

Working with Australian Defence Force interpreters in Timor 1999 and Aceh 2005: Reflections drawn from personal experience

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Abstract:

Working with language specialists offers unique challenges and opportunities. This chapter focuses on the author's experience in working remotely with interpreters on Australian Defence Force deployments during military operations. This was particularly significant during the peacekeeping campaign in East Timor in 1999 and the humanitarian-aid relief provided in Indonesia following the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2005. The need to be flexible and to adapt to differing levels of language support is made apparent in these two case studies where contributions made by various specialists in these high tempo environments is examined.

The realities of conflict, peacekeeping, and international humanitarian disaster reconstruction mean it is relatively rare for the military of any nation to deploy to offshore environments with language or cultural mastery, and for these reasons, good interpreters are critical to mission success. However, mission success relies on more than just good interpreters as the experiences of the end user also have to be considered. Both language and cross-cultural communication skills are important for interpreter and end user alike, and the skills and experience of the interpreter have to be matched with the skills and experience of the military end user. This chapter explores a personal perspective of the Australian Defence Force experience of working with interpreters in two very different deployments: the 1999 International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) peacemaking mission and Operation Sumatra Assist, the humanitarian aid and disaster-relief mission to the Indonesian province of Aceh following the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. I personally experienced how the Australian Defence Force worked with interpreters on two atypical military operations overseas, and observed how increased experience and the capacity to adapt led to increased rates of effectiveness.

While small numbers of Australians had served on peacekeeping operations in the 1980s and 1990s in deployments that never exceeded one thousand troops,¹ in the late 1990s Australia's last large-scale military deployment was the Vietnam War. This left the Australian Defence Force with some collective knowledge, but only limited numbers of military personnel who actually had direct practical experience in working with interpreters while deployed on operations. The experiences of 1999 and 2004 would prove to be important steps in a steep learning curve.

Confronting 'Hiroshima'

As a young public affairs officer (PAO) serving in the post-Somalian deployment Army, I had heard stories of the experience of those who worked with interpreters in Somalia, Cambodia, and Rwanda but the tales rarely matched the reality of relying on another person for everyday communication with a local populace, particularly when that other person was not vetted for security or their actual suitability to be an interpreter. For example, during the

¹ For more on these deployments see Peter Londey (2004), *Other People's Wars: A History of Australian Peacekeeping* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin).

initial stages of the international response to the Boxing Day Tsunami in Aceh, on the advice of our Civil Military Liaison team I approached a stranger sitting on the hood of his four-wheel drive vehicle in the Banda Aceh Airport car park and asked if he would act as my driver/interpreter for a daily rate. Agreeing on the sum of 700,000 Rupiah per day² we set off on what would be several weeks of confused but workable communication; a map across my lap as I made hand gestures and grunted (the tone would be tenor for a positive response, baritone for a negative.) Mistakes were made in our mixed English/Bahasa conversations. Often we would arrive at the wrong location, and it would take hours to cross the flooded and badly damaged city to arrive at what had originally been our intended destination.

Once we had reached where we needed to be, my driver, Agun, would step into interpreter mode, assisting me as I spoke with Indonesian Army members (TNI) or Banda Aceh residents. Woefully underprepared for this deployment to a totally unanticipated natural disaster at the furthest point northwest on the Indonesian Archipelago, I relied on my own previous experience with interpreters in East Timor, and on his ability firstly to understand my meaning, and then to communicate it faithfully, before translating the response from his native tongue into our shared ‘dialect’ in a way I could (hopefully) understand.

Over the next few weeks I regularly asked Agun to drive me to the portside residential area that Australian Defence personnel had taken to calling ‘Hiroshima’ because of the level of devastation caused by the tsunami. News crews were particularly fond of using this area as the location for their live television crosses as it offered a visceral representation of the destruction visited on the city. Dead bodies lay in unusual locations amongst debris. I have a clear memory of a man floating with the tide, his bloated corpse buoyant as he moved with the currents. Up and back he went for some hours, without dignity.

