winnie the war-winner'

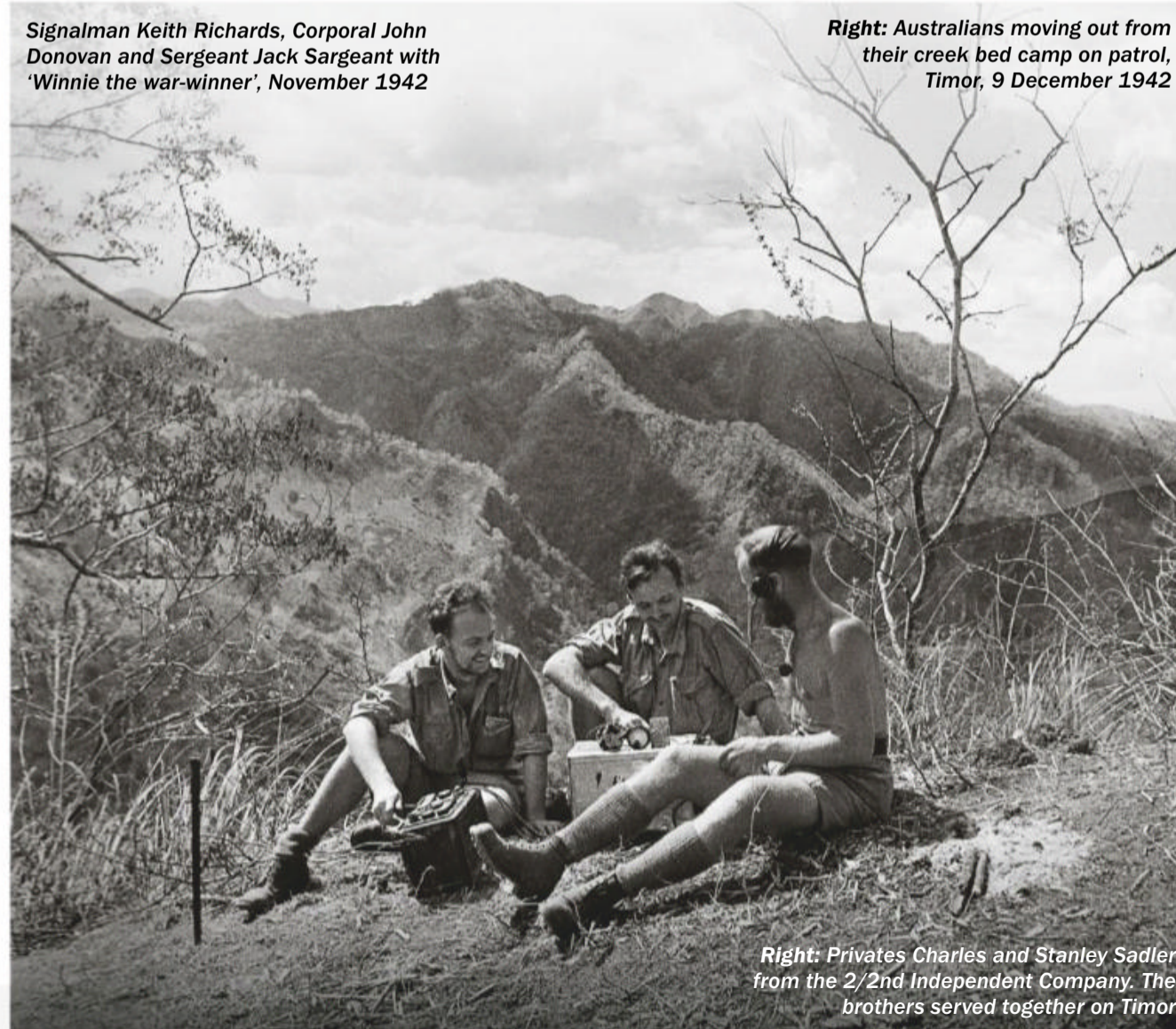


2/4th Commando Squadron on Borneo, was in charge of the ambush. His observations gave an indication of the enemy's training and tactics. Dexter reported, "From my observations of the 4 ½ hour fight I am convinced that when surprised the Jap is a ditherer. His field-craft was very bad. When first fired on, he stood or lay on the open track. Then he climbed to higher ground and presented a beautiful target against the skyline. He made for obvious positions such as prominent native huts upon which our Brens already had range."

