

## **Soldier survives years in jail cell**

TIMORESE resistance fighter Mario Nicolau dos Reis spent 17 years as a political prisoner in an Indonesian jail before the Australian-led peacekeeping force came to the aid of his people.

He was in Ipswich last week with three fellow Timorese veterans visiting the country's RSL associations to help form a veterans organisation in East Timor and to join the Anzac Centennial commemorations.

Mr Reis, who became the country's Secretary of State for Veterans Affairs, had been fighting for five years in the jungle after joining up with the guerrilla fighters when war broke out in 1975 before he was captured.

Locked away in the Indonesian prison at Cipinang for so long, it is a miracle he lives to tell the story.

One of the veterans travelling with him, Antonio Thomas Do Amaral da Costa, was held in Kupang prison, West Timor, for seven years after years of fighting in the jungle.

He abandoned his career as a young teacher to join the guerrilla forces at the outbreak of war in 1975.

There were 69 freedom fighters imprisoned with him at Kupang.

"One died in prison from starvation and 54 disappeared without a trace. They were taken by the military and never came back," Mr da Costa said.

"Only 14 of us were rescued by the Red Cross and taken back to Timor."

Mr Reis said the brutality of the Indonesian occupation gave rise to a spirited resistance movement.

"The military intervention of Indonesian forces brought a lot of hardship for the people," Mr Reis said.

"Houses were burned, crops destroyed, people killed - the brutality is why the people stood up

and resisted against it and that later became the factor where the campaign abroad was gaining momentum in terms of sympathy.

“We were nothing in terms of firepower, men and guns, but we had spirit, the spirit of struggling for the right to be a separate nation, independence, justice and peace.

“That was the driving force that lead us to win the war.

“The guerrilla movement came out of the population itself. It was the people that organised themselves. They themselves, their sons and daughters took up arms to defend their sovereign right and independence.”

But the years of fighting and imprisonment took a harsh toll on the Timorese.

Despite Timor’s close ties with Australia after our Diggers liberated the country from Japanese occupation in the Second World War, Australia and the world had turned their backs on the conflict.

“After 24 years, the world woke up to say the people were suffering and struggling just to vindicate the right for freedom and peace and justice,” Mr Reis said.

“The decision-makers in the government in Australia and the United States at the time, they clearly supported Indonesia, that’s why (Indonesia) invaded our country.

“With the intervention of the international community Australia had no choice. And apart from what had happened in the past, the intervention of the Australians in Timor was very much welcome.

“We were pleased with the involvement of Australia to bring about peace and independence for our country.”

Source: <http://www.ipswichadvertiser.com.au/news/soldier-survives-years-in-jail-cell/3007245/>