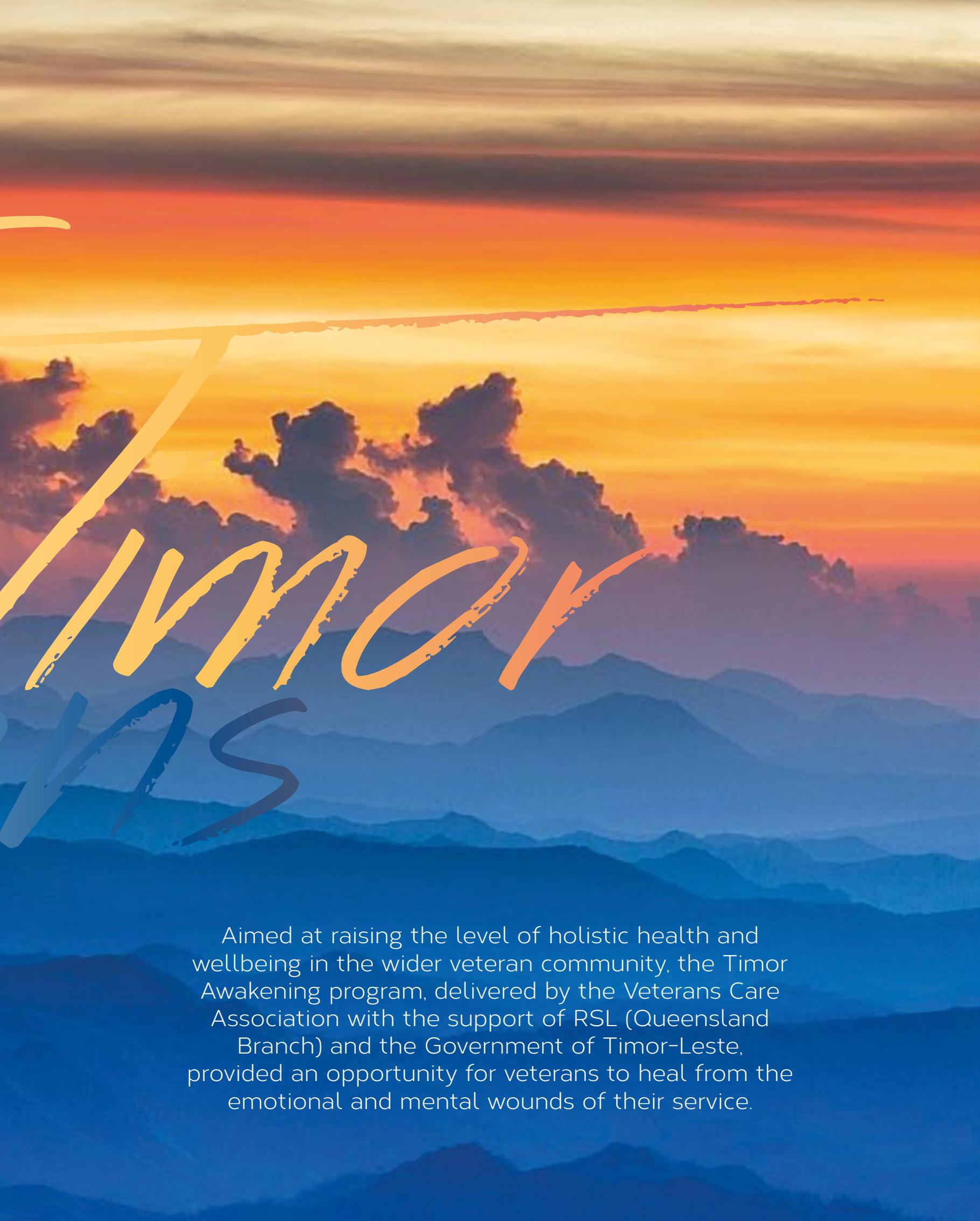




Spokane

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a sunset over a mountain range. The sky is filled with warm colors of orange, red, and yellow, with some dark clouds. The mountains in the foreground are silhouetted in shades of blue and purple. Overlaid on the left side of the image is the text 'TIMOR WAS' in a large, bold, brush-stroke font. 'TIMOR' is written in a light orange color, and 'WAS' is written in a dark blue color.

