

Radio Maubere and Links to East Timor

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'A luta continua' on all fronts. In a letter to Xanana Gusmao in February 1997 I reminded him I had heard that phrase for 21 years, starting during the monitoring and two way use of Radio Maubere 1976-8. The long struggle takes its toll of supporters as well as participants inside East Timor, and some of the tensions and disagreements from that time still impact, though the struggle for freedom still continues on all fronts.

Communication with East Timor in the early years of the Indonesian Invasion from 7th December 1975 to near the end of 1978 was almost entirely dependent on the use of probably just a single radio transceiver in East Timor in the hands of the Resistance. This radio had 2 crystal controlled frequencies, 3804 MHz in the 75m band used for Radio Maubere, and 5270 MHz for two way use. We never heard anyone else on it that I can remember, apart from during peculiar circumstances at the end, except the Fretilin Minister Alarico Fernandes.

This is utterly amazing. Could there be a parallel in history where a whole nation could be so completely isolated? A population of around 700,000 on 7th December 1975 is thrown to the wolves by the entire rest of the world. This world included democratic industrialised freedom-loving Australia, the land of 'a fair go', the land of 'looking after your mates', on whose northern shores I live in Darwin, situated only 600km from where the genocide is taking place. The sense of shame and disgust at Australia's attitude has fuelled my activism to try to help East Timor, the other main thrust of course being the knowledge of the atrocities and genocide going on so close at hand.

During World War 2, in late 1941, Australia technically invaded the then neutral Portugese East Timor in order to preempt the possibility of the Japanese landing first. Of course this ensured the Japanese did land, in February 1942, a few days after they bombed Darwin to prevent air counter attacks. This caused over 240 deaths in Darwin, but at the time that was denied by the authorities - the first casualty of war is truth etc etc!.

What happened then is perhaps best summed up by ex-Aussie commando from the 2/2nd Independent Company, the inestimable, inimitable Paddy Kenneally, in a piece he wrote in 1995 for AFFET (Australians for a Free East Timor) in Darwin, called: 'The Friends Australia Abandoned'.

'On the 17th December 1941 Australian and Dutch troops landed near Dili in neutral Portugese East Timor. It was a hastily planned

Dili in neutral Portugese East Timor. It was a hastily planned operation, as apart from their weapons and ammunition the troops had few supplies. Their stay in East Timor was expected to be short, they were to withdraw to Atambua in West Timor when Portugese troops arrived from East Africa.

'Within a few weeks of their landing, 76% of the Australian troops had contracted Malaria. Strategic areas in the mountains were selected for new camps. One section remained on the aerodrome in defensive positions. That was the position in East Timor when the Japanese invaded on the night of the 19/20th February 1942. By then Ambon and Rabaul New Britain were in Japanese hands. Singapore had surrendered. Australia was in a desperate position.

'The men in East Timor refused to surrender. They were short of everything except weapons, ammunition and fighting spirit. Prior to the Japanese landing contact between Aussie and Timorese was minimal, but all this was to change. The Australians were entirely dependent on the Timorese and Portugese for food, shelter and guides. The Timorese carried the wounded - they were directly responsible for saving the lives of the badly wounded men. The 2/2nd Independent Company fought a successful guerilla campaign in the mountains of Timor until they were evacuated on December 16th 1942.

'The unit could not have survived had it not been for the help so freely given by the people of East Timor during that campaign. The 2/2nd unit returned to Australia, but the people of East Timor had to brace themselves to face a vengeful Japanese force. The price they paid was staggering! By the time the war was finished in 1945 about 60,000 Timorese had died through reprisals, slave labour, disease and starvation, (that is 10% of the whole nation).

'How did a grateful Australian government repay them for their loyalty, aid and faithfulness to Australia's fighting men during a most critical period in Australian history? From Whitlam in 1974 to Keating in 1995 Australian governments have abandoned and betrayed the people of East Timor. Through our governments we have waded through a sea of Timorese blood, and climbed over a mountain of Timor's dead, to sign the Timor Gap Treaty for economic gain with Timor's invaders. That is how we repaid the people of East Timor'.

On the 17th September 1917 the then Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes claimed that "on entering the world conflict in 1914 it was my government's policy to protect our national integrity, to safeguard our liberties, and those free institutions of government which are essential to our national life, and to maintain those ideals which we have nailed to the very topmost of our flagpole - including White Australia". (Quoted from 'Songs of Australia' 1988 by Peter and Martin Wesley-Smith). We can see now that it was our tradition that the brown people of Timor could be sacrificed. And we don't bother about other peoples' liberties, integrity and institutions!