A dangerous supply line

Maintaining the supply line to Timor was difficult and dangerous. Allied aircraft and ships ran the gauntlet to maintain the vital supply link. In September, the destroyer HMAS Voyager ran aground at Betano Bay on Timor's south coast while reinforcing Sparrow Force with the 2/4th Independent Company. During the night of 23 September the destroyer ran aground, but the company was still able to disembark. Voyager was attacked by Japanese aircraft the next day, and despite shooting down a Japanese bomber it was destroyed by demolition charges. Voyager's crew was subsequently evacuated to Darwin by the corvettes HMAS Kalgoorlie and Warrnambool on 25 September. During another run to Timor, on 1 December, Japanese aircraft sank HMAS Armidale when the destroyer was carrying 200 Dutch soldiers during an operation to relieve 2/2nd Independent Company. 40 officers and ratings and 60 Dutch soldiers died.

The Japanese also strengthened their garrison and used people from Dutch Timor to encourage the Portuguese Timorese to abandon



Signalman Keith Richards, Corporal John Donovan and Sergeant Jack Sargeant with 'Winnie the war-winner', November 1942

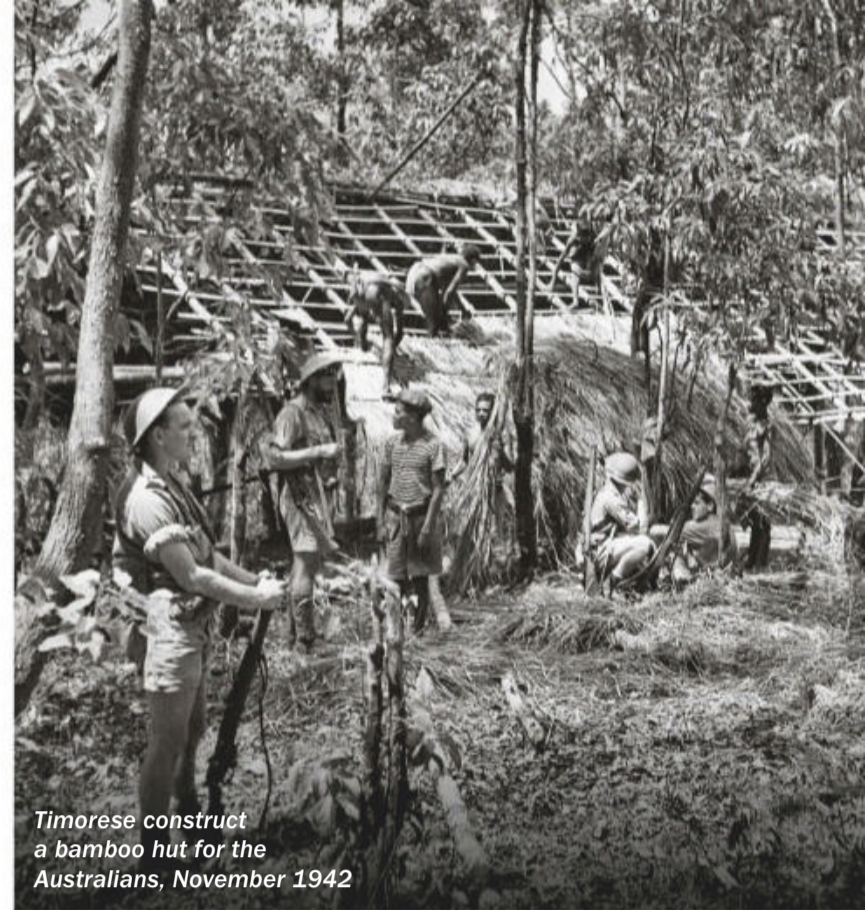
Right: Australians moving out from their creek bed camp on patrol, Timor, 9 December 1942



Right: Privates Charles and Stanley Sadler from the 2/2nd Independent Company. The brothers served together on Timor



Private Marvyn 'Doc' Wheatley, front row, second from the right, with other men from the 2/2nd Independent Company, 9 December 1942



Timorese construct a bamboo hut for the Australians, November 1942

their ties with the Australians. The Japanese also conducted brutal reprisals against villagers and recruited some Timorese to track down the Australians and their allies. Damien Parer and a group of war correspondents arrived late in the year, and he noted that the Japanese had incited the Timorese to “revolt”, arming them with “rifles and automatic weapons” to kill “loyal” Timorese and drive out the Australians, “as without native assistance we could not exist”.

He added the enemy had “set the country fighting and burning”. Major Callinan was unhappy with the correspondents, objecting to Timor becoming a “fun place for journalists”. When Parer said he wanted to see action, Callinan replied, “We can’t turn it on when we want to... We might sit and watch for a week.”

