

THE CANADIAN FORCES IN EAST TIMOR

DND Photo ISD99-442a/East Timor.

Members of the Canadian Forces have served in many different parts of the world on international peace missions over the past six decades, but few of them have been as far away from home as the mission to the Southeast Asian land of East Timor, on the other side of the globe.

Canadian personnel were in East Timor from 1999 to 2001, first serving with a United Nations (UN)-sanctioned multinational peace-enforcement mission and then in a subsequent UN-administered effort to help restore peace and security in the troubled country.

EAST TIMOR

The small, tropical country of East Timor, (or Timor-Leste, as it has officially been known since 2002) is located on the island of Timor, several hundred kilometres north of Australia. It is an impoverished, mountainous land, having an area of about 15,000 square kilometres (making it about three times the size of Prince Edward Island) and a largely-rural population of approximately one million people.

East Timor experienced great turmoil in the 1970s when the territory began to move away from being a colony of Portugal. Controversy erupted over whether it should become an independent country or become a part of nearby Indonesia. In late 1974, the Indonesian military launched a secret operation to take over East Timor. In 1975, civil war erupted, thousands fled the territory for the neighbouring Indonesian province and one of the main factions in the fighting declared independence for East Timor. Indonesia then invaded and took over the territory. Ignoring UN resolutions supporting the right of the East Timorese people to self-determination, it

was made a province of Indonesia in 1976. In the years following the invasion, armed resistance against the Indonesians, forced resettlement, and famine led to the deaths of more than a hundred thousand people in East Timor.

Despite years of UN-brokered diplomatic efforts, East Timor would not be able to begin to reassert its independence until 1999, a year after Mohammad Suharto, the long-time dictator of Indonesia, resigned and the political situation in that country finally changed. A UN-supervised referendum was held for the people of East Timor to decide whether it should remain a part of Indonesia (but with special autonomy) or begin the process of becoming an independent country – and the citizens overwhelmingly voted for independence. However, this result unfortunately set off further strife in the territory that saw pro-Indonesian militias, at times supported by the Indonesian military, burn homes, kill civilians and create unrest that resulted in 500,000 to 700,000 people being displaced. Even members of the UN assistance mission there were being attacked.

THE WORLD RESPONDS

With international pressure growing for Indonesia to halt the violence, that nation accepted a UN offer of assistance. A UN-authorized, Australian-led multinational force (which included Canada) went to East Timor in 1999 to restore peace and security, to protect and support the existing UN mission in carrying out its tasks, and to help humanitarian aid reach the citizens.

Canada's main contributions to the international peace missions in East Timor came at the beginning of these efforts in late 1999. Canada had committed to sending



HMCS *Protecteur*, an infantry company, and transport planes to support the mission. The more than 600 Canadian Forces members who went to the region at this time filled important roles such as providing security, constructing a camp, repairing local facilities, keeping the naval task force supplied, and other similar duties. The Canadian Forces members were also able to help by reaching out to the people of the country with humanitarian aid and nation-building projects.

The 3rd Battalion, Royal 22nd Regiment ('Vandoo's') contributed 250 soldiers to the Canadian force. Their main role was to patrol a large territory from Ainaro in the east to Suai in the west. The soldiers also repaired a school and hospital, distributed basic sanitation needs, clothing and containers, and taught some English.

An important component of the Canadian efforts in the area was the work of the Canadian Airlift Task Force, made up of two Hercules aircraft and more than 100 personnel. Between September and November 1999, the Canadians transported approximately one million kilograms of cargo and more than 2,000 passengers between Australia and East Timor. As well, the Sea King helicopters based on the HMCS *Protecteur* flew many supply missions from the ship to different places ashore. Following this sizeable contribution early in the mission, Canada's military participation in East Timor was then scaled back.

With the steadying influence of international peacekeepers in the area, the political situation has improved. The new Indonesian government eventually recognized the independence of East Timor, withdrawing its troops and its political claim to the area. East Timor held democratic elections and finally became an independent country in 2002. However, UN forces remained until May 2005 to help maintain the country's security as it made the hard-won transition to full nationhood.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- At times, the total international UN contingent size was more than 10,000 men and women, including civilian policemen who came to serve in the country as well.
- In addition to the 650 Canadian Forces personnel who went to East Timor for a six-month deployment, a contingent of more than 15 Canadian civilian police officers served in the country, helping to train and mentor the local police forces there.

HEROES AND BRAVERY

A Canadian engineering group repaired the electricity, plumbing and water supply of an East Timorese police academy, as well as renovated three main buildings in the academy compound so they could be used for classrooms, offices, and barracks for the police cadets.



Canadian sailors from the HMCS *Protecteur* supplied the multinational forces with fuel, food, spare parts and other materials. They also joined forces with RCMP officers serving with the peacekeeping effort in the country to help in the refurbishing of a police academy and a downtown police station.

SACRIFICE

Canada's long experience in peace missions puts our military in high demand when an emergency situation arises. Indeed, in many ways the Canadian Forces members who participate in international peace and humanitarian support efforts like the one to East Timor act as Canada's ambassadors – the face of our country in places in turmoil. These men and women provide an array of expertise and, using both the skills of war and the skills of peace, are able to fulfill a wide variety of important tasks. However, serving on a peace mission is dangerous. The Canadian Forces members who participated in helping bring about the end of conflict and easing the suffering of people in East Timor put their lives on the line. While about 25 international peacekeepers lost their lives during the UN efforts in East Timor, fortunately no Canadian Forces members were among them. However, approximately 125 Canadians have died in the course of peace support missions overseas, paying the ultimate price in their efforts to help the people in these strife-torn places. Many more have been injured in these efforts.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada's Veterans during times of war, military conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians. Knowing about our country's values and history helps us understand the Canada we live in today and how we can build our future together.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Veterans Affairs Canada:
www.vac-acc.gc.ca
- Canadian Military History Gateway:
www.cmhg.gc.ca
- Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association:
www.cpva.ca
- Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping: www.cavunp.org
- The Royal Canadian Legion:
www.legion.ca
- United Nations Peacekeeping:
www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/index.asp

