This was the first time that combat troops from the 3rd Brigade had been placed under NZDF command. Major General Power spoke to Hummert and addressed his troops in Brisbane during a refuelling stopover before the flight to Tonga, telling them that they would be under the tactical control of the New Zealanders, who would be in charge of the overall mission. He confirmed that Hummert’s main task was to support the TDS to maintain a secure environment in Nuku’alofa.41 Hummert and his 52-strong contingent arrived by RAAF Boeing 707 at 6.30 pm on 18 November and joined Lieutenant Colonel Beck and his NZDF task force in securing Fautau’a International Airport.42 HMAS Newcastle, commanded by Captain David Johnstone, RAN, supported Hummert’s troops offshore.43

On arrival, Lieutenant Colonel Beck told Hummert that his liaison and support section were to report to his company commander at the airport and that Beck would employ Hummert, his Company Sergeant Major and signallers in liaison roles. Realising that it was better to appear to have misunderstood these directions later rather than question them immediately, Hummert acknowledged these orders and proceeded to work out how to continue with the mission he had received from Power in Brisbane.44

A reconnaissance into town told Hummert that the TDS personnel were exhausted and needed a break. The Tongan commander asked Hummert to deploy his troops as soon as possible. Hummert and Beck differed over the scope of their mission.45 Hummert interpreted his orders as the creation of a stable environment and the conduct of patrols with Tongan soldiers to deter further civil unrest. Beck had been told to secure the airport, located 20 kilometres from town.46 In Hummert’s opinion, this was a meaningless task unless there was danger to an evacuation and, having met with the TDS Commander, Brigade General Tau’alia (David) Uta’atu, he felt that he needed to deploy troops as quickly as possible to support TDS patrolling operations.47

Hummert and his troops deployed into town. For the next two days leading up to the closing ceremony for Parliament on 23 November, Australian troops patrolled with their Tongan counterparts and maintained a Quick Reaction Force. Australian police continued to support policing operations and were present at crime scenes in the riots where bodies had been discovered. The contingent of the central business district, high tempo patrolling and further arrests stymied additional pro-democracy rallies. Nuku’alofa remained quiet thereafter. The crisis was over. Hummert and his men returned to Townsville a week later on 30 November.48 Prime Minister Sevele came to the airport to thank Hummert and his men who had completed an eventful year as the 3rd Brigade’s Ready Company Group.49

For the 3rd Brigade, the year 2006 reinforced the wisdom of ‘expecting the unexpected’ in the South Pacific and being ready at short notice to evacuate Australian and other nationals in danger while also assisting local security forces to restore law and order. The 3rd Brigade deployed significant task forces in 2006 into what has been described as the ‘arc of instability’, fully armed and in an assertive manner to restore law and order. In the South Pacific, this will be an enduring role for the 3rd Brigade in crisis situations when governments are threatened and innocent people endangered.

Chapter 17
Return to Turmoil: Timor-Leste 2006

John Blaxland

In 2006 the Australian Army was focused on reconfiguring its commitment to Iraq and redeploying forces into Afghanistan. East Timor, or ‘Timor-Leste’ in Portuguese, was no longer the focus of attention. In fact it had been almost two years since the withdrawal of the last Australian battalion group from Timor-Leste at the time that the UN mandate expired.

Thus when the security situation in Dili deteriorated dramatically in May 2006 it came as a considerable surprise to many. The crisis followed the sack of several hundred soldiers from the Timorese Army, part of the Falintil-Timor-Leste Defence Force (known by its Portuguese acronym, F-FDTL). The factors leading to the outbreak of violence pointed to what in hindsight had been a premature departure two years earlier. Yet despite years of experience of working in this newly independent country, those Australian troops committed to assist had little understanding of what had prompted the return of international security forces.

Nevertheless the Army quickly accepted its role as part of an inter-agency approach to a complicated situation and sought to come to grips with the opaque inter-ethnic disputes that had led to the breakdown in law and order. Noting its complexity, the ADF, and the Army in particular, remained the government’s force of first resort to bring order to the chaos in Dili in May 2006. ADF units were pre-positioned for a rapid response as the breakdown in law and order continued and the situation worsened. Elements of the Australian Army were once again tasked to deploy at short notice to Dili as the main part of an international force assembled for Operation Astute.

