

*In 1983, as the lead singer-songwriter of Redgum, John Schumann wrote and recorded the Vietnam veteran's anthem "I Was Only 19". Despite dogged resistance on the part of some who considered John Schumann an inappropriate performer to entertain Australian troops on overseas deployments, in December 2009 he and his band, the Vagabond Crew, joined a Forces Entertainment tour to East Timor.*

## **I've Been to Dili Too**

Monday morning. December 18, 2009. Mercifully, the heavy rain that lashed Darwin during night had backed off a bit for our walk across the tarmac to the plane. I looked at the Dash-8 squatting there and made some asinine remark to Hughie McDonald about Buddy Holly Airlines.

We took off and struck out across the Timor Sea, bumping around in the back-end of a cyclone that was on its way east. The seat-belt sign stayed on. About an hour into the flight, those of us not reading or otherwise engaged saw a brilliant flash on the port wing right near the propeller. Ten minutes later the captain announced that, yes, we had been hit by lightning and we were on our way back to Darwin.

Perfect. For the first time in 35 years of flying, in all sorts of aircraft in all sorts of weather, I actually studied the card in the seat pocket and made a note of the emergency exits. I also made a note to put a lid on the Buddy Holly-Jim Croce-Lynard Skynard jokes.

After a thoroughly tiresome five hours in Darwin's international departure lounge, we reboarded the Dash-8 and took off again. Ninety minutes later, the captain turned on the nose-cone camera so we could watch as we crossed the shores of East Timor. Between towering monsoonal clouds, we looked down on volcanic mountains and scrub-covered hills sprinkled with little villages.

It was raining hard when we touched down. "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Dili," said the captain. We all clapped.

I peered out the rain-streaked window at what passes for the Dili International Airport, remembering the concerts, rallies and fund-raisers for the Free East Timor campaign Redgum played at in the late 70s and early 80s. It's ironic that it took a conservative Australian government to finally do what left-wing students were demanding decades ago.

Dili is your stock-standard, regional Asian town – scruffy, nondescript and replete with pot-holes, puddles, loud advertising in Manglish and barefoot children. The distinguishing feature here is that Dili has been comprehensively trashed and while the reconstruction effort is evident, the scars are still there: burned-out buildings, bedraggled cyclone fencing, boarded-up windows and rubbish-strewn blocks.

Nonetheless men, women and children looked up at us, smiled and waved as we lurched past. Unless my bullshit detector needs re-calibration, these smiles and waves were genuine expressions of gratitude.

Driving along the main drag, Dili seemed to me to be peaceful and stable. This, of course, is the primary task of the International Stabilisation Force, comprising Australian & New Zealand personnel. I remarked on the demonstrable success of the mission to one of the senior officers. He agreed but went on to explain how a simple incident, such as the “wrong” person being arrested, or a traffic accident involving two people from different sides in the civil war, could precipitate a full-blown, city-wide riot inside one hour. I looked back out the bus window through different eyes.

The Australian base where we were billeted for the duration is called H-POD. It’s right behind Timor L’Este’s Presidential Palace, occupying what was the Japanese air-base in World War 2. They bombed Darwin from here and the runway and the control tower remain as sobering reminders of another war in another era. Some of us forget that many East Timorese risked their lives to assist the miniscule Australian “Sparrow Force” which was left to defend Timor against the invading Japanese.

H-POD is not exactly Club Med. Rather, it’s a sprawl of ATCO huts, idiosyncratic workshops, shipping containers and imprecise lines of military vehicles. All this is enclosed by a high cyclone fence on the other side of which East Timorese families live in bamboo huts on bare dirt. The occasional chicken scurries by.

Hunched over Dili are cloud-shrouded hills promising rain, more humidity and mosquitos. Sleeping quarters are utilitarian: bare concrete floors, windows covered in black plastic and gaffa tape to keep the light out, bunk-beds and mosquito nets. Suitcases and instruments were plonked on the floor. Hughie and I shared a solitary plastic chair. Luxury. Showers and toilets are 50 metres away, a less than entertaining walk when you’re half asleep at 3.00 am in the wet season. That said, the ablutions blocks are cleaned constantly and it’s no-one’s fault in particular that 5 minutes after a shower you’re drenched in sweat again and feel like another.

