

# Freedom FIGHTER

**From suburban Melbourne to First Lady of a small nation, Kirsty Sword Gusmao plays her audacious part with gentleness and calm.**

Little Alexandre was playing outside, looking for bugs. "I can still remember him running down the driveway towards the house when the shooting started," says Kirsty Sword Gusmao, a picture of perfect calm as she retells the story. "He'd stubbed his toe and ran into the house, screaming." While she busied herself consoling her five-year-old son, the sound of gunfire ricocheted around Kirsty's home at Balibar, just 10 kilometres south of Dili, East Timor.

It was May 2006 and the unrest had been brewing for some time. "One of the scariest things about this kind of violence," says Kirsty, "is you just don't know how bad it's going to get and how dangerous and illogical it's going to be."

Always at the back of her mind is the knowledge that she and her children could well become targets as East Timor struggles to assert its recently won independence. With the parliament only established in 2002, some of the political factions are more accustomed to guerilla warfare than parliamentary negotiation. Given Melbourne-born Kirsty is married to the legendary resistance fighter and independence hero, Xanana Gusmao – the new nation's first president and now its prime minister – she knows her life is always going to be inexorably tied to the politics and power battles fought in East Timor.

A day or so after the angry mobs began torching government buildings, ransacking property and burning cars, Australian troops arrived in Dili. They quickly set about taking control of the streets and responding to the pockets of resistance. "There were

a couple of nights where I went to bed and stayed awake lying rigid, thinking, 'Am I going to have to get up during the night, grab my kids and run?'"

By day four of the shooting, Kirsty and her children – Alex, Kay Olok who was nearly four, and Daniel who was 18 months old – had become almost immune to the violent sound. "I guess I tried to downplay it. I tried not to freeze every time there was another volley of gunfire, and I just worked at keeping the children occupied."

That night Xanana received a phone call warning him that a group of disaffected young soldiers had

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left the barracks, armed with grenade launchers and machine guns. "No-one knew where they were heading," says Kirsty calmly. Australian SAS troops were deployed to protect the Gusmao house.

Over the ensuing days 38 people were killed in mob violence, and around 150,000 East Timorese fled their homes and sought sanctuary in makeshift camps set up by aid organisations. The Australian government coordinated the evacuation of over 550 people to Darwin, including many Australians who were living in East Timor. Naturally there was pressure on Kirsty and her children to join them. But





she refused, intent on staying by Xanana's side, which is not surprising, given everything we know about Kirsty Sword Gusmao suggests she is a woman of steel.

Kirsty is a softly spoken woman who exudes calm. She doesn't move with the jerk of panic; instead, she glides, like a slow-moving gazelle. When she speaks in that very quiet, unassuming voice, her words are gripping. Her soft hazel eyes and flawless skin belie a tough interior. She just doesn't look or sound like the freedom warrior she really is.

Back in her days as a language student at Melbourne University, Kirsty had vague notions of becoming a teacher, like both her parents. They had introduced her to Indonesian at a very young age, and along the way she picked up Italian as well. But

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when dressed in a waitress uniform for her part-time job at Melbourne's Windsor Hotel, who could have picked Kirsty Sword for the extraordinary crusader she would become? Who would have guessed that this somewhat shy, gentle young woman would soon embark upon a clandestine journey to join an underground resistance movement, becoming a perfect spy, a people smuggler, a human rights champion, and eventually the First Lady of independent East Timor?

Kirsty is many things, but perhaps the most startling aspect of her remarkable story is the strength of her love for Xanana. Like her, it's made of steel. The two of them fell in love before they'd even met. He was in prison in Jakarta, facing a 20-year sentence

after being captured by the Indonesian military. As commander of the guerilla army of resistance fighters he had spent years waging war with the military from his jungle hideout. His capture was a setback for the independence movement. As its unofficial translator, Kirsty translated Xanana's speeches and letters smuggled out of prison and faxed and emailed them around the world. She became pivotal to keeping the fight for independence alive.