Soldiers from the 3rd Brigade disembark from HMAS Ballarat in the Caramoan district of Timor-Leste in May 2006 (Defence PR image).
Unlike in September 1999, however, the ADF's unprecedented operational tempo meant there was no single complete battalion group that was prepared to deploy. The year 2006 also marked the first time since 1988 that the COs of all RAR units wore the Infantry Combat Badge. This was symptomatic of an army that had experienced a particularly high operational tempo.

The Australian deployment to Timor-Leste followed the receipt of a formal request for military assistance by the Australian government late on 24 May. Prime Minister Howard approved the response immediately, and the VCDF, Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, travelled to Timor-Leste the following day to negotiate the terms and conditions of the deployment. The ADF's mission was to assist the government of Timor-Leste to facilitate the evacuation of Australian and other foreign nationals as necessary. It was then to stabilise the situation and facilitate the concentration of the various conflicting groups into safe and secure locations. Finally, the ADF would work to create a secure environment for the conduct of a successful dialogue to resolve the crisis. Brigadier Michael Slater, Commander 3rd Brigade, was appointed commander of all Australian forces in Timor-Leste.

As the negotiations for the mission were taking place and prior to the arrival of Slater's force and Special Forces under Lieutenant Colonel James McMahon, the Australian Defence Cooperation Program manager in Timor-Leste, Lieutenant Colonel Grant Sanderson, played an important role in assisting the F-FDTL to contain itself, preventing the situation deteriorating further. Sanderson's team also facilitated liaison between Slater's 3rd Brigade team and the government of Timor-Leste, easing tensions in the initial period of the Australian deployment.

Establishing a presence

The initial elements to deploy secured Comoro Airfield, much as their counterparts from the SASR and 2 RAR had back in 1999, to enable the follow-on force to establish a presence in Dili before fanning out across the city. Slater, who had commanded 2 RAR during the initial INTERFET deployment, now faced fresh challenges. This time the threat was more difficult to identify and contain as local police and soldiers had taken to fighting one another. Even once these elements were restrained, armed gangs roamed the streets, making it particularly challenging for the Australians and other coalition forces to restore security without the use of lethal force. The problem was compounded by murky local political wrangling of which the Australians initially had only a limited understanding. Reflecting on these circumstances afterwards, Slater observed:

The first 10 to 14 days of [Operation] ASTUTE in 2006 were far more complex and dangerous than the situation I faced in 1999. In 2006 there had been a total breakdown of the rule of law and Timor-Leste was on the brink of civil war. There were approximately a dozen different groups and factions all struggling for control of the country and as a result the Australian Forces had NO allies in Dili until the arrival of the other international forces.

In 1999 most if not all Timorese in Dili were united in their objectives of gaining independence and developing a democratic society. Rallying the locals to work towards a unified vision was far more achievable in 1999 than it was in 2006. During 1999 there was potential for a miscalculation between ourselves and the TNI, but because of the high levels of discipline within 3rd Brigade and strong leadership within the Indonesian military the potential for miscalculation never eventuated. The presence in Dili of the [Indonesian military] assisted the deployment of the ADF in a number of ways in 1999.

This was far from the situation in 2006 when all groups and factions in Dili were generally hostile towards the presence of Australian soldiers for several weeks. The threat of the hostile population was further complicated by the number of high-powered weapons, numbering in the hundreds that were spread throughout the population. The JTF [Joint Task Force] was confronted at times by crowds in excess of 15,000 hostile protesters. This was all within a looming humanitarian disaster involving a reported 170,000 internally displaced people. Atop of all of this, the F-FDTL was being cantoned against their will in two main locations and its members were constantly agitating to take to the streets and play an armed active role in internal security. Restraining this force required strength, diplomacy, understanding and cunning on the part of the [JTF].

