

Chris Elenor

Calling Fretilin

Chris Elenor joined the Communist Party in Australia in 1976 after finding political enlightenment on the hippy trail from England to India. He now works as a strategy analyst with a large mutual organisation. He plays viola with the Strathfield Symphony Orchestra, is President of the Down Syndrome Association and is a Director of the Redfern Legal Centre in Sydney.

JOE Palmada rang me and suggested we meet. With Joe on the Communist Party National Committee and responsible for party security, it was a question of where and when to meet rather than whether to meet him. Besides I was intrigued to find out why he wanted to talk. Clearly it was business that should not be discussed on the phone.

It was 1977 and I had been working in Canberra and hadn't talked with Joe since the time of protecting the Party printery following the dismissal of the Labor government the year before. We agreed on Elkington Park in Balmain for the next day, close to where I was living in a shared house with the new love of my life—a location where it would be difficult for spooks of whatever variety to share our conversation.

As we leant against the wall in the winter sunshine Joe explained the Party was carrying out an important role for the East Timorese national independence forces. They needed a person to disappear from Sydney for six months to do this underground work. It would involve isolation, some physical risk and possible arrest. The job was pressing and he would need my decision in a couple of days and I would have to leave following training within a couple of weeks. He would tell me more on a need to know basis. Was I interested?

Interested? I was already completely taken with the idea. I tried to appear calm and serious, but I did need to know more. What would it involve? Why did he think I was the right person? We walked a little as he considered how much he needed to tell me to keep me interested. Once around the corner he started slowly.

The Party had been running a radio link between the Fretilin leadership inside East Timor and their external leadership which was now in Mozambique, Lisbon and New York. This was the only inward communication from the outside world to Fretilin. The radio operation had been financed by money from Dutch (and other?) support groups. Recently this operation, based near Darwin, had been raided by police, the equipment confiscated and those involved charged. No communications had been sent to East Timor in several weeks. Someone needed to go to the Northern Territory, re-establish the radio link and operate in a way that would avoid detection by police, ASIO, DSD¹ or any other forces of the State.

Now I was totally hooked but doubtful of my ability to do it; a boy scout recently arrived from gentle England did not seem a very adequate preparation for crocodiles: salt water and human.

As a relatively new Australian I had only a vague grasp of the geography to the north of Australia and had never heard of East Timor prior to the collapse of Portugese rule. I did however understand the

1 Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and Defence Signals Directorate.

Indonesian invasion had destroyed any chance for self determination in East Timor (wherever that was).

I said nothing, thinking furiously about the bigger problem of how I was going to square this with Paula, or even if it could be less than terminal to the grand passion currently underway.

I told Joe I was very interested but that I would have to discuss it with Paula. He seemed taken aback, perhaps not knowing we were a serious item. Joe thought that this would compromise the need to know principle. I said the principle was that Paula needed to know and I was not prepared to consider doing this unless I could be open with her. He was dubious: the less people in the know the better. I reminded him she had been active in Party organizations since she was at school and would clearly understand the need for absolute discretion about an issue such as this. Joe was troubled but agreed reluctantly and we arranged to meet again. I tried to maintain a sensible stride on the walk home but with my head zinging, my feet wanted to skip, only sobered by how this boys-only adventure would be viewed by the woman to be left at home. The political had become very personal.

It was rough, for both of us, discussions went on into the night. Paula understood the importance of the job but why me, why now? I had only recently returned from Canberra and presumed to move in to share her room. She had been here before, a partner who went to Moscow for close to a year. She felt deserted and what would she say to others who might think the same? But a boy's got to do what a boy's got to do and what she would do is decamp with Cassie, her daughter, to England in the University vacation. We were both bruised and I was relieved to leave it there, at least until the next round.

I told Joe I was keen to do the job at our next meeting and he gave me more of the picture. This was to be a different sort of operation from the previous one: complete security and very mobile. I was to start to put about the story that I was thinking of going to Western Australia for work. Meanwhile I had to find a four wheel drive, preferably short

wheelbase. Look for something ex-government.

