

## Chapter 10 – ASLAV Troop

As we pulled into Dili harbour in the early evening, first impressions were probably lost amongst the strange sights and smells as we were hurried to waiting trucks and were whisked down to Port Hera. Along the way many of us took in our first look at the country and the locals as they made their way about town. Some members, on their second trip to Timor, remarked at the noticeable changes that had occurred in the 12 months since their previous tour. The usual flurry of briefs and passing of information had us in a whirl, but before we knew it, a brief ANZAC Day Service was in full swing. A brief recital of the Ode and a minute's silence was all we could afford, as once again we were loaded onto the Unimogs for transit to Aidabaleten. This four-hour journey provided us another glimpse at the rugged terrain that would be our home for the next six months. It was also our first look at the narrow roads and the somewhat dangerous event that driving was going to be for us.

Once at Aidabaleten, a nice little compound down by the beach, we met up with our colleagues from V22 Troop, the Troop supporting 1 RAR. Eager to keep things moving, vehicle hand over was conducted and it was off to the splash range to conduct our first range shoot in country. This turned out to be an exercise in staying out of the sun in an attempt to not dehydrate. With the range shoot completed it was goodbye to our mates for the drive to Balibo. Along the way we were given our first task which for some, lasted into the night before even unpacking any kit.

### Day to Day

Initially the wet season presented movement difficulty and tested every crew at some stage. A critical parts resupply problem exacerbated this, and at one stage early in the deployment, the troop struggled to have a patrol at operational standard. Some, like the crew from V32B, spent the first month tearing their hair out and tearing their vehicle apart. Jason Lane would soon testify that his vehicle was a lemon possessed by demons that needed exorcising. How else would you explain suspension 'A' frames dropping off your vehicle, changing gears and accelerating on its own, and that weird smell the Commanding Officer (CO) complained about. When Trooper Morgan Chong swapped crews from Bravo and came to the vehicle, nothing seemed to change. Eventually, the parts started rolling in, and once again, the troop was mobile.

For most of us in V32, Balibo was home for the majority of the time in country. Having everyone in a close environment for too long caused inevitable friction and invariably, the boys would get sick of the place and were itching to get out. A patrol was soon needed down at Maliana so an additional camp was set up with Delta Company. This proved an enjoyable location as the Delta boys gave us plenty to do and the region was heavily populated and full of activity. Responding to market and family reunion days gave us new experiences with the local people and an understanding of the ways in which they tried to earn their living.

When the river system that surrounds Maliana dried out it became a fast route for our ASLAVs, allowing better reaction times to different areas. Picture a dry riverbed 100 to 150 metres wide, covered with small rocks. In some areas our reaction time to different villages was cut in half using the riverbeds. These trips were often done at 80 – 100kmh and were always wet. When the news got out about these, the river runs became a sought after ride by many including most of Delta Company and even the CO. The CO ordered us to get his battle captains wet, and we did our best. Columns of water up to 10 metres high would accompany a fast water entry, inevitably coming down on the roof of the vehicle as it slowed down, drenching everyone.

Corporals Bruce 'Pearso' Pearson and Sean Patterson, and the rest of Bravo patrol found a new location up in Bobanaro. Although the fuel shed accommodation was not what we had become used to, the Bravo Company boys had more to offer in the way of range shoots and new weapons qualifications. The climate proved a little frigid and this prompted a brew-drinking marathon, after 16 brews the boys from Bravo patrol found the ride down the mountain punctuated by several short halts as well as the need to rehydrate. When the Commandos from B Company and the crew from Bravo patrol got together, the result was the wild concept of commandos dropping out of the skies and into the backs of Australian light Armoured Vehicle (ASLAV's) which were to be conducting amphibious operations.

Pearso and Jason 'Silverback' Nuske will be sure to stick their hands up for that one if the utopian concept ever becomes a reality. The mountainous region of Bobonaro, with its narrow roads, made for exciting driving with the Razor Back Ridge up to Sibuni being a highlight for the crews. The blokes were sorry to leave, however the time up there was immortalised with footage of the hot springs, and the white freshwater whales which inhabit its depths.

We constantly took measures to keep things as safe as possible when operating in AO Matilda. Speed was a major safety issue for all road users, especially the large vehicles like us, and the Mack trucks. The close shaves experienced on the treacherous roads served as a reminder, that driving recklessly endangered lives for no justifiable reason in a peacekeeping environment.

