



Duty nobly done

Questions will be asked about recent events in Afghanistan, but the value of the contribution made by Australians is not in doubt.

BY MATT ANDERSON



Left: Coalition of the willing: a US Army Blackhawk lands at a British secured LZ to collect Matt Anderson. Qarga, Kabul. All photos courtesy of Matt Anderson.

Right: Members of Task Group Afghanistan, Australian advisors with Afghanistan's 205th Corps and Australian and British embassy staff, Kandahar.



I had the honour of serving in Afghanistan in 2015–16. The views expressed here are my own, formed from that experience. As Fred Smith wrote in his book, *The Dust of Uruzgan*, “Every one of us experienced a different Afghanistan, and this is only my account of what I saw.”

Australia went into Afghanistan in 2001 to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and to ensure Afghanistan never again became a safe haven for terrorists. Then, and now, I believe it was the right thing to do. As a nation, we felt keenly the shock of the 9/11 attacks. They were an attack on our closest ally. And it was personal, not only because 10 Australians died among the 3,000 innocents; it was an attack on who we were, what we stood for and, ultimately, it would prove a test of what we were prepared to die for. Any doubters were shocked when, a year later, 88 Australians were among 202 people murdered in Bali by three men who had trained with al-Qaeda under the protection of the Taliban.

Having spent the bulk of my career in the Pacific, prior to heading to Kabul I asked Professor Bill Maley of the Australian National University for a ‘deep dive’ on the Taliban. The first thing, he said, was to acknowledge it is the Taliban, not Taliban. It was not a single, homogeneous entity. It had political, religious and ethnic elements. It had groups based in Qatar, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was home to fundamentalists and to opportunists. It had also proven spectacularly incapable of raising and maintaining

the institutions necessary to govern a modern functioning nation state.

I arrived in Afghanistan in early January 2015. The US-led surge had been and gone, NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) flag had been lowered a fortnight earlier, and a NATO Resolute Support (RS) flag flew in its place. The Taliban’s Spring Offensive of 2015 took up this cue – it was named *Azm*, Pashto for Resolute – and the focus of the 2015 “fighting season” was to be the foreign occupiers, including the military, intelligence and diplomatic centres. They lied, and not for the first time. The majority of victims would not be the “occupiers” but rather the innocent Afghans going about their lives peacefully.

The Taliban launched direct attacks on our interests – and our Embassy – and I remain indebted to the remarkable men, mostly ex-Australian military with previous tours of Afghanistan and/or Iraq, who kept my team safe and my mission functioning in those testing days. Indiscriminate rocket attacks, car (and truck) bombs, roadside bombs, magnetic bombs attached to mini-buses containing journalists and Ministry of Justice officials, and complex attacks were regular occurrences. My staff – diplomatic, security, interpreters and Locally Engaged Staff – responded to the challenges with courage, professionalism and good humour.

Peace and development

In 2013 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “There can be no peace without development ... no

development without peace.” By 2015, Australia had spent more than one billion dollars on aid in Afghanistan. I was responsible for our fourth-largest aid program, and our assistance focused, rightly, on economic growth and governance, education, agriculture and rural livelihoods, empowering women and girls, and providing humanitarian assistance to those displaced by conflict and natural disasters. In parallel, we were spending 100 million American dollars per year to sustain the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). No development without peace ...

Diplomats get paid to be “the sharp eyes, the attuned ears, and the influential voice of Australia overseas”. They must get out of the capital to truly understand a country and the reach of its government. So I travelled. From Kunduz in the north to Herat in the west; Jalalabad in the east, and Kandahar and Uruzgan in the south. I even drove up the Panjshir Valley, past the rusting hulks of Russian hardware that had been destroyed by the Mujahedeen, and visited the tomb of Ahmad Shah Massoud. I pondered whether Afghanistan’s fortunes would have taken a different course had he not been killed two days before 9/11.

I have been surprised by critics who have lamented what they call the ‘mission creep’ from capturing or killing Bin Laden and ensuring Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists, into nation building. After the rout of the Taliban in late 2001, safe havens in Afghanistan were established in ungoverned spaces. They were ungoverned because the fledgling government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan could not provide, on its own, the essential services – education, health, infrastructure – that would be the drivers of much-needed economic growth and stability.

During a call on the governor of Uruzgan in February 2016, he told me he was pleased to “welcome Australia back to Uruzgan”. As a testament to those who served there, he asked if I would convey his request that the Australian soldiers be redeployed to Uruzgan. I told him it was not under consideration. With the wisdom born of much suffering and a regular changeover of foreign faces, he said simply, “The alternative to the Taliban and poppies is jobs.” It was that simple. And that hard. And so it proved. ▶

Early in my posting I also met the US Commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan and received a briefing on his campaign plan. He told me it was a continuum: Fight, Fracture, and Talk. To fight both the Taliban and terrorist groups, to fracture the Taliban, and talk to the breakaway moderates (or those who, for whatever reason, might eventually sue for peace). Because, he said, the solution would rest ultimately on dialogue. It was a continuum that was necessarily conditions-based, not time-bound. If the Taliban knew they could ‘wait the occupiers out’, they would. The reality was that the Taliban(s) were always there, had been building for years (out of frustration with the national government’s ability to deliver services for all and apparent corruption), and waiting for everyone else to leave. Good, solid, ageless strategy.

