

## OBITUARIES

# Shirley Shackleton

## A Timor-Leste hero's quest for truth

26 December 1931 – 15 January 2023

**Abstract:** Shirley Shackleton said that after her husband Greg was killed in Timor-Leste in October 1975, for seven weeks she became a campaigner for justice for the journalists murdered in Balibo, then after Indonesia invaded in December 1975 she became a campaigner for justice for all the East Timorese too. Shackleton saw the Australian government treatment of the killings as a litmus test of Australian East Timor policy. She continued to pressure the government for a Federal Police investigation of those responsible for the deaths, culminating with Australian politicians and diplomats being put in the dock and scrutinised under oath in a Coronial Inquiry in 2007.

**Keywords:** Australia, Balibó Five, East Timor, Indonesia, journalist killings, journalist safety, media freedom, obituaries, Timor-Leste

PETER CRONAU

*Investigative Journalist, Sydney*

IT WAS in the darkest days of the East Timor freedom struggle. Before the world again remembered East Timor. Before the Santa Cruz massacre in Dili was filmed by Max Stahl and broadcast to the world. Before John Pilger's Timor film *Death of a Nation* (1994) was shown on commercial television. Before East Timor re-entered the public consciousness in the 1990s. Long before, but not so long ago.

Shirley Shackleton said that after her husband Greg was killed in October 1975, for seven weeks she became a campaigner for justice for the journalists murdered in Balibó, then after Indonesia invaded in December 1975 she became a campaigner for justice for all the East Timorese too.

'One could hardly put the killings of five white men ahead of an entire nation,' she said (Shackleton, n.d.).

Shirley was one of the people who never gave up in the struggle for East Timor. When many forgot about East Timor as the years passed after the invasion, Shirley was a go-to person for journalists like me, needing a quote to make a short story on Timor come alive to be accepted by the editor.

Always available to journalists, she studied events in Timor, talked to every-



**Figure 1: Shirley Shackleton, an extraordinary campaigner for justice for the Balibo Five journalists murdered by Indonesian soldiers in 1975 and the East Timorese people: Her quest for the truth lives on.**

one with some knowledge of what was happening inside, and urged leaders and the public to not forget. One of an infinitely small group of external activists, aid workers, religious figures, and others, at that time, Shirley was perhaps the bravest.

By 1989, Indonesia thought they had the Timorese resistance defeated. The resistance leader Nicolau Lobato had been captured and shot dead, the capture led by the putative 2024 Indonesian president, Prabowo Subianto. Successive Australian governments had officially recognised the Indonesian annexation. The brutal war and the forced famine of 1978-1980 had killed more than 180,000 people out of the 600,000 population. It was a policy of ‘pacification’, approaching genocide.

So confident in having won, the Indonesian government decided to open the territory to allow visitors in for the first time since the invasion. They had such high confidence in the Timorese staying silently cowed, they even invited Pope John Paul II to visit the largely Catholic nation in October 1989.

Shirley Shackleton decided to also visit East Timor, using the Pope’s visit as an opportunity to enter the country where her journalist husband Greg Shackleton had died in 1975. She said she wanted to see for herself the real condition of the Timorese, to see whether their lives were improving as Indonesia’s mouthpieces in the Western media made out.

In the capital Dili, she stayed at the Turismo Hotel from where Greg and

his four colleagues had left to report on the Indonesian build-up on the border at Balibó. By chance, also staying at the hotel for the Pope's visit at the same time as Shirley, was the architect of the Indonesian invasion and planner of the Balibó attack, Indonesian General Benni Murdani.

The night before the Papal Mass in Dili, Murdani walked into the Turismo courtyard puffing a huge cigar followed by deferential aides. Shirley couldn't stomach it and she stood and walked out into the night air. By the beach across the road, as Shirley describes in her brilliant 2010 book, *Circle of Silence*, she imagined the shells on the sand were pleading eyes, and the gusts of fireflies in the air, the souls of dead Timorese. She mustered her courage.