Sanderson was more critical than this. According to him, Timor-Leste political leaders Taur Matan Ruak and Xanana Gusmao 'played' Slater and Australia. But to be fair to Slater, it was difficult to find anyone in or out of Timor-Leste who had a clear understanding of what was going on. Arguably, this was an indictment of the Australian neglect of Timor-Leste while distracted by other priorities further afield. This also reflected poorly on Australian understanding of Melanesian culture and politics. There was clear room for improvement.
The force at Slater's disposal had to be able to handle this level of complexity and uncertainty. His force included a strong Australian presence in and around Dili with some 1,900 ground troops conducting security operations, supported by 500 Malaysian troops and a company of New Zealand infantry.

**Force composition**

The Australian contribution centred on the 3 RAR Battalion Group under Lieutenant Colonel Mick Mumford, who had served as the 1 RAR Operations Officer with the UN Transitional Administration in Timor-Leste in 2000–01. Owing to extensive commitments elsewhere, the force deployed with a disparate group of sub-elements brought together at short notice for the operation. Mumford's Operations Officer, Major Gavin Keating, recalled that the 3 RAR-based group included one infantry rifle company from 3 RAR, two rifle companies from 2 RAR and one from 1 RAR. The group also included 3 RAR's Admin Company and a composite Support Company drawn from 2 RAR and 3 RAR along with G Company, a recoilless artillery battery from Townsville. A commando company group from 4 RAR (Cdo) operated alongside the SASR elements within the Special Forces component. Support was provided by Black Hawks from the 5th Aviation Regiment, the RAAF (including Airfield Defence Guards), and naval support from the fleet's amphibious ships (HMAS ships Manoora, Kanimbla and Tobruk).

A key tactic utilised during this period was to deploy small teams across Dili with an APC-mounted mobile force and a company-sized airborne force. Eventually these patrols also included members of the UN Police Force (UNPOL). The goal was to use the small teams to 'deter' an adversary, then dispatch a larger force to deal more comprehensively with the situation. Working closely with the police at the tactical level proved crucial in enabling arrests to be made, ensuring that detainees were appropriately handled and processed and that they would be legally held to account for their actions.

Slater later observed: "The May 2006 deployment was our first truly Combined Joint Interagency Task Force involving coalition partners, ADF, DFAT, and working with a range of other Australian and foreign NGOs including the UN. The deployment was at very short notice and characterised by the diversity within its composition, the speed at which the force was concentrated and deployed, with some tri-service contributions being made on the run. In some ways, Slater benefited from experience with the similarly structured force that deployed to Solomon Islands in 2003. In essence, the ADF had learned important lessons from earlier experience and adapted accordingly.

The breakdown in law and order that confronted Slater's force was symptomatic of deep-seated problems within the fledgling nation that would not be addressed in one six-month deployment. In fact there was widespread recognition in Timor-Leste, Canberra and in UN Headquarters in New York, that Australian military engagement would be required for an extended period. With a longer term commitment in mind, the Australian government committed the ADF to maintaining a 'green helmet' force, under direct Australian rather than UN control, to assist the Timorese to restore stability. Colonel Mal Rendell was selected as the officer to command the follow-on force and initially deployed as Slater's deputy commander, replacing Colonel Don Roach, who was due for rotation back to Australia.

By late 2006 five of the six Regular Army COs of RAR units were deployed on operations. The CO 1 RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Gallaway, was in Solomon Islands while 2 RAR's Lieutenant Colonel Mick Mahy was in Iraq conducting a handover with his counterpart from 5/7 RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Short. CO 3 RAR, Lieutenant Colonel Mick Mumford, was in Timor-Leste, preparing to hand over to 6 RAR under Lieutenant Colonel Scott Goddard, and the CO 4 RAR (Cdo), Lieutenant Colonel Mark Smithurst, was in Afghanistan. Only 6 RAR remained in Australia meeting the mandatory requirement to have a Ready Battalion Group prepared for short-notice deployment.

Maintaining the level of operational tempo demanded of the Army in 2006 and 2007 presented a number of challenges. Without doubt, in the face of such a multitude of ongoing tasks, the small size of the Australian Army entailed capability limitations that the Australian government had to take into account when considering additional tasking. In one sense, the Army was a victim of its own success, with the community having very high expectations of its performance.
Force Rotation

On completion of Slater’s term, and as the Australian force was being reduced to around 800 personnel in late 2006, Reeden was promoted brigadier and tasked with command of the residual force based around Lieutenant Colonel Scott Goddard’s 6 RAR Battalion Group. Goddard had been the 5/7 RAR Operations Officer with INTERFET in 1999 and early 2000 so, like Slater, he had his own experiences on which to draw. Goddard’s group included a rifle company from 1 RAR and G Company, a relieved air defence battery from Adelaide’s 16th Air Defence Regiment.

