



**Ken Fry MHR, left, speaking to Fretilin in East Timor with radio operator, Brian Manning, right.**

Brian Manning

## **Charlie India Echo Tango calling Timor Leste**

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**Brian Manning** recently retired after 35 years working on the Darwin wharves. He was a co-founder of the NT Trades and Labor Council, and is now Chair of the Darwin Port Welfare Committee. He has been involved in a wide range of industrial and progressive causes.

**T**HE coup in Portugal<sup>1</sup> was no sooner a reality than Denis Freney<sup>2</sup> was on his way to East Timor. He filled me in on the prospects of East Timor becoming independent, along with other Portuguese colonies. At the time, he was on his way back to Sydney and stayed over in our caravan abode in Gardiner Street Darwin.

Denis was full of enthusiastic optimism at the prospects given the

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1 On 25 April 1974, radical army officers overthrew the fascist regime in Portugal, unleashing two years of revolutionary struggle. One result was the granting of independence to Portugal's extensive colonial empire.

2 Denis Freney, 1936-1995, was a journalist for *Tribune*, the Communist Party's weekly newspaper, and a leading organiser of solidarity for East Timor. His autobiography is *A map of days* (1991).



**Part of the team that kept communications going between the Fretilin in East Timor and the external leadership. From left: Brian Manning, John Wishart, Chris Elenor and Dave Arkin in Dili for the Fretilin Congress in 2000. Brian ran the “public” radio. The other three were underground operators.**

aspirations of the people he had met. They had impressed him with their progressive plans to deal with illiteracy and poor health amongst the Maubere<sup>3</sup> people in the development of a Democratic Republic in East Timor.

Denis woke screaming in the middle of the night. I leapt out of bed and went down to the end of the van where Denis was now sitting up still half- asleep. He was having a bad dream. I have wondered since if he had witnessed an insight into the tragic events that were to unfold over the next 25 years.

A year later, Fretilin<sup>4</sup> invited the Northern Territory Trades and Labor Council to send delegates to the occasion of the first anniversary

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3 The Maubere: From an indigenous Timorese language, the word was used in a derogatory manner to refer to the people of East Timor. The resistance adopted the word to mean the people of the resistance.

4 FRETILIN: Frente Revolucionaria do Timor-Leste Independente (Revolutionary Front of Independent East Timor), the leading East Timorese independence movement.

of the founding of Fretilin. Darwin people were recovering from the ravages of Cyclone Tracy<sup>5</sup> and desperately working to restore what they could of damaged homes. Consequently there were not many who took up the invitation. A Timor born ethnic Chinese wharfie, Lai Con Liong and myself were the only respondents.

We flew into Bacau on 19 May 1975 with Trans Australia Airlines (TAA)<sup>6</sup> and on to Dili by light aircraft. I was booked into The Tourist Lodge and met some of Fretilin's leaders, Rogerio Lobato and Jose Ramos Horta, who introduced us to the President, Francisco Xavier Do Amaral, at Fretilin's headquarters in Santa Cruz. He was busily engaged welcoming delegations who were walking in to Dili from all parts of East Timor to join in the occasion. Timorese women in traditional dress played gongs and danced to entertain the gathering multitude.

The next day, 20 May, a procession of Fretilin supporters moved off in a sea of faces waving Fretilin flags. Some were in traditional dress, mounted on ponies and they moved to gather in the park in front of the Administration buildings. I would estimate 100,000 people at least were there. I took photos from the back of a truck which became the speakers podium, alongside Oliver Strewe, a professional photographer who was staying with Horta. The whole scene was one of joyous celebration at the prospects of independence. It made an indelible impression on me. I was privileged to be a witness to the birth of democracy in one of the last remnants of the 400 years of Portuguese colonialism. Fretilin clearly expressed the aspirations of the majority of the population. Ramos Horta pointed out to me the ominous presence of Indonesian agents photographing the scene from the balconies of the administration buildings.

I spent the next five days absorbing the lifestyle of the Timorese, meeting with Chinese workers who wanted help to form a Chinese

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5 Cyclone Tracy destroyed most buildings in Darwin on Xmas Day, 1974.

6 TAA was then the government-owned domestic airline. It was later amalgamated with Qantas.

workers union to cope with their gross exploitation by Chinese merchants, and talking to Fretilin supporters. I learnt of their programmes to improve literacy using Paulo Freire<sup>7</sup> methods and of the inadequate medical treatment of the Maubere people. Malaria was rife. Medical facilities were for the treatment of Portuguese expatriates. I witnessed the racist attitudes of elements of the Portuguese expatriates who just wanted to go home to Portugal. Fretilin had formed a coalition with the UDT<sup>8</sup> towards the development of independence. This was to fail later as those elements attempted to stage a coup which then triggered the Indonesian invasion.