That night, secretly, dozens of young Timorese were organising banners and planning for a protest against the Indonesians in front of the world's media at the Papal Mass the next day.

In the morning, with her legs shaking, she walked to the table where the muscular much-feared general was having breakfast, and sat down. She says she resisted slapping his face, and instead after introducing herself, asked him, 'Tell me what happened at Balibó'.

The brave general—who had a fearsome reputation, who had once commanded the army parachute assault in the invasion of West Papua, who had planned the invasion of East Timor, who had dined with and seduced the Australian ambassador in Jakarta, who had condemned the five journalists in Balibó to army commanders on the ground, who had toured Dili on the morning Australian journalist Roger East was captured and murdered by his soldiers, who had also ordered the shooting of hundreds of anti-government demonstrators in Jakarta—was gutless in the face of a little 58-year-old widow.

'He denied any knowledge of the fate of the Balibó Five or Roger East,' Shirley wrote.

Later that day the young Timorese protesters carried out their plan and suffered beatings, arrests and more, at the hands of the embarrassed Indonesian authorities.

Shirley on that journey did, however, discover some of the truth of what had happened to Greg and his four colleagues in the mountain town of Balibó on 15 October 1975. An Indonesian military officer she met in a park in Dili wanted to speak. He hesitantly told her how they were shot, stabbed and mutilated, some having their genitals cut off and stuffed in their mouths, an Indonesian Kopassus special forces 'trade mark'. This image would live on in Shirley forever.

In November 1991, a huge rally of mainly young students in Dili gathered at the Santa Cruz cemetery for the funeral of a student stabbed to death by Indonesia's thugs. The cemetery was to become the death site of 271 of the young people who were shot and bludgeoned to death by Indonesian soldiers. Massacres such as this had been done many times before in Timor, but this time was different.

It was filmed by journalist Max Stahl, whose smuggled tapes put Indonesia's crimes on television across the globe (Stahl & Gordon, 1992).

Following the massacre and excuses from Western politicians and diplomats, Shirley immediately found another opportunity to confront the Indonesian authorities. She was inspired to join a small Portuguese passenger ship, *Lusitania Expresso*, trying to take aid to the Timorese people. In March 1992, after threats from the Indonesian Navy, the voyage of the ship was halted off the coast of Timor as three Indonesian warships blocked the ship's path.

Three years later on 16 October 1995, on the 20th anniversary of the Balibó murders, Shirley spoke at a seminar held by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) at the University of Technology Sydney, while I was the centre director. Late that night after the event, Shirley took action to formally confront the Australian government by writing a demand to the Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. It called for the government to once and finally hold a formal official government investigation into the deaths.

The ensuing Sherman Inquiry reported in 1996, but it was a sham. It had been apparently infiltrated by a suspicious witness unfortunately furnished to the inquiry by journalist Jill Jolliffe in Lisbon. The witness provided fake details not supported by dozens of other witnesses. To the delight of both the Australian and Indonesian governments, the Sherman report could then claim the deaths had been accidental and that the journalists were 'caught in the crossfire'.

This contradicted everything Shirley, and others, had previously learned of the killings, and she called out the scam. She was joined by others to pressure for a recall of the Inquiry. After new witnesses appeared on ABC TV, in 1997 the Second Sherman Inquiry was called and stated finally that it appeared the journalists were intentionally killed.

Global events were to overtake the glacial approach of the governments to the independence calls of the East Timorese. Shirley's ultimate victory over the murderous generals, the lying diplomats, the cowering politicians, came when in 1999 the East Timorese voted in a UN-supervised plebiscite to be free.

Campaigning and pressure from the supporters of East Timor, of which Shirley was a leading member, had finally found fertile ground the year before. With the fall of the Indonesian president General Suharto during the Asian financial crisis, the then-Labor foreign affairs shadow minister, Laurie Brereton, decided the party's policy on East Timor was untenable—he moved the party to adopt a policy supporting independence in Timor.