Cruising the car yards down Parramatta Rd, I eventually found a Telecom Landrover ute in the red corporate livery of the time. It was however a longer wheelbase. This was checked over and purchased by someone else in the network and delivered to Harry Hatfield's, a metalworker comrade, for a few modifications. As an optional extra, Landrovers could have an extra fuel tank fitted for long range operations. Harry made a tank that was indistinguishable from the genuine accessory and fitted it complete with fuel line and tap to the Landrover. Access was from inside the cab, and once the disguising mud film and four screws had been removed from the lid, there was room in the tank for the radio, aerials, power cables, code books and other transmitting paraphernalia. In the bottom was an asbestos mat to keep heat radiating from the exhaust pipe running alongside away from the radio equipment.

I met with Denis Freney who was the prime mover in mobilising support around independence for East Timor. Denis and I had previously argued angrily over the tactics to be used in the Canberra Campaign for an Independent East Timor (CIET) and we had major differences in the strong internal Party debates of this period. But these issues were put aside for this venture. He laid out the current military situation. The guerilla army, with guns seized from the Portugese armouries, were defending significant areas of the high country and the people who lived in these areas. Falintil, the armed wing of Fretilin, had many guns but limited ammunition. Food and medicines would be in short supply. The Indonesians had control of the main towns and the major roads by day but insufficient firepower to attack the core Fretilin held areas in the high country. The counter-insurgency operations and mass killings by the TNI² were continuing.

It was imperative to quickly re-establish contact with the Fretilin leadership inside East Timor. The coded radio messages were the only

2 TNI: Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Army).

link between the internal leadership and the leader of the external delegation, Marie Alcatiri in Mozambique, and others such as Abilio Araujo in Lisbon and Jose Ramos Horta who was focusing on the United Nations in New York.

The radio broadcasts were in breach of the Telecommunications Act, however the problem was not the likely fines. The operation could not afford to keep losing very expensive radios and vehicles. Two sets of equipment had been seized already. Until now the radio operators had been Timorese who spoke Tetum.³ One had finished his stint and the other had been deported after the last bust. The trick would be for me to lie low down the track outside Darwin, leading another life, and from this base make forays to operate, never the same place twice. Brian Manning, a wharfie in Darwin, had located a possible base and had some safe transmitting sites in mind, based on his local knowledge.

Denis was the Sydney connection in the pipeline and the coded and plain text messages and tape recordings would flow between us via Australia Post boxes in Darwin and Sydney, registered in other than our own names. The coded messages were then sent on via an old telex machine Denis had acquired, cheaper than international phone calls.

Arrangements were being made for training and I would be contacted. I met Andrew Waterhouse at the Café Sport in Leichhardt. Amidst the Italian din he said we were going away for a few days. I had to learn how to operate the radio, some electronics for trouble shooting, and as immediate homework, the international alphabet.

He took me to a safe house in the Blue Mountains and we started work on radio theory and electronics. Andrew was very skilled in this and was constantly learning from the experience of the operation, refining the gear and working to get a stronger, more reliable radio signal into East Timor. Power supply had been a problem with the previous operation;

3 Tetum is the primary indigenous language of East Timor. Portuguese is now the official national language.

this time the radio would be powered directly from the vehicle battery through detachable leads. He had sourced the radios. He was waiting for money to come through from the international support groups. Someone else in the network was buying the radios because he had been arrested when visiting the previous operation and was now known to be involved. He had to do some modifications to the radios to crystal lock the radio frequency which would be used.

We pored over the map of East Timor and Northern Australia and he explained how the aerial needed to be aligned by compass to punch a signal directly into East Timor. The rainy season was approaching and massive tropical storms would make radio communication difficult. Heavy rain, humidity and constant rigging of the equipment would lead to failure of the gear. Getting the dipole aerial up as high as possible (thirty feet would be good) in an area free of obstructions and with the two aerial legs in the correct alignment to the target was a tight specification. I set about learning how to make and rig aerials and troubleshoot the equipment.

