



Margherita Tracanelli with an SAS soldier, Vice-Commander Taur Matan Ruak and his cousin, celebrating Taur's 44th birthday in Atelari in October 1999.

The Pain of the Sinner Betrayed by Margherita Tracanelli

The pain in João Marques' eyes was haunting. The militia men's eyes I'd seen before and after the ballot were frightening, bloodshot, raging and disturbed. But these were the eyes of a man who had done evil from which he could find no rest.

At Lospalos in East Timor on Saturday, September 25 last year, 34-year-old Marques led the killing of two nuns, three priests, an Indonesian journalist, and a hapless boy who witnessed the massacre.

Marques told me his story inside a Falintil (Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor) cantonment.

Region One at Atelari in western East Timor was under the command of Lere Anan Timor. Marques and his accomplices, known as Team Alpha, surrendered to Commander Lere at Region One with their weapons and some drugs two weeks after the massacre, around October 9.

Word came to Falintil headquarters at Uimori that a party would be held at Atelari for the 44th birthday of Xanana Gusmão's deputy, Vice-Commander Taur Matan Ruak.

The Uimori headquarters was home not only to Ruak, but also Region Two under Commander Sabica and Three, under the enigmatic and charismatic Commander Falur Rata Leik. Region Four was split into two sub-regions at Bobonaro and Ermera in the far east of the country, under commanders Decca and Ular Reik.

Uimori is only 110 miles from Dili, but the journey took five hot, bone-jolting hours by road, crossing the Laleia River at least twenty times to reach the cantonment. Finishing the journey was hardly a relief. Because

of Uimori's extreme isolation, facilities were less than basic, bamboo huts and a satellite dish the only structures. The power source was an old generator, which constantly broke down.

A large parade area cut into the jungle clearing was the place where history was made when InterFET Commander Major General Peter Cosgrove inspected a military parade of Falintil freedom fighters on his visit to Uimori by Black Hawk helicopter in October.

The visit to Atelari was our first road trip outside the Falintil HQ at Uimori since the arrival of InterFET, touring Baucau, Laga and surrounding areas on the way.

The trip was a welcome diversion from the isolation and rigors of life at Uimori. Our motley convoy of range rovers, trucks and motorbikes made the bruising three-hour trip to Baucau with three Australian InterFET soldiers, who accompanied us for our protection.

The men in our party stayed the night at the seminary in Baucau. I went to stay at the Salesian convent, where the mother superior had been shot and macheted by Marques' militia gang.

Sister Domingos showed me to my room. There was a single bed with clean sheets and a mosquito net. There was a toilet and bathroom, with plumbing that worked. A month spent in the cantonment at Uimori invested this humble, modest room with more allure than any five-star hotel I'd ever stayed in.

The convent was a rambling old Portuguese building. Bougainvillea tumbled luxuriously over balconies, the sun shone brilliantly, and the view to the pristine waters of the ocean below was glorious.

Trained in Rome, the Salesian sisters spoke Italian, and so we conversed, quietly, gently, and reverently about the loss of their mother superior. Their acceptance was total, their pain palpable, their resolve and commitment to the struggle undiminished.

Breakfast was a bread roll, a Kraft cheese slice, a sugar banana, and Timorese coffee. I stopped on my way out in the hallway to look at the photo of their deceased mother superior. The picture, taken just one month before, showed her eyes clear and bright, her disposition strong and serene.

Old Baucau remained mostly intact in the wake of the militia rampage. Our convoy left the old town and climbed the windy road to the plateau above. On this pleasant sunny morning, it was hard to imagine that two weeks before, Baucau had witnessed mayhem, death, and destruction at the hands of the TNI-led militias.

The buildings on the entirely deserted plateau were ugly, flat and eccentric. The Indonesians had made few concessions to the local culture except for the occasional insulting cement replica of the traditional Timor house with poorly painted detail, now chipped and in sad disrepair.

