



Into the war zone ... was for Wendy Sharpe a once-in-a-lifetime experience

picture: RAY STRANGE

AT THE SHARPE END

Sydney artist Wendy Sharpe went to East Timor as an official war artist and saw Australian soldiers turning horror into hope. **ELIZABETH FORTESCUE** reports on Sharpe's exhibition at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Last December, Wendy Sharpe became an honorary captain in the Australian Army and took her sketchbooks into the nightmare territory of East Timor. As an official Australian war artist — the latest in a distinguished line-up of names including Lambert, Streeborn, Dargie and Dobell — Sharpe was embarking on what she now calls a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

But she couldn't have guessed at the human suffering and loss among the East Timorese — nor the acts of humanity by the Australian troops with the Interfet peacekeeping force, whose daily lives it was her mission to document.

"I did meet some wonderful people that were in the [Australian] Army," Sharpe said. "Seeing the kindness and generosity of some of the soldiers over there really was moving. In fact, the couple of times when I cried really was to do with things like that."

Sharpe said one of the most extraordinary people she met during her two-week posting to East Timor was Warrant Officer Col Watego of A Battery.

"He was such a humanitarian," Sharpe said. "One of the things I can particularly remember him doing is helping this frail, blind old East Timorese woman off this ship in Dili port and helping her on to this truck."

Sharpe mimics the ineffable gentleness with which Watego assisted the woman. Watego was constantly on the lookout for ways to help his own soldiers and obviously drew great joy from simple gestures, such as handing out biscuits to the local children.

Among other soldiers Sharpe remem-

bers was Captain Ben Farinazzo who, coincidentally, could speak the local Tetum dialect and became beloved of the East Timorese for his jokes and story telling.

Farinazzo would greet East Timorese refugees returning home from across the border.

These refugees were traumatised by their experiences and frightened by propaganda about what the Interfet troops were going to do to them. But when they saw Farinazzo, they received a caring, helping hand and heard a calm voice in their own language reassuring them: "You are home. You are home."

"They would just burst into tears," Sharpe said.

Farinazzo's linguistic skill paved the



Work and play ... Dili Hospital (above) and (below) Children At Suai

way for Sharpe to visit East Timorese in their huts near Suai. These people had decorated their simple homes with pictures of their heroes: resistance leader Xanana Gusmao, the Pope and Interfet soldiers.

Sharpe, born in 1960, is a former Archibald Prize winner who lives in Sydney's Erskineville and teaches part-time at the National Art School.

A selection of 64 of her East Timor drawings and paintings went on show this week at the Australian War Memorial in an exhibition called *New Beginnings*.

Sharpe's vast output from East Timor encompasses four sketchbooks, two oil paintings, a suite of five etchings and hundreds of drawings, according to the

War Memorial's head of art, Lola Wilkins. All these works go into the War Memorial's huge collection of official war art.

New Beginnings closes at the War Memorial on July 23, but a selection of Sharpe's East Timor works will tour to Sydney next year along with those of Rick Amor, a Melbourne artist who was also an official war artist in East Timor last year.

Sharpe lived with the troops, drawing and painting all day as the soldiers went about their daily tasks. There is Sergeant Kate Pendergast cleaning her rifle in Dili — with her stuffed toy dog as a reminder of home.

There are soldiers playing cards and in the mess tent. There are cooks and other behind-the-scenes workers, all drawn or painted in Sharpe's expressive, gestural style.

There is a large painting of the *Tour of Duty Concert* featuring John Farnham and Kylie Minogue, which was televised in Australia. Sharpe recalled perching in boiling heat backstage, surrounded by black plastic and almost fainting from dehydration as she did not have sufficient drinking water with her.

One of her large paintings is of a Christmas Eve mass and concert outside the cathedral in Suai, where a massacre happened in September. During the performance, local people re-enacted the killings — their way, perhaps, of coming to terms with the magnitude of their tragedy.

But sometimes it was the little things that intrigued Sharpe, like the varying colours of the camouflage worn by soldiers of different nations, reflecting the colours of their homelands.

The Minister for Veterans Affairs, Bruce Scott, opened *New Beginnings*.

"What Sharpe has captured on canvas is something that the camera doesn't, and that's a personal feeling of being there at the time," Mr Scott said.

Sharpe's East Timor artworks now become part of Australia's heritage, so the feeling of being there will never be forgotten. ■