We left East Timor on 26 May and returned to Darwin intending to return in August, after reporting to the Union. I had my pictures developed by the *NT News*. In return, they used a photo of the celebration on their front page a few days later. I eagerly despatched pictures around the countryside to trade union journals and *Tribune*, keen to spread the good news of the encouraging developments in East Timor.

Fretilin leaders needed to leave East Timor to develop their foreign relations. They were denied visas for Australia unless they had accommodation in Darwin. I was able to guarantee accommodation at 6 Gardiner Street where our caravan was intact following the cyclone, and there was a bedroom not in use in the little house.

The coalition between Fretilin and UDT had collapsed shortly after I left Timor and the UDT, aware that they would lose an election to Fretilin, staged a coup in early August. Horta was in Darwin and I had received a telegram for him from Xavier, the President, ordering him back. However I was not able to find him to deliver the telegram until

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7 Paulo Freire, a celebrated and radical Brazilian educationist who condemned the oppressive educational methods of the west, and argued for education to be informal, a conversation between “teacher” and “student”, in which both contribute.

8 UDT: Uniao Democratica de Timor (Timorese Democratic Union), described as “a smaller white collar and commercial group which wanted a gradual process of independence” from Portugal.

after the coup hit the news. By then flights to Dili had been suspended by TAA. Fretilin put down the coup in a couple of weeks and attempted to hand back control to the Portuguese Administration who would have no part of it. Instead they retreated offshore to the island of Atauro, awaiting repatriation to Portugal.

Refugees started arriving in Darwin, mostly UDT sympathisers and a few families of Fretilin leaders who anticipated that their families would become hostages in the event of an Indonesian invasion, which appeared imminent. UDT refugees spread horror stories of Fretilin atrocities. On a visit to Darwin by Abilio Araujo, where he addressed a public meeting at the Darwin High School Theatre, he was confronted by a hostile crowd of UDT supporters. As I understood the situation, UDT elements commenced their coup attempt by killing some Fretilin members. I don't doubt that there was killing in retaliation by Fretilin forces to quell the coup attempt. The extent of such will one day be chronicled when an investigation is undertaken by a democratic Government.

Fretilin obtained single side band radios (SSB) off the shelf in Darwin so as to maintain communications through the Darwin outpost radio, VJY Darwin. They would phone me and read out messages which I would copy in longhand and forward to Denis Freney who was one of the addressees. He would then forward messages to other addressees which included UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim and supporting governments around the world. The Whitlam Government was sacked by Governor General Kerr on 11 November 1975 and Malcolm Fraser was installed as caretaker. Communications continued through VJY Darwin until just before Xmas. Alarico Fernandes had read a message which included Christmas greetings to his mother who had been sent out to Sydney. The operator acknowledged the message but then said, "But this message will not be delivered." Fraser had ordered the cessation of the service to Dili, no doubt on the insistence of Indonesia. We had been tuning in to VJY and recorded the message. We then had to face the task of setting up an alternative communications network.

Fretilin had set up an AM broadcast in the evenings which we listened to in order to obtain news of the Indonesian atrocities. These were not accepted by the Australian news media as they maintained that they were unconfirmed reports. The Indonesians had murdered six Australian journalists, so of course there were no independent witnesses until such scenes as the Santa Cruz massacre were seen on television 22 years later, filmed by a person who was lucky not to have been murdered whilst shooting the scene.

Radio Maubere as it was named, could broadcast only, and was of such poor quality it was barely audible at times. There was a need for two-way communication. So began a covert operation with Toni Belo going out of a morning with an SSB set and whip antenna to the outskirts of Darwin, and speaking to Alarico Fernandes. He would then come to my place and telephone whoever he needed to call internationally in Mozambique, Lisbon or New York, and pass on the messages. It wasn't long before I had a \$3,000<sup>9</sup> phone bill for which I did not have the funds. The phone was cut off but miraculously was reconnected a day later! We reckoned that someone desperately wanted the information being transmitted over my phone and had it reconnected. We eventually paid the bill when funds came available.

Toni got a bit over-confident and despite warnings, continued to transmit from the fringe of Darwin, just off Macmillans Road. The inevitable happened and the Feds swooped on him one morning as he was returning along Bagot Road. He was surrounded by police cars and his radio seized.