On the plateau, destruction of the utilities and infrastructure built up by the invaders since '75 was complete. Looted, wrecked and torched, nothing of

any value endured. Cement shells remained where the electricity station, telecommunication towers, television and radio stations, administration offices, schools, and market place once stood.

Silent with disbelief at the wanton destruction, I thought that the only compensation brought about by the destruction was that the Timorese would be rid of the hideous Javanese anti-architecture.

We stopped when Ruak ordered, so he could video small piles of rocks, marking the places where Timorese had been killed in the wake of the August 30 ballot.

Ruak is a deeply spiritual individual. Although slight in stature, he exudes a powerful sense of integrity and peace, effortlessly commanding respect from all who meet him. Each time he videoed, as if out of respect for the fallen, he insisted on describing what had taken place, in broken English, revealing the details and date and the name of the victim if he knew it.

Throughout East Timor, these small distinctive piles of rocks were everywhere. How would the Timorese ever heal from the savagery they'd endured, when the toll was so overwhelming?

Ruak, a serene man of few words, has an acceptance of their situation that would seem to go beyond human endurance.

That acceptance was put to the test when, in September, at the height of the violence Ruak told Gusmão by sat phone from Uimori to Jakarta that he and his men were going to retaliate and defend the population who were begging them to help.

Gusmão commanded him not to do it, warning that to retaliate would mean the loss of the support of the international community. Ruak was deeply frustrated and angry and slammed the phone down in the Supreme Commander's ear.

As Ruak agonized over the orders from Gusmão, still desperate to protect his people, Bishop Belo phoned from Dili, explaining, calming, pleading, and reluctantly Ruak obeyed.

We visited the barracks where the notorious 744 and 745 battalion of TNI had been stationed. At 744 we got out and walked around in the eerie deserted silence. Ruak videoed more rock piles.

Then they began to reminisce. They told stories of how they'd sneak up to the barracks firing a single shot, immediately disappearing into the blackness. The sound of the shot cracking the still night sent the TNI leaping from their bunks, preparing for battle, only to find their enemy had dissolved into the night. They found the guerilla tactics unnerving. After many of these well-timed and unsettling irritations, the enemy were exhausted and their guard was down. It was then Falintil would launch a successful attack.

And now they were here, in the full battle dress of their Portuguese

camouflage in the broad light of day, standing in the grounds of the silent, deserted 744 barracks. How delicious for them. How tragic. They laughed and gagged around, reminiscing in Tetum, Commander Falor leading the jokes. The brutal Indonesian invasion never captured the hearts and minds of those who knew that to resist was to win.

We saw more of the evocative little rock piles, where Timorese had fallen around the barracks. We drove on to a nearby seminary at Fatu Maka, where Ruak hugged the priests and chatted.

Further down the road we stopped again to video another pile of rocks. Ruak told me that a young boy's bike had broken and a group of passing militias had stopped, macheted him to death, and burnt the body afterwards.

Such mindless evil. And for what? Burn marks on the grass around the rocky marker left an ugly reminder of his fate. The charred remains of a small bent bike wheel lay on the other side of the road.

We arrived at the orphanage at Laga, where we were to spend the night. The nuns had prepared a feast for our arrival, but the most special treat was reserved for the Vice-Commander.

Their unassuming hero walked towards the nuns and about 100 children. Ragged and shoeless but clean, with bright shiny faces, gigantic brave smiles, and gleaming happy eyes, their voices rang out in glorious harmony, singing "Happy Birthday" in Tetum, and it was like hearing the voices of angels.

We stood back, savoring this precious moment, and steeled ourselves; but it was too much emotion, and tears rushed down our faces.

Standing there, in the orphanage at Laga, watching the nuns in their impossibly white habits, smiling as they conducted the singing children, I was reminded of the role they'd played in the life of Gusmão's father.

Back in mid-September I had been at APEC in Auckland, working with Jose Ramos-Horta. A Portuguese journalist called with the news that Gusmão's father had been killed, wanting a reaction. I guess we should have known not to trust the Portuguese media, but later other agencies began to carry the story, and so we began to believe it.

