Tactical Omissions

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Don Greenlees and Robert Garran
Deliverance: The Inside Story of East Timor's Fight for Freedom
Allen & Unwin, $35pb, 375pp, 1 86508 367 4

The account of the events surrounding East Timor's liberation from Indonesia by News Limited journalists Don Greenlees and Robert Garran is subtitled 'The inside story of East Timor’s fight for freedom'. Dealing as it does primarily with the diplomatic machinations of the Indonesian and Australian governments in that period, it would be fair to say the subtitle should read 'The inside story of those who worked against East Timor’s fight for freedom'. By detailing the story of East Timor’s transition to independence from the perspective of Jakarta and Canberra, the two reporters run dangerously close to echoing the perceptions of these two governments. The book reads in some parts like press releases from, alternately, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Indonesian state newsagency, Antara. A well-placed former Australian army officer remarked to me that, after reading the book, he came away 'almost feeling sorry for the TNI [Indonesian Army]'.

In many ways, this account offers glimpses into events in the inner sanctums of Habibie and Howard that have not been recounted elsewhere, and therein lies its historical value. However, it is full of blithe, incorrect assumptions that mirror the lines being pushed by the two main players at the time for their own ends. On page 44, they relate the death of a school teacher in East Timor in December 1998. They state that he was killed by FALINTIL pro-independence guerrillas. In East Timor, at the time, it was well known that the killers were Indonesian military posing as FALINTIL. It is a small point, but not in the context that this example of a so-called FALINTIL atrocity was cited by Australian government representatives to explain away the rise of the militia.

Similarly, the authors' account of what happened in the village of Alas in November 1998 is a replica of the DFAT version of events. They disregard an episode widely viewed as the beginning of the arming of civilian militia in East Timor as pro-independence propaganda. The reported death of fifty independence supporters, and the destruction of houses and property in the town as reprisal for a FALINTIL attack, predated the Australian government’s letter of support for eventual self-determination and Habibie’s offer of a ballot in early 1999. Because of that, Australian officials were still in the habit of downplaying the excesses of the Indonesian military. Greenlees and Garran follow the Foreign Affairs line that only nine people were killed, including three Indonesian soldiers. That was the assessment of DFAT, based on the report of its military attaché, who visited the town for half an hour in the presence of TNI, and the ICRC who also visited in the presence of the military. Journalists in East Timor, myself included, were receiving a very different picture, composed of armed militia controlling the town and killings occurring. That impression was reinforced when I was among the first three journalists to enter the town two weeks later. The militia were very much in control, to the extent that they tried to kill my guide. Contrary to the authors’ claim, parts of the town were burnt down, and the remaining population were under armed guard in the school. The authors then use this incident as an example, claiming: ‘It would not be the last time a description of a violent event and estimates of dead or injured would prove to be greatly exaggerated.’ That Greenlees and Garran unquestionably take the DFAT line on this incident, though neither of them was present in East Timor, and dismiss out of hand many contrary accounts, weakens many of the other claims in their book. One has to ask what other information in the book they have accepted uncritically from diplomatic sources with their own agendas.

Sometimes this works both ways. The account of Howard’s letter to Habibie, and the latter’s response — offering the possibility of self-determination for the East Timorese — is interesting. It reveals that Howard had no intention of proposing independence for East Timor. He simply wanted to defuse the issue and delay any process of self-determination. It makes Howard’s subsequent grandstanding on the East Timor issue rather hollow. By his own admission early in 1999, he was prepared to postpone their fate for another ten years.

The strength of the authors’ diplomatic connections again comes into focus with the reference to the suggestion of US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth, to Ashton Calvert, Secretary of DFAT, that the peacekeeping option had to be pursued. Note that this was in a meeting in late February. The agreement that gave the Indonesian state control of security had not yet been signed. Why, then, is the reader subjected to a spirited defence of Calvert’s reasons for rejecting Roth’s overtures regarding the need for peacekeepers? With the benefit of hindsight — and this book surely has that, appearing three years after the events — it is obvious that Calvert’s thinking was wrong and led, according to the UN, to the deaths of 1500 East Timorese immediately after the ballot. So why do the authors expend so much effort defending him?

The book has a tendency to represent the Indonesian military in a sympathetic light. A great deal of attention is paid to the concept of ‘Bumihangas’. Greenlees and Garran explain that the concept of the ‘scorched earth’ policy ‘was nearly as old as the Indonesian republic; indeed, it featured in Indone-
sian military doctrine’. So what? Does the fact that the Indonesian military dynamited public buildings during its retreat from Bandung in 1946, to deny the city to the Dutch, have any relevance as to why the Indonesian military destroyed East Timor while they retreated in September 1999? There are many small examples in the book of the way the authors downplay or belittle the direct involvement of senior military figures and redirect the blame towards the militia. When they do blame the Indonesian military, they go out of their way to explain how upset and humiliated the Indonesian military were. How upset and humiliated the East Timorese were after twenty-four years of murder, rape and theft at the hands of the same Indonesian military is barely touched upon.

The authors refer to the ‘allegations that tens of thousands of East Timorese were forced to leave against their will’. They are, of course, talking about the forced deportation of 250,000 East Timorese across the border to West Timor after the announcement of the ballot. As someone who was present in Dili whilst this was taking place (Don Greenlees left the day after the announcement of the ballot, along with all but twenty-seven foreign journalists), I can say that there was nothing ‘alleged’ about the columns of people forced at gunpoint by the Indonesian military that I encountered. Nor was there anything alleged about the Indonesian air force C-130s that deported people to West Timor, or the hundreds of military trucks used to move people out of the Indonesian navy ships in the harbour to which those at gunpoint were being marched. It is these small, frequent references in the book, giving the benefit of the doubt to the Indonesian line, that are insidious. You’ve got to wonder if the authors seek to distort the history of what happened in order to diminish the rôle played by the Indonesian military. There is a word for this. It’s called revisionism.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t end there. The near rebellion in the UN compound to prevent an evacuation by the UN staff, who were abandoning the East Timorese to their fate, is represented as having been an order from Ian Martin, the very man who ordered the evacuation. It is interesting to note that the only people Greenlees and Garran quote in relation to the period when they were not present are UN officials, DFAT officials and Indonesian military. The other foreigners in Dili during this period are dismissed, as are the East Timorese, because their testimony would jeopardise the hypothesis that it was mainly the militia who were responsible for the destruction. At best, the authors concede that some members of the Indonesian police and the military broke ranks and joined the militia. This fits comfortably with the shifting of blame for the sacking of Dili away from the Indonesian military, a process we are still seeing in the tribunal in Jakarta, and one that seems to be succeeding.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning one more tactical omission, this time on the part of Garran. Interestingly, he makes no reference to the Australian Army briefing given to then Defence Minister John Moore in Oecusse in December 1999, at which Garran was present. Intelligence Captain Andrew Plunkett outlined in detail how Indonesian military and police had rounded up and killed nearly fifty men in the enclave before the arrival of the Australian peacekeeping force. Plunkett was reprimanded for his candour, and not a word has been heard from the Australian military about it since. I was told later that the briefing had been ‘off the record’, although it clearly had not been, and myself and Geoff Thompson from the ABC duly filed the information. How much more ‘off the record’ material regarding the Indonesian military’s direct involvement in the violence didn’t make it into this ‘inside story’?