

Balibo: A war crime exposed

By Richard Phillips
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Directed by Robert Connolly, screenplay by Connolly and David Williamson and based on the book Cover-Up: the inside story of the Balibo Five by Jill Jolliffe.

Balibo dramatises the true story of how five reporters working for Australian television networks were brutally murdered in East Timor by the Indonesian military on October 16, 1975, in the lead-up to the invasion of the tiny country a month and a half later.

The journalists—Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham, Malcolm Rennie, Tony Stewart, Brian Peters—were all under 30 years of age. They were killed in Balibo, their bodies burnt, and then transported back to Indonesia, where they were buried in an unmarked grave.

Writer/director Robert Connolly's movie is an intelligent work. It brings to a wider audience the little-known facts that the Australian Labor government of the time, led by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, was fully aware of the impending Indonesian invasion of East Timor, that it supplied intelligence to the Indonesian army and that it falsely claimed to have no knowledge of the execution of the five reporters.

The Whitlam government, and successive Australian administrations since, have insisted that the "Balibo Five" were killed in crossfire. In fact they were consciously targeted in a war crime that was one of many committed in East Timor during the nearly quarter century long Indonesian occupation of the country. Estimates vary, but more than 180,000 East Timorese, or over a quarter of its population, died between 1975 and 1999 as a result of the occupation.

East Timor had been a Portuguese colony since the sixteenth century but in 1974, following the overthrow of Lisbon's Salazar-Caetano fascist regime, Portugal began withdrawing from its African colonies. The East Timor National Liberation Front (Fretilin) was formed to demand independence.

With the US facing defeat in Vietnam, Washington

and Canberra were determined to ensure that East Timor did not become a source of instability in the region. The Indonesian military dictatorship of President Suharto falsely claimed that Fretilin was communist and began moving with local political allies in East Timor to crush the organisation. Both Australia and the US, as well as Indonesia, were also deeply concerned about the future of East Timor due to its substantial oil and gas resources.

Balibo dramatises the fate of the five young reporters through a series of flashbacks, which are combined with the story of Australian journalist Roger East (Anthony LaPaglia) who travelled to Balibo four weeks after the murders.

The movie opens with testimony from Julianna, an East Timorese woman who witnessed some of the Indonesian atrocities. It then moves back to the northern Australian city of Darwin in late October 1975, where Fretilin secretary of foreign affairs, Jose Ramos-Horta (Oscar Isaacs), has located Roger East.

The world-weary 51-year-old reporter displays little interest in what is going on in East Timor until the 25-year-old Ramos-Horta gives him a file on the murder of the television reporters. The Fretilin leader offers to take East to where the reporters were killed, if he will head the newly-created East Timor News Agency.

East, who has previously reported from apartheid South Africa and on the civil rights movement in the US during the 60s, decides to take up the Fretilin offer. He undertakes the dangerous journey to Balibo and files the first on-the-spot report for Australian Associated Press that the journalists were murdered. A few weeks later on December 8, East is executed by the Indonesian military, along with hundreds of others on the waterfront in Dili, the East Timorese capital. Their bodies are dumped in the sea.

Performances by LaPaglia and Isaacs are generally

strong and the movie's three-strand narrative provides depth, helping to make the key events real, convincing and disturbing.

Connolly's latest feature, however, is not without flaws. The five journalists are never really developed as complex characters. We see them leaving their families and/or girlfriends in Australia for their new assignment and their work in East Timor but their appearances are mainly vignettes. The dramatisation of reporter Greg Shackleton's last despatch from East Timor is well handled, and the capture and execution of the journalists chilling, but more is needed about the motivations and concerns of the young reporters.

The film's references to the role of the Whitlam and US governments, which green-lighted the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, are effective although additional detail would have been helpful, especially for audiences—in Australia and internationally—that know little about what really happened.

Balibo concludes with Ramos-Horta returning to East Timor in 1999, following the UN-sponsored referendum that overwhelmingly rejected Indonesian rule. The ending tends to naively glorify the Fretilin leader and implies that the problems facing the East Timorese people have been resolved. In fact, Ramos-Horta, now the country's president, presides over one of the poorest countries in the world, accommodating his regime to Australia's continuing control of the lion's share of East Timor's oil and gas resources.

Director Robert Connolly, executive producer Anthony LaPaglia and the families of the Balibo Five have demanded war crimes investigations into those responsible for the murder of their husbands, brothers and sons. These calls have been studiously ignored by the Rudd Labor government, which has no intention of letting democratic rights issues get in the way of its economic and political relations with Indonesia's ruling elite.

War crime investigations have also been ruled out by President Ramos-Horta. Speaking at a Q&A session following the movie's premiere at the recent Melbourne Film Festival, he declared: "My answer has always been; let time deal with this. There have been dramatic changes in the last thirty years and Indonesian democracy today is one of the most inspiring in the south-east Asia region ... Those responsible for killing

the Balibo Five will be brought to justice when the Indonesians are ready for it."

An alternative ending to *Balibo* could have used extracts from Australian intelligence and diplomatic cables to the Whitlam government. This would have raised critical questions about the ongoing diplomatic manoeuvres and political dirty tricks being conducted by Australia's ruling elite to ensure that political and economic decisions in East Timor conform to Australia's regional aims.

As one October 16, 1975 de-classified cable from the Australian embassy in Jakarta to the Australian government—the day the Balibo Five were killed—noted: "On the operations which were launched yesterday, October 15, [Indonesian] General Murdani confirmed what [Harry] Tjan had already told us and which we reported previously. In these circumstances I can only repeat my earlier comments that, in the next few weeks, we are going to need steady nerves and to keep our assessment of our longer term interests in this region in front of us."

Another possibility would have been to use some of Whitlam's testimony to the 2007 NSW coroner's inquiry into the deaths of the Balibo Five, which ruled that the reporters had been murdered. In his evidence Whitlam denied any responsibility for the five men's deaths and attempted to blame them, and Greg Shackleton in particular, for going to East Timor in the first place.

Notwithstanding its limitations, *Balibo* is a serious work and a worthwhile step in the right direction. Hopefully it will encourage more filmmakers to explore other dark corners of Australian political history.

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