The food in the mess is varied, well-prepared and plentiful. Outside designated meal times, cakes, fruit, sandwiches and a range of hot and cold drinks are available on a self-serve basis 24 hours a day. In this climate, dehydration is a real issue and there are, quite literally, pallets of bottled water everywhere you go.

Defence takes great care of visiting artists. We were well-briefed and well-equipped before leaving Australia and the health and safety exhortations continued unabated in-country. There were some interesting moments in the pre-embarkation medical briefing, however. Among other things, we were encouraged not to drink from stagnant puddles and it was suggested to us that we avoid eating bird faeces.

When we arrived at the base we were issued with helmets and bullet-proof vests and told, with all the gravity for which the military is justly famous, that we had to take both items with us whenever we were off-base. In fact, we wore the helmets quite often, in trucks and choppers. The bullet-proof vests we just schlepped around for the entire time we were there. They were heavy and cumbersome and we came to hate them with a deep, abiding passion.

I also realise, belatedly, that everywhere we went we were discreetly minded by two impressive looking MPs in a Land-Cruiser. The truth is I was safer in East Timor than I am in the tree-lined streets of inner suburban Adelaide.

We did three concerts while we were there. The first was on the Tuesday when we were choppered into the hills in Black-Hawks to perform a lunchtime concert for 30 or so troops at the Forward Operating Base. We also popped in to an orphanage and played some songs for the kids. It wasn't long before they'd wrested our instruments away and were enchanting us with beautiful Timorese songs. One of the young lads, a left-hander like me, could scarcely believe his luck as he strapped on my guitar. When we eventually had to leave, he gave it back it with some reluctance. If I'd had two with me I would have given him one.

The first major concert was on Wednesday night in the hangar at A-Pod, the Black-Hawk base at the far end of Dili Airport. We took to the stage about 8.30 pm to perform to two or three hundred troops: mainly men, cheerful, sober and mostly seated. I now know how Johnny Cash felt at San Quentin. Given that many of the bands that go on these tours are cover bands, I was told that some of the tour organisers had doubts as to how the troops would respond to a concert set of original songs by a bloke whose moment in the spotlight was over 25 years ago.

They needn't have worried as it turned out. Some songs resonated more than others, true, but there was no doubt that when we left the stage, we'd won handsomely. "I Was Only 19" clinched the deal - hardly a surprise - as did our arrangement of "Waltzing Matilda". But there were some real surprises. The audience loved "Scots of the Riverina" and "To an Old Mate", songs I'd written based on the poems by Henry Lawson. Our slow, acoustic version of Don Walker's "Khe Sahn", with a line change to refer to the Battle of Long Tan, was a winner too. The introductions and contextualising stories helped, of course, but it was clear to us that these men and women were very receptive to songs that actually meant something and reflected their own experiences and their country's history and culture.

The gratitude was palpable too. There are about 650 men and women serving their country in East Timor, on deployments that can last as long as eight months. We don't hear a lot about the nation-building work these people are doing: it's really a case of "out-of-sight, out-of-mind". For them though, entertainment tours like the one we joined are tangible reminders that their fellow Australians haven't forgotten them.

The tour to East Timor was one of the most exciting and moving experiences of my life. It was a privilege to be invited and we were treated as honoured guests by everyone at every turn.

I have lots of memories of my week in East Timor but I think the most enduring one is of the bank of phones near the gym. They're available, day and night, for the troops to ring home and they're pretty well used, as you might imagine. As a travelling musician I know how difficult it is to maintain relationships over vast distances and long absences. I know how it goes: the heartache of not being there for kids' birthdays, anniversaries and important sporting events, the problems left for the wives to manage on their own, the emotional tensions, the insecurities and the loneliness.

Those of us who don't wear a uniform toss around the word "sacrifice" without a lot of thought or real understanding, especially around Anzac Day. In our name and at great cost to themselves and their families, these men and women from Australia and New Zealand are giving the East Timorese a shot at a new life, free of violence and fear. I loved my time in East Timor and I'd go back and play again for the troops in a heart-beat. But, the truth is, after five short days I was glad to get on the plane and go home. I'm not sure how well I'd handle Dili for eight months.

I learned a lot in that week before Christmas 2009 - but nothing as important as the real meaning of the word "sacrifice".

We should be very proud of these people.