

## Wendy Sharpe in Timor

# Images of war

Artist Wendy Sharpe is flamboyant, feminine, the last person you'd think of covering a war zone, but this Archibald prize winner returned from East Timor with a unique insight into the courage, humour and kindness of its people.

**I** saw tenderness and I saw compassion. There were moments of courage and some of utter sadness. It was a terrible – and wonderful – time. At first, I didn't want to go. Looking back, I wouldn't have missed it."

Last December, award-winning artist Wendy Sharpe, 39, stepped out of her safe, sun-filled Sydney studio to trade her T-shirt and sarong for an army uniform.

Her destination was East Timor in the violent, horror-filled days following the vote for independence. Her assignment, a commission from the Australian War Memorial to capture images of Australian soldiers sent to help people in a land devastated by fire, fury and mind-numbing cruelty.

Wendy's works will go on exhibition in Canberra around the end of June. At this stage, she has no idea how many paintings she will complete.

The first female military-zone artist since World War II, Wendy teaches at the National Art School. She won the Archibald Prize in 1996. Her life, she says, is rather safe and ordinary. "I'm not adventurous," she claims. "I felt like a Bohemian flower

that's been thrown into a war zone."

Along with paintings, Wendy will also hand over her sketch books and mementos of her trip – a piece of card a woman gave her to fan herself with on a hot night, for example, and wrapping paper from a Christmas gift. She has kept a photograph of graffiti on a wall which says: "I love you military Interfet (sic) forever. Thank you verry (sic) much Interfet my darling".

"I felt incredibly honoured to be there, to be part of the tradition of artists at war," she says.

When Wendy was approached by the Australian War Memorial to be the official artist in East Timor, she baulked. "It was a frightening place at the time. And I am not brave," she says. She agreed, instead, to go to Darwin, where the troops were stationed before leaving for East Timor.

"When the situation calmed down, I told them, then I would go to Dili and anywhere else they wanted me to go."

One night before Christmas, she shuffled onto the *Jervis Bay*, a huge catamaran ferrying troops from Darwin to Dili. There were 100 Australian soldiers on board and 200 Kenyan military personnel – all part

of the Interfet (International Force in East Timor) forces.

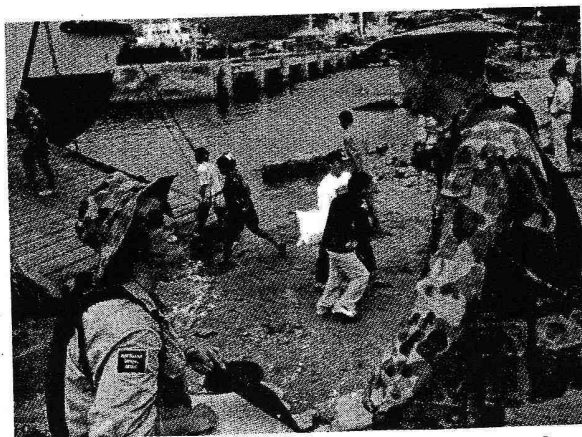
"I remember, in the early hours of the morning, how they all gathered at Mass and sang. It was enthralling. None of us knew what we were heading into. It was a highly charged time."

From the moment she stepped off the boat in Dili early on a Sunday morning, Wendy knew she would never be the same person again: "It was an amazing experience. There are images I will never forget."

There was the village she went to in the island's south, called Suai: "It would have been a lovely little town by the water, lush, green and filled with life. Yet there was no life, not even the sound of a bird. The houses had been systematically destroyed. All that was left were the concrete slabs where they'd been."

"I think what was so horrifying was the calculated thoroughness of the destruction. What was going through a soldier's mind, I wondered, as he destroyed?"

Later, Australian soldiers who had been there just after the pro-Indonesian militia had ripped through the village, told her of finding dead



Above: Wendy Sharpe and her bodyguard Private Cameron Simpson wait at the dockside in Dili for refugees from West Timor. Above right: One of Wendy's sketches of Australian soldiers at a Darwin briefing.

bodies everywhere, bodies hacked to pieces and strewn around like rag dolls.

"I'm glad I didn't see that," Wendy says. "There are some images you don't want to have to carry for the rest of your life."

We are talking in her Sydney home, which she shares with her partner, sculptor John Bartholomew. It's an old terrace, packed with colour, energy and exuberance. There is art everywhere. She has painted the bookcases, the walls, the plates and bowls, the tables and chairs. It gives the sense of a woman with a huge gusto for life.