Precisely! So what happened? A few concerned Australians had tried to help East Timor in 1975, fearful that time would run out before a fullscale Indonesian invasion. Denis Freney (deceased) from Sydney and Brian Manning from Darwin, both members of the CPA (Communist Party of Australia), had visited East Timor in 1974-75. In his book 'A Map of Days' (W. Heineman 1991) Denis tells of his early meetings with Jose Ramos Horta and the trips to Timor by himself and some others. These included 2 delegations led by Ken Fry MHR, soon to become a great friend of mine and important in the radio contact. Denis wrote that Brian had organised some radio transmitters to Dili, keeping one in Darwin for contact should an emergency arise, which was very prescient.

After the murders of the 5 media crew in Balibo on the 16th October 1975, Indonesia pulled back, as they expected a strong protest from Australia. Whitlam did not protest, neither has any Australian leader to this day. Had Whitlam done so, then the full scale invasion would not have taken place. Whitlam is rightly a hero for Aboriginal rights, but a dingo to the East Timorese (sorry dingoes!). We all knew an invasion was likely imminent, I remember sending telegrams to Whitlam and Peacock asking them to block it.

The last planes flew out of Dili as the invasion gathered, the ICRC got advice on 2nd December to evacuate, and Andrew Peacock personally intervened to get a plane to pick up Jose Ramos Horta joined by other Timorese leaders. As people arrived in Darwin there was a lot of emotion and angst, and some competition, not the least for the control of future sources of information. Jill Joliffe wanted to have a pooling or shared fully open access to future information which would likely come by radio, but this was not the plan of those who controlled it.

I personally also was committed in trying to get aid to East Timor. There was a need at that time to chase this in case it could get through, so I drove a Government truck to Kununurra to facilitate and hasten the loading of 100 tonnes of rice to go on the next ACFOA chartered barge from Darwin. I was legally able to visit Kununurra in WA if it was not an overnight stay, so had to get from border to border within 24 hours, in a speed limited 7 tonne truck. I was also to bring back coated seed rice for Timor, and new varieties for my own work as an agronomist. Exhausted, and feeling desperate and lonely with hours of driving to go, I heard the news of the fullscale invasion as I returned.

The first receiver was set up in the office of the NAWU (North Australian Workers Union, soon to become part of the MWU Miscellaneous Workers Union), with the help of a strongly committed union organiser Warwick Neilley. The office happened to be across the road from my flat, and all buildings still bore the scars of Cyclone Tracy from Christmas eve the year before. Reception was not good, it was on the wrong side of Darwin city. It took a while to get better locations, and to improve techniques.

I moved to a new bedsitter flat closer to the coast, and which had less electrical interference, so set up an antenna on a high pole strapped to the top of the external stairs rail, with 2 wires extending down on either side of the driveway. This gave pretty good reception, but once I even received on my portable tranny, jumping with excitement on the top stairs. Another time when recording a broadcast I noticed the Catholic Bishop wandering outside the adjacent Cathedral. He was a rightwing conservative but agreed to visit the bedsitter and listen. Dressed in his white robes he sat on the bed in the gathering twilight, when 2 aboriginal kids came by, peered in, thought they saw a ghost and frantically fled. The Bishop must have thought he heard ghosts, because he never supported the rights of the East Timorese people in their time of dire distress. Another visitor, brought in 1978 by our loyal ALP Senator Ted Robertson, was the future Governor-General Bill Hayden. He was then a fierce supporter, but from 1983 he betrayed the East Timorese right to self-determination and freedom from Indonesian genocide.

The Union office receiver was a perfectly legal device, and we encouraged Timorese and general public to come and listen and help. Carlos Pereira, whose father Henrique in WW2 had been trained near Darwin as a paratrooper, was one who helped. Another was Jose Franco. The Pires family was the main family brave enough to consistently get involved during these years. Rumours were spread that this radio was illegal, so I took a Commonwealth cop incognito to see that it was not subversive, though she was later sent for retraining! There were some not happy with the attention and demands the radio attracted, and this gave added pressure for new locations.

Alarico Fernandes as Minister for Internal Affairs and Security in the DRET (Democratic Republic of East Timor) had been broadcasting desperate messages asking for support, but none was to come. Northern Territory users of the Outpost Radio system such as nurses heard this material too. The messages initially were sent from their Marconi Centre, where apparently Roger East sent his last dispatch to AAP as the paratroops rained down, but his message mysteriously disappeared. AAP has never explained what happened to this last message.