Withdrawal

In November, the situation with Sparrow Force, now retitled ‘Lancer Force’, was becoming untenable. The independent companies were withdrawn by sea in December and January 1943, and several hundred Dutch soldiers and Portuguese civilians were also evacuated. Many of the Australians too were exhausted.

There had been little variation in their diet. “We had a feast or a famine”, remarked Parry, “more often than not a famine.” Army rations were supplemented with rice, which became the staple food, or maize. Bananas and small quantities of vegetables and fruit were eaten. Buffalo meat, wild pig, small birds, and – on very rare occasions – crocodiles found their way into the cooking pots. Parry remembered being sick most of the time early in the campaign but only bringing up bile when he vomited, because there had been no food to eat. Little by little, the men became weaker. They developed ulcers and suffered from dysentery. When based in areas near the coast they came down with malaria. Parry thought the worst feature of the campaign was the “terrible fevers”. Only the wounded or very ill were evacuated to Australia. Otherwise it was only the occasional mail from home that offered some respite.

Many of the Australians had mixed feelings about their evacuation. They were relieved and happy to be returning to the mainland, but some felt anxious, even guilty, at leaving behind their Timorese allies and friends to the fate of the Japanese. Corporal Arthur Wray later wrote how the remaining silver coins were distributed

“TIMOR HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A MODEL FOR THE SUCCESSFUL CONDUCT OF GUERRILLA WARFARE”

by the soldiers to their creados as a reward for their loyalty and service. Wray also gave his haversack, a pair of shorts and a shirt to his helper Paulino. “The scenes at the parting from our boys were most affecting”, Wray remembered, “the boys weeping and embracing their Australian friends, and saying ‘Tuan Australie’ come back?’ He continued, “We had a lot to thank the Timorese for, those loyal boys who stuck to us through thick and thin, guiding us and finding food for us.”

Following the Australians’ withdrawal, propaganda leaflets with statements such as “Your friends do not forget you” were dropped by Allied aircraft on Timor. Such leaflets were intended to assure the Timorese people that the Australians would return to liberate the island from the Japanese.

From late September, the press began publishing articles with headlines such as “AIF guerrilla heroes”, “Australians fighting on in Timor” and “Timor heroes”, alongside illustrated features of “Timor beards” with photographs of the variety of bushy, flowing beards worn by the “Australian guerrillas”. Such stories were even broadcast on the BBC in Britain. In January 1943, Parer’s newsreel *Men of Timor* was released across Australia. Although most of the action sequences, including the film’s climactic attack on a pro-Japanese Timorese village, were re-enacted and staged by the soldiers for the camera, the film captured a powerful visual record of the campaign (the images accompanying this article were photographed by Parer).

The Australians were celebrated for their endurance and defiance: “Even now,” wrote Parer, “while the Australians in Timor are a relatively small and lightly equipped band, they have filled the enemy with a restless nervousness, so much so that the Japanese call them ‘Diavi’ (devils). And devils they are, coming suddenly from nowhere, killing and destroying, and disappearing as suddenly again.”

Timor has been described as a model for the successful conduct of guerrilla warfare. The Australians inflicted many more casualties than they suffered. Detailed figures are unknown, but it was thought that during the year, several hundred Japanese were killed for eight Australian combat casualties. The 400 or so men of the 2/2nd Independent Company and Sparrow Force, later strengthened with 300 men from the 2/4th Independent Company, raided and harassed a Japanese garrison that numbered 10,000. The active guerrilla war perhaps in part led to a build-up of Japanese forces on the island in anticipation of a possible Allied effort to retake Timor. By the war’s end, the strength of the Japanese garrison had doubled to around 20,000 men.

Did these achievements warrant the sacrifice – a sacrifice principally born by the Timorese? It was certainly in the Allies’ interests to continue resistance, but the Timorese suffered terribly. Figures vary, but between 40-70,000 Timorese died during the Japanese occupation. This is a staggering figure when it is considered that the combined populations of Dutch and Portuguese Timor numbered around 900,000.

While the scale of the loss and destruction suffered by the Timorese was likely not well-appreciated by many Australians, the support and bravery offered to the men of Sparrow Force was not forgotten. 50 years later, much of the public sentiment in favour of Australia’s military intervention in East Timor in 1999 was framed by the acknowledgment of a debt to the Timorese. Speaking in federal parliament, one Australian parliamentarian commented, “We owe an extreme debt of gratitude to the people of East Timor. We know how much assistance they were to us during the Second World War, and anything that this country and this parliament can do to help them must be done.”

Dr Karl James is a senior historian at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. He is the author of *Double Diamonds: Australian Commandos In The Pacific War, 1941-1945* (2016).



Images: Australian War Memorial, Canberra