The Liberal government, facing the looming 1998 election, had to counter this popular policy. PM Howard tried to have Indonesia take the heat out of the issue by announcing a referendum to be held in 10 to 20 years' time. This cynical policy of accommodating genocide backfired on Howard, and Indonesia called for an almost immediate referendum.

At that point, thousands of Australians and others around the world, came out to demonstrate support for the Timorese, and to pressure the Australian government to lead the INTERFET peacekeeping mission. History shows when the referendum was held in September 1999, the Timorese voted to be free. Indonesia though wrought a terrible retribution on their former colony, destroying the majority of buildings and killing around 2000 more Timorese, before leaving.

The world celebrated with the Timorese the formal independence ceremonies in the capital Dili on 25 May 2002. At that moment a new phase of rebuilding became East Timor's priority. Shirley too threw herself into these efforts. For Shirley the campaign for the Timorese did not stop with their liberation.

Shirley participated in dozens of documentaries and thousands of news stories on East Timor for the world's media. Her trip back to Timor with SBS journalist Mark Davis in 2000 to document the invasion and the journalists' killing, is one of the most memorable (Davis, 2000).

At times, Shirley could be abrasive and off-putting to some around her, but her voice was able to cut through when others often did not. Described as 'a true giant of democracy', her devotion to the cause had a huge personal cost.

Shirley became integral to the formation of the Friendship Groups programme to link Australian communities with communities in East Timor. Dozens of similar friendship projects have since flourished around the country.

Shirley worked to set up the Balibó House Trust with other Balibó journalists' family members and supporters, to raise funds. In October 2003 the Balibó House, where her husband Greg and his colleagues had sheltered before their murders, was opened and handed to the Balibó community as a community learning centre.

The Trust has gone on to construct and support other community facilities, including a kindergarten, several schools, and a dental clinic. They also supported renovations to the old Portuguese Balibó fort, and in 2015 the Balibó Fort Hotel was opened. It provides a beautiful holiday location, as well as a point for historical learning.

Shirley saw the Australian government treatment of the killings as a litmus test of Australian East Timor policy. She continued to pressure the government for a Federal Police investigation of those responsible for the deaths. In 2007 with this and great pressure from other family members, a Coronial Inquiry into the Balibó death of Channel Nine cameraman, Brian Peters, was opened in Sydney (Balibo five deliberately killed, 2007).

For the first time, Australian politicians and diplomats were to be put in the dock and scrutinised under oath. Then-Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was questioned for three hours. He gave evidence that he didn't know about the impending attack on Balibó, although other evidence showed intelligence reports had been sent to Canberra giving advance notice.

Then-government ministers and officials testified they had no knowledge the journalists had travelled to Balibó, despite many in Timor at the time knowing of their plans. No warning of the invasion and impending attack on Balibó was ever passed to the journalists. Their fate had been sealed.

‘Dead men can’t tell stories, so it’s left to their poor old wives to do it for them,’ Shirley told reporters outside the hearing.

The NSW Coroner ruled that the Balibó Five had been deliberately stabbed and shot while surrendering by Indonesian special forces, led by Captain Yunus Yosfiah, who had later, in an act showing Indonesia’s lack of remorse, become Indonesia’s Minister for Communications (NSW Bar Association, 2007) .

For seven years, a Federal Police investigation that sprang from the Coronial Inquiry, limped on. Despite Shirley’s ongoing pushing and prodding, she smelled a rat. After several years without ever interviewing any of the accused Indonesian killers, the AFP investigation was closed in 2014 due to ‘insufficient evidence’ (Davidson, 2014).

In 2009, Shirley visited the Indonesian capital Jakarta, where her husband’s and colleagues’ remains have lain interned since 1975. Sitting on the grave, Shirley declared to gathered cameras that Greg’s ‘grave is a crime scene’. She called on the Indonesian and Australian governments to cooperate to have her husband’s remains returned to Australia for burial. The burnt bone fragments, believed to be of four of the murdered men, remain buried in a cemetery plot in Jakarta.