# TIMOR WAS

Aimed at raising the level of holistic health and wellbeing in the wider veteran community, the Timor Awakening program, delivered by the Veterans Care Association with the support of RSL (Queensland Branch) and the Government of Timor-Leste, provided an opportunity for veterans to heal from the emotional and mental wounds of their service.



“**TIMOR-LESTE** is a country that is peaceful, unexplored, rich in culture, and shares a significant history with the Australian Military. It’s a country full of veterans and civilians who have suffered unimaginable atrocities, hardship, trauma and oppression; a people who have exhibited incredible resilience, reconciled with their foes and are moving forward,” says Michael Stone of Veterans Care.

“We can be very proud of our military intervention since INTERFET, and we are honoured to provide our veterans the opportunity to be inspired by the healing and rehabilitation the Timorese veterans provide us; to move forward with hope and purpose.”

Timor Awakening is much more than an 11-day experience through East Timor. As veterans found on the two tours conducted this year, it is an opportunity to heal from the emotional and mental wounds of their service. The tour through eight districts enables veterans to see firsthand how far the communities impacted by war have come following the restoration of peace, thanks, in part, to Australia’s Defence personnel.

Timorese veterans from the Resistance and Timorese Army join with the Australian veterans and share their stories to gain a deeper understanding of the people. But the program doesn’t end when the adventure does.

Veterans who participate in the program will be supported before, during and after the adventure, with staff from Veterans Care preparing veterans for the trip, attending the tour and providing ongoing support to

## VETERANS CARE ASSOCIATION

Veterans Care Association aims to empower veterans to support other veterans and their families by giving practical, direct support to wounded, injured and ill veterans. Acting as a hub, Veterans Care Association brings together traditional medical, complementary and holistic practitioners, therapists, counsellors, chaplains and more to support the journey to good health and vitality. Find out more about Veterans Care Association at [www.veteranscare.com.au](http://www.veteranscare.com.au).



**“WE WERE WELCOMED WITH A TRADITIONAL TIMOR-LESTE CEREMONY AND IT STIRRED PRIDE IN ME, KNOWING THAT ALL THE EFFORT WE PUT IN AS SOLDIERS NOW MEANT SOMETHING; THAT OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THIS COUNTRY HAD LED TO A SELF-SUSTAINING, SELF-GENERATING, SECURE COUNTRY.”**

the veterans when they return. The benefits of this experience are already being felt by veterans who participated in the pilot programs this year.

Veteran Nicholas Hodge served on deployment to East Timor in 1999 and again in 2001, and found the Timor Awakening experience to be healing and relieving of a lot of the pressure felt from anxiety and depression.

“My first experience when we got off the plane in Timor was, ‘Wow, the country is clean and doesn’t smell of smoke – unlike the last two times I was

**ABOVE:**  
Last surviving Timorese who was forced into labour to dig the Japanese Munitions Storage and air raid shelter Tunnels south of Baucau.

there with the Army,” said Nicholas.

“We were welcomed with a traditional Timor-Leste ceremony and it stirred pride in me, knowing that all the effort we put in as soldiers now meant something; that our contribution to this country had led to a self-sustaining, self-generating, secure country.”

The highlight of the experience for Nicholas was being able to shake hands with an Indonesian soldier at the border of Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

“This time [I was there] not as an

Infantry Soldier, but as a veteran seeking to make amends with an adversary,” said Nicholas.

“I let go and forgave the Indonesians for what awful acts they had committed against the people of Timor-Leste. My growth as a veteran had exceeded my expectations of the Timor Awakening experience.”

Nicholas is just one veteran who has benefited from Timor Awakening, and it is for this reason that RSL (Queensland Branch) was proud to support the program in 2016.

