

MAF pilots carry Timorese culture on their shoulders

By Lobitos Alves

Specially made tais epaulettes are more than just a part of the uniform worn by MAF pilots serving in Timor-Leste. They connect pilots with the rich culture of the Timorese people – embracing identity, heritage, and pride in the skies.



Photo: Lobitos Alves

The iconic Timorese *tais* is a traditional woven textile that represents Timor-Leste's rich culture and heritage.

Registered on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, *tais* is worn across all of Timor-Leste's regions, and is now also being worn in the sky above them.

"The epaulette shows your role, and the traditional design shows where you come from," said Mary Domtta, MAF's People Care Coordinator in Timor-Leste, and the spouse of MAF pilot Ping Domtta.



The MAF pilot wears *tais*-designed epaulettes on their shoulders. Photo: Lobitos Alves

"I would say it's like mixing your job with your roots. Through colours, patterns, or small symbols from local clothing or art, *tais* is a subtle way to show culture in a formal piece," Mary said, describing how traditional decoration is incorporated into the epaulette design.

"The designs usually tell stories about family, community, or even history," she said. "So, when they appear on an epaulette, they carry those stories forward. It's a simple way to show both sides of yourself: your role and heritage. People can see what you do and where you come from at the same time."



Aldo Falo, an MAF Base Maintenance Manager and Engineering Assistant, wore traditional *tais* in his pre-wedding family photoshoot. Photo: Lobitos Alves

MAF pilots in Timor-Leste began wearing the *tais* epaulettes a few months ago, whether flying the regular shuttle service that connects isolated communities, or flying lifesaving medevac flights.

Reactions from Timorese people have been positive.

Suzana Nunes, an MAF Booking Officer, spoke from the heart about the importance of preserving cultural identity.

"I'm proud to be Timorese because my country is rich in cultural identity, and values our ancestral heritage," she said. "I'm super excited to see MAF pilots wear an epaulette combined with *tais*, and I'm proud that they are not just flying to save the lives of the people of Timor-Leste but also promoting our cultural identity."



Suzana Nunes, an MAF booking officer, wears a shawl with a *tais* design. Photo: Lobitos Alves

Mary's husband, MAF pilot and Country Director Lungpinglak 'Ping' Domtta, comes from Nagaland in northeastern India. Serving in Timor-Leste since 2021, Ping found his 'better half' in a place that actively preserves cultural heritage, like his own home.



Captain Ping and Mary wear Timorese *tais* for their engagement ceremony. Photo: Ping Domtta

"When I moved to Timor-Leste, I noticed many similarities between my culture and that of the Timorese people," Ping said. "It's been such a blessing when community members affectionately call me '*mane-foun*', a son-in-law of Timor-Leste."

"My mother-in-law gifted me Timorese *tais* representing their community. I decided to make it a part of my daily life. I feel honoured wearing it on my shoulder alongside my MAF uniform. It represents Timor and creates a meaningful connection."



Source: <https://timorleste.mafint.org/news/2025-maf-pilots-carry-timorese-culture-their-shoulders>