The next time he picked me up we went across the Blue Mountains to a tin shed on an isolated property. We would be there for a few days. As we drove he explained that our objectives were two-fold. He wanted to try an experiment, to try and bounce a signal into East Timor late at night from several thousand kilometers further south than ever before. People in Darwin would be listening for it. He could also try out the transmitter he had crystal locked and it would give me some hands-on practice with the equipment.

We picked a transmission site on high ground and I got plenty of practice attempting to sling a weighted line over a high bough, the most difficult part of setting up. We checked the equipment and then settled down in the bitterly cold, star-bright night to wait for transmission time. Not even a small nip to keep out the cold; this was active duty. Andrew talked of how DSD would have used detection finding equipment to pinpoint the location of the previous transmitter and how all

transmissions would need to be kept to under half an hour. This had been the downfall of the previous operation. They had camped and transmitted from the one spot for too long, and even had a vege garden going when he visited them.

We fired up and bounced the signal off the ionosphere. Did anyone hear it? Andrew would find out from the Darwin listening post on our return to Sydney. The gear had worked well and I had been initiated into the cold and arcane rites of single side band radio.

Despite the urgency of re-establishing the radio link, preparations had slowed. Money was tight and the need to prepare in secret through the network added to the delays. I was conscious of appearing idle and unemployed to my friends. I could say nothing. I was now waiting in solidarity as Brian Manning later termed it.

I saw Paula and Cassie off on their way to England. All I wanted now was to get on with it. Preparations were now well advanced and I received final briefings from both Joe and Denis. I would stage a sudden departure to Western Australia with Paula apparently deserted in preference to a job. Contact would be through an address in Perth. In reality after driving the vehicle (at not more than fifty miles an hour) to Darwin, I was to immediately set about securing a base. I was to shun open contact with Brian Manning and keep contact to a minimum, however he had found a ramshackle demountable on an out of the way block which would make a suitable base. The rainy season had started and there may be difficulty in getting through to Darwin. At best it would take a week. Do not take any risks in getting there even if this means delays. A route was suggested which allowed for some variation depending on which highways were closed by the wet.

By the time I reached Tamworth I had transmuted into Steve. The shoulder length hair and the full beard were gone and I was getting used to living and sometimes sleeping in the ute cab. The rains had swept through Central Queensland and nothing without tracks was moving on the black soil plains. So we all waited in Winton. Some drank, others

watched from the hotel balcony as the boys drag raced their V8 utes up and down the mainstreet in the rain. Two days lost. A lot of miles, slow down, don't cook the truck, keep concentrating, try and keep it out of deep water. The pommy new chum, awed at being alone in this wide land stretching to every horizon. Sleeping in the stardome by a little fire, more for company and ambience than the need for heat.

More miles and then further delay through flooding at Newcastle Waters. We sat for a week, the makeshift camp growing bigger as people arrived daily and waited for the waters to subside. They rose. As I had to keep largely to myself the highlight of the day was eating in the roadhouse, well stocked from the stranded road trains. I was impatient, conscious of how relatively close I now was and of the amount of time the radio link had now been down. The river had peaked and was now falling very very slowly. It could be another week before it was safely passable. How much would the water need to fall before I could attempt the several kilometre long crossing? The local police had already warned me they would push the vehicle off the causeway into the river to clear the road if I failed to proceed. In preparation I had sealed and taped up the distributor, removed the fan belt and moved the radio gear from the false petrol tank and had it perching it as high as possible inside the cab, hidden in a sleeping bag. The big trucks and snorkel equipped 4WD's were now negotiating the crossing. I watched the bow wave of a truck. The displacement was creating a moving spot immediately behind the truck where the river level was lower in the vortex. Eventually I took a risk and went into the water right behind one of the largest trucks from the camp. If the truck stopped I would be in trouble and if my depth estimates were wrong I would be stranded with a wet engine. The water was quickly over the floor of the cab, and lapping my feet. How much higher would it come? How much longer would the motor keep operating?

On the other side I backed off from the truck, gave him a relieved wave and pulled over to take stock, well away from the camp which had

formed on this side of the flood. Harry Hatfield had built well. No water had got into the dummy petrol tank despite its total immersion and the radio gear was soon safely stowed away again for the remainder of the trip to Darwin.