After the speed limit was made clear to all in the AO, the troop attempted to be as accommodating as possible, to ensure road safety. There were several occasions when people got a fright on blind corners, and blamed the ASLAV's for speeding. Generally, both parties contributed to some of the scares experienced. The Troop adjusted from its standard operating speeds of up to 120kph in the Northern Territory. There was no requirement to go over fifty kph, even when on a reaction task, for as we found out, many of these tasks did not involve life threatening situations, and to speed to them would only mean danger to ourselves and other elements of the Battalion Group.

## Recovery

Almost every radio operator manning the Battalion net will recall the garbled conversation between the Troop Commander and the Operations Officer when Callsign (C/S) V32A was recovered by helicopter on 7 September. A notorious stretch of track caught two ASLAV's and while wide enough, would not support the 13 tonne weight. Unfortunately, Corporal Ian 'Junior' Hunter, the Troop Recovery Mechanic could not get a tie down point to safely anchor the vehicles for recovery. The terrain was far too unstable, and steep on both sides of the track. It was the first time any of us had ever heard Junior say that he could not get us out (and that was saying something, as normally, he could pull a bull away from his herd.) He recommended a helicopter recovery and a Russian giant, the MI 26 was tasked with the job.

Everything was proceeding as planned, and the Force Logistic Squadron (FLS) riggers from Dili, who were tasked with the recovery, were pumped as it provided them with a much more difficult job than unloading containers at the wharf. The downdraft of this chopper is unbelievable, and they were right in the middle of it, hanging off a vehicle that was set to roll into a forty metre re-entrant. The ASLAV's two back wheels were hanging in the air and all the while a force four cyclone created by the huge rotors was threatening to pick them up like a tornado. They did a very good job.

Unfortunately, the next phase of the recovery did not go so well, and after the initial lift, the pilot of the MI26 chose to fly level and skull-dragged V32A over a 100m stretch of mountainside, before depositing the trashed vehicle at the Landing Zone ( LZ). The crews present, especially Woodsy and Byrne-Dog, were stunned into silence as Sergeant Adams' car was repeatedly smashed into the hillside.

No one had foreseen this occurring as everyone had assumed the pilot would not dare to endanger the MI 26, let alone the 2 million-dollar gun ASLAV beneath it. Suffice to say that it took V32 a while to articulate to Battalion Headquarters, exactly what had just occurred. (Obviously too much vodka

comrade, eh?) The crew of V32A would like to thank the onlookers from Civil Military Affairs (CMA) for their insightful comments and assistance in the recovery. It was good to have them there for advice and guidance and the boys invited CMA from that day, to come and watch us with routine servicing, tyre changing, and other tasks in which they could help out.

### Surveillance

Initially the V36 crews were tasked to conduct surveillance along the Tactical Co-ordination Line (TCL) in vicinity of Junction Point Bravo. The affectionately known Kevin Hill provided good observation into the west with many reports of the TNI (Indonesian Army) patrols and locals moving throughout the area. Curious pigs and falling twigs during the night tested the early warning and resolve of the piquet, much to the humour of those awoken by the ruckus. Boosted by new equipment in the form of digital cameras and additional high-powered scopes, we began moving the asset around the Australian Battalion Area of Operations (AUSBATT AO).

Finding the best locations for surveillance proved difficult in the earlier stages of the deployment due to the soft, steep ground and the height of the vegetation. This prompted some tasks down on the coastal areas of Batugade, setting up surveillance to monitor the coastline and maritime activity. This proved a favourable task as the sunsets were spectacular and the sea breeze was also pleasant. Unfortunately the lack of suspicious movement combined with more accessible terrain, combined with the need for increased ASLAV carrying capacity meant that V36 section was combined into the two line patrols. Re-constitution meant a change of call sign, and V32 Golf, Foxtrot and even Juliet C./S emerged, to further confuse the signallers in the Battalion as to just who, and how many of us there really were.

