

## **Interviews with War Dog Operatives**

Series 3, Profile 1 – East Timor

### **Corporal Vanessa Wallis - Royal Australian Air Force**

Dateline for this profile is 29 September 2009.

NOTE 1: Corporal Vanessa Wallis is the first female in the history of the Australian Defence Force to handle a Military Working Dog, with a bullet in the chamber of her rifle and ready to take her part in a firefight, during a combat situation.

NOTE 2: All images in this profile are the property of Vanessa Wallis

### **Background**

CPL Vanessa Wallis comes from the Ipswich area of Queensland and spent most of her formative years mixing city life and country living together. She has had a love of animals, particularly dogs, from a very early age. When she was seven years of age, her school took her to see the RAAF Police Dog demonstration at the RAAF Base at Amberley. At the end of the demonstration Vanessa made up her mind that she wanted to become a military working dog (MWD) handler in the RAAF.

After leaving school, Vanessa was employed in retail and retail management, followed by work in a security company. The security company work opened up an opportunity for Vanessa to work with security dogs and she also worked in a dog boarding kennel in the Ipswich and Sydney areas.

### **RAAF Career**

When Vanessa turned sixteen she made her first attempt at signing up for the RAAF but found that she was too young to be assigned a position in the MWD muster. In 1996, the required age was twenty-one (later reduced to eighteen), so Vanessa had to wait patiently for time to pass before attempting again to sign up into the RAAF. Vanessa signed up in 2002 and after initial recruit training was posted to RAAF Base Amberley where she graduated from the RAAF Security and Fire School as a MWD handler.

On graduation, Vanessa was teamed up with her first dog, RD Kirra. A short time later Kirra passed away from a veterinary problem. Vanessa was then teamed up with her second MWD, German Shepherd Akyra, and they have been a team ever since. Her first posting as a RAAF security person was with 382 Expeditionary Combat Support Squadron (ECSS) base at RAAF Amberley where she and Akyra patrolled the base and conducted sensitive area security duties.

Vanessa and Akyra attended a course at the Intelligence Centre at Canungra in Queensland where they were exposed to realistic riot control situations. Akyra actually bit a hostile suspect during this course and demonstrated her ability and willingness to perform a “takedown” if need be. Vanessa considers that this type of course work is of great benefit to ADF security personnel, particularly those with MWD.

## Overseas Service

In early 2006 the threat to peace and stability in East Timor had become an international issue. 382ECSS was the standby unit to deploy at that time, and when the call came to deploy to East Timor, 382 ECSS mobilised. The mobilisation included six MWD teams in which Leading Aircraft Woman (LACW) Wallis was one of the personnel to go, with her dog Akyra. LACW Wallis' group were airlifted to Darwin by C130 (Hercules) transport aircraft in May 2006 where they commenced training and acclimatisation for their on-movement to East Timor. This training included long distance marches with full combat loads in the heat of the day in the Darwin area. When the order came for the dog unit to deploy to East Timor, Sergeant Shane "Kiwi" Campbell and Corporal Brett Thompson with their dogs were sent to East Timor to arrange for the reception of the remainder of the dog unit. The rest of the unit followed forty eight hours later. There were a few issues to address initially with the administrative and logistic support for overseas dog deployments such as this one for East Timor.

The time came for the movement of the remaining four RAAF dog handlers and their dogs. They were CPL Brett, CPL Allen, LAC Luckman and LACW Wallis. The group was loaded on to a RAAF C130 aircraft and arrived at Komoro airport near Dili in East Timor just on midnight. As there were intelligence reports that there may have been a chance of hostile fire being directed at the aircraft, a tactical landing was executed.