We hurriedly set him up again, this time well out of town on a property near Batchelor belonging to a stalwart. Toni was marooned there for a couple of months unable to leave. He was virtually a prisoner. He had spread the word he was going to Macau and he indicated he was calling from Macau when he called up. His tapes were delivered to me and

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9 In price terms, \$3000 in 1976 would be the equivalent of \$13,000 in 2003.

forwarded to Sydney by air freight. He was becoming stir crazy and insisted he be relieved. Rocque Rodrigues was going to replace him but was refused a visa.

I went to Sydney to consult with Joe Palmada<sup>10</sup> and Denis. We decided to outfit a Toyota Coaster so a Timorese operator could travel around the Top End as a tourist with an Australian companion. Estanislau Da Silva was the operator with an ex-seaman, Neville Cunningham. An ideal set up but unfortunately not executed according to instructions and the operation was blown and another radio confiscated. Estanislau was arrested with Andrew Waterhouse, our genius technician, as they were about to break camp from a camp site on Cox Peninsula. They faced court, pleaded guilty, made compelling political statements and were fined one hundred dollars. Estanislau had his passport confiscated. Eventually after a bit of angst with Immigration it was returned so he could leave the country and carry on working for Fretilin outside Australia.

It was at this time we had to have another serious look at setting up a covert operation. Learning from our experience, it was decided to operate with an Australian operator, so the search was on for likely comrades from the South who could be self reliant, would be unknown in the Top End and who could be trained in the operation and move about with absolutely minimal contact with the local operation. Four remarkable comrades were selected over time and all carried out their tasks with dedication. They will all tell their own stories.

My role was backstop. In the event of running into difficulties, I would be called on to help. This occurred a few times. A mechanical breakdown, busted radiator needing repair, getting bogged in the treacherous melaleuca country in the wet season, help with maps and possible suitable sites, names, and where to find trusted people they could rely on. I obtained sections of mast materials which I installed on a five

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10 Joe Palmada was a leading member of the Communist Party.

11 Five acres = 2 hectares.



acre block<sup>11</sup> I bought just out of Darwin. This was designed to monitor and record two way traffic each morning and expedite its despatch to Sydney where the contents would be telexed<sup>12</sup> to its destination. We had no problems getting supporters to monitor the receiver each morning. Geoff ----- was happy to live in a caravan there and tune up each morning. He would bring the tapes to me at my office and I would get them on the midday TAA flight to Sydney. *Tribune* agreed to instal a telex and Andrew and Denis (possibly others too) would work on transcribing the material to a telex tape to transmit to its nominated destination.

At the same time as we were meeting the needs of Fretilin's two way traffic between their external mission and inside leadership (largely conducted in simple code form), there emerged needs to provide direct contact access between the Australian media and Fretilin, humanitarian access for refugees who wanted news of family, opportunities for Australian politicians to speak directly with Fretilin, as well as transmitting taped messages from support groups around the world. It was decided to operate what was called the "Public Radio" which would operate on weekends "when required". Andrew modified a couple of radio receivers to convert to transmitters and eventually acquired a Codan SSB transmitter which was under my control. I received a crash course from Andrew on how to build a quarter wave length tuned inverted V dipole antenna at my brother Jack's place in Brisbane.

Denis and Andrew came up for the launching. He invited national media, journalists and politicians to participate. As the numbers grew beyond one carload, I eventually had to charter a bus to carry 15 people and their equipment to the transmission site! Covertly?

We started the day at 6.00am with a hearty breakfast and a working bee in the kitchen, making a pile of Denis's enormous sandwiches of thick crusty bread, ham and salad, corned meat and pickles to feed the multitude. We packed an esky with cold drinks and went off to pick up

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12 A telex machine transmitted typed messages, letter by letter, along telephone lines.

the passengers at the Travelodge in one of Nancy O'Hara's buses by 0800.

Andrew and John [Louisa] had gone out the evening before to a site we had selected so as to set up an antenna and prepare the transmitter for a 1000 call up. The bus driver was told we were going "down the track" so we headed off, detouring first down Virginia road at the 17 mile, to check out the receiving site and the 90ft mast with Andrew's design of a tuned antenna which increased the strength of the receiving signal by a couple of decibels. This was the first such diversion to check out if anyone was following us. We still had time to kill so we took another detour down to the Darwin River Dam on the Berry Springs Road. We noticed a grey Holden sedan following us which had been observed earlier, obviously tailing us.