The unusual mix of forces reflected the large number of operations elsewhere, which had left the Army with little choice. But the selection of the 16th Air Defence Regiment also indicated that many of the tasks of the infantry soldier could be performed by soldiers from other corps. With some additional infantry-centric training, artillerymen could fill several roles otherwise the domain of infantrymen. Admittedly, the infantry’s central and arguably most challenging role (to close with and to kill or capture the enemy regardless of weather, season or terrain) was not tested in this instance. Still, the flexibility displayed by the soldiers of the 16th Air Defence Regiment reflected well on them and the ethos of the Army that made it possible. In selecting these soldiers, the Army was demonstrating just how tightly resourced it was, with numerous operations running concurrently (in Solomon Islands, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere). The use of non-infantry soldiers in these roles underscored the age-old need for excellent all-arms training for soldiers and officers alike. The Army was also showing how flexible and responsive it had become in the years since the 1999 East Timor intervention.

By the end of 2006, the 6 RAR Battalion Group was working far more closely with UNPOL to facilitate a handover of responsibilities to the F-FDTL and the Timorese Police Force. But with elections scheduled by mid-2007, and several outstanding issues which had contributed to the May breakdown left unresolved, the force’s work remained incomplete and Goddard’s troops were replaced by yet another battalion group in 2007, this time based around 1 RAR, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Gallaway. His command included W Company from the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, and his group was subsequently renamed the Anzac Battle Group.

Gallaway’s troops had a challenging task to perform, providing security support for the presidential elections in April and May as well as the parliamentary elections at the end of June. Gallaway attributed the smooth running of the elections to a combined effort. ‘It would be presumptuous to say that we deserve all the credit. There are a lot of players involved here – UNPOL and the UN in general did an outstanding job in running the elections ... and the people of Timor-Leste deserve credit for their excellent approach to exercising their democratic right to vote.’ Gallaway’s response was appropriate for the occasion, although he understated the significance of the small yet disproportionately influential Australian forces in ensuring that the elections proceeded smoothly.

Specialised Support

In the background throughout much of this period, Special Operations Command forces had rapidly mounted and deployed the Preemption Task Group to Timor-Leste. The rapid deployment and excellent work of the task group early in 2007, coupled with the ongoing deployment of a commando company group, demonstrated the continued responsiveness and versatility of Special Operations Command at a time when it was also heavily committed to operations in the Middle East. Of note, more than 100 fully qualified Reserve commandos deployed on operations to Timor-Leste during this period. Special Operations Command’s contribution once again demonstrated the utility of having such highly trained and resourced troops available for contingencies.1

Another key element was the composite Anzac Aviation Task Group, under the command of Major Andrew Johnston. The task group comprised elements drawn from the 5th Aviation Regiment and the 1st Aviation Regiment as well as the RNZAF, with six Black Hawk helicopters, four Kiowa light observation helicopters and two New Zealand Ingrams utility helicopters. The task group performed aeromedical evacuations, reconnaissance and surveillance, air mobility operations, general passenger and stores movement and imagery collection. It also delivered ballot boxes to remote communities during the mid-year elections in 2007. Johnston observed that the three-squadron task group provided a new dimension in achieving our mission of responsive aviation support to Joint Task Force 631.12

The engineers from 3 CER formed a key component of the Anzac Battle Group. The 3 CER sappers worked on a range of reconstruction projects around Timor-Leste to help rebuild rundown structures. In Los Palos, near the eastern tip of Timor-Leste, one project also
involved the Timorese Police and Timorese Army. Sapper Tim War explained: They come around to see what is happening and we get them on the tools. We have showed them drop saws and got them measuring and cutting. In another instance, the sappers constructed equipment for a children's playground. Sergeant Matthew Hill commented: When [they] found out it was for the kids, the guys came in and built a seesaw, monkey bars, swings and a cubby house. They also built some tables and furniture as well. The project took 11 soldiers three days to complete. The best way to quantify the results was in the goodwill generated. The focus on reconstruction and infrastructure development reflected incoming force commander Brigadier John Hutchison’s emphasis on ensuring that Australia cemented friendships and built confidence in government institutions.