In Vanessa's words: "the four of us were on the back door of the aircraft and the dogs were in containers in front of us. We were fully kitted up for action with weapons, live rounds, Kevlar body protection and field packs. The loadmaster came to us at the rear of the aircraft and told us to prepare for action and that we were about to land. His instructions included "put on your helmets". That was very difficult because the helmets were attached to the packs on our backs. So, we sat and looked at each other and wondered what the heck we had let ourselves in for. Immediately the aircraft touched down we were ordered to "load", and on to our rifles went a full magazine. The aircraft had barely stopped when the cargo hatch was lowered and we told to get off quickly. After sitting in the cold of the Hercules from Darwin, the heat and the smell of East Timor hit us as a sudden surprise, given that most of us had never been outside Australia before. The Hercules kept its motors revving and the crew were obviously getting ready to load up again and then take off. Our gear and dogs were removed from the aircraft very swiftly by the air lift team. I had a problem moving because we had been sitting for a long time without the opportunity to move about, then the weight of the pack and the need to move quickly on numb legs and jump the twenty centimetres from the ramp on to the tarmac was a far bigger effort that I had imagined it would be. I was helped down from the ramp by some kind soul who could see my predicament. The dogs were still in their containers and the containers were lashed to a pallet. The pallet was removed by a forklift and we saw our dogs disappear into the darkness. SGT Campbell and CPL Thompson were there to receive us and helped us to keep together and reunite us with our dogs". Vanessa continues:

“The “airport” had been taken over by local people who were probably homeless. We had to walk over sleeping bodies all over the floors of the airport building. The dogs had to be held up short and dragged over the folk on the floor. We saw the local police guarding the entrances and parts of the airport as we moved outside into an area next to the airport which had been allocated to us for the first night. We slept on the ground with dogs tied up short to us and weapons under us. When I woke up early next morning, I saw a crowd of people staring at us from outside the airport perimeter fence. I felt like an exhibit in a zoo. I needed to use a toilet and asked CPL Thompson where it was. He laughed, and then took me to the toilet in the terminal. It was out of order and had been well patronised. It reeked, but I managed to use it without touching it by stretching my rifle out in front of me to counter-balance my body. I’ll bet the small arms instructors, back in my basic weapons training, didn’t think of that use of a firearm!”

The RAAF MWD section spent a few days in that area before being allocated a building in the airport precinct. Their initial job was to guard the evacuation centre so that foreign civilians, including Australians, could be air transported out of the country without the aircraft being rushed by desperate East Timorese people. Other tasks included the removal of local people from areas which were needed by the security forces. The local people knew that the international troops were not about to open fire at them with firearms, so they were very slow to respond to demands to move on. However, when the dog section turned up they moved very quickly. Apparently, the local people were afraid of large dogs, such as the German Shepherd. This was handy when the large carparks adjacent to the airport were being cleared of people and illicit weapons. Suspicious people and armed civilians were quickly rounded up and handed over to the security forces. There is no doubt that the dogs were a boon in this function. There was a lot of gang violence, spontaneous riots and rock throwing going on at the time. Many of these incidents were pacified the moment the dogs arrived as the dog section was instrumental in assisting the security forces to separate out the opposing factions.

Eventually, a large tent city was constructed near the airport and the security duties became more intense and larger in patrolled area. The area included villages. The villages were a conglomerate of housing with narrow laneways, many of which resembled a wandering footpath with no organised town plan. In some places, a rabbit warren would have been better organised. Obviously the people had been traumatised and they put up whatever shelter they could, things like access routes through these villages at times, “just happened” without any idea of direction or purpose.

There is a monolithic mountain feature which overlooks the airport and its runways. This was nicknamed “Megadeath” and was the reason behind the concern of the aircrew of the Hercules the night Vanessa’s team arrived. This concern lasted several weeks until Megadeath was secured and patrolled by the international security forces.

Some RAAF MWD patrols assisted the Australian Federal Police while they patrolled the general area and eventually they saw some Army Military Police (MP) dogs in the area also. However they were unable to join forces with the MP because their tasks were

located in the city of Dili guarding the jails and other sensitive areas, whereas the RAAF had been allocated security duties in the airport area.