I arrived in Darwin in a downpour and tracked down the owner of the block and the demountable to his house in one of the suburbs rebuilt after the cyclone. He was not in the know about the operation and his wife was particularly happy to negotiate a rent for the place which had been uninhabited. It had power and water and that's all. He had plans for the block but not for a few years. For my part, I needed a place to stay to do some writing, I did however plan to put up a television aerial tall enough to get line of sight from Darwin.

From the track leading from the main road it was difficult to pick out the hovel (as it became less than affectionately known). The spear grass rose high around it, a four-cell, flat-roofed box which had air conditioning units in a previous life but sadly no longer. It was uncomfortably steamy. The ablutions consisted of minimal breeze block walls with a shower rose and tap, open to the sky and the elements. The water in the pipes was warm from the sun but clean.

I moved in my meagre possessions. A camp bed a few books, the mosquito net and a second powerful radio to receive signals from Fretilin which would be captured by a tape recorder for later transcription. All I needed now was to set up an aerial. I set about constructing a tall TV antenna from galvanized pipe held up by stays running to pegs in the soft ground. I made sure the TV antenna array was pointed in the right direction. The dipole radio antenna aligned to East Timor was disguised by running it down the stays.

Brian paid me a surreptitious visit at the block, armed with a few creature comforts and some equipment salvaged from the previous operation, such as a small mobile generator. He was sure he had not been followed. He talked of the difficulty and danger of operating in the Top End in the wet alone in a single vehicle. Many areas were impassable and

there was grave danger of getting seriously bogged or stranded whenever you ventured off the roads. He was concerned that out there, I could possibly die in a roll-over or other mishap before anyone knew I was missing. I could not be seen delivering anything to his house in town so we set up a system where I would leave a note in a dead letter box saying how long I would be out for, and my likely operating area so he could raise the alarm and start a search if I failed to notify of my safe return. It was a small consolation to have this safety net after he had rightly scared me with Top End horror stories.

He talked of the bases and airstrips that had been bulldozed from the bush during the Second World War as part of the forward defence of Australia. These places had all weather tracks leading in from the bitumen highway to clearings in the bush where the runways had been. These were big enough to get a signal out over the trees. He showed me some possible sites on the map which I should check out. He suggested a place for the initial attempt to re-establish the radio link. The plan was to break in over the regular broadcasts which were still coming out of East Timor.

I was starting to panic, it had taken me longer to get to the transmitting site than planned and I had difficulty slinging the aerial high enough into the dripping trees. It had been an early start before dawn but time was running out, and the rain had started again. I was fumbling in my haste to make the connections and keep the gear dry. The last connection made, sweating and dripping I hauled myself into the cab pulled on the headphones, switched on to receive and turned on the tape recorder. It all seemed to be working so far.

Amazing, through the crashing storm static, I could hear the tinny strains of Foho Ramelau.⁴ This was it. Somehow, from somewhere, they were still broadcasting: “Viva Fretilin, Viva puovo Maubere.” Alarico Fernandes started his news bulletin. Deep breaths as I nervously caressed the microphone switch and waited to break in. He finished the first item. I

4 National anthem of the Timorese independence movement.

hit the microphone button and the needle indicating signal strength soared strongly as I croaked out in as calm a voice as I could muster, "This is Kolibere, This is Kolibere. Calling Alarico Fernandes and Fretilin. This is Kolibere in Australia. Can you hear me, over." No response, Alarico had continued with the next news item. I tried again and this time he stopped reading the bulletin, a short silence, he had heard something, who was it? I hit the airwaves again and this time, a response. "Hello Kolibere, Hello Kolibere, this is Alarico Fernandes. I am receiving you." I pulled out the rapidly smudging paper with the frequencies, and radio schedules. They would need to listen at 10.30 am on any of three days and I would do the same on the other three. Were these schedules OK? He extravagantly confirmed the schedules and I then read him urgent messages from Jose Ramos Horta and Denis.