An Australian-made feature film *Balibó* was released in 2009, presenting a largely historical account of the killing of the five journalists at Balibó and that of journalist Roger East in Dili (Connolly, 2009). In Indonesia, the film was banned. Shirley confronted Indonesian authorities again by travelling to Indonesia to give evidence in a Jakarta court to try to overturn the ban on the film. Although the film remained banned, blackmarket copies of the DVD became a best seller on the streets of Jakarta.

Meanwhile Shirley was working on her autobiographical account of her life and struggle. But it is so much more, being a cold case investigation and an expose of political crimes and deceit. Her book *The Circle of Silence* was released by small publisher Murdoch Books. And it certainly deserves now to be republished by a larger publishing house.

The book won the 2010 Walkley Award for best book. At the gala televised event in front of hundreds of gathered journalists she said, ‘We need to have some justice paid because our Australian journalists in the field are going to go on being targeted, because governments have colluded to cover up for the murderers.’

Conscious of the wider struggle by the media for truth-telling, she also declared, ‘Our democracy is under threat again because of the [crackdown on] WikiLeaks.’

The Timor-Leste government in 2013 recognised Shirley for her efforts over 40 years. In a ceremony in the capital Dili, she was awarded the Order of Timor-Leste medal in recognition of her life's work to support the independence and the future success of the Timorese people. And in Australia in 2015 she finally saw the unveiling of a War Correspondents' Memorial at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra—the memory of the journalists would live forever.

And Shirley was far from done yet.

In 2019, at the age of 87, she travelled again to Dili to deliver a petition of 4000 Timorese signatures to the visiting Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The petition demanded the dropping of charges against lawyer Bernard Collaery and Australian spy 'Witness K', who were then facing charges over revelations of the 2004 bugging by Australia of Timor-Leste's cabinet's discussion on oil and gas.

At the Palácio do Governo in Dili, she entered the official welcoming ceremony and sought to present the petition. Blocked and harassed by officials, she said, 'Don't bully me. I'm here to see the prime minister.' She later delivered the petition to the Foreign Minister, but not before getting the lion's share of attention by the assembled media to gain coverage of the spy trials underway in Australia.

In the next years, Shirley again travelled to Timor, assisting and helping write a film being made by two filmmakers, Luigi Acquisto and Lurdes Pires. The film takes a fresh look at the Timorese struggle for independence, through the eyes of Shirley's search for the truth over the journalists' murders. Shirley was able to see the completed film in late 2022. The film, *Circle of Silence* was released in early 2023 (Acquisto & Pereira, 2023).

After the trips Shirley continued with her writing and campaign work, but time, and a life in the struggle, were beginning to tell. In Melbourne after a lingering illness, Shirley finally slipped away on 15 January 2023, at the fine age of 91, in the presence of her son Evan and close friends.

Following Shirley's death, the accolades were many from activists and leaders alike. Timor-Leste President Jose Ramos-Horta thanked her in a statement and said that now her 'soul rests with us in Mt Ramelau', the highest mountain in the country where the Timorese believe the spirits of their deceased reside.

In a move that would have pleased Shirley no end, Ramos-Horta also used his statement about her death to call on the Australian government to immediately, and finally, release all the remaining secret government documents relating to the Indonesian invasion.

Shirley's quest for the truth lives on.

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*Peter Cronau is an Australian journalist who has reported on East Timor since the 1980s in numerous newspapers, radio, and in the 2000s for Australian ABC TV. In 2007 he and his team was awarded the Gold Walkley Award for journalism for a report on an outbreak of political violence in East Timor. He has since produced reports on the Timor Sea gas and oil dealings, and the Australian bugging operation in Timor and its aftermath. In 2000 he helped establish the Friends of Maliana-Leichhardt friendship group and helped his sons raise funds for Timorese communities at their local school.*

@PeterCronau