From then on Alarico used his portable radio. For most of the year his telegrams were received at the Outpost Radio in Darwin, and passed on to the addressees, but on 17th November 1976 the Fraser Government ordered this to stop. The Telecommunications Union people were very supportive of the Timorese, but could not prevent this betrayal and denial of the right to communicate. They even received one message from Alarico to his Mum in Sydney, and told him 'message received but it will not be passed on', which was probably heartbreaking not only for Alarico but also the operators. (We later broadcast a message from his Mum to him, to which he responded after a pregnant pause: 'received with great emotion'). East Timor supporters campaigned on this for some time, with a petition,

and a 'Let East Timor Speak' funding campaign. In Darwin we also campaigned, but of course had to concentrate on the radio reception.

For initial two way communication from December 1975 an East Timorese young man Tony Bello used an Australian made Traeger transceiver, usually carried openly on the seat of a 'Moke', having to go out of town to throw up an antenna and get away from electrical 'noise'. The Australian Government secretly listened to the information and did not interfere. The UN Special Representative Winspeare Guicciardi came to Australia, and rang Bello on the 24th January 1976, asking him to seek information from ET. It was then the Australian Government decided to interfere, and so this radio was seized by Post and Telecom officers from Tony as he drove along on Sunday January 25th. This anti-UN action apparently was directly authorised by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser.

Winspeare Guicciardi came to Darwin on the 2nd February 1976 and stayed at the Travelodge. I went to see him and he was happy to chat as I think he was isolated and bored. Jose Ramos Horta was there too, and I helped him do a press statement which was front page NT News when he left. Guicciardi insisted he would only visit areas of East Timor declared safe by Fretilin, and insisted on radio verification. Of course he was told that was foolhardy, but he insisted. As Bello's radio had been seized, they tried to use the radio of the Portugese Corvette tied up at Darwin wharf, but did not make useful contact before being jammed. They then were 'graciously' allowed to use the government Darwin Outpost Radio, and so on the evening of 5th February Alarico named 4 airstrips at Same, Suai, Viqueque and Con, but by the next morning the 6th they were all being bombed. Surprise surprise.

Winspeare Guicciardi left Darwin complaining of lack of support from the Australian Government, but later denied this. (Such tends to be the behaviour of Government and UN officials, one wonders why it has to be this way, who taught them, and where do they go to eventually. The contrast with the morality of the East Timorese in Timor is vast. But do I digress?) On 11th February the Government stopped Bello using their radio. On 19th February Bello announced he would leave Darwin and set up a radio in Macau, but instead the CPA comrades in Darwin set him up at a farm about 70 miles away, a site they cheerfully called Mount Macau. They installed a new Australian made Wagner 50 watt SSB transceiver. After a couple of months Abilio Araujo and Estanislau da Silva arrived, used the radio, and decided Estanislau should take over its use, and also to make it a more mobile operation. This went OK until it was located and seized on 27th September 1976. Ironically, the stolen Wagner was later donated to the NT University.

The overall radio picture is quite complex, as there were various radios involved:

1. Public Receiver;
2. the 'Secret Public' one (Radio Maubere 2-way); and

3. the 'Secret Secret' one for Fretilin radio traffic only.

I was involved in the first 2, and gleaned a bit about the other, although in general terms only members of the CPA were trusted with that knowledge. Despite my years of dedicated service, my loyalty, financing of facilities, lending my car and having to replace its motor as a result, and local knowledge of the bush, I was never really trusted into the bosom of the CPA operation, nor ever had control even for a moment of the 2-way gear. All the 2-way Radio Maubere stuff was done with me driving to bush spots in my trusty Subaru 4WD, with Brian Manning and sometimes with guests. We had a pretty good hiding spot in the car for the radio and antenna, which was never breached.

At one stage we had a revealing brush with the authorities. Brian and I had set up overnight in hills near 'my' research station, 100km from Darwin, but Alarico had not come on air. We explored around a bit, and going up a bush track saw wires strung between the trees. We eased away, and the next morning I came back and photographed what turned out to be a full-on radio direction-finding station. The operator called for help, and within one minute Radio, Police and ASIO officials smugly appeared, wanting to search my car. I prevailed on them to take some literature about the East Timor struggle. We found out that even the army had helped set up 3 radio direction-finding locations to try to trap us, a special effort before our Prime Minister Fraser did another trip to Jakarta, but dare I say smugly, they were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile Denis Freney coordinated setting up a new 'secret' Radio Maubere on the seventh May 1976, done as a public challenge with Ken Fry MHR, friends and journos attending, the drive to the site being hilarious in a serious manner as they managed to elude Telecom and Police pursuers. Delegates had to lie motionless in the long grass as the pursuers hastened past. Denis had to rugby tackle a rather large, slightly inebriated, aboriginal lady who really didn't see why she should lie down - at least Denis cushioned her fall with his own ample body.

