



**“Crumbs of Compassion”
Robert Wesley-Smith
and the voyage of *The Dawn*, 1976.**

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I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights.

—Bishop Desmond Tutu

An Australian Prime Minister interfering with due process; Kerry Packer on an ocean-going barge with a stockpile of Fanta and his hunting rifles; ASIO and the Australian Army beating about the bush looking for clandestine radio transmitters; a battered yellow Volkswagen

Kombi being staked out by Australian Customs; and the Royal Australian Navy in “blackout mode”, prowling about Darwin Harbour by night.

Then there was Gough Whitlam getting sacked; Henry Kissinger in Jakarta setting up an invasion; five Australian journalists getting murdered and \$38,000 worth of illegally imported East Timorese coffee being sold off to Andronicus in Sydney—no wonder the ABC didn’t want to do the documentary!

The “Dawn in Darwin” affair had two distinct aspects. One was the exotic mix of characters, institutions and events—in almost comic proportions—set against the terror and bloodshed that were taking place in East Timor. The second, less known story, was of four rather idealistic Australian men who were about to become pawns in the murky world of international politics that was unfolding in Jakarta.

The four Australians were: Robert Wesley-Smith, a government agronomist working in Darwin; Jim Zantis, a Bondi jeweller (and suspected ASIO agent); Cliff Morris, a Deniliquin dairy farmer and ex-commando; and Manny Manolis (Mavromatis), a Broome fisherman, working in Darwin. On September 17, 1976, the four men were arrested and charged with undertaking an illegal voyage, drug-smuggling and gun-running. The Royal Australian Navy, who stopped their fishing boat, the *Dawn*, a few minutes after it left the wharf in Darwin, and the Australian Customs who took the men to the Darwin Customs House, didn’t want to lay any charges. But they were overridden by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, who insisted that the four men be prosecuted.

What was Australia’s Prime Minister doing interfering with the normal course of the law? Why was Malcolm Fraser telephoning Darwin’s Customs House in the middle of the night issuing instructions about laying charges—overriding decisions by the government officers in control of the investigation? How was he aware of what seemed to be such a minor affair involving a fairly small fishing boat—and why was he so concerned?

Henry VIII was still married to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, when the Portuguese started sniffing about the island of Timor, around 1514. They claimed Timor in 1520 and set up a Dominican mission there in 1566. In 1602 the Dutch grabbed hold of the Western side of Timor and established the trading port of Kupang.

The English buccaneer William Dampier visited the island in 1699 aboard the *Roebuck*, after leaving the north-west coast of Australia near the site of Broome. His visit might be said to be the first known Australia–Timor connection.

Captain Bligh made for Timor in his small boat after being cast adrift by the *Bounty* mutineers in 1789. Timor was then Australia’s closest European settlement and the town of Dili was barely twenty years old. Timor was also the destination of the survivors of the wreck of the *Pandora*, which sank on the Great Barrier Reef in 1791. A twenty-four-gun Porcupine Class Sixth Rate Post-ship of the Royal Navy, and she had been out hunting for the *Bounty* mutineers.

For the Portuguese and the Dutch, Timor had little in the way of spice, but it had some things to export such as sandalwood, wax and honey. Australia’s commercial interest in East Timor perhaps began when Portugal granted an Australian company oil exploration rights in 1926.

Australia really got to know the Timorese during the Second World War when, in 1941, a small force of Australian troops were driven out of Dili, up into the hinterland. There they conducted a guerrilla war against the occupying Japanese army. They were supported by the Timorese, who lost between 40,000 and 70,000 fighters during the four years of the campaign. A former Australian commando, Paddy Kenneally, said after the war, “We did the surviving, they did the dying. Nothing we achieved could have been done without them.” Another ex-commando was Cliff Morris, who revisited East Timor in 1974 to renew some old friendships and presented the community with an English–Timorese (Tetum) dictionary he had just completed. Cliff Morris would stay involved with East Timor and become the quiet crew member of the arrested fishing boat.

Around this time the various elements that were to form the “Dawn in Darwin” affair started to fall into place. Reading the developing weather pattern well, the skipper of a small fishing boat, the *Dawn*, decided to run his ex-crayfishing boat into a side creek of the Finnis River, instead of making for Darwin. It was a smart move. His name was Manny Mavromatis, also known as Manny Manolis. The *Dawn* survived Cyclone Tracy, and Manny managed to get her back to Darwin Harbour with its cargo of fish in time to help feed the hungry, shattered city.