With the Timor-Leste parliamentary and presidential elections concluded relatively uneventfully, Brigadier Mal Reid had completed his deployment and was replaced by Brigadier John Hutchison in mid-2007. Gallaway’s battalion, 1 RAR, was also replaced as the third Timor-Leste Battle Group by 2 RAR, under Lieutenant Colonel Ben James. The 2 RAR Battle Group’s mission rehearsal exercise took place in early September 2007 at Toowomba’s High Range training area with more than 30 units contributing troops from all the Army’s various specialist corps around Australia, although the majority were from the 3rd Brigade. The exercise demonstrated the benefits of a mature system of force preparation. In Timor-Leste, Lieutenant Colonel Jamie’s unit was joined by elements of the NZDF and became the next rotation of the Anzac Battle Group. The close working relationship with New Zealand elements spoke of the significance of ties with close allies.

In an address to Australian troops on 29 October 2007, President Ramos Horta thanked the Australians and New Zealanders for their efforts since the crisis in May 2006, and assured them that their presence was extremely important to Timor-Leste. Indeed, Australia’s contribution provided a levelling effect for Timor-Leste’s stability and security. With a deliberately balanced political and security situation in place, and with the Timorese president backing ongoing participation, Australia’s military presence endured for some time beyond 2007. This was a credit to the men and women of the Australian Army, but it also pointed to the need to continue finding ways to adapt and adjust as circumstances changed.

**Conclusion**

On reflection, the experience in Timor-Leste in 2006 stands as a useful contrast to that of the forces deployed in 1999. By 2006, even with forces heavily committed on operations elsewhere, the ADF could muster significant naval, air and ground forces to undertake a mission arguably as complex as that faced by INTERFET in 1999. The INTERFET mission had consumed the overwhelming majority of the ADF’s focus and effort in 1999. By 2006, however, the ADF could undertake a similar task with relative ease — although, admittedly, the deployment was on a smaller scale and into what had become familiar territory. Indeed, with better resourcing and closer government interest in events, the Army’s experience was far more positive than in 1999. Troops who deployed did so with a considerably greater baseline of experience and general competence, particularly in the range of enabling skills that the peacetime Army of the 1980s and early 1990s had neglected, including key logistic and intelligence enablers that had withered before INTERFET but which had been subsequently revitalised.

While the deployment was on a smaller scale than previously, the complexity and ambiguity of the situation on the ground placed considerable demands on the soldiers involved. With little to indicate who was in the right and who was not, or who was supportive, each and every soldier had to be confident in understanding what was and was not permissible. Here the benefits of the common individual training and combined field training bore real fruit. Indeed, the opaque and highly tense political problems behind the outbreak of violence in May 2006 meant there was a requirement for soldiers to display high levels of initiative and critical decision-making skills. Soldiers had to exercise remarkable restraint and resourcefulness in a murky situation. The fact that the situation was brought under control so quickly is a reflection of just how the Australian Army had progressed. Soldiers with less finesse or skill could easily have exacerbated existing tensions. The Australians’ performance echoed the delicate work of RAMSI in Solomon Islands.

The strong working relationship with New Zealand bore testimony to the importance of enduring ties with close friends and security partners. Similarly, engagement through the Five Power Defence Arrangements validated training undertaken with Malaysia as a means to engage regional partners and call on them for support when in need.
Notwithstanding the utility of ties with close allies and regional partners, the Timor-Leste crisis in 2006 revealed Australia’s embarrassingly casual regard for Timor-Leste as an enduring strategic priority. Having gained a wealth of goodwill in 1999 and beyond, the Australian government, with the ADF in tow, had largely walked away from Timor-Leste, squandering much of that goodwill while it focused on priorities further afield. The 2006 experience demonstrated the need to maintain an enduring focus on Australia’s immediate region.