We stopped at Manton River for Jim Bowditch to catch up. He had been travelling in his own car as another check on whether we were being followed. He had noticed the grey Holden also which just then passed us and continued down the track on a long straight stretch until it was out of sight. We were certain by now that we were being tailed so we debated what we would do. Continue on was decided, so we set off from Manton River. Halfway along the stretch the grey Holden came back in the opposite direction and passed us. We continued on for a further couple of k's to a sweeping bend on the Batchelor turnoff where we disembarked to walk to the transmission site up the hillside. With everyone off I asked the bus driver to continue on to Batchelor and wait there until 12 noon when he should return for us. We would be waiting on the side of the road. I also asked him, if questioned as to where he had dropped us, to say something vague like, "Oh, back along the highway somewhere."

As the crowd were walking up the hill, we could hear a car speeding towards us. Denis yelled, "Everybody Down" and we all dropped to the ground, hidden by the tall spear grass. Except Topsy Secretary, an elder of the Larrakia people, who with Fred Fogarty had come along in support. Without hesitation Denis applied a classic flying tackle and brought her to the ground. The driver would have been watching the road and wouldn't

have gazed up to his left on the sweeping curve. He followed the empty bus to Batchelor where he and others quizzed the driver.

We were on air one for 90 minutes as messages of support were relayed from around the world. Ken Fry<sup>13</sup> read greetings from supporting parliamentarians and various TV and radio journalists interviewed Fretilin as the cameras rolled.

The session over, John and Andrew walked over the hill to Coomalie Creek where a non participant was waiting to receive the transmitter. The rest of us walked down the hill to where an irate Radio Inspector with antenna wire trailing out the car door in the company of army and Federal Police exclaimed loudly, "There they are!" Just then the bus pulled up for our drive back to Darwin. As John and Andrew returned to the transmission site, it was crawling with personnel looking for the transmitter. Mission successfully accomplished! A most extraordinary event given that we were followed and frankly were expecting to get rumbled. We certainly had luck on our side following some very careful planning.

A cardinal rule for the public radio was to never return from a successful contact carrying the transmitter. Various contingency plans were made to dispose of the equipment before we returned. Alan, a casual wharfie, became an important part of many successful missions in disposing of the equipment which he would return to me a day later. On one occasion, after a session with a Channel 10 TV journalist in the Berry Springs/Darwin River area, I took off through the bush with the transmitter and intercepted Alan. John picked me up on the side of the Berry Springs road and we drove to the highway where we met the Inspector looking for us at the turnoff. We were escorted into Darwin with a Federal police car in front and another behind. We pulled up outside the Travelodge and they surrounded the vehicles looking for the transmitter. The journalist was worried he might lose his film and was

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13 Ken Fry was Labor MHR for Fraser (ACT) from 1974-84. He was the leading supporter of East Timor in federal parliament.

nervously waiting for them to say or do something. I could see they were not able to lay charges given that we did not have transmitting equipment. I said come on let's go upstairs and have a coffee. We just walked away and went upstairs to their suite where we all breathed a sigh of relief as the adrenalin rush wore off. Other cardinal rules were:

- Don't use the same site continuously.
- Don't transmit for longer than 30 to 45 minutes.
- Don't follow the same patterns when going to transmit.
- Use different vehicles and vary the times when leaving home.
- Start off in one vehicle and change into another one.
- Go out the night before and camp out.
- Don't decide in advance on transmission site. Decide enroute.

I had gone out on a Friday night with Robert Wesley-Smith and camped out for a transmission the next morning in the Adelaide River area. We had both worked in the area and knew it well. We called up in the morning at the usual time and after half an hour there was no response, which meant Fretilin was not on air that day. We decided we would look around for other potential transmission sites. Wes had a Subaru 4WD so we went off road in the Glenlucky Creek area.

From the crest of a hill we noticed a Landrover on the other side in a clearing with 4 whip antennae set up in a square pattern with cables attached to a central piece of radio equipment and an operator engrossed in listening with headphones on. It was obviously a triangulation site, set up to pinpoint our operation. We depressed the clutch and rolled back out of sight and hightailed it out of there as we still had the transmitter on board. We disposed of the equipment on the way back and I collected it later.

Wes couldn't resist going back the following day on his way down to Adelaide River to see if the guy was still there (he was) and going up to him to ask him what he was doing. This caused a flurry of activity by the operator who hurriedly called up on his two-way radio to alert his backup that something was up. In a short while, the copper from Batchelor turned

up and quizzed Wes wanting to know what he was up to. Wes, feigning all innocence, wanted to know what the radio operator was doing. Wes wanted to take the radio out on his own to make his own contacts. I had some problems with this. I don't think he fully understood that the CPA organisation was in control of the operation. He didn't relish accepting the decision that the equipment didn't go out of my possession.

