

East Timor Forensics

[Justine Adamek]

In the southern district of Same, a tiny village called Alas was home for several months to two officers of the Australian East Timor Contingent. Australian Federal Police officer Nick Khan and South Australian Police officer Dave Manning received a report of a murder. The investigation was to involve Forensic Services officers Steve Olinder and Justine Adamek in what Justine describes as one of her the most interesting cases of her mission in East Timor. This is the second Platypus article on Justine's work in Timor. The following is an edited excerpt from her journal:

Monday 16 September 2002

Steve and I had been given approval to travel to a town called Alas in the Same district with two UN investigators. Steve had already been there in June, in response to the a call from the Australian police at Alas. Together, we were going back to Alas to exhume the remainder of two people Steve had partially retrieved in June.

By way of background; around mid 2002, local (Alas) UNPOL, received a report from a villager that he had buried a man in a cave in the district after he had been beaten and stabbed to death for being a militia sympathiser in 1999. I do not know what prompted the man to come forward at this time.

Steve went up to Alas in June with a couple of UN investigators. He tells me the forensic work was very interesting, but logistically, it was the trip from hell. For a start, on a good day, it's a seven hour journey. On a normal day, it takes longer, as it did when Steve went. They drove to Alas, but on the way there got badly bogged. They also got bogged coming back again. They got bogged again going there to dig the next day. When they finally started digging, in the location nominated by the witness, there was no body. Steve finally found some remains elsewhere in the



Exhumation in East Timor

cave, which appeared to cause a riot among the locals watching. Again, they got bogged going back to the police station in Alas, with the remains on board.

They were soaking wet and Steve hadn't taken a change of clothes because it was supposed to be a "one day job".

Several months later, when the anthropologist back in Dili looked at the bones Steve had managed to retrieve, several months later, she pointed out there were three leg bones, which meant more than one person—hence the impetus for the return trip to Alas.

The drive to Alas was long and tedious. Although it was only about 140km to the destination, the roads were very narrow and winding, through mountains and valleys, and we hit all sorts of weather patterns that day. It was raining, then sunny, then misty etc. Steve kept telling me I was missing the best vistas in the fog, but I was just feeling car sick from all the winding, rough roads.

In the late afternoon, we arrived in Same, which is a district almost directly south across the other side of the nation from Dili, as the crow flies. Unbeknown to us, the UN police in both Same and Alas had been moved out of the district about two days earlier. This meant that the police who had been involved in Steve's earlier expedition in June, Nick Khan and Dave Manning, were not going to be around to see the conclusion of the forensic exhumation.

We set out for Alas. We missed the turn off several times (as you do in an unfamiliar country with a seasonally changing landscape) and the day was getting darker and darker. Once we were on the right track (and track it was) we bumped along until we reached our destination.

It seems that although phone lines were down, the Alas locals were nonetheless expecting us—the grapevine communication system in Timor never failed to amaze me. We had just entered the main room of the police station when a bubbly young local lady burst through the front door and spoke to us in near-perfect English. Her name was Ghillermina (Gilly) dos Santos, and she was the Station Commander. I found her to be utterly charming and an enthusiastic, committed and capable leader. She held Nick and Dave in very high esteem. She was very friendly—a ball of energy—and pounced on us immediately to give us each a big sloppy kiss, all the while chirping on about how happy she was to see us. It was a very warm welcome!

Following the formalities of a drill parade and briefing at the front of Alas Station,

we were off to the site with Gilly and four of her staff. We drove back along the track we had come in the dark the previous night. In daylight it was easy to see why Steve had previously become bogged every time he passed way, just after the wet season in June.

The site we were heading to was a natural cavern, which the locals called Fatuk Cubece—rocky outcrop. It was nearest to the village of Nabularan, and soon we had a few visitors from there to 'oversee' our work.

From first examination—and from what Steve told me—this was going to be a difficult job. The site inside the cavern was uneven, sloping downwards to a spot under a rock shelf only about 30cm off the ground. I could see where Steve had placed spoil from the last dig. I asked him what he wanted to do and he decided to dig further down into the floor of the cavern, under the shelf, near where he had located the skull. First, we had to get rid of the spoil from the last dig, to see what we were contending with. We had enough helpers, in the form of the five local police, the cluster of on-lookers and the two UN investigators. Steve and I decided we should be the only two working in the cave. We would pass out spoil to the production line outside for them to sift through. The local police were very enthusiastic.

“The local police were very enthusiastic. They sifted through the spoil like old pros..”

They sifted through the spoil like old pros, looking for bone. It quickly became apparent they were bloody good at finding it, as little bits and pieces were presented for examination within half an hour of them starting. There were little bits here and there, mainly fragmented, and extremely fragile—like the consistency of soap. Some were animal bones, which were not collected.

Steve and I finally cleared the floor of the cave, and although drenched in sweat, we were enjoying ourselves—if you can say that—finding the odd bones. It was hot and heavy work, despite being in a cave, and I was very surprised to look down and see my entire overalls completely wet with sweat. My hair, too, was wet within about an hour of starting.