Another helping with the relief work was a government employee, Robert Wesley-Smith. Wesley-Smith had met Jose Ramos Horta in

Darwin in 1974 and was an active member of a pro-independence group busily working for the East Timorese in Darwin. One of the group's activities was operating a clandestine radio network between East Timor and Darwin. It was the source of broadcast news getting out of East Timor from 1974 to 1976. Members of the radio group were racing along outback tracks, setting up their ex-wartime transmitters and receivers, making contact with East Timor, then hurriedly dismantling their gear, with the police, ASIO, the Army and Telecom officials hot on their tails. It was like a combination of Dad's Army and the French Resistance being stalked by radio-detection vehicles of the German signals corps.

In September 1974, three months before Cyclone Tracy, Gough Whitlam visited Indonesia and declared that the Australian government's position was that Portuguese East Timor should be incorporated into Indonesia. Whitlam qualified this statement by adding that it should be done with the express wish of the Timorese people. Both Whitlam and his ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, surely knew that this was never going to happen and that the East Timorese were not going to accept an Indonesian takeover. Ironically, it was the East Timorese business community, four months later, that offered the first international aid to Darwin after Cyclone Tracy had destroyed the city.

Business and commerce were at the heart of Australia's interest in East Timor after the Second World War. Between 1961 and 1968 Australian-based companies were exploring the Timor Sea. In 1972 the Australian Prime Minister, William McMahon, visited the Indonesian President, Suharto, and got an agreement on the sea border between Timor and Australia. The agreement described two thirds of the seabed in Australia's favour—as well as establishing a three-year formal defence co-operation program.

Portugal, still the colonial guardian of East Timor, objected to Australia's action and demanded a UN Law of the Sea conference. This request was ignored by the Australian government. In 1972 BHP received a concession to explore the Timor Sea and in 1973 Woodside obtained a lease over the Koepang Basin. In 1974 the fabulous Troubadour hydrocarbon oil and gas deposit was discovered.

On the political front the little half-island of East Timor was attracting the attention of the really big players. In July 1975 President Suharto

visited US President Gerald Ford and they discussed East Timor. Suharto proposed its “integration” with Indonesia and, according to minutes of the meeting, “was not rebuffed”.

In East Timor the situation was deteriorating rapidly, with a split between the Revolutionary Front for an Independent Timor (Fretilin) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT). A front group for the Indonesian military, the Timorese Popular Democratic Association (Apodeti) was also stirring up trouble. In July 1975 local East Timor elections returned 55 per cent in favour of Fretilin. A brief civil war erupted between Fretilin and the UDT—with a twitchy Indonesian-backed Apodeti watching and mischief-making from the sidelines.

On August 12, 1975, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger met to discuss the East Timor “crisis”. At this special meeting was Paul Bremner, later to play a key roll in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq. Kissinger stated at the meeting that he didn’t want a “communist dominated” independent East Timor, and stressed that if Indonesia invaded East Timor it must do so effectively, quickly, and without using US-supplied equipment. He also ordered his officers to determine Australia’s viewpoint.

About this time Labor MP Michael Darby telephoned Gerald Stone and suggested to him that an interesting story for Channel Nine might be evolving in East Timor and that the television channel should send in a news team. Stone got Kerry Packer’s approval for the venture, but to Stone’s horror, Packer wanted to come along too.

In mid-August Packer, Stone and news cameraman Brian Peters arrived in Darwin. Packer had with him his hunting rifles, his personal Zodiac inflatable and a large supply of Fanta (apparently his preferred drink). They boarded a barge, the *Kompiri Maru*, which was loaded with medical equipment and supplies, volunteers and some medical people. Packer had agreed to pay the \$6000 charter fee for the barge to sail to Dili and back—against the wishes of the Whitlam government.

Packer, Stone and Peters landed in Dili and experienced sporadic gunfire and a town in chaos. Peters was given a letter, from Fretilin’s Nicolau Lobato, which he was asked to deliver to the Australian government on his return to Australia. As the situation deteriorated, the Packer party evacuated Dili in an RAAF aircraft, while the barge, the *Kompiri Maru*, returned to Darwin loaded with refugees. Brian Peters,

two months later, became one of the Balibo Five journalists killed by the Indonesian military.