Ramos-Horta, already devastated by what was going on inside his beleaguered country, wondered. Had all his years of fighting for a referendum come to this? What had he inflicted on his people?

He had been on the phone to Gusmão in Jakarta, who cried inconsolably at the death and destruction under way inside. "Be strong," Jose had told him. "Now you must be strong."

Now the news of Gusmão's father. It was too much. Ramos-Horta was close to breaking down.

But in Laga at those same moments, in this other galaxy away from Auckland, a quiet and humble clandestine victory was unfolding. As the propaganda rumors went out that he was dead, it was in this poor run-down orphanage

overlooking the sea at Laga that Gusmão's father was secreted away.

The nuns had hidden the old man in the laundry, covertly squirreling in food and drink. Whenever the menacing militias or TNI came routinely searching, one of the nuns busily began mopping the floor, pleading with them not to walk on the freshly cleaned but still wet surface. It worked, and Gusmão's father was never discovered.

He lived to see his son return a hero, and died peacefully recently in Dili.

These brave, humble women worked hand in hand with the guerilla resistance. Playing a major clandestine role, they hid them, fed them, clothed them, gave a home and education to their orphaned children, carried the documents, and took fearful risks.

The success of the resistance owed a great debt to the nuns, making them and all the religious targets for the evil gangs like Marques'.

The sound of the small angels singing faded up under my reflections, transporting me back to those present moments, watching Taur Matan Ruak, the children, and the nuns.

That night as I drifted off into a peaceful sleep at Laga, my heart was full.

The following morning we arrived at Atelari. Rauk made a point of inspecting a full military parade and Falintil flag-raising at 7.30 a.m. in the clear, clean, bright air of western East Timor.

Such is the isolated nature of guerilla warfare that for some of these freedom fighters it was their first meeting with their Vice-Commander. By 8.00 am the parade was over and we sat inside Commander Lere's bamboo hut on the gaudily-colored plastic chairs that seem to proliferate in East Timor.

We drank the warm beer we were graciously offered.

On the wall was pinned a timetable banged out on a typewriter for the big day. All the military precision they could muster had been poured into this historic occasion; a very special surprise had been organized for Taur Matan Ruak. He was about to meet members of his family for the first time in over 20 years.

Celebrating a birthday in this way was completely new for the guerilla commander. As Gusmão's chief of staff for 20 years, he'd lived in the jungles and mountains, in isolation from his family and friends in order to protect them from harassment from ARBRI's (now TNI's) Intel and BAKIN.

Taur Matan Ruak's role was to plan every guerilla maneuver with precision. The number of weapons the Falintil had captured over the years from the TNI, their only source, stands testament to his competence.

Not even his closest friends knew who the legendary Taur Matan Ruak was. Once he'd joined, he'd never allowed himself to be photographed. Nobody guessed that at 19, Jose Maria Vas Conselhos, a bright student of commerce

and former hotel bartender would join the freedom fighters in the jungles of East Timor.

While Ramos-Horta was the pebble in the shoe of Indonesian Foreign Minister Alatas, Ruak, along with Gusmão and their men, became the thorn in the side of the TNI.

Ruak returned to the hut after the emotional reunion. The family remained a good distance away. For this humble man without political ambition, being the center of attention at his own birthday party was a strain.

"They suffered a lot because of me," he said and fell silent.

Unable to reveal his whereabouts, some family and friends were often harassed, detained, tortured, even disappeared, feared dead. Kaikere is now secretary to Ruak, but a couple of years before, he was a TNI soldier and a clandestine member of the resistance. He told me over dinner in Aileu:

"They pulled out my toenails ... and excuse me for saying this, but they attached electric wires to my testicles and then my penis." Embarrassed, he giggled at his misfortune, a typical Timorese style of self-deprecating humor.

The nuns from Laga had come to the party and brought some of the orphans to sing. They had even managed to produce a large western-style birthday cake, complete with icing. It looked totally out of place in this jungle setting surrounded by armed guerillas.

A priest had come from Baucau to celebrate mass. The affinity among the guerrillas, priests, nuns, and orphans was natural, heartfelt and completely unaffected; they were one family.

