

# Top Public Service award for Customs officer

Customs officer Neil Sugget has been awarded the Public Service Medal in the 2001 Australia Day Honours List, acknowledging the role of Customs in rebuilding East Timor's border controls.

Neil was nominated for the medal for outstanding leadership in setting up and leading the first Australian Customs contingent to assist the United Nations Transitional Authority for East Timor (UNTAET) in the development of East Timor Border Services.

"When we were first asked to assist the UNTAET, we had to organise and train the people selected to go," Neil said. "Because we didn't know the exact tasks we would be engaged in, we prepared Australian Customs people to deal with the climate, the environment, the hazards, possible living conditions and health issues. We were relying on the variety of experience and abilities of the people selected to be able to adapt to the work."

"We didn't know what we would be doing when we got there. We were prepared for anything."

He said the preparation and versatility of the Australian Customs

contingent had come into play immediately.

"Instead of being told what tasks had been allotted to us, when we got there we were asked what we wanted to do.

"It was a fantastic experience for all of the people selected to go to East Timor. It proved that people have a lot more skills than they think. People often downgrade their individual abilities. In most aspects of the work in East Timor persistence, patience and initiative paid off."

Key achievements of the contingent included:

- establishing a system to collect customs and excise duties;
- significant contribution to the training and development and conditions of service for East Timorese recruited to the Border Service, resulting in the first group of local staff employed by the East Timorese civil service.

The work to establish a system to collect customs and excise duties has already achieved positive results, with US\$1 million collected between March and May 2000. It was the first locally raised revenue for East Timor and the United Nations Transitional Authority for East Timor (UNTAET).

Neil said relationships with international Customs agencies, the Australian Army, the New Zealand Army and many other international agencies were built up in the time.

"Relationships with the East Timorese were also quickly made with the establishment of a border



Neil Sugget is congratulated by the Governor-General of Australia, Sir William Deane.

greeted with great excitement," he said. The East Timorese saw it as the first sign that they actually had their own country.

"One of our best memories was seeing the excitement of the East Timorese Customs officers in taking over the work, including the training of new staff. Thousands of people applied."

"Some had previously worked for Indonesian Customs and others had not. All of them had to do basic training—the system we were implementing was from a more Western approach than that of the previous Indonesian Customs Service."

Highlights for Neil included: selection by UNTAET as Officer in Command of the Western Border Region (Land Border) for the Border Services Unit;

- supervising Australian Customs officers, two United States police officers and 12 East Timorese Border Services officers;
- liaising directly with senior UN and international administrators, including Mr Sergio DeMello, Head of UNTAET, Mr Xanana Gusmao, Head of CNRT in East Timor, Indonesian officials and senior peacekeeping force officers.

Two teams of Customs staff and one team of trainers from Customs served in East Timor during 2000. Team One (March-May 2000) consisted of: Neil Sugget (team leader); Rick Brook; Adrian Dandeker; Peter Lutley; Lorraine McCann; and Jeff Michael. Team Two (June-September 2000)



Neil discusses the merits of fresh fruit with a Canadian counterpart.

consisted of: Stan Davidson (team leader); Phil Davis; Terry Davies; Ron Dyer; Louise Moore; and Phil Taylor.

Trainers (July 2000—January 2001) were: Lorraine McCann (who stayed on as a trainer after her time in Team One was completed); and Jennifer Stokes.

Customs CEO Lionel Woodward congratulated Neil on his receipt of the prestigious award.

"The whole of Customs can be proud of the excellent job done by Neil Sugget and the Customs contingents and the very real benefits they brought to the community of East Timor," Mr Woodward said.

The award was fitting recognition of the leadership and example shown by Neil in putting together a balanced, well-prepared team that was able to meet the many tasks they faced under difficult circumstances.

"The team worked hard in difficult conditions and were successful in

implementing border controls and training schemes," he said.

Mr Woodward said nominations for the Public Service Medal were open only for individuals. It had been a difficult decision to nominate just one of the team that worked in East Timor, but he thought nominating Neil would reflect on the excellent and tireless work of the whole group.

"Neil displayed outstanding leadership, professionalism and initiative under difficult circumstances, managing the selection, preparation and training of a group of 20 volunteers," Mr Woodward said.

"Each member of the group that went to East Timor made a significant contribution. The group helped show the East Timorese that, in time, there was the possibility of becoming self-sufficient.

"Neil's efforts, and those of his contingent, contributed to demonstrating Australia's commitment to practical, regional

leadership and directly benefited the community of East Timor."

Mr Woodward said Public Service Medals were not given away lightly, with a maximum of 100 medals awarded across Australia each year. A maximum of 30 of these go to Commonwealth employees.

Established in 1989, the medal was created to encourage, recognise and reward excellence of service, and are awarded on the basis of merit, for outstanding public service.

Neil is the fourth Customs officer to receive the Public Service Medal.

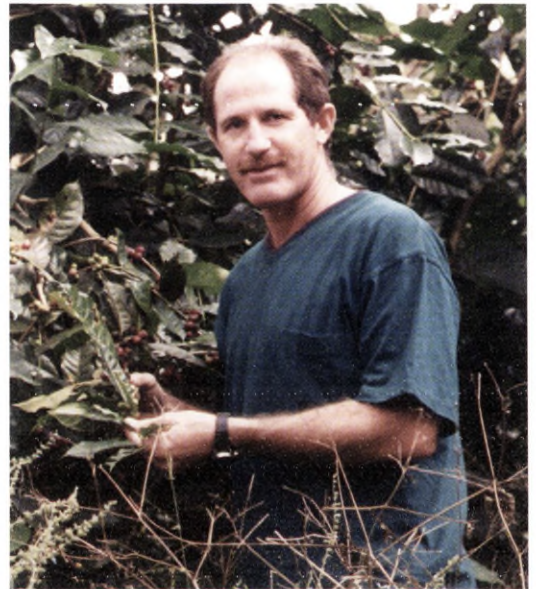
Previous recipients are:

- Paul Murphy (1990) for significant contributions to the public service and Customs;
- John Vandeloo (1998) for initiating and implementing Australia's breeding and rearing program for drug detector dogs; and

- Jenny Peachey (2000) for outstanding performance in the research and delivery of the across public service report *Beyond Bean Counting*.



A village scene near the border town of Batugade



Neil inspects the local coffee crop.



UN vehicles suffered in the violent aftermath of the East Timor independence elections.