The surveillance detachment Commander Corporal Kevin 'Sloppy' Heslop and his detachment remained on four hours notice to move for surveillance tasks throughout the deployment and were a useful complement to the Line troop. The decrease in activity along the TCL in the form of cross border movement, and suspicious activity meant that the surveillance lads had a welcome relief from endless piquet's and staring at their blank radar screens. They got stuck into 'humanitarian aid' and other support tasks, and provided a useful addition due to their own local knowledge and willingness to find the most obscure spots in the AO and establish good rapport with the locals in these spots.

### Echelon

V32 Echelon was a diverse organisation, comprising the various tradesmen who kept the troop running throughout the months of deployment. In this unruly mob were two fitter armourers, two vehicle mechanics, the quartermaster and his sidekick Private Christian Oswald (whose Spanish looks belied his Australian accent), and the radio and recovery mechanics. The role of the echelon was made doubly important by the fact that they were postured as a combat element throughout the deployment. Whenever the line troop was stretched too thin on the ground the echelon was called up to cover the ground in between. Everything did not sail smoothly in the first couple of months, and the echelon were flat strap trying to keep the cars on line. Losing the mechanic Corporal Alexander Limn for personal reasons literally threw a 'spanner' in the works, however his replacement Sergeant Paul Florian soon took it out.

Another major challenge for the echelon was the move from Balibo to Tonibibi, which was completed in probably the busiest time of the deployment while much of the troop were out of the country on leave. It sounded easy enough. Packing up the workshop and accommodation and moving in preparation for the eventual move of the Bn Gp to Moleana. In practise, it was a large exercise in planning and logistics, coupled with maintaining a repair and recovery capability for the rest of the troop who were patrolling frantically during that time. One hidden asset of the echelon boys was their ability to make almost anything out of scraps lying around. Thus the troop benefited from a new BBQ, hot-water system, pizza oven, and a myriad of gadgets used to help out in everyday life. Many of these were of patent quality, but they are probably still sitting in Timor, being used by our replacements.

### **Monsta's Service**

Our tour in East Timor also presented us with a chance to remember Corporal Stuart "Monsta" Jones in the country of his peril. Monsta was accidentally killed when a rifle discharged in the rear of an ASLAV whilst on patrol near the village of Raefun on 9 August 2000. A cross was erected outside of Fort Maliana and dedicated on the 10 July in the presence of Lieutenant General Cosgrove, Minister for Veteran Affairs Bruce Scott and Mr Bruce Ruxton.

Although this was a nice tribute the Troop felt that it would be more appropriate to erect a stone memorial near the incident site on the 12-month anniversary of Monsta's death. This task was one that the Cavalry Boys (2 Cav and 2/14<sup>th</sup>) took upon themselves to ensure a fitting memorial service was held.

The village people of Raefun were also extremely helpful in assisting with information of the incident site and allowing us to intrude into their quiet little village. This village, and in particular the memorial site, presented spectacular views of the surrounding countryside. On the day we erected the pink marble monument, the local's enthusiasm to help overwhelmed them and they grabbed the shovels from the lads and hooked in to dig in the memorial stone. The villagers were of great assistance during the preparation of the site and the conduct of the Service.

The Service was held on the 9 August 2001 and the entire armoured contingent attended along with a large party of VIPs. The catafalque party made up of members from V32 Troop and the Light Horse donned black berets, as prayers were delivered and fitting memories were shared before the dedication of the memorial. The VIP party showed up and walked into Warrant Officer Potter's splendid rendition of Gary Owen on the bagpipes. The members of Raefun village accepted our invitation and laid a traditional scarf and wreath. We would like to thank all those involved including Chaplain Darren Jaensch, members of the Military Information Support Team (MIST) for their help in producing copies of the service, Sergeant Jackson for his skill with the Bugle, and everyone who supported us with our remembrance of Monsta.

### **Recreational Out of Country Leave (ROCL)**

Leave was a source of much conversation and the wait for leave to Australia was often accompanied by a big countdown by the blokes. The Cavalry occupied the halfway rotations out of the country, usually with between four to eight blokes being absent at any one time. There were however a few exceptions. The first crew to go on leave (Bravo) made sure the rest of us knew about it with the usual jokes about greeting the wife or girlfriend and having that much sought-after beer.

The return of Pearso and Jase Nuske back to Timor however, introduced us to the syndrome we called Post ROCL Blues. No one will forget the look of dejection on Pearso's face as he stepped back into The Eagles Nest to the roaring laughter of Calvin McMillan. This produced the realisation that we were back in country, away from families again and that the great time we had at home was over. The cure was to get straight back into work, find some local kids, or play with the new shiny toy that we had purchased on ROCL. Developments on the positive were that the countdown to FOCL (Forever Out of Country Leave) was on with vengeance.