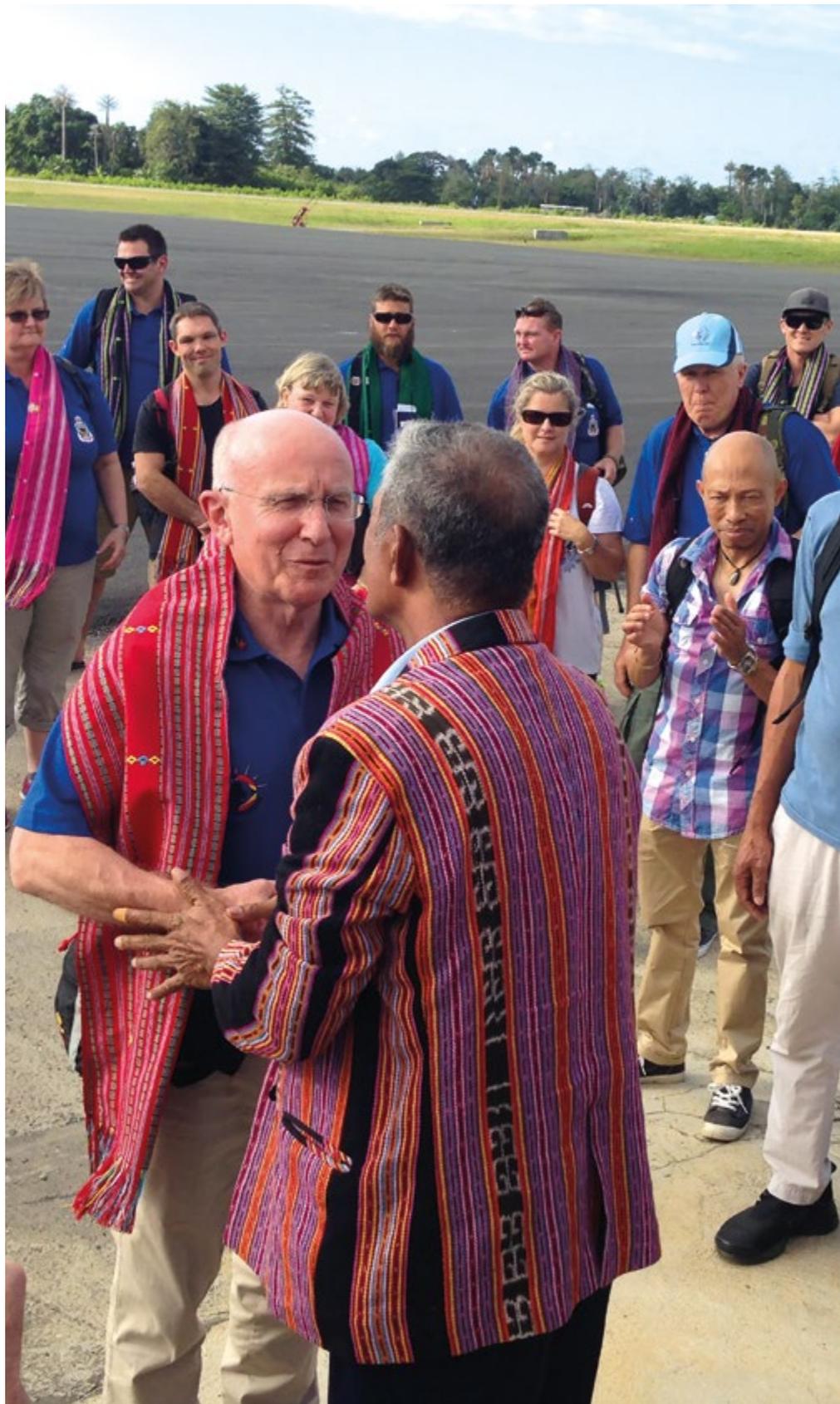
# Personal

**I AM** a veteran managing depression. For many veterans like me, mental illness is a private nightmare that becomes a public humiliation, as well as a disaster for loved ones. The consequences include relationship breakdown, substance abuse, unemployment and suicide. I have been publicly humiliated by my illness. I am divorced. I have lost my job. I am managing my illness much better now and have another job. I am writing to share the effects of the Timor Awakening program on me and others.

After 40 years in uniform, finishing as a Colonel, I have re-joined a brotherhood and sisterhood once again, with the common purpose of fighting our mental illnesses by helping each other. Timor Awakening is a high-risk program that reaches out to mostly high-risk veterans. I participated in the first Timor-Leste immersion experience in July 2016. The program design was sound, and veterans – especially some who had ‘closed down’ in despair – completed the 11-day program strengthened and committed to getting well again, knowing that they were not alone in the ongoing battle. They rediscovered mateship on the roads of Timor-Leste, and were both inspired and strengthened by the stories of resilience from Timorese Resistance veterans who accompanied them.