This radio was never seized, but was used in a rather conservative manner in my view. Sometimes there were indications of extra government interest in seizing it, and there was one period in 1977 when Brian refused its use for transmission for months. I was never allowed to take it on my own even if going a long way away to allow safe use, such as on my declining number of trips now possible to Wattie Creek, Yarralin and Bulla in the Victoria River District, around 800km from Darwin, far from where it could be siezed on site.

All this time the grind of having to tune in at least 3 times per week at 6.30pm to record Radio Maubere created its own tensions. We did not have a good spot for it in a house or whatever, and at one stage a suitable house had to be left due to personality problems.

Sometimes when reception was crook, eg in the Wet season, we would be reduced to recording from the back of my car parked in bushland. We could never be sure that a broadcast might not be made in the morning, or it might be expected at various times due to weather or pressures, and eventually I used to tune in before going to work if possible. We tried to involve volunteers, but it was hard to get reliable workers. I got into trouble for querying a comrade's failure to monitor one night, but in even more trouble when he discovered I was covering his shifts from home on my 'Realistic DX-160 Receiver'!

And people had families or partners to look after or to seek, and all manner of activist stuff to do like demos, meetings, lobbying, newsletters, bookstalls (which Bill Day managed), and liason with the East Timorese eg I would have gone to the Pires family home more than once a week for 3 years, ostensibly to discuss the radio news, but I also got a pretty good feed; (their son Quito later became the subject of my brothers' prize-winning CD 'Quito', a must for supporters); and earning a quid, which in my case as an agricultural scientist was quite demanding in itself.

By the way, in 1976 myself, a former commando Cliff Morris, and other right wing activists, made attempts to use a boat to take over not only medical supplies and food, but also communications equipment, advice, codes etc. The attempt on 16th September 1976 was captured by the brave Australian Navy and Customs, and Malcolm Fraser personally ordered us to be charged with attempting to take 'guns and drugs' to East Timor. Freney was upset, but so were we. On the 14th February 1977, after 10 days in court, we were duly convicted of gun and drug running, and placed on small bonds. The dangerous weapons were mainly 4 Darwin-registered shotguns, and the drugs included Vegemite and thousands of dollars worth of Camoquin financed by Community Aid Abroad. The return of the medical supplies was delayed by Customs Minister John Howard until they were out of date. These convictions were later overturned on appeal to the NT Supreme Court, the Government's purposes having been served.

The results of Radio Maubere were always publicised, and when we had 'public 2 way' then attending journalists would assist. Valuable messages in English would be transcribed by myself or Brian, sometimes having to listen to phrases 5-10 times to understand if the static was bad. Denis did amazing work with the production of the comprehensive East Timor News and other literature for many years.

We had to cope with plenty of disbelieving journalists, who preferred to publish known lies from the Indonesian government 'accredited' Antara newsagency, than the palpable truth from the battlers in the bush, without 'accreditation', or even a radio licence. This is still a problem sometimes. Mind you there were/are decent journos too. Brian sent the original tapes on to Denis in Sydney for 'official' use, including forwarding to Fretilin in Maputo. Whilst I worked closely

with Brian, and whoever, the lack of trust meant that in late 1978 I bought my own Codan 6801 transceiver, more powerful than currently being used. The struggle to get the necessary 3804 MHz crystal required a threat issued by local TV station owner John Lewis to invoke trade restriction laws. John, a conservative but fair-dinkum bloke, was living evidence that it is not whether you are Left or Rightwing that counts, but your decency and belief in fundamental human rights for all!

Estanislau da Silva 'sat in' in a government office in Sydney to try to force resolution of threatened charges against him from the seizure of the radio on 27th September 1976. Two large cops flew to Sydney to escort this diminutive 'urban or bush guerilla'? to Darwin. On the 3rd December 1976 Estanislau (currently a Fretilin leader in Australia), and Andrew Waterhouse (a very decent and technologically competent activist), were convicted in a Darwin Magistrates Court for 'use of an unlicensed radio'. The Magistrate was aware of thousands of unlicensed CB radios, and the repeated refusal to give us a licence. He thought political influence was involved, and Estanislau was operating from the highest patriotic motives, so set a very low penalty of a \$100 one year good behaviour bond. He set the same penalty for Andrew, but without the kind words.

