

See the road well: Customs helps out in East Timor



Customs officer Neil Sugget with East Timorese

Acting Director Enforcement Operations Neil Sugget spent four months in the fledgling nation of East Timor in 2000. He has now written a book about his experiences. Titled *See the road well*, its May release date was timed to coincide with celebrations to mark the third anniversary of the country's independence. Any profit from the book will be used to help school children in the Batugade region near where Neil was stationed.

We returned from East Timor in June 2000 with a feeling of satisfaction that we had helped develop the East Timorese Border Service but at the same time there was a nagging feeling that there was more to do. We had left our replacements behind, confident that they would continue the work. It was not for us to tell them how to do it and they went on to do everyone proud.

As the second contingent went about their work, we looked on from Australia, tired, worn out and happy we had done our bit. The East Timorese were finding their feet and they now had a sense that they could develop the independence they had so feverishly sought before the militia had taken it away so violently.

As time went on, I found myself thinking about the East Timorese more and more, eventually a desire began to return to find other ways to assist. There was a lot of rebuilding to be done in East Timor and the Border Service was just one small part. There was a nation to rebuild.

I had kept a diary during our deployment and one day hoped to put it together into a personal legible record with a few photos. The diary was fairly simple and had been handwritten at night in bed or by torchlight and often during periods of frustration. Naturally it didn't record the whole deployment for everyone, just the bits I saw.

The events in *See the road well* are from that diary. The book would never have happened without the constant support and encouragement of a lot of people along the way. I probably never would have finished it without all that support. The many late nights of writing were probably sustained by the thought that I might be able to at least raise some awareness of the ongoing needs if I wrote about my experiences. Maybe if it was published, I could donate the royalties to schools in East Timor.

Writing the manuscript itself took longer than my deployment in East Timor. The first efforts were pretty average but I learned as I went on. I was quite amazed when Pandanus Print wrote back and said they were interested and actually wanted to publish it.

See the road well introduces six Australian Customs officers who, in January 2000, received an out-of-the-blue chance to assist with the rebuilding of East Timor. The opening of the book attempts to capture the emotions of the group, their training and preparation, and their departure from Darwin for Dili in the front row of the UN transport flight.

Dili was an eye-opener as we saw the recent destruction first hand. We were introduced to the bureaucracy of the United Nations and its inherent frustrations. We worked with other international contingents in the sparse Dili Airport and at the port while also organising Customs training for East Timorese officers. During this time, the differences in the way the UN deals with its own staff and the East Timorese became obvious.

The group was given the task to develop a border service post in a remote region on the western land border - a move designed to 'normalise' border relationships with Indonesian West Timor.

The first half of the book sees the group working in, with and around the UN supply and administration arms as we attempted to conjure enough equipment and supplies to move ourselves and 12 East Timorese officers from Dili to the remote border village of Batugade.

With unlimited access in Dili, we were exposed to UN politics as well as various local political groups. We witnessed, first hand, the divisions between the older Portuguese-influenced officials and the younger people who were raised in Indonesian-controlled East Timor.

As we mingled in markets and road-side stalls, we were overcome by the sheer tenacity and goodwill of the East Timorese.

Going about our preparations to get something happening at the border, we witnessed the misery as refugees from West Timorese camps were shipped and trucked home to East Timor.

An audience with national leader Xanana Gusmao inspired us at a time when frustrations were building. The joy of the newly trained East Timorese officers at the first graduation, with uniforms modelled proudly, also boosted morale for all. Accounts of riot attempts, civil strikes and religious celebrations are included in the book with Anzac Day on a Dili beach a high point.

When the group finally arrived at the border in Batugade, we settled into a village lifestyle with the East Timorese officers and developed a close bond with the community. The Border Service was the only security group in the region in which East Timorese were employed - the peacekeeping forces and police at the time were all foreign. The East Timorese quickly proved to be effective in dealing with traders from Indonesian West Timor.

Cultural and language difficulties caused some misunderstandings but, as a group, we continued our struggle to obtain basic rights for the East Timorese staff. Invitations to be guests of honour at a birthday and wedding showed that we had been embraced by the community - the events brought both surprises and embarrassments.

Time went quickly and, on the day of our departure from Batugade, the frustrations and other tensions created by the environment, work and bureaucracy issues seemed to melt away as we were warmly farewelled by the East Timorese. The nation still needs assistance from its neighbours and will continue to need support for some time.

* See *the road well* is published by Pandanus Print at the Australian National University.

