

AN ITALIAN IN EAST TIMOR

by James Panichi

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Frank Favaro is an Italian Australian from the old school, the type of person who has seen and done it all. And while he now lives in the Adelaide hills, surrounded by all the trappings of the successful second-generation immigrant dream, he says his greatest hope for the future is to be back behind the counter of his Dili hotel, serving Martini. At the age of 63 Frank is ready to start all over again, and has promised to return to East Timor the day Indonesian troops have left. And that day may be closer than we think.

Frank's East Timor adventure appears unremarkable when compared to the rest of his life. He was born in 1935 in the Queensland outback, where his *Veneto* father worked in small communities of feisty cane-cutters – many of them Italian. Frank's mother was Sicilian, which made standard Italian the family's *lingua franca* (his mother tongue remains in very good shape, although now slightly contaminated by Portuguese). At the age of three his father put all of his possessions onto a rickety truck and drove the entire family through dusty desert roads to Western Australia. Their destination was the mining town of Kalgoorlie, which the family reached after many days of difficult travel. But when the Favaros drove through the town centre they realised something had changed: Italy was by then at war, and Italians throughout Australia were being rounded up and interned. Frank's father was immediately arrested and taken to a nearby prison camp, where he would remain for three years, three months and three days.

Those years were particularly difficult for the Favaro family, which was forced to rely on the mother's meagre income as a cook in a local pub. Reminiscing on the terrace of his Adelaide home, Frank laughs at the thought of such dire straights. 'We were forced to eat the heads of sheep which we could get free from the abattoirs. When father was released he was extremely ill because his diabetes was not treated in the camp. They were extremely difficult times'. As soon as the family had saved up enough money for train

tickets, Frank's father decided to move back to Mareeba, in Queensland. 'At least this time we didn't have to drive', says Frank.

But soon after their return to Queensland, Frank's father heard of a good business opportunity in Darwin. Once again he bought a truck and hit the long desert roads with his family in tow. 'He wanted to buy machinery cheap from the army and then re-sell it. But that didn't work out, and we ended up running a small transport business, driving trucks between Darwin and Mt Isa. At the age of eleven I was driving my own truck, and I had to lie to the police about my age to get my licence. But back then there were so few cars on the roads that it was quite common to come across kids driving'.

By the age of 19 Frank was running an extremely profitable business in Darwin, selling Fiat farming machinery. 'If you look at it on a per capita basis, no-one in the world was selling more machinery than me', Frank says in jest. It is a statistic that says more about the small population of the Northern Territory than it does about the number of machines sold. Yet it was clearly a most lucrative venture, and Frank had managed to buy his wife and young children a comfortable house in the suburbs of Darwin.

In 1969 his wife pointed out that in all his life he had never allowed himself more than a few days' holiday. It was around that time that someone had mentioned East Timor as a close holiday destination, one far less expensive than a trip to Melbourne or Sydney. So Frank booked a room in a Dili hotel and with his wife boarded the first plane to East Timor, in those days still a Portuguese colony. To this day he remembers how stunned he was by the beauty of the place. 'I couldn't believe it. On Australia's doorstep there was a European oasis. It was like being in a provincial town of Portugal'.

The owner of the *Hotel Dili*, in which Frank was staying, happened to mention to his guests that he was planning to sell. Frank was unable to resist the temptation of a new and challenging venture and immediately returned to Darwin to sell up his business interests. He returned and bought the hotel, which was in downtown Dili on the Avenida Sa Da Bendeira, just down the road from the residence that had housed a Portuguese Governor for over four hundred years.

Frank now remembers those years as the best and the worst of his life. 'As far as investments go, the decision to buy that hotel was an appalling one. The Portuguese were as poor as church mice, and the few people who came to the bar would spend a ten cents on a coffee and just sit there all day. Every night I would just come home and cry'. Then things deteriorated further when Frank became involved with local politics, going from hotelier to 007. 'Everyone knows that I was working for both ASIS and ASIO. I would pass on to the Australian Government any information I had about the fighting between the two factions, the moderate UDT and the Fretlin communists'. But he denies he ever took sides. 'Absolutely not. When in 1975 the UDT coup forced the Portuguese Governor to abandon Dili, I put my boat at the disposal of the Red Cross, and helped to get injured people out of Timor. I continued to help once the UDT had been driven out of town by Fretlin. But for some reason the UDT thought I was giving Fretlin the co-ordinates of their positions. And that's when the threats began'. Over the air-waves the UDT let Frank know they were out to kill him. 'They would repeat that they were going to come to Dili to kill 'comrade Favaro'. That's when I knew it was time to get out'.

Back in Australia Frank's position in East Timor had been complicated further by the Federal Opposition's attacks on the Whitlam Government's Timor policy in Parliament. Frank was named repeatedly as an Australian spy, and Australian newspapers ran his photo on page one. 'There was no way I could stay after that. I had already got my family out, and I had my own twin-engine plane at Dili airport, ready to fly'. Frank also remembers warning a group of Australian journalists to leave the territory at once. They ignored his advice, and Frank was the last person to see the "Balibo Five" alive. 'It was extremely dangerous. My plane had already been damaged by gunfire at the Dili Airport. I managed to get away by miracle, just days before the 1975 Indonesian invasion. I landed in Darwin and have not set foot in East Timor since'.

The collapse of the Suharto regime in Indonesia has meant new hope – and new uncertainty – for East Timor. Gino and Ernesto Favaro, Frank's sons, have since returned to Dili, and have managed to buy back the *Hotel Dili* from the Indonesians for a few thousand dollars. Yet as

non-Indonesian citizens their rights of ownership are limited – a far cry from the freehold land title they had been granted under Portuguese law. 'In a way, a return of the Portuguese would be ideal, says Frank, although he is doubtful that it will ever happen. 'Independence would be good, provided foreign investment is welcome once again. There will be so many good business opportunities there for people with a bit of initiative'. People like Frank Favaro.

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