He was also not aware that by this time, Alarico Fernandes had surrendered and handed over the radio to the Indonesians, nor that Operation Skylight was being planned by them to ambush Nicolau Lobato. Wes was working with Community Aid Abroad and may have wanted to send material from this source as well as news items he selected. He may have been used unknowingly as a conduit for information in this double game.

Although we became aware that Alarico had surrendered and the Indonesians were orchestrating the contacts, we continued to maintain contact hoping to learn more of their intentions. In due course, when the time was right, the underground operator, Cosmos, broke off contact after giving Alarico a serve. He will tell his own story.

Radio contact was effectively finished for some time as Fretilin had lost their equipment. It now fell to the resourcefulness of Andrew, who created a transmitter out of a ghetto blaster. This was smuggled in to Fretilin through Dili. When it was anticipated that they would have the equipment, we began to monitor the frequency at the usual call up schedule. Eventually, a tentative voice called us. I was monitoring with a receiver scanner and hurriedly switched to the transmitter and responded. The voice came back, "Need Portuguese Operator. Need Portuguese Operator". He had no more English and my Portuguese was limited to a greeting and the Fretilin slogans. I got him to understand that we would have a Portuguese operator the next day.

I contacted Laurentino and Maria Pires who came out the following day and we made tentative contact. After contacting Denis, and consultation with the Fretilin external leadership, Agiu Pereira was

designated as the operator. We then recommenced fairly regular contact operating with Agiu and I going out mostly at weekends and tape recording the material. This was also recorded back at the Howard Springs receiver site. This material included updates on Indonesian atrocities in Portuguese which had to be translated and issued as press statements. As usual, the media was reluctant to use the material, again maintaining they were unconfirmed reports.

One of the last contacts was a major celebration in the mountains with speeches by Fretilin and Falantil<sup>14</sup> leaders. We were expecting to be on air for more time than usual so travelled further from Darwin to the Grove Hill area. We had messages of support to play from around the world. We also had Andrew Olle<sup>15</sup> lined up to interview them, but at the last minute he was prevented from participating by his producer because of the illegality of the contact! Andrew Olle listened to the contact from the receiving site at Howard Springs. He was very disappointed that he couldn't participate as he understood he was listening to a special event.

Contact was lost some time after that and although we monitored for another year on weekends, it was not resumed. We assumed that they had set up alternative channels of communication as the struggle continued and information continued to come out, eventually with graphic film footage of the massacre at Santa Cruz cemetery.<sup>16</sup>

There were many people in Darwin who contributed to the East Timor Radio, playing a supporting role in a variety of ways. Monitoring the receiver, helping erect the radio mast, lending vehicles, driving, being cockatoo,<sup>17</sup> translating endless documents, typing press reports, and most

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14 FALANTIL: Forças Armadas de Libertação (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor); pro-independence guerilla force. Originally under Fretilin control, later the armed wing of all the independence forces.

15 Andrew Olle was perhaps the most famous ABC news personality at the time, and presented of the *7.30 Report*.

16 On November 12, 1991, Indonesian troops fired upon a peaceful procession to Santa Cruz cemetery in Dili, East Timor killing 271 East Timorese.

17 Cockatoo: acting as lookout.

importantly, continuing to support independence and keep faith in the Maubere people's determination to resist the Indonesian oppression and occupation. This, despite the terrible price they paid over 24 years of betrayal by successive Australian Governments from Whitlam to Fraser; through thirteen years of Hawke and Keating's economic opportunism and Keating's disgusting subservience to Suharto.

Howard, forced by world outrage and Australian demonstrations to act, dragged his feet in sending Australian troops to support the UN costing a further toll in human misery and murder. He has agonised over getting Australian troops back out as soon as possible, being more concerned we might offend the Indonesian military rulers and damage our trading interests.

As for my part in the radio operations, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to make a contribution towards Timorese independence. I am sure there are plenty of Australians who would have gladly taken my place.

Tony Belo and Estanislau Da Silva, the Timorese radio operators in Australia, were both at the post independence Fretilin Congress in May 2000. Their contribution, along with that of the four Australian operators who attended, was recognized and thanked by the 1,500 delegates.

However, this is just the beginning of the struggle. Fretilin again look like being elected as the government in a democratic East Timor. They need to be vigilant against those who would betray their mandate and sabotage their embryonic democracy. They deserve our continued support to rebuild their country savagely mutilated by the Indonesian military thieves and vandals who smashed and burned what they couldn't steal.

A Luta Continua  
Viva O Povo Maubere  
Viva Fretilin