It was at this location that we had seen a corpse lying across the only access road leading out to the designated lodgement point for the Royal Australian Navy Landing Craft (LCM-8s) due to link Royal Australian Navy Ship HMAS *Kanimbla* with the land-based efforts. Noting that the drivers of the trucks coming off the landing craft might mistake what appeared to be a collection of rags for rubbish and drive directly over—all in view of the world’s news media who we had invited to film the arrival of more Australian troops—I moved the body off the road with the help of another Australian Army member. The body would be collected by the so-called *Hantu Laut* (‘Ghosts of the Sea’ or ‘Sea Spirits’)—the

² Author’s notes. According to a field notebook stub written by the author and signed by Agun.

TNI detachment driving around the city in open-tray vehicles that they filled with corpses before delivering them to one of the mass graves pressed into service in an attempt to prevent an outbreak of cholera caused by the sheer scale of death and decay.

Almost daily we made the trip to ‘Hiroshima’ until one day, for no particular reason, I turned to Agun and asked how he had fared in the ‘wave,’ as the Acehnese referred to the tsunami. Wife and daughters gone, he told me. Here, he said; gesturing to the ground we stood on, at ‘Hiroshima.’ No words can describe how I felt at that moment. But with the hindsight of nearly a decade and a half, I can see that in an intense humanitarian crisis where tasks needed to be done at once, carrying on without respite day after day, I had been working like a machine, devoid of emotion. My interpreter had likewise become a machine, an extension of myself. Despite our good rapport, teamwork, and amicable relationship I had lost the perspective of him as a person with his own agency, who was confronting his own traumas that he dealt with uncomplainingly, on a daily basis.

Ironically, empathy is an attribute that assists the public affairs role—an ability to understand some of what the local population is experiencing in order to craft communication campaigns that achieve the Commanders’ Intent, the Holy Grail of military public affairs.³ While the role of the public affairs officer (PAO) in the Australian military context is largely to provide information and advice to commanders on matters relating to public comment in order to shape domestic Australian and targeted foreign public understanding and awareness, the implication is that the PAO also draws information in through his or her dealings with independent news representatives and others they encounter as part of their day-to-day duties.

It stands to reason that in order to effectively operate in a foreign language environment some language skills are essential. However, there is often not enough time to develop those skills prior to deployment. The response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, for example, was rapid and significantly altered as more information filtered through.⁴ Because

³ ‘Commanders’ Intent’ is the military term used to neatly summarise the preferred mission outcomes intended by any number of simultaneous activities at the direction of the person in command, the Commander. Meeting the Commanders’ Intent in a public-affairs sense may mean to communicate—through words and pictures transmitted by multiple news-media channels—those outcomes.

⁴ Originally the author was instructed to pack civilian clothes and fly to Phuket, Thailand as part of the Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) operation. Between boarding a domestic flight from Townsville and arriving at the mounting headquarters in Brisbane, Australia that mission had changed from Thailand to Indonesia and required field kit for what was expected to be several weeks of living in harsh conditions.

of rapidly changing military requirements, it is likely that local interpreters will continue to offer the solution to short-term military deployments.

It is also imperative that the PAO and interpreter are able to move within the Area of Operations semi-independently (that is, to undertake a specific mission, dependent on security considerations and the projected outcomes of the activity.) In East Timor in 1999 this meant obtaining a Transport Control Number (TCN) and passing through various checkpoints around the country in vehicles equipped with short-wave radios meeting expected arrival times. In Aceh in 2005 the situation was much more fluid and I found myself, with the help of Agun, traversing the devastated city without any such restrictions.

The experience of having worked as a journalist prior to becoming an army officer had given me some knowledge of communicating with others of different backgrounds, although communicating extensively across language barriers had not been part of my previous skill set. By the time I deployed to Aceh in 2005 I had some prior experience with cross-cultural communication issues through serving as a member of the Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville as part of a multinational, unarmed peacekeeping mission⁵, and on previous deployments through the Middle East and Timor. However, it was during my first deployment, to East Timor in 1999, that I experienced working with interpreters for the first time, and with mixed results.

East Timor peacemaking deployment 1999-2000

Following the departure of the colonial Portuguese, Australia had watched as Indonesia annexed East Timor in 1975, essentially joining the small country with West Timor and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago. Over the coming decades Fretilin (the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) prosecuted its political case while the FALINTIL (The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor) waged guerrilla warfare against the Indonesians. In 1999 international political pressure saw Indonesian President B.J. Habibie push for a public vote within the East Timor province for autonomy. The ballot was held on

⁵ Richard Gehrmann, Matt Grant, and Samantha Rose (2015), 'Australian Unarmed Peacekeepers on Bougainville, 1997–2003', *Peace Review*, 27:1, pp. 52-60.