Very quickly secure transmission time was up and it was all over, the gear was back in the dummy petrol tank and I was out of there, singing in the rain about to put fifty plus miles between the radio and the transmission site. I tried to concentrate on the driving, but it was hard to stop grinning to myself. It had worked, first time, and I knew they wouldn't catch me, not this time. What a blast.

The tapes went to Denis in Sydney and I collected my mail through Steve's post box and bank account which I had established on arrival. I had also picked up a prospectors permit, a panning dish and some rock samples as a valid and legal reason for roaming around in remote areas.

The news from East Timor was mixed. The Indonesians had acquired A10 ground attack aircraft which flew slowly enough to pinpoint vegetable gardens and settlements in the Fretilin defended areas. Falintil was however still holding these areas and had stemmed the attacks.

I settled into a solitary pattern of checking the post box, stocking for a sortie, and away for two or three days and then returning to record long messages from Alarico, dispatch the tapes and transcripts and disappear down the track again. The hovel leaked, necessitating keeping supplies off the floor. I shared it with a variety of crawling and flying

things which were difficult to keep at bay.

Brian Manning had a scheme hatching, as always. I heard his latest project was to put up a 90 foot aerial on his block to receive signals from East Timor. He had acquired the triangular sections for the bottom part of the installation and was working out how to stay the top. I of course could go nowhere near him. At our meeting he had had given me the name of a bloke he trusted who knew the country well and could possibly help with additional sites, particularly as the wet receded and the safe areas of operation could expand beyond the all weather tracks.

Norm Hack had a truck and bulldozer and did earth moving jobs in the area. He also had a shack on a gold lease down the track towards Pine Creek which could be a useful place for me to camp on some of the transmitting trips. Norm was described as more of a fellow traveller, close to the Party but never a member. He was married to Maureen who came from the Docker River area. Norm was close to the traditional owners around Oenpelli. He had helped them negotiate terms for the mine site and now looked after the mothballed exploration site for the company. Norm felt strongly about what was going on in East Timor and was likely to help. I should see him.

I met Norm over a beer in a pub in Darwin after he finished work and sounded out the possibilities. Norm was going down the track the following week to check on his claim at Fountain Head. If I came too, we could check some places out along the way. Norm became very important to my sanity. As well as helping find safe sites and using his goldmine as a forward base, he and Maureen were my only regular human contact, infrequent as it was.

Paula and I had hatched a plan for her to visit me secretly on her way back to Australia. I didn't think my Sydney controllers would approve so I didn't tell them. Cassie would come back with Paula's best friend. It was planned for all to arrive back in Sydney about the same time. Paula arrived from the mid winter cold of London to the steaming heat of a Darwin evening. I looked very different without the beard and I had to

take her back to the hovel where conditions were still very basic. For Paula it was purgatory, the heat and isolation. When I went for a couple of days to transmit she was alone in the wet heat of the hovel with no transport and just the radio for entertainment. She was pleased to leave for Sydney. Her visit however enabled me to see through the rest of my stint. Mail to and from Paula via the underground contact in the west proved to be slow and intermittent. We had however arranged our own private cut out mail system in anticipation of this difficulty.

Gradually the wet receded and operating became easier. I moved further afield in search of new sites. I wanted to give the all weather sites a rest and save them for the time when the rains came again. I was starting to feel that despite my best efforts to operate unpredictably over several thousand square miles, after several months my operating method was detectable. There are so few people and vehicles in the remoter areas that any movement is noticed with interest. I was also thinking that as there were only a couple of roads out of Darwin and my base at the hovel, all the forces of the State would need to do if they wanted to catch me badly enough would be to road block the appropriate highway for a period after the transmission and search all vehicles. The false petrol tank was good but not that good. Perhaps I was getting paranoid or suffering a touch of hubris. Starting to do the solitary confinement hard.

I put a proposal to Joe and Denis that I should explore the possibilities of moving camp further west towards the Daly River. The answer was no. They did not share my security concern. The operation was working successfully, just keep doing it.