Involved in the toing and froing between Darwin and Dili, during this period, was a shadowy figure called Jim Zantis. A one-time Bondi jeweller and suspected arms dealer, Zantis was, in 1975, an aid worker setting up a clinic and nursery in Dili for a charity organisation called ASIAT. Zantis, while working for ASIAT, was suspected of also being an ASIO agent. He also bragged that he was smuggling illicit gems.

In Dili, aid agencies were calling for humanitarian assistance as the instability on the island, and in Dili, was becoming alarming. Both Fretilin and UDT were sending radio signals to the clandestine bush radios outside Darwin, calling for international assistance and aid. Australian government agencies were hunting down the radios, as the news out of East Timor was becoming an embarrassment to the Whitlam government.

In October 1975, Australian intelligence intercepted Indonesian military signals that confirmed their plans for an Indonesian invasion across the West Timor border, into the Malianas area, including Balibo. The signals were passed on to the Australian Minister for Defence, Bill Morrison, but were kept secret to preserve the surveillance. As it turned out, the five Australian journalists killed on October 16 were in the line of the invasion route and were most likely killed to restrict information of the obvious Indonesian military activity around Balibo.

On November 11, 1975, Gough Whitlam was sacked as Prime Minister and Malcolm Fraser took his place as caretaker. About this time, and with an Indonesian invasion imminent, Ramos Horta organised with Jim Zantis the sale of the East Timor coffee crop to the Andronicus coffee family in Sydney. The crop was quickly sent to Darwin by barge and the \$38,000 proceeds were deposited in the Commonwealth Bank in Darwin—where they remained for the next twenty-five years.

Six days later, Labor MP Michael Darby wrote to the new Foreign Minister, Andrew Peacock, warning him that Indonesian troops were poised to attack East Timor. Peacock replied, saying, “You might be right, but we can do nothing.”

On December 5, while Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger were visiting Chairman Mao in Beijing, Kissinger received a cable from the US State Department alerting him to the approaching Indonesian invasion of East

Timor. The next day Ford and Kissinger were in Jakarta meeting with Suharto and Indonesian Foreign Minister Malik. They reassured Suharto, “We will understand and not press you on the issue.” Their main concern was to hide from the US Congress and Senate the fact that US-supplied aircraft and heavy weapons were going to be used in the invasion.

The next day Indonesia crossed the East Timor border. Kissinger described the invasion as “illegal and beautiful”.

To try to understand Kissinger’s attitude, it is insightful to look back at his doctoral thesis, written in 1957, on the 1815 Congress of Vienna. In it he argued that “in international affairs there is an inescapable priority to pursue order and stability over justice and other considerations”. Those “other considerations” obviously included US law, because eleven days after the invasion Kissinger overruled his senior State Department staff who wanted to put a halt on Indonesia receiving any more US armaments, as Indonesia had knowingly used US-supplied military equipment during the invasion.

On Christmas Day, 1975, a year after Cyclone Tracy, Australian welfare bodies, including Australian Catholic Relief, the Australian Council of Churches, Austcare, Community Aid Abroad, St Vincent de Paul, UNICEF and World Vision wrote to all the parties, including Indonesia, offering relief supplies and requesting that “safe passage be guaranteed for a boat or boats to transport its relief supplies from Darwin to Dili without interference or impediment”. Indonesia ignored the request. By mid-1976 Community Aid Abroad had raised \$160,000 from public appeals in Australia for aid for East Timor and was anxious to get food and medical supplies to Dili.

So began the saga of the “Dawn in Darwin” affair and the fate of the four unlikely players who were now becoming impossibly entangled in the affairs of Australia’s now elected Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser.

On January 11, 1976, Andrew Peacock refused permission for a relief barge of medical supplies and food to leave Darwin for East Timor. Dr John Whitehall, a member of a medical team ready to leave for Dili, stated in a media interview: “The Australian government is guilty of an enormous bungle and a party to violence by proxy ... they are guilty of complicity with Indonesia.”

Commonwealth police and Telecom officers found and confiscated in Darwin the only radio link with Dili, thus cutting off contact with the outside world. Then a second clandestine radio in Darwin received the following message from Dili: “In the name of the 50,000 Timorese who died to help Australian troops during the war, the people of East Timor request the return of the radio seized last Sunday.”