August 30, 1999, and saw an overwhelming 78.5% vote for independence. As a result, pro Indonesian integrationist militia groups rampaged through the capital Dili and through other key towns across the small country, forcing an estimated 300,000 people to flee across the border into West Timor to escape the violence.

Worldwide condemnation followed, and Australian Prime Minister John Howard sought United Nations agreement for Australia to lead a multinational military force to quell the violence and return the region to normality. Crucially, Howard specified that Indonesian approval was required before any force would mobilise, and on 15 September 1999 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1264 established INTERFET (the International Force for East Timor) under Australian leadership and commanded by Major General Peter Cosgrove. More than twenty sovereign nations combined to form INTERFET: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Fiji, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Portugal, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, United Kingdom, and the United States—with Major General Sonkitti Jaggabattrra of Thailand identified as the deputy commander.

Through the early weeks of September, Australian military planners worked on the mission details that would culminate in the September 20 lodgement of the main Australian forces at Komoro Airfield in Dili, East Timor. Significantly, some Australian military had been in East Timor since June, initially on Operation Faber supporting the United Nations personnel overseeing the autonomy vote and later during Operation Spitfire evacuating Australian nationals.

The Australian Army official record states, “By the end of the second day of deployment 3000 troops were on the ground and by the end of first week this had increased to 4300. In mid-November INTERFET peaked at nearly 11,500 personnel; 9300 were ground troops. Australia’s commitment reached 5500.”⁶ Chief of the Australian Defence Force Admiral Chris Barrie stated at the time that the INTERFET deployment was ‘the most significant military undertaking we have had since World War II.’⁷

⁶ <https://www.army.gov.au/our-stories/operations/east-timortimor-leste>

⁷ Defence Public Affairs Press Release 277/99 released by Defence Public Affairs Organisation 16 September 1999 <https://reliefweb.int/report/timor-leste/east-timor-media-conference-chief-defence-force-admiral-chris-barrie-darwin>

For the members of the initial INTERFET deployment the arrival in Dili was a shock. Some, who had served in Somalia or Rwanda, warned of ‘Third World Syndrome’ where a person becomes overwhelmed by the living conditions of those around them and focuses on the human suffering to the detriment of their situational awareness. My memory of Dili Airfield is that it was strewn with human faeces, toilet paper, discarded food containers, and other detritus—testament to the thousands of Timorese who had fled their homes and huddled at the airfield in the hope the United Nations aircraft that had carried the UN workers away would return to rescue them. The streets were unusually empty with debris everywhere, while much of the urban landscape seemed to consist of burnt-out structures. For some days black smoke hung over the city as the pro-Indonesian militiamen continued to set fire to homes and commercial buildings.⁸

As the security situation improved over a short few weeks, local residents began to return to the city and to begin the process of rebuilding. At this point I was working out of the CPIC compound, the Combined Public Information Centre that housed the Civil Military Liaison team, our HQ INTERFET Public Affairs cell, and a small number of other teams from the United States and United Kingdom. This group was joined by a Royal Australian Navy interpreter fluent in Bahasa, the official language of Indonesia.

While proficient in his core skill, the interpreter represented a shortcoming in Australian military planning. Where Bahasa was regarded internationally as the official language of East Timor while it was a province of Indonesia, following the autonomy vote, the subsequent violence and the arrival of INTERFET the feeling of many (if not all) Timorese was that Bahasa was the language of the occupier. Tetum, they felt, was their language and after more than twenty-four years of Indonesia’s rule they were not about to abandon it when independence felt likely. More than once I engaged in conversation with local Timorese with the assistance of our Royal Australian Navy interpreter, who was becoming more and more frustrated with his inability to deliver communications support in his specialist-linguist role. On each occasion the exchange would be polite but ineffectual; simply put, without Indonesian provincial rules guiding their behaviour there was no way a

⁸ In the early days of the deployment smoke began streaming from a neighbouring building to Headquarters INTERFET. The Force Regimental Sergeant Major, Dale Sales, stuck his head out of a second-floor window and enquired loudly of nobody in particular ‘Is anyone going to do something about that?’ Together with a few others the author jumped the fence and entered the building to find a number of fuel-soaked mattresses burning fiercely and emitting pungent, choking black smoke. This was an example of a diversion, or distraction, as well as a message that the militia were still among us and could still cause us concern.