It was here I met João Marques.

Two young Falintil soldiers were ordered to take me to where João Marques was being held. We walked 300 yards from party celebrations. Twelve militias had surrendered to Falintil with 11 weapons days before, after being told the still pervasive lie that InterFET would torture and kill them.

Like hundreds of other militia, they had long been abandoned by their leaders. The lavish promises of boats to take them away to luxury hotels in Kupang and endless amounts of rupiah in turn for their allegiance were, of course, lies.

The militias had faithfully done their dirty work. The raping, the killing, the burning, the destruction. Now they were defeated, homeless, belonging nowhere, despised by the population they had terrorized. Stateless; hated Timorese in East Timor.

The betrayers had been used and betrayed utterly. If I had to name the pain I saw in João Marques' eyes, it had to be the pain of the sinner betrayed. They were as much victims as those who met death at their hands.

Militia leaders Tavares and Gutteres were long gone, living it up in Kupang with a poor desperate whore on each arm. Now Gutteres hides like a frightened animal in Jakarta, another Arkan in the waiting.

I sat opposite João Marques, shook his hand, and told him my name. We sat at a bamboo table with a palm leaf shelter overhead. A soldier on each side, carrying loaded M16's, it seemed like overkill. Marques was defeated and harmless.

His hair was afro style, long and black. His dark brown eyes were deep pools of unfathomable sadness. His build was small but strong, his demeanor humble. Wearing an old tee shirt and some ill-fitting trousers, he sat with his forearms on the table, his hands clasped in front.

Marques told me that in '75 he had been a civilian seeking refuge in the mountains with the Falintil, sheltering from the Bronco OV 10 bomber raids by the Indonesians but piloted by "white eyes" in their efforts to wipe out the entire population. (Many Timorese who were in the mountains when the Bronco OV 10's were bombing them have told me that they saw the pilots and that they were Caucasian, referring to them as "white eyes".)

He was poor, illiterate, and unskilled. Depressed and frightened by the invasion, Marques was ideal meat for collaboration work. In 1986 he became an informer for ABRI district command to "collaborate to fight Falintil".

Marques was earning 1,000 rupiah per day when he first joined, the equivalent of A\$0.25, and up to Rp150,000 (about A\$8.00) a month with rations. He was given a TNI uniform and sent to Bandung with the Kompasus command to take part in military training with Australians in Situ Lemba.

He was used in "role play exercises" where he was required to play the part of a Falintil guerrilla to train Kompasus to fight and kill them. His role in Bandung lasted three months, and he was returned to Lospalos, continuing to cooperate with TNI in their relentless but mostly fruitless pursuit of Falintil freedom fighters.

Marques said that he'd never gone to school, but that he could speak Bahasa Indonesia, Tetum and Fatu Luku, the dialect of Lospalos. He was married, and his wife and their four children lived in Leuro, a desa (village) of Lospalos.

His brother had joined TNI in 1983, and a week before the massacre had come to him, as head of the village, and told him that some priests and nuns had to be killed.

Marques said that the night before the massacre took place, he and his brother talked about how to kill some nuns. He took a vehicle to Le Haku, picked up some accomplices, returned, and talked again about killing.

At midnight, he told his brother he was having second thoughts. At about 2.00 a.m. he said his brother gave him some wine. Having heard that chemicals, including drugs and alcohol, had been given to militias, I asked him to describe the wine to me.

He said: "It was blue, it was red, it was bitter, but it was sweet."

He said he drank the mixture and then gave the order to the other five to kill.

"I felt ready to go killing," he told me. He said that he told his brother: "I'm ready to go!"

At around 3.00 p.m., Marques ordered the other militia to roll rocks onto the road. When a car drew to a halt, they saw nuns and priests inside and started shooting into the car with SKS 762s.

I asked him if he knew there was a journalist in the car. He said that they knew the Indonesian was a journalist because he had a camera around his neck. A luckless boy witness was also killed, making a total of nine people.