I was one of those who found Timor Awakening to be a turning point. I am an INTERFET veteran, who returned to Timor-Leste several times after 1999, both in uniform and as a UN volunteer. Like a number of others on this first Timor Awakening immersion experience, I found that firsthand experience of Timor-Leste’s revival and observing people going about their business happily was cathartic. This was true of the second trip in September, when several veterans who had served in Timor-Leste achieved closure from the cumulative experience of service there, as well as specific traumatic events they experienced.

The second Timor Awakening trip applied the lessons of the first. I facilitated discussions that resulted in the group committing to responsible use of alcohol, safety protocols and ‘calling others out’ who broke any of the agreed rules



# Reflection

✍ Associate Professor Bob Breen

for personal behaviour. The Timor Awakening design was confirmed and enhanced on the second trip. Timor Awakening draws the group together in common purpose and takes everyone out of their 'illness zone' and commits them to a quest. The quest is to represent Australian veterans in the company of Timorese veterans, to help them engage with communities and establish an RSL-like organisation with supporting legislation in Timor-Leste.

While doing this, the Timor Awakening group took time each evening to share in open forum the daily impact of their quest. The amazing impact of travelling around Timor-Leste in convoy, participating in traditional community welcomes and listening to testimonies from Timorese veterans, was not only binding and bonding the group to the quest, but

also building sufficient confidence and trust within the group to change tentative and 'closed down' individuals into teammates who could share their most personal reactions to the day's events. Without prompting, many committed to emulating the resilience of Timorese veterans and reciprocating the generosity of the Timorese people and veterans by returning to Australia and contributing to the Australian veteran community.

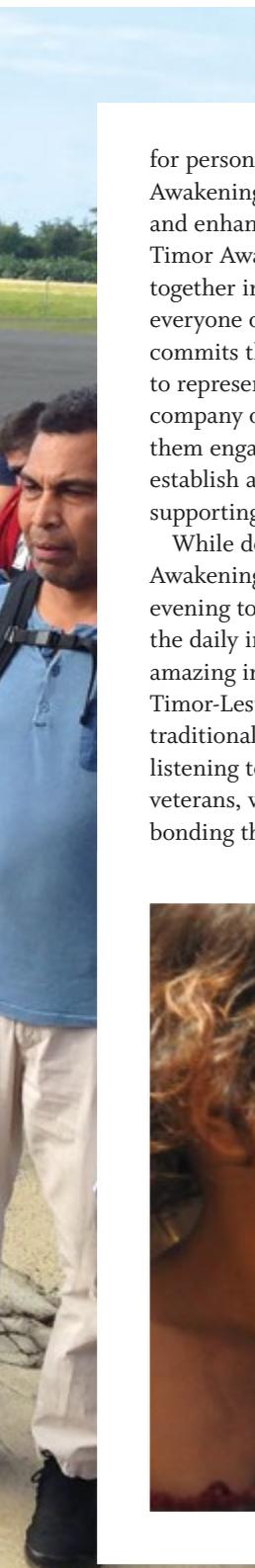
At the end of the second trip, I interviewed several participants who I had spoken to on the first day in Dili. The results were similar. Most had a sense of accomplishment. All had made new friends with whom they would maintain contact. All were uplifted and committed to a better future for themselves and their loved ones. This substantial effect was

to be confirmed in the subsequent Timor Awakening Facebook closed group interactions. Alcoholics were exercising. Those with depression were travelling and sharing positive experiences. Those with PTSD were exploring new techniques for achieving wellness and better sleep. Even I returned to interacting on Facebook, after three years of non-participation.

In summary, Timor Awakening binds, bonds and builds groups of self-helping veterans by taking them away from their current circumstances and immersing them in a different place with a different culture. Through mateship and a quest, it recreates a military family and a sense of worthiness and belonging. These effects not only reduce the chance of self-harm, but also build bridges of hope to more productive futures. ←

**OPPOSITE:**  
Bob Breen receiving his Tais from a Timorese veteran on arrival at Dili airport.

**BELOW:**  
Engagement and interaction with local communities was part of the healing process for those on Timor Awakening.





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