Timorese person was going to speak anything other than Tetum. Interestingly, from this miscalculation regarding local language, the Australian contribution to the INTERFET mission learnt early on about the necessity of Tetum language skills, and, possibly, a lesson in reserving immediate judgement over local customs or cultural requirements prior to having spent time in country.⁹

Although soldiers with rudimentary Tetum did arrive in my location, they had different operating priorities. A small team from the Australian Army's 4th Battalion (Commando) had deployed in the early weeks of the mission to provide close personal protection and some Tetum interpretation for the civilian news-media representatives attached to the 1st Media Support Unit based at the Turismo Hotel in Dili. Despite the presumption that this might provide further language support, their role was primarily to oversee the safe movement of news crews around the Area of Operations, and not to perform any formal translator/interpreter role.¹⁰ This experience shows that even when language support might notionally be present, it is not always available for all the end users who actually might need it.

Each member of the compound contributed a small amount of money to pay for the two Timorese cleaners who would sweep and wash the tiled floors of the buildings we occupied. I, like most, tried to be friendly and to engage in limited conversation with them. However, this arrangement soon changed from the usual pleasantries to an intensive Tetum language class in which the cleaners would instruct us on basic phrases and assess our delivery and inflection. We, in turn, would instruct them in basic English phrases. From this unconventional school we built our basic armoury of Tetum phrases such as *Diak ka lai?* or *Obrigado*.¹¹ This experience demonstrated a willingness of both locals and soldiers to make the most of the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural communication, and to informally work together to resolve communication shortfalls.

⁹ In the early stages of the deployment it was not unusual for older Timorese men to come to a rigid halt when they encountered uniformed Australia troops and offer a salute—a hangover from colonial days, perhaps, or from Indonesian rule.

¹⁰The Australian Commando Association makes brief mention of the commandos attached to 1MSU, however the author's recollections are of the professional service provided by those members during escorted media convoys around Timor in the early months of the operation.

<https://www.commando.org.au/Commando%20History/2%20Cdo%20Regiment%20History/>

¹¹ 'How are you?' and 'Thank you.' *Diak Kai Lai* was usually accompanied by a thumbs up/thumbs down gesture literally meaning 'good or bad?'

Despite our best efforts the local engagements throughout this period were marked by partial understanding at best. This lack of cultural understanding and communication contributed, I feel, to the very Australian perspectives reported by civilian news-media during the 1999 phase of Operation Stabilise, rather than the more obvious Timorese perspective of travelling the path to autonomy. In late 1999 it was impossible to see what awaited the world in just two years' time. However, for the Australian Defence Force at least, the journey towards understanding and valuing the input of language and cultural communication experts had progressed significantly. The East Timor operation revealed the challenge of providing language support for the mass deployment of large numbers of Australians at short notice. This was vastly different to the more manageable, small-scale peacekeeping of previous decades, where the limited size of deployments meant that the limited language resources of the Australian military had been able to adequately serve deployment needs. The lessons learnt from the INTERFET experience of large-scale military deployment would pay dividends during the years to come in the future conflict zones of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Indian Ocean tsunami: Humanitarian deployment in Aceh Province, Indonesia, 2005

A few minutes before 8.00am on Sunday 26 December, 2004 an earthquake measuring 9.4 on the Richter scale shook the ground of northern Sumatra, Indonesia for eight minutes. The wave created by the earthquake moved across the Indian Ocean at speeds approaching 500 miles per hour and reached the East African coast seven hours later. The devastation to the northern city of Banda Aceh was extreme, as it was across the western coastal areas of the Province. The United Nations estimated more than 225,000 people died as a result, with more than one million displaced.¹²

For the Acehnese the tsunami resulted in economic disruption on a grand scale. As a region that relied on oil and gas mining, agriculture, and fisheries for approximately 60% of its income, the effects of the wave were profound. Mining efforts ceased, fishing vessels lay strewn through the city streets, and even agricultural pursuits were affected by the penetration