Around 1pm I had cleared a spot in the cavern that was shaped like a triangular shelf, where Steve had put a lot of spoil last time. We swapped jobs for a while—I took over digging and sifting through the floor of the cave. Shortly afterwards, Steve excitedly showed me something he unearthed on the shelf. He had uncovered what appeared to be clothing and a leg bone. We worked on that area together and it became evident very soon that there was a clothed, fully articulated skeleton lying face-up on the shelf. It seemed we had finally found the person we were looking for, about 1m to the left and 2m above where

the witness said he would be. But we still had a concern about who the other bones belonged to.

This skeleton was in complete condition and was far more consistent with the version of events likely to be the person we were after. It was lying face up, with the head extended back and turned to the right side. Both arms were extended behind the back, crossed at the wrists with the hands exposed to the left of the torso. The position seemed to suggest the hands might have been tied at the wrists when the body was buried. There was no evidence of any ligature, but that is not to say it had not rotted away.

Later, while I was gently moving the soil from around the right leg, some extra soil from below fell away to expose yet another long bone completely separate to our skeleton. So, we found part of another person! Would this job never end?

By the end of the day we had exhumed the top skeleton, and many fragments of the lower one, all in pieces and more consistent with the earlier bones from the spoil and the earlier work Steve had done in June. We collected as much of these other bones as we could, but we hadn't yet examined the area where Steve found the skull and other bones in the earlier trip.

“I did not want to leave the skeleton and the other remains on the back of the truck. They deserved more reverence than that. I made a makeshift shrine in the disused cell at the back of the police station...”

So, exhausted but satisfied, we packed up about 6pm to return to Alas for the evening.

I did not want to leave the skeleton and the other remains on the back of the truck; they deserved more reverence than that. I made a makeshift shrine in the disused cell at the back of the police station. Gilly saw what I was doing and managed to find a small cluster of flowers, which we placed into an old tin can. We lit a candle, said a small prayer, and left the room. The candle, a new one I had brought from Australia, burned all night.

I went to bed in my mozzie dome thinking of the progress we had made. I recalled the experiences that would stay with me, apart from the business we were there to do. These included partaking of the local produce in the form of green coconuts—cut open by the locals with their katanas (machetes) to expose

a small hole through which to drink the milk inside. And Gilly—singing, or chirping away in Tetum to her colleagues and squealing with delight at some funny story either she was telling, or she was listening to. Best of all was the camaraderie that developed among the diverse group, despite the language barrier and the seriousness of the work we were there to undertake.

Wednesday 18 September 2002

We returned to the site by 9am and got stuck right into it. We scratched around for about three hours, turning up little. It was reasonable to theorise that all three bodies had been buried on the shelf where our full skeleton was found yesterday. Water activity in the cave (there was plenty of evidence of that in the soil, and in the “tide lines” along the walls) is likely to have contributed to the disruption of the lower body/ies. Parts have then travelled to the lowest point of the cavern, under the rock shelf (where Steve found most of the bones he recovered the first time he went there). It was reasonable to assume that the full skeleton was the person we were after, and that the other bits and pieces belonged to something that happened quite some time previously. Despite Gilly making extensive inquiries, no report of any other missing people was received.

Around 2:30pm, exhausted but feeling satisfied, we left Alas with the remains for the arduous return to Dili where we lodged the remains at the UN mortuary around 9:30pm.

The subsequent pathological examination of all of the remains revealed the most interesting conclusion to the story. Firstly, it was established that the skeleton and the other remains were definitely separate cases. Secondly, there were physical-fit matches with the remains from the June exhumation with the fragmented bones from the September exhumation, linking those remains as a second, separate case.

Skeletal examination

An anthropological examination of the skeleton revealed no evidence of injury or damage that could be attributed to a cause of death. However, this does not rule out the possibility that a soft-tissue injury, such as a severed artery, may have ultimately caused the death.

Identification of the remains centred on their unique aspects, including the clothing and other physical attributes. Ante mortem data collected by Ghillermina dos Santos from surviving relatives of the person the deceased was thought to be, married with the physical attributes—the major piece of anecdotal evidence linking the remains with the missing person as reported by his family was the dentition—the remains displayed unique dental characteristics. The person had been born without lateral incisor teeth, which resulted in prominent gaps between the front upper teeth. Although not in technical terms, the family was able to say that their missing relative had gaps between his teeth when he smiled, similar to those displayed on the skeletal remains.

This unusual congenital disorder, calcification of other bones attributed to lifestyle, clothing, and witness accounts, lead to the successful identification of this skeleton as the person reported by his family as missing since 1999.

The remaining bones were linked with each other through physical-fit matches, several displaying tool-mark damage that could be attributed to being cut by a sharp implement before disposal in the cave. It could have been either the cause of death or a post-mortem method of disposal. Forensically, the tool-mark damage on the bones has the potential to be identifiable, should a weapon suspected of causing the damage be located. However, there was no reported case of violence, or any report of missing person/s that could be linked to these remains. It is likely that these remains are the consequence of a violent event that occurred some decades ago, involving at least two people, now deceased.



*Anatomy of a forensic examination.
Photos supplied by Justine adamek*