Another secret radio was set up soon after, in late December 1976, and this remained in place and remained 'secret' until communications were ceased in December 1978. We had established some sort of bond with tough man Alarico, who spoke Portugese, Tetun and English, and also had radio technical skills. Thus it was very difficult when the sole radio link was broken, actually by the Darwin operator calling Alarico a traitor, due to the belief that he was attempting to betray the Resistance leader in 'Operation Skylight'. I suspect the radio effectively had been in Indonesian hands for a while. I would like to know more about that time. Soon after, our hero Nicolau Lobato, the leader of the East Timorese nation, was killed by the brave Indonesian military.

Nicolau's death gave great pleasure to the Indonesians, as he joined over 100,000 of his fellow country people killed since late 1975. By the time Xanana Gusmao clearly took over the leadership of the Resistance in March 1981, over another 100,000 had been killed by assassination, sickness and starvation, in a situation worse than Biafra, whilst the world did almost nothing. In 1977 the peace-loving USA president Jimmy Carter had authorised the supply of Bronco OV10 ground attack aircraft, which to terrible effect in the second half of 1978 dropped bombs and napalm on the population, defenceless against this assault. Broadcasts of the screaming sounds of the divebombing aircraft provided some of the more dramatic broadcasts. An English speaking presumed US adviser was reported killed. The attitudes of the USA, Australia, the UK and Japan in support of the Indonesian genocide in East Timor have changed only a little since then. Thus the killings have continued, sometimes more intense than others, since then until this day.

In early 1985 a transceiver was bravely taken into East Timor, and a link with Darwin was re-established on the 26th May 1985, again orchestrated by Denis, with Ken Fry and journalists again present, and our locals including Agio Pereira, Brian and myself. Abilio Araujo was here, and said who was to do what. I was not allocated further site access but was asked to do publicity, which as I pointed out was bloody stupid and would not work, and it didn't. Agio and Brian did the radio contacts, but interest by media flagged. After a few months the link ceased, and I heard that a part was required for the radio inside, but the request for it fell on incompetent ears.

Since 1989 there has been physical contacts, and usage developed of phones, fax, mobiles, email, audio and film tapes etc. Since the Dili Massacre of 12th November 1991 a lot more people resources have assisted the struggle for a free East Timor. One useful development, for example, has been that information collected on East Timor is often posted on an Internet conference called reg.easttimor, to which most activists subscribe, even some in Dili.

In 1992 we sent Xanana a computer, a Toshiba T1000SE, with word processing installed on the ROM, but no hard disk, so that the information lost would be minimised if it was seized. It was seized at Xanana's arrest on the 20th November 1992, but did not get mentioned at his trial, being safely esconsed with some corrupt Indonesian officer.

In 1997 the Indonesian brutal military occupying power has particularly targetted outside communications, and information is very hard to come by. None is easy. Independent journalists, Australian politicians, UN and Aid organisations still are barred from East Timor. And this is coming up to the next millenium, in our region and our age. Not that I suppose anyone interested enough to read this will NOT know this.

To complete the story, another bad and two more good ones. The Howard government elected 1996 is ultraconservative and hypocritical, pretending to want to be engaged with Asia, but restricting Radio Australia and closing its powerful transmitters across the harbour in Darwin. Although Radio Australia's Indonesian translators sometimes used derogatory terms for the Timorese Resistance such as 'GPK', at least some news and comment got reported. I tried to no avail to interest the Portugese in these facilities.

In 1994 the valuable SE Asian service of Radio Nederlands was under threat of closure, but public outcry saved it. I passed on the story of how it was used to good advantage in Timor in 1983. A local Indonesian military commander in the border region asked his Resistance counterpart for a local ceasefire, and was told to prove his bona fides by having certain information broadcast on Radio Nederlands. This was done, and the local ceasefire spread to the whole of East Timor for much of 1983.

In 1997 at last the Portugese Radio RTP is broadcasting weekdays to East Timor 8.30 - 9.30 pm Darwin time on frequency 17.595 MHz in the 16m band. This is in Portugese and Tetum, but of course only one way. Full communication requires Indonesia to withdraw its troops and controls, and Indonesia should be under severe sanctions until this happens. Meanwhile ... *a luta continua*.