Each gun carried ten rounds per magazine, and he said that between four and six guns had been used. The shooting didn't stop until they'd emptied the magazines into the victims.

The militias who didn't have guns reached into the car through the shattered windows and hacked into the limp, bullet-ridden bodies with their machetes.

I was told later that when the militias were brought before him and questioned, Ruak was unable to stay and listen. He walked out, appalled, sick and disgusted, leaving it to the other commanders to finish the interrogation.

Marques then said that they doused the car with petrol, set it alight and pushed it over the cliff.

He claims that after two or three days the effect of the wine wore off, and he began to realize he had done something wrong, describing it as "a very bad thing".

Marques told me that two weeks before the killing, the Bupati of Iliomar, Oracio, the senior administrator, Chief of the TNI, and Kompasus, had suddenly left.

After Team Alpha committed the massacre, they went to the coast to wait for the boat to take them to Kupang. Promised to them by the Bupati, it never arrived.

He said that they were shot at by InterFET at Com and ran into the mountains. Marques returned to his village with 21 guns. He said he knew then that there was no hope.

On surrendering, he told his men: "If we are killed, so be it."

Falintil have these rapists, murderers, looters, burners, killers of their beloved nuns and priests and people, in their midst.

They feed them, give them shelter and work, rehabilitating them, treating all the militias inside the cantonments as brothers. They see them as victims, like all Timorese in the wretched war, and offer compassion and forgiveness.

I regularly saw militias moving along in single file, being taken to different areas of the cantonment by Falintil soldiers to perform work tasks such as land clearing, burning off, and building. At Uimori it was the militias, under instruction from Falintil soldiers, who were engaged in building a special bamboo hut to house journalists, until plans were abandoned when we moved to Remexio. The men were fed three meals a day, and at the end of the day returned to their quarters and held under guard.

Late in October, all four regions came together into the one cantonment area at Aileu, where Gusmão also was based. The cantonment had within its 50-km perimeter a set of small, officer-rank ex-TNI holiday cottages, stripped & looted to the bare cement. Here five other militias were held.

The UN special rapporteurs who visited the cantonment in November met with Vice-Commander Taur Matan Ruak. In a meeting at the Falintil HQ at Aileu he said: "Yes, we have militias here, but we believe that without justice there can be no peace ... after a while, we try to send militias back to their villages, but the population try to murder them, and so they return to us ... seeking protection."

When the meeting was over, I drove the impressed but skeptical rapporteurs to meet the prisoners. Through an interpreter, they asked if they were free to leave and when they'd last been fed. The men answered individually in the affirmative regarding freedom of movement, and all said that they were getting three meals a day and that they felt very safe with the Falintil.

The drive back to headquarters was very quiet indeed. The rapporteurs were almost speechless. Their usually detached and imperious manner was humbled by the uncomplicated expression of compassion in the Falintil cantonment.

As Indonesia moves precariously close to Balkanization in the wake of the Timor referendum, Indonesia watchers predict that Aceh will be the first to be lost. The deeply cynical practice of growing up militias from within poor, uneducated and desperate populations is underway in West Papua, Lombok, Aceh, Kalimantan, Celebes, and the Muluccus. A favorite tactic of the powerful factions within the TNI desperate to protect their interests, it presents the region with growing threats and challenges in terms of stability for trade, tourism, and security.

But those who will suffer the most are the communities who eventually must re-absorb their own. Already there are thousands who, like João Marques, are the new unwitting victims of their own powerlessness, caught in the grip of greedy TNI factions that will arm them, drug them, and split them from their families and loved ones, turning them for a time into demented killers, burners, looters and rapists.

It will be their families and friends who must find ways to forgive them in order to heal as a community, allowing the perpetrators to be punished and

justice to prevail. Perhaps South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission could provide a useful model.

Somewhere between the vengeance desired by the villagers and the compassion practiced by Falintil there must be a place for justice and reconciliation. Perhaps willingness on the part of the perpetrators to repent and the healing power of forgiveness by the victims can deliver them from this evil.

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