The pull toward what is now her adopted homeland began with the East Timorese people Kirsty met when studying Indonesian in Melbourne. "Hearing their stories of struggle in their fight for independence, knowing that more than 100,000 people had already been killed during the Indonesian occupation, and that people were still dying for the cause, I was just amazed by the fire in their belly and their tremendous sense of hope," she says. Offering to help seemed the obvious and most natural thing to do.

Once Kirsty moved to Jakarta in 1992, ostensibly to teach English, she quickly became immersed in underground action. "I think over time I just got seduced by the trust that people had in me," she says. "There was no-one else the East Timorese could go to in Jakarta. If you mentioned East Timor to either locals or foreigners, they would run a mile." And Kirsty knew how to play to her advantage. "Precisely because I do have a very unassuming style and I don't look like a spy, I was able to get away with it!"

What she 'got away with' was audacious and, at times, mind-boggling. Once she smuggled a group of East Timorese men into the Finnish Embassy in Jakarta so that they could seek political asylum. She arranged for another group to simultaneously try their luck at entering the Swedish Embassy to do the same. Her bluff was brilliant and strategic. With

the aid of a Revlon business card she'd managed to procure, Kirsty posed as a well-heeled foreigner with a group of salesmen. It worked. Knowing the authorities would track her down, she was forced to spend a couple of excruciating weeks moving from safe house to safe house, until she eventually fled to Australia, with the Indonesian military hot on her heels. Kirsty Sword was then black-banned from the country, but returned soon afterwards after changing her name and securing a new passport.

She laughs now as I remind her of the perilous risks she took, but not because of the danger. Her laughter is more at how inconceivable it would have been not to return to Indonesia. "I had this amazing relationship with the country and had so many friends there and a love affair with East Timor," she says. And then, of course, there was Xanana.

Falling in love with a prisoner she had never met or touched didn't seem surreal to Kirsty. There was a huge amount of correspondence between them, and with the aid of a smuggled mobile phone and later a computer, their relationship blossomed.

When growing international pressure forced the Indonesian government to finally release Xanana from prison in 1999 and agree to a referendum on independence for East Timor, Kirsty finally got to hold him, five years after he first declared his love to her via a smuggled cassette tape.

The overwhelming vote in support of independence was just the beginning of a long, slow journey for the small nation, now officially called Timor-Leste. And Kirsty's role in how that journey unfolds continues to be pivotal. In 2001 she established a non-profit organisation, the Alola Foundation, to raise awareness of the shockingly high levels of sexual violence against the women of East Timor. But her work quickly spread to encompass all aspects of



Kirsty with young people at a refugee camp in Dili.

women's lives, as Alola struggles to combat infant and maternal mortality rates that are among the highest in the world, along with East Timor's dangerously high fertility rate. "When I look at East Timorese kids I see my own kids," says Kirsty. "And I think, 'What I want for my own kids is what I want for you.' And at the moment we are just so far from being able to achieve that." Clearly there is no stopping her.

With the violent crisis of May 2006 now well behind them and Australian troops still instrumental in keeping the peace, Kirsty and Xanana push on. He had promised her he would retire as president and become, of all things, a pumpkin farmer. Instead the events of 2006 tore at his heart and Xanana – ever the independence hero – felt compelled to accept the role of prime minister, in order to continue the struggle to make East Timor strong, proud and prosperous.

So, does Kirsty ever feel she has to share her husband with a family the size of a small nation? You bet. "But we've always just moved from one set of demands to another," she says gently, almost whimsically. She jokes about how nice it would be to have a weekend away with her husband at the Hunter Valley where they could sip wine in a spa and "re-connect". But not even in her wildest dreams is that ever going to happen. "We've never been able to find that space in our lives for one another, and maybe that's okay too," she says. "Maybe that's the nature of the beast for us."

But are such heavy demands sometimes just too much? While most of us struggle to juggle work and family, Kirsty is juggling life as the 'mother of a nation' with her role as the prime minister's wife in the new and developing Timor-Leste. This time Kirsty lets out a big belly laugh when I ask if she ever misses her little flat back in Australia. "Oh for a life in suburban Melbourne," she hoots. "If only I had married an accountant from Box Hill!" ♦