Andrew had to return to Darwin in connection with his arrest at the previous radio site, we met at night in the car park by the Beach. The sand flies ate us in the cool seeming breeze. My Sydney controllers apparently thought my idea to migrate to Daly River was a sign of restiveness. How was I holding up? I could honestly say, well. I was healthy, operating safely and I had come to terms with having too much of my own company. I was however starting to cross off the weeks and days on the cell wall, glad

that this tour of duty had an approximate end date.

Norm had told me that after the wet he had to drive out to the exploration site with diesel and supplies and do some grading with the bulldozer. He asked if I wanted to come with my vehicle to assist with any unbogging. He thought there was also an abandoned Landrover out there with a hard top that might fit the back of mine. The trip to Narbalek was rough but uneventful. We stopped at Oenpelli so Norm could renew friendships. We found the Landrover canopy, it fitted after much sweat and swearing and then on to Narbarlek close to the mouth of the East Alligator River. Norm was now a trusted part of the operation and we transmitted twice from the area around there. Norm found a tobacco tin from his last visit with some grass in it. Active duty or not we laughed and solved the problems of the world for a couple of hours watching the giant ants in the sun at Green Ant Dreaming.

Whilst the transmitting was always a great adrenalin boost, I had a lot of time to fill in between the radio schedules. Much of it was spent driving or waiting, either because I had gone out early to set up transmissions or to stagger my return to the hovel and not create patterns of travel which correlated with the transmissions. I was still operating carefully and securely but starting to go stir crazy with the isolation. It was a mind game that was now more difficult than managing the physical environment.

By the time John Wishart arrived to replace me I had built up a bank of 25 usable transmitting sites based on Norm and Brian's local knowledge and my own explorations. Some of these were being kept back for the wet season others had not provided good signal projection. John and I had a week to do the handover, we went over the maps and down the track and I introduced him to Norm and Maureen and said my goodbyes to them. I was eager to share my work with another and leave the operation in good hands.

I had only a small twinge as I parted from John and the Landrover outside the airport. The Landrover had gone well and so would he, I was

out of there. Enough waiting in solidarity. R&R here I come. The flight to Sydney seemed interminable. Joe Palmada met me at the airport and drove me over to Balmain. We were both very happy. Paula and Cassie were there. We were all very happy.

The operating plan had worked well. It had been more than six months so far and never a sniff of being caught. Perhaps they were not even trying? Denis had told me the codes being used were simple substitutions which was all that could be set up in the haste prior to the invasion. The intelligence community may have realized that the radio messages were a valuable source of information and decided that their interests were better served by allowing the radio to operate. We of course could not know or presume this and the radio continued to operate underground for another 2 years as the only link between the Fretilin leadership and Falintil and the people in the areas they were defending.

Postscript

It was strong turbulence and a small plane. I held my seat and stomach. We finally broke through the cloud on the descent to Dilli. Long deep ridges running East-West. The world crumpled and pushed up on its edge. Few roads, tropical rainforest. Perfect guerilla country. The plane was directed in by an Australian forces ground controller as a UN helicopter clattered in. We clambered out (from the back first please so the plane does not tip up) into an unusually late wet season. Collecting our bags we enter the spartan terminal building. The sign on the wall proclaimed:

Welcome to East Timor.

The Newest Country in the World

Year 2000.

UNTAET⁵ put a stamp on my passport for 90 days and I was in. Peter, a long time Party member and East Timor activist was there to meet me. We climbed into a minibus with an A4 Fretilin flag taped to the windscreen and drove in to Dilli along a street of burnt out buildings. Twenty five years on, here I was in an independent East Timor. The thought of this moment had sustained me during the isolated months in the bush with the radio. How little I knew then that it would be so long coming and in such reduced circumstances. Peter broke into my thoughts. We are going straight to the Fretilin Congress, there are about 2,000 people meeting in the basketball courts. Nine of the Australian delegation have already arrived and there are five other comrades from the radio operation here.

Viva Fretilin

Viva povo Maubere

5 UNTAET: United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor, which administered the country from October 19, 1999 to May 19, 2002.