For some members of the troop ROCL meant getting home for the birth their first child, and for Trooper Chris 'Yowie' Yow this meant not getting home on leave until the end of September. This brings with it the added excitement at what their leave would bring but once again the added pain of coming back after such an event. Mind you, the smile could not be removed from Kevin 'Possum' Thomson's face as he proudly displayed photos of his new daughter. ROCL like all leave was too short and gave us just enough time to get comfortable with the real bed and the taste of our favourite foods, not to mention perhaps spending some of our new wealth. The pro's and con's of taking leave early or later in the tour have been a topic of debate, but I think all agree they had a good time and were better for the chance to rest.

## Election Period

Operation PAVEWAY covered the lead up and subsequent election. This saw the troop spread across the AO with 3 Patrols in Balibo, Maliana and Bobonaro. Many kilometres were travelled during the deployment. For example, in one day Alpha Patrol managed to drive across AO Batugade down to the Maliana district and up through the centre of the AUSBATT AO to Aidabaleten before returning to Balibo via Batugade. Charlie Patrol was vigorously patrolling the TCL in AO Maliana and delivering the Infantry boys up and down the AO. Charlie Patrol also assisted in the illumination plan for this period, which consisted of firing 84mm and 40mm illumination rounds at set intervals during the night. This 'fireworks' display was a big drawcard for the locals and the thunder of an 84mm round going up was generally accompanied by applause and cheering in the villages up and down the Nunura River. They knew they were safe!

As the local people looked forward to the elections, Operation PAVEWAY was drawing to a close. Election day was a real non-event as far as we were concerned. Everywhere we went, people happily went about their voting, and would stop to give us a wave. Our fears of any violence were unfounded. With voting pretty much over by early afternoon the job of setting the conditions for a free, fair and peaceful election was successfully over.

The ASLAV's sheer presence and mobility provided the Battalion with a capability to cover the AO in a short period of time and quell any possible violence. We found that the men of 4 RAR came to appreciate a lift every now and then and also became familiar with the added equipment and carrying capacity. With a fridge and boiling vessel we could provide our footslogging friends with hot, cold or room temperature water.

Fun aside though, there was not one company operation where ASLAV assistance was not requested. All major Battalion operations also included the troop, and the CO found in us, a useful mounted tactical headquarters, from which he could command the various operations. The intimidation factor we provided was not missed by the infantry companies, and the company commanders especially loved to have us roll up at any potential trouble spots. The lack of violence during the 4 RAR Battalion Group rotation can be attributed in part to the willingness of commanders to employ the armoured assets whenever possible. The challenge for us was to balance intimidation with our normal cheery disposition, to the locals.

## Range shoots

The experience of a range shoot in an operational environment is a unique one. The reasons are obvious in that we need to keep our skills fresh and ensure the serviceability of our equipment. The majority of our range shoots were carried out at the splash range, a picturesque location at the beach near Fort Aidabaleten. That was about where the fun of a beach location ended. Once a month we would attend this location for a fun filled day of heat stroke and dehydration. The blistering hot sun was inescapable though the spanners overcame the problem through ingenuity, somehow having procured Leopard Tank umbrellas, prior to departure from Australia.

Our targets consisted of whatever we could make, and past experience suggested that a wire cage full of plastic bottles was the most resilient. This didn't stop attempts at designing the perfectly constructed reusable models. Unfortunately, the time that the Artificer Sergeant Major (ASM) spent in design and construction of the steel framed target, to be kept afloat by two 200 litre drums, was wasted. A Landing Craft Mark 8 (LCM8) towed the target off the beach, however a six foot dumper upended it immediately, much to the amusement of all in attendance. Corporal Limn was the most vocal, wishing he had taken a few side bets and replayed the video for all to watch. The target did however remain somewhat afloat before the troop sent it to its watery grave. This event ceased efforts to continue with anything more than a cage full of water bottles. These targets were dropped into the water by the Blackhawks at varying ranges with various results. Sometimes the current would be too strong and the target would attempt to make a run for it out of the trace before we could shoot