¹² *Tsunami Recovery: Taking Stock after 12 months*, Report from the UN Secretary-General's Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

of saltwater far inland. Over 500 kilometres of coastline was destroyed by the waters and an estimated 130,000 killed with a further 500,000 displaced within the province.¹³

The eventual Australian military response of 560 troops on the ground with additional 400 offshore in a navy and air task group saw more than 1200 tonnes of humanitarian aid distributed via air together with seventy aero-medical evacuations and more than 2500 people transported to hospital or further care. Another (estimated) 3700 people sought medical treatment from the military medical teams based at the Zainal Abidin hospital. Nearly five million litres of clean water were produced using the portable water-treatment plants and some 9000 cubic metres of debris cleared.¹⁴ Such was the scale of the disaster, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Red Cross, Robert Tickner, said that when considering the challenges the aid organisation had faced in its history he would ‘rank the First World War and the Second World War and then the tsunami. It is that big.’¹⁵

My role during the initial phases of this humanitarian aid and disaster-relief operation was to head the public-affairs effort in Banda Aceh, reporting to the operational headquarters situated in Medan 600 kilometres to the southeast. While initially I had two Army photographers with me they were redeployed after two days and I spent the next week working alone, liaising with the world’s news-media arriving in the region and moving about via my impromptu arrangement with Agun, my Acehnese driver. During this time, I was cautiously feeling my way around the situation, gaining insights from my interactions with news representatives from various organisations and countries and through my conversations with local people, foreign and Indonesian aid workers, and the TNI. Agun was, of course, front and centre in most of these discussions and through him I began to build an appreciation of the situation.

The initial phase was difficult for everyone. My handwritten notes scrawled into a field notebook from the passenger hold of a Royal Australian Air Force C-130 Hercules transport aircraft from when I first flew over the area read:

¹³ While there are many available reference materials attesting to these figures they remain an estimate. The UN figures point towards 116,000 homes destroyed in Aceh as a result of the tsunami and approximately 12% of the population displaced.

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20121104225220/http://www.defence.gov.au/optsunamiassist/default.htm>

¹⁵ Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2006), ‘Australia’s response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami’.

First impressions from the back of a C-130 is principally one of how similar it looks to Dili in Sep 99—although on an impossibly larger scale ... (flying) low level up the West coast, moving from untouched Sumatran fishing village to the point where the wave began—village, village, paddy field, rocky headland, sand, pushed over trees, debris stretching kilometres inland, nothing moving. The sea still muddy grey with long lines of silt running from river mouths deep into the ocean.¹⁶

The streets of Aceh were blocked with trapped seawater and debris, the structural integrity of buildings that had borne the force of the wave were suspect¹⁷ and potentially dangerous, and, it seemed that everywhere we looked there was evidence of death, whether human or animal. At the end of each day Agun would drive me to the airfield where I would hand over his daily payment and make arrangements for the following morning, before walking alongside a flooded canal to the Australian Army tent lines where I had my temporary home. Hard tropical rain had turned the area into a mud-pit and keeping dry was impossible. Add mosquitoes, cobras, and humidity and the full picture becomes more apparent.¹⁸ From here I would work by lamplight, answer news-media enquiries by SMS,¹⁹ and make my evening situation report (SITREP) to Medan.

As the humanitarian-relief operation settled into ‘steady state,’²⁰ I was joined by a Deployable Field Team from the 1st Joint Public Affairs Unit out of Canberra and an interpreter from the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. A Javanese man, Mubarak, brought with him the necessary language skills but also insights into the culture of the people we were there to help. Within days of his arrival (to live with and work alongside the wider team based out of the quagmire beside the Banda Aceh airfield), Mubarak had begun to exert a subtle influence over how we approached our tasks. While continuing to provide standard

¹⁶ Author’s notes. Personal field notes from deployment as member of Combined Joint Task Force 629 on Operation Sumatra Assist, 3 January 2005.

¹⁷ On my first night in Banda Aceh on 3 January 2005 a loud crash woke us. It was a shopping centre collapsing approximately one kilometre away from our location as a result of the water damage.

¹⁸ Well, almost. According to my field diary notes, some days into the mission an Australian Army health officer conducted tests of the mud we lived in and found (unsurprisingly, given we were surrounded by paddy fields being worked with beasts) that the ‘mud’ was more bovine excrement than soil.

