

Spies, security and aid: Christopher Whitcomb's Anonymous Male

by Gordon Peake

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Sunset outside Dili, Timor-Leste
Photo Credit: Flickr/Kate B Dixon

The Development Intelligence Lab's [recent breakdown](#) of Australia's foreign affairs spending in the 2026 Federal Budget turns up some astonishing figures, one of which is the amount of money spent on intelligence. According to the Lab's number crunchers, \$2.2 billion will be spent on the National Intelligence Community in 2026–27, a figure which rises to \$4.6 billion if you include the Australian Signals Directorate, which resides within the Defence portfolio. That higher figure almost equals what Australia will spend on [total Official Development Assistance](#) in 2026–27 (\$5.2 billion).

Yet the very nature of intelligence means details of how this money is spent and the way, if at all, it intersects with aid is obscure, seldom mentioned in public dispatches, and a furrow largely unploughed by policy researchers. There is no "Intelligence Development Lab" or "Intelligence Policy Centre", for instance, nor an industry bench of consultants toiling on monitoring and evaluation or churning out communications products.

Tantalising peeks behind the bureaucratic curtain indicate that there certainly have been links between the worlds of intelligence and development. These include the revelations that [Australia spied on Timor-Leste's Timor Gap negotiation strategy](#) under the guise of an aid project in the early 2000s, with prime ministers in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu occasionally venting suspicions about what expatriate technical advisers get up to and in some cases booting them out. In 2013, the American whistleblower Edward Snowden leaked data that detailed efforts of countries in the ["Five Eyes" network to listen in](#) on Pacific phone networks and Pacific leaders.

Yet, for the most part, this world is closed off firmly to anyone not holding a top-secret security clearance. We are left with the feeling that there must be some connection but unsure of its contours and extent.

The shadowy worlds of espionage and aid are among those covered in [Anonymous Male](#), Christopher Whitcomb's memoir about his life in, out of and around the spy

game. It's a high-octane, often diverting, sometimes plain odd; the literary equivalent of a sprawling night at a sketchy bar where one can never be sure the next drink is going to result in smiles, a challenge to a knife fight or a discussion about Ernest Hemingway.

A former hostage negotiator for the FBI as well as a novelist, Whitcomb came to spying halfway through his career. The book recounts how he flitted from Afghanistan to parts of Southeast Asia and Somalia on various assignments. At each juncture, he descends ever further down the ladder of sanity.

Whitcomb was barely hanging onto the last rung when he arrived in Dili in 2007, where he ran a private security company called APAC for five years. APAC provided guards to protect expatriate offices (including those of the Australian Federal Police, for which I worked at the time), the United Nations, contractors and NGOs. A former Australian Labor minister, [Gerry Hand](#), co-owned the company, along with another equally colourful Australian whom Whitcomb declines to name. It is impossible to know how much aid money APAC trousered for providing all this protection, but one must assume it was a goodly amount. Whitcomb describes APAC's revenue flows as being in the millions per annum.

Even though Whitcomb and I lived in Dili during the same time, I never met him — although I knew him by sight. He was a tall man and cut a striking figure in the small city, with his gunmetal grey hair and an array of moustaches that recalled everyone from Hulk Hogan to Fu Manchu. Whitcomb's experiences of Dili were different to mine, as were many in the social circles in which he ran. By his telling, Whitcomb's most frequent associates were sex-obsessed inebriates he met at the Hash House Harriers and in various bars and bordellos. He gets most of his knowledge of Timor-Leste from these encounters, and it made me wonder how A1 the security information he traded in could be.

Whitcomb always looked on the edge when I saw him. Now that I have read the book, this impression was scarcely surprising as he details the heady regime of testosterone top-ups, magic mushrooming, alcohol abuse, bar fighting and extreme taxidermy in which he engaged.

He learns all of three words of the national language, namely *malae* (foreigner) and *ema halo*, which connotes putting a curse on someone. The latter is a phrase Whitcomb uses often in the book to engage in barstool philosophising about how Timorese are bathed in such ancient mystical codes that they could not be remotely understood. Talking to a few more people outside his grubby circles might have revealed to him a more rounded story.

When it comes to spying in Timor-Leste, the book promises much more than it delivers. Whitcomb writes beguiling prose about his involvement in “complex interactions” between Five Eyes interests and China in Dili, but never tells us what these interactions were. He boasts about APAC’s role in “install[ing] cameras and microphones at sensitive locations and ... round-the-clock surveillance” but gets coy about where he was bugging and who he was tailing. The reader looking for revelation here is entitled to feel shortchanged.

At the same time, other sections on Timor-Leste are grimly illuminating about the small intersecting worlds between Australian business interests and local sources of power. The inaugural Timorese hire at APAC is Nito Gusmao, a son of the prime minister. Whitcomb’s young, charming and head-turning Russian business partner finds it easy to ingratiate herself within the circles of the elite.

Whitcomb’s descriptions of the rituals of the Hash read like something from the Epstein files. I recognised a few of the people he describes, some of them still *éminences grises* in Dili’s expat crust, reliable invites at any embassy functions and wheeled out when a minister was in town to expatiate on matters relating to “private sector engagement”. It’s always illuminating (and often dispiriting) to see how people really are — very different from the twaddle they put out on their LinkedIn profiles.

The book made me think a lot about the role of private security in the Australian aid program. The private security industry plays a large and relatively under-examined role enabling projects to proceed throughout the region, particularly in a place like Papua New Guinea. The costs of providing security services are absorbed and accepted in contracts as reimbursable administration costs. Talking up danger suits these companies’ bottom lines. Places where aid projects are ubiquitous are especially good for making a killing.

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