The dogs had to be administered in line with AQIS quarantine protocols which included daily and bi-weekly medications, and dipping every three days. This was to combat the possibility of pathogenic parasites being present in the dogs. Every dose, type of medication and dipping regime had to be annotated and certified in writing for monitoring by AQIS personnel. Vanessa was assigned the responsibility of packaging the medications for her compatriot handlers as well as reminding them of the timing for dips. Her previous experience in civilian dog kennels was a handy experience to her in East Timor. The dog food was packaged in twenty kilo bags and came from the Eukanuba producers in Australia. However, dry dog food is a magnet for rats and mice and it was a constant battle to protect the dog food from the abundant vermin in the area.

### **Village Incident**

Vanessa went on a patrol with three Airfield Defence Group airmen (“ADGs”). Their task was to patrol the area near a village close to the airport. On arrival, the patrol saw a commotion going on with the local people and an armed suspect. The suspect saw the patrol and bolted off. The ADG commander gave the order to pursue him and so the three ADGs, Vanessa and Vanessa’s dog, Akyra, gave immediate chase, straight into the village. The ADGs began to close on the suspect because he had to run between civilians, who seeing the problem began screaming and running for cover. However, the ADG commander realised that the suspect might be running his patrol into an ambush. So the commander ordered his patrol to go to “action” with their weapons. Vanessa cocked her weapon and for the first time in her life, realised that she just might have to fight her way out of a dangerous situation. They continued the chase with adrenalin pumping, finger on the safety catch and Akyra ready to go into action if Vanessa just burped. There came a point in time when the patrol almost tackled the suspect, but he turned a corner and ran straight into the arms of another group of soldiers from the international security forces and was captured. It was not his day. But the RAAF patrol breathed a collective sigh of relief as they “made safe” their rifles.

### **Life for a female combatant**

The accommodation for Vanessa afforded her no privacy and no chance of ever being on her own. Despite this, she became confident in her safety while with her own group of “doggies”. They trusted each other without any possibility of doubt. Bathing was by communal shower arrangements and this was augmented with numerous packets of moist towelettes. In the early stages after arrival, the vast majority of meals were taken from ration packs and these became monotonous after a while. Some resourceful local purchases were made to augment the combat rations, such a loaf of bread and sometimes a box of fruit. Eventually, a dining mess was opened and they received cooked meals.

## **Return to Australia**

Reinforcements from the MWD section at RAAF Base Richmond began to arrive after about three weeks after the RAAF Base Amberley MWD team had arrived in country. There were four reinforcement airmen with their dogs from Richmond who travelled to East Timor aboard the HMAS Kinimbla. A perennial problem, at that time, was the lack of knowledge about how long in time they were going to be held in East Timor. Three months? six months? a year? nobody appeared to know. This put pressure on the personnel who had organised functions at home in Australia and did not know how long to postpone them or whether or not they should be cancelled. Eventually, they were given a return to Australia date and information that they would be transported by air to Darwin. The dogs had to be made ready for their return to Australia (RTA) under the strict AQIS protocols and veterinary arrangements for that move. Two of the handlers were assigned to escort the eight dogs back through the AQIS process of certification and quarantine en-route to, and on arrival in Australia. The remaining six, including Vanessa, were tasked to pack up, clean their equipment and area and prepare themselves for their own RTA. Four days later, the group was air-lifted by civilian air charter to Darwin, then on to Cairns and Brisbane by QANTAS. Vanessa was assigned to security duties in 382ECSS at RAAF Base Amberley where she was promoted to Corporal in late 2007. In 2008, Vanessa was posted as an instructor to the RAAF Security and Fire School at Amberley. Her current posting is at RAAF Base Darwin.

## **MWD Akyra**

At the end of 2009, MWD Akyra continues to serve on full duty in the RAAF. She is expected to retire from service soon.



ACW Vanessa Wallis and RD Kirra on graduation 2003



CPL Vanessa Wallis and MWD Akyra in East Timor 2006



CPL Vanessa Wallis on patrol with MWD Akyra in East Timor 2006



CPL Vanessa Wallis on street patrol with MWD Akyra in East Timor 2006