The radio was critical for UN Envoy Winspeare Guicciardi, based in Darwin, to assess the situation in Dili. The Australian government was obviously following Indonesian requests to silence all communications with the island. Darwin activists were causing some embarrassment to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Affairs Department. In February 1976, four carloads of police and Telecom officials seized the other clandestine radio that had resumed contact with Dili.

Also in February, Australian charities were becoming desperate to get food and medical supplies to East Timor. They had raised tens of thousands of dollars from the public, purchased vast quantities of rice, tinned food and medicines, but all this urgently needed aid was standing uselessly in storerooms and warehouses scattered about Darwin. What was needed was a boat to run the blockade. Indonesia had threatened to sink any boat with humanitarian aid that approached East Timor. Australian organisations began rebelling against their government.

Trade unions in New South Wales were looking at buying an ex-Sydney ferry, the *Bellubera*, for \$20,000, to undertake a voyage to East Timor. Community Aid Abroad organised a Bertram motor-cruiser, the *Lady Jane*, which, when it got to Darwin, was found to be totally unfit for the venture. An attempt in July to use the *Lady Jane* failed. Then Robert Wesley-Smith, Jim Zantis and Cliff Morris approached Manny Manolis to provide his fishing boat, the *Dawn*, an ex-crayfishing boat from Fremantle. He eventually agreed. The men offered to get the Community Aid Abroad supplies through to East Timor illicitly. CAA accepted their offer.

At this stage, events began to take on a Monty Python twist. The four men had set up their planning headquarters across the road from the Australian Customs House, and down the street from the Indonesian Consul’s office. Each building was in sight of the other buildings—with comings and goings clearly visible by Indonesian agents, Australian Customs and security officials and the four blockade-runners. Wesley-Smith’s yellow Kombi, used as the main vehicle to transport the food

and medical supplies between the various charity agencies, was under constant surveillance by security people, including ASIO. There was a Customs officer hiding in a warehouse opposite where the *Dawn* was moored, watching the boat, and its occupants, with binoculars.

In early September it was announced that a high-level meeting between Malcolm Fraser and President Suharto would take place in Jakarta, and other high-level meetings were planned to unfold in Kuala Lumpur. Noise from Darwin was obviously embarrassing.

The *Dawn* was taken for a “dry run” to the entrance of Darwin Harbour during the night of September 16, and returned to the dock without incident. Then, in the darkness, the bags of rice, cartons of tinned milk and the medical items were picked up from the various charity depots by Wesley-Smith in his slightly battered yellow Kombi, and taken to be loaded aboard the *Dawn*. It took many trips.

Jim Zantis carried an additional item, a withdrawal slip for the \$38,000 (the coffee money) that had been deposited in the Darwin branch of the Commonwealth Bank. The withdrawal slip needed the signature of a Fretilin member who was trapped in Dili. His signature had to be added to that of Ramos Horta before the money could be released from the bank.

As the *Dawn* quietly slipped away from her berth into the darkness, heading for East Timor, the four men thought they were safely on their way. They were eating a vegetarian snack, and were not even outside Darwin Harbour when a Royal Australian Navy patrol boat, HMAS *Adroit*, appeared out of the dark. Its searchlight flooded the *Dawn* with blinding light and a 50-calibre gun was pointed at the *Dawn*'s startled aid-runners. Naval ratings, armed with machine-guns and side arms, leapt aboard and arrested the four men. The *Dawn* was escorted back to Darwin's Stokes Hill wharf.

Locked in police cells, the four were told by a Customs officer that they would not be charged with any offence, but kept in custody overnight while the *Dawn* was searched. Wesley-Smith described the event as “bigger than *Quo Vadis*”. The Customs report revealed later that the boat carried “periodicals wrapped in plastic, rice, powdered milk and medical supplies and a small quantity of weapons”. These were two old shotguns and an M1 rifle, later described as normal weapons that would be found on any Northern Territory fishing boat.

Reconstruction of the events following the arrest of the *Dawn* and the four men revealed a story of intrigue and startling conduct by the Commonwealth government. During the interrogation of the four men, the second-in-charge of Australian Customs in Darwin, Officer Botes, was called away to take an urgent telephone call from Canberra. Accounts state that twenty minutes later, Officer Botes returned “pale and breathless”, saying that it was Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser on the phone and that he had insisted that charges be laid against the four men for gun-running.

