



He owes his life to an Indonesian Army officer

The former army officer would be old now – maybe 70 years or more. He was a high-ranking member of the Indonesian army during the occupation years. But now a poor coffee farmer from the Ainaro District wants to find him and once again thank him for his life.

You see, back in 1980, when local Timorese sympathisers to the Indonesian cause wanted to kill that nine-year-old boy – this remarkable soldier stepped in and not only saved the boy's life.... he educated and helped to raise him.

While atrocities committed by Indonesian soldiers are well documented, there are also many untold instances of special kindnesses displayed by them.

The boy (whom we will call Florio) was born in May 1971 and lived in the village of Hatumera, not far from the town of Ainaro in the Ainaro District, where the *Tour de Timor "World Race for Peace"* the passes through on 15 September 2010. His family were farmers, growing mostly coffee as well as corn, cassava and taro which they would sell in the market in Ainaro.

In December 1975, the Indonesians invaded Timor-Leste and occupied the country for the next 24 years. Within three months of the invasion of Dili, the Indonesian Army (known as TNI) had arrived in Ainaro town. Many local people fled from the town and headed for the hills. From early 1976 until 1978, TNI and Falintil fought across the valley between Ainaro and Hatumera. The Indonesians were far better equipped and the village of Hatumera was completely destroyed by the constant bombardment. During these two years of fighting, Florio and his family lived in the mountains behind Hatumera. They built temporary shelters to protect them from the elements but due to the constant fighting they were regularly on the move. Florio remembers huddling with his mother during the fighting, feeling the earth move.

In 1980, Indonesian soldiers came to his family's shelter. All his family members fled in fear but Florio was busy playing behind the house and was forgotten in the rush to depart. When the

Indonesians found Florio, they asked where his family were. He cried and explained that they ran away. One of the soldiers was Timorese and he kicked Florio but an Indonesian soldier, Rashid, from Sumatra stopped him and suggested they take him with them. This soldier was an officer. The Timorese soldier wanted to kill Florio but Rashid stopped him from doing so, saying that Florio was only a child and should not be killed.

The soldiers were based in Hatu-Udo, another village in Ainaro district. The army group, along with Timorese “tebio” (army helpers) and Florio walked to the base camp at Hatu-Udo via Atsabe and Zumelai. It took a week of walking over the mountainous terrain.

Florio lived with Rashid, collecting water, washing clothes and cooking. At that time the officer also taught the boy to read and write in Indonesian. Florio would practise writing the alphabet in the dirt.

Rashid was a high ranking member of the Indonesian army. He was part of the invasion forces in 1975 then returned to Timor-Leste in 1979 for another 12 month tour of duty. Florio was with Rashid for his final six months in Timor in 1980.

Even though Florio was effectively a child slave for Rashid, he was treated very well. And Florio now remembers Rashid fondly. Florio hadn't been to school before his kidnapping so this early education proved invaluable in later years.

According to Florio, there were many times that other soldiers suggested that he should be killed. Each time Rashid would explain that he was only a child and shouldn't be killed.

As the officer's tour of duty came to an end he sent word around that he was willing to sell the boy. Florio's older sister heard this information and requested to buy her brother back. She paid 100 rupiah for her brother's return. At that time, 100 rupiah was equivalent to \$10US which was a large amount for a rural farming family. Florio remained in Hatu-Udo with his older sister and attended school for the first time.

According to Florio, Rashid knew 100 rupiah was a lot of money, so Florio would be valued and looked after.

It is difficult to comprehend how Florio could idolise a man that made his family pay to get him back but Florio sees it that Rashid was protecting him and ensuring his future safety.

Both his parents and several siblings were killed during the 1980s. When his parents and siblings fled the family home in Hatumera, they went to Ermera. His mother was killed by the Indonesians in 1984 or 1985, however the details are unclear as Florio was only ever to get third hand information from people in the area years after the event. Her body, like so many Timorese during the occupation, has never been found. Florio's father died around 1989, also killed by the Indonesians in unexplained circumstances. From the day they fled in 1980, he was never to see his parents alive again.

Florio completed primary and junior high school in Hatu-Udo (Aldeia Leisu) while living with his sister. During that time, his sister changed their family name. The reason for this was that their name was strongly associated with the resistance movement and it proved to be a dangerous name to have during Indonesian occupation. The new name was considered more pro-Indonesian and therefore safer. Many people from Hatumera changed their names in the 80s.

Florio completed his schooling in Ainaro town in 1992. In 1994, Rashid returned to Timor-Leste, no longer an army officer, and begun making enquires in Dili about the young boy that he left behind in Hatu-Udo. He was told that Florio was then in Ainaro so he travelled to Ainaro looking for him.

Florio was very happy to see his former captor. Rashid helped Florio obtain his high school diploma then to get a job with the local government office in the Economics department.

Florio was sent to Surabaya in 1994 for three months of economics training. Again he was able to meet with his saviour. When Florio was returning to Timor Leste via Kupang, he spotted a beautiful teenage girl from the bus. He was later to discover that she was Indonesian, from West Timor. In 1994-95 she followed Florio back to Ainaro and they were married.

Florio worked in the government office in Ainaro until the end of Indonesian occupation in 1999. He voted for independence in the referendum on 30 August 1999. Shortly after the referendum results were released in early September, violence broke out as the Indonesians began to withdraw and implemented the “scorched earth” policy, destroying both offices and private homes.

In September 1999, many locals fled Ainaro, including Florio and his wife who remained in Hatumera for three months. More than 200,000 people crossed into West Timor, many in a forced migration by the departing Indonesian forces. By December 1999, the majority of the Timorese returned to Timor Leste to rebuild the country.

Since then Florio has supported his family through farming, mainly growing coffee in the mountains behind Hatumera. In 2001 he rebuilt the house in Beiscem (near the big market in Ainaro town) which was destroyed in 1999. Florio’s wife weaves traditional cloth known as tais which is also a source of income, particularly in the dry season. They now have five children aged between 1 and 9 years old.

Florio has been an active and eager student of the Ballarat Ainaro English Support Program since it began in Ainaro in 2006. He has befriended many of the Ballarat volunteer teachers over the last three years.

Rashid was aged about 40 in 1980 which means he may be in his 70s now. Florio can't remember his family name and he hasn't seen the man since 1994-1995 but would like to see him again.



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