Wendy's studio is upstairs, a large room filled with sketch after sketch, painting after painting, of her time in East Timor.

"I probably did about 500 sketches in a week," Wendy says. "I never stopped. It was odd, really. When I sketch in Australia, I always try to hide what I am doing because it makes people uncomfortable. In East Timor, everyone wanted to watch, to help. They loved what I was doing."

There is a drawing of a young Australian soldier with huge brown eyes and a wicked grin, who moved through the lives of the survivors in East Timor with humour and compassion.

"When he helped to deliver a baby, its parents named their son after him. Ben, he was called. He was so tender as he held that tiny baby. I'll never forget that image."

Then there are the dark moments, paintings filled with faces in anguish and despair.

"This is the church in Suai," she says, holding up a sketch. "It was being built with all the love and hope of a very religious people. When the soldiers marched in, about 100 people fled to the church for sanctuary. But they were not spared. They were all killed. So the church has become a symbol of death and no-one wants to go near it any more."

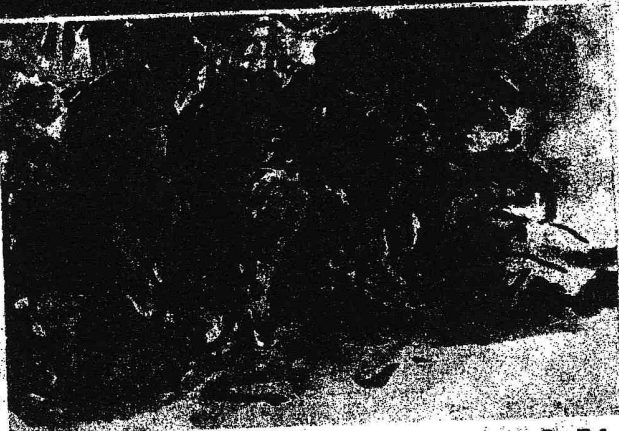
The survivors of Suai re-enacted the carnage one sweltering night before Christmas. At first, Wendy was shocked. Then she realised it was their way of coping, of living with what had happened to family and friends. In her paintings, the church, still with scaffolding, looms bleak and black; the faces around it etched with both disbelief and angry helplessness.

She sketched the two young women who did the washing for soldiers. She drew a picture of a young female soldier wearing nothing but her hat and her boots: "She sent it home to her boyfriend."

There are images of young men in camouflage queuing for breakfast in the



Wendy and Warrant Officer Colin Watego with some East Timorese children, the inspiration behind the painting (left).



**"I'm not brave ... but I felt incredibly honoured to be there, to be part of the tradition of artists at war."**

mess hall, there are pictures of the camp stretchers Wendy slept on, sharing a space with a woman who sat calmly in front of her cleaning her rifle.

"No-one went anywhere without their rifle," Wendy says. "Soldiers would jog, shower, eat and sleep with their rifles. At first, it scared me. I'd never been around guns before. I learned a soldier must never leave his weapon unattended for his own safety in case it gets stolen."

There is a poignant image of a little boy in dark shorts, wearing a white shirt buttoned down the front. His face is serious and intent. In his hands he carries a woman's handbag like a businessman would carry a briefcase.

"He was trying so hard to be grown-up," Wendy says. "He was a survivor."

There are other children, laughing and joyous, children who realise they are among the lucky ones because they are alive. Some carry huge teddy bears, handed out by the Australian army during

the Christmas period. Others wear incongruously frilly pink dresses found "goodness knows where" as they go to Sunday Mass. Others are naked and filled with fun as they swim and splash in the sea.

From the start, Wendy battled her own fears. "I was too afraid to have a shower at night because the showers were outside. I worried I might get bitten by a mosquito and get malaria. So I'd go to bed every night absolutely filthy. The weather was stinking hot, the humidity relentless. But I stopped caring. All I wanted to do was document every moment I could."

When Wendy arrived there were about 4500 Australian soldiers in East Timor, and about 500 women - some numbered among the soldiers, others nurses and supporting staff.

Wendy says, "What immediately struck me was how young most of the women were. I don't think that I came across anyone older than 25."

"They were young but they were so kind and competent. And so fearless. They were also emotionally balanced. When they found locals attacking an Indonesian soldier, they stopped it. They explained to the locals: 'We are here to stop all violence. To see it all ends'."

"They were there to rebuild, not to judge, nor to condone revenge. This is going to sound odd, coming from an artist who has never thought much about war, politics or despair, but I was so proud of our soldiers, so proud to be Australian."

- SUSAN DUNCAN

Additional reporting from Anthony Roy in Dili