Later the four were taken before Magistrate Roy Watson and charged with “exporting medical supplies without a permit”. This was later enhanced by adding an additional charge of “exporting firearms”. Another charge, “making an illegal voyage”, was added. What was not mentioned was that the *Dawn* was carrying radio equipment and operating instructions. There was also a Fretilin code-book.

A few weeks later, on October 4, 1976, the Commonwealth announced that they had “captured” a third clandestine radio near Darwin. That radio had been receiving news of the situation in East Timor and reports on the conduct of the Indonesian troops. Malcolm Fraser, defending the seizure and closing down of the radio, said, “I would hope that nobody is trying to argue that illegal radios of this kind, carrying the sort of messages that we know have been carried out on it, should be allowed to operate.” Once again, all contact between East Timor and the outside world stopped.

The trial of the four men started on October 15, 1976, one day short of the anniversary of the murder of the Balibo Five—and the farce continued.

During a lunch break on the second day, vials of morphine, found on the *Dawn*, just “disappeared”, reducing the quantity the prosecution could produce as evidence to a mere twelve grams. Then one of the defendants’ lawyers, Geoff James, pointed out that the Commonwealth was using two sections of the Customs Act to establish one crime. “That’s not how it works,” he told the court. When questioned in court about the “Malcolm Fraser call”, a distressed Officer Botes stated that he couldn’t answer without committing perjury or making damaging revelations. The magistrate ruled that the information was “protected” and he was excused.

At one stage the magistrate was reduced to tears, when confronted with evidence of Australia's "blood debt" to East Timor, explaining that he had lost a brother in the Second World War. A gun expert for the defence stated that one of the shotguns "wouldn't blow the arse off a duck". Strangely, the Commonwealth lawyers were mostly concerned with the old shotguns and seemed uninterested in the M1 rifle and the large amount of ammunition Zantis had in his possession on the boat. The lack of interest in Jim Zantis by the prosecution during the court proceedings added to the belief that he was an ASIO agent.

The Darwin magistrate found the four men guilty and the defence lawyers immediately announced an appeal to the Supreme Court—stating thirty grounds. The appeal was upheld on April 26, 1977, by Justice Foster, citing technical grounds. The Commonwealth in turn appealed, but three months later withdrew its case—two days after President Suharto signed legislation incorporating East Timor as Indonesia's twenty-seventh province.

After the arrest, the *Dawn* was placed on a slipway by Australian Customs, where it fell out of its cradle three times and was severely damaged. The Commonwealth government offered Manolis \$8000 compensation for the damage. Cliff Morris returned to his dairy farm and Robert Wesley-Smith returned to work, while Jim Zantis quietly slipped out of Darwin. After experiencing bureaucratic difficulties renewing his skipper's ticket and other maritime issues, Manny Manolis left Darwin for Broome and never returned.

The most intriguing aspect of the "Dawn in Darwin" affair was the actions of Malcolm Fraser. It was not his involvement in the international politics of the time that is so puzzling—that is what prime ministers do—but his conduct and attitudes in later life. His attacks on his Liberal successor, John Howard, regarding refugees and boat people, and his silence about Mugabe in Zimbabwe, sit very uncomfortably with his own actions against the four aid workers who were trying to help those dying, starving and abandoned in East Timor. There is almost no doubt that Australia was complicit in the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and that the Fraser government was determined to silence critics in Australia—and to cause as little embarrassment to President Suharto and Indonesia as possible.

When challenged about his silence on Mugabe, Fraser said in the *Australian* in 2008:

The director of the office [CARE] rang me to make sure that I did not say anything publicly about the disturbances in Zimbabwe because he feared it would put at risk people working in CARE in remote parts of the country. It was advice I accepted at the time.

It seems that saying nothing about Suharto, and Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1976, was also, for some reason, "advice he accepted at the time".

Material for this article was uncovered from court records, newspaper articles and historical documents during research for a documentary film idea, in association with Broome author Peter Bibby. The idea was declined by the ABC in 2005.

HYPERLINK

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Note from Robert Wesley-Smith: A few points I would could clarify/correct. John Tomlinson would be upset he doesn't get a mention for his use of the NTCOS yellow Kombi, not me. Fixing the Dawn cost more like \$30,000 - thanks Oz Govt! . Years later I asked M Fraser when he might do a mea culpa about this issue, we said something like 'we will have to see', or 'think about that', or somesuch. Thanks to John and Peter Bibby, and to Libby T