¹⁹ In the early days of the deployment the local mobile towers didn’t have the capacity to carry voice calls but could sustain SMS messages, which became the preferred means of communication between news-media representatives.

²⁰ An Australian military term referring to rate of effort. For example, there is the ‘high tempo’ environment of the lodgment phase and, once the desired long-term routine has been established it is considered to be ‘steady state.’

language interpreting services, Mubarak also provided cross-cultural communication services and, more importantly, independently began to take actions to build rapport between locals and foreigners in order to promote positive outcomes in the ongoing humanitarian-relief effort.

Given the nature of the deployment it was unsurprising that we were supplied with hard rations (*rats*) to eat—canned food prepared with preservatives designed to keep the meal fresh for a number of years and across a wide range of climates. While I (like everyone else in the ADF) had eaten ration packs in the heat and the cold, most would decline to identify the cuisine as a meal of preference. Indeed, I would expect most, if not all, people who have lived off ‘hard rats’ for a period of time to share a similar ambition—to eat fresh fruit and vegetables. As it happened, approximately three weeks after the tsunami wreaked destruction across the region, a local food market opened its stalls and Mubarak insisted that he and I go there. Having enjoyed the same preservative-laden fare for a few weeks I did not require a great deal of persuasion and so Mubarak, Agun, and I set off for the markets intent on returning with enough greens for all of our team.

A proud and distinct region of Indonesia and a formerly independent Sultanate, Aceh defines itself through religion and local Acehnese culture. To find itself overrun with Australians, Germans, British, Americans, and Turks (and so many more) must have been confronting to Acehnese sensibility. (One student activist, Daudy, was quoted as saying the military aid in particular concerned local people who felt that aid was a ‘second colonisation.’²¹) Yet, as we left Agun’s Kijang Bensin SUV and made our way into the markets, I was to experience a particularly humbling and emotional shopping trip among people who were themselves enacting one of the first acts of normalcy in their community for weeks.

A small group of people had gathered at the market and Mubarak informed me that they were actually there because they wanted to express their gratitude for the efforts of the Australians. They placed various food items in a large cardboard box that they thrust into my arms. I stood there for thirty minutes shaking hands, being slapped endlessly on the back, refusing more food until Mubarak whispered in my ear that it would cause offence to decline. The mood was one of celebration—of a society triumphing despite the enormous losses.

²¹ A. Ride and D. Bretherton (2011), *Community Resilience in Natural Disasters*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan), p. 43.

When we left the market, I struggled to hold the overflowing box of fresh food, given by people who had lost almost all they owned before the disaster. It had been an opportunity for some of the Acehnese community to say ‘thank you’ to a representative of one of the international groups that had responded to the tragic events of December 26 and I have never felt more humbled by the resilience of the human spirit. We drove back to our accommodation past the broken houses and the children playing in the swollen creeks and I pondered the cultural communication aspects of that afternoon’s excursion. Without language support, I could not have entered that market with any real ambition for success. With Mubarak, however, we had made a meaningful connection in a public place, albeit in a way usually reserved for senior officers or politicians rather than just another field officer hoping for a preservative-free meal in a land unbowed by possibly the greatest disaster of the twenty-first century.

We had, in effect, closed the loop between the military logistics, medical, and engineering efforts and the Acehnese community. By refusing payment for their produce, and by being given an opportunity to express their gratitude these people had done everything they could to complete the transaction between Indonesians and Australians. I think Mubarak knew this even before we set off to the market.

Conclusion

There are various dimensions to consider when evaluating experience of military communicating and interpreting, with a significant consideration being the experiences of those who rely on the skills of interpreters to do their job. Studies can understandably focus on the very challenging experience of interpreters themselves, but the experience of the end user also needs to be considered to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities implicit in communicating and interpreting. Peacekeeping and humanitarian-relief operations offer their own unique challenges to military personnel deployed in the field, and the experience of working with interpreters who provide both direct language translation and cross-cultural understanding has been invaluable. My personal experience provides examples of how the Australian military quickly adapted to the requirement to rapidly deploy troops into crisis zones with language support, of how adaptation to local conditions occurs, and

how practice and familiarity was to enhance the experience for end users of interpreter services.