When talks between the US and the Taliban stalled, the fighting was increasingly between Afghanistan’s National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Taliban(s) and, of course, the foreign fighter groups who have long exploited Afghanistan’s ungoverned spaces.

Much has been made of the fact that it seemed the ANDSF barely fired a shot as the Taliban advanced on Kabul in August 2021. From 2001 to 2014, the ANDSF suffered 14,000 casualties. Following ISAF’s departure, the ANDSF suffered 45,000 killed in action. These numbers were never sustainable, and

they challenge the narrative that they were not prepared to fight and to die for their country. My experience was, so long as they felt they had the backing of the West – and access to air power and the intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance, which was both a critical combat enabler and a key driver of morale – they would, and they did. This was especially true of their Special Forces, who were sent in regularly to turn the tide, and suffered disproportionately as a consequence.

Our roles

Australia should be proud of the role we have played in Afghanistan; indeed, of the multiple roles over the 20 years of our longest war. From the sharpest of edges of our Special Operations Task Group, through the Reconstruction and Mentoring Task Forces, aviation and medical elements, Australians embedded in coalition headquarters and units across Afghanistan, RAN units in the Persian Gulf, and the RAAF both on the ground in Kandahar and in the skies throughout – each of those made a difference. They did what was asked of them. As one of the painted blast walls in Tarin Kot attests, “All gave some. Some gave all.”

When not taking the fight to the Taliban, our soldiers, diplomats, police and aid workers restored dignity, reduced suffering and offered the most precious of all commodities, hope. You need only witness the Malalai Girls’ School in Tarin Kot. When the

Taliban were removed from power in 2001, there were fewer than one million children in school, and none of them were girls. When I left in 2016, there were nine million children in formal education, and three-and-a-half million of those were girls. Again, to quote Fred Smith in his oral history in the Memorial’s *Afghanistan Story* gallery: “What we’ve done is turn the lights on, and I don’t think they’ll be turned off readily.”

We can now only hope this is true, but the proud (and incredibly brave) procession of the Afghanistan tricolour through the streets of Jalalabad, and female journalists asking questions of the Taliban at their first press conference, suggest there are some for whom the lights will continue to flicker if not burn.

For six years, the priority of the Resolute Support mission was training, advising and assisting. I had the privilege of presenting the Duntroon Sword of Honour to a top-ranked cadet at the Afghan National Officer Academy, where a remarkable group of young patriots, trained by Australia, the US, the UK and our allies, swore an oath of allegiance to Afghanistan. One of the recipients of the Sword of Honour was a female, who had studied pharmacy before joining her army in a time of war. I cannot imagine she’ll be as quick to surrender the gains she and others have made over the past two decades, but only time will tell.

What next?

“My personal position on counterinsurgency in general, and on Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, could therefore be summarized as ‘Never again, but...’”

So wrote David Kilcullen in *The Accidental Guerrilla: fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*. This piece is being written in August 2021. The white flag of the Taliban again flies over the Arg Palace in Kabul and, as I write this, we are in a desperate race against time and tyranny as we try to evacuate

Left: Australia was the major funder to Afghanistan’s Strategic Grain Reserve.

Right: Presenting the Duntroon Sword of Honour to a top cadet at the Afghanistan National Officer Academy (face obscured to protect identity).



Australians, locally engaged staff and those who stood by our side during our longest war. Our soldiers, diplomats and Home Affairs staff are again in harm’s way and working heroically in previously unimagined scenes.

We now enter a different and likely protracted phase. With the retreat of Generals Dostrum and Noor and some of their loyalists over the border to the north, and the massing of some resistance in the Panjshir, we might also see a growth in “home grown” militias. Afghanistan has form in that regard, and it will complicate things in a country already complicated enough.

There are 43 people recorded on the Afghanistan panel of the Memorial’s Roll of Honour, and there are many more we have lost since their return. Chaplain Rob Sutherland completed three deployments to Afghanistan, one

in 2006 and two in 2008, ministering to our service personnel in Tarin Kot, Kandahar and Kabul. He concluded rightly that “Victory or success in Afghanistan is not going to be measured in the way it might have been measured in the past. I think some of our best successes are actually going to be in the people we bring home and, hopefully, the pride they will have in the job that they’ve done.”

I am so much richer for the experience of serving alongside our remarkable men and women in Afghanistan. I witnessed firsthand their professionalism, lethal capability and compassion, and they earned an enviable reputation among our coalition partners. They fought our longest war and they are now home. Some have, sadly, brought the war home with them, and are owed nothing

less than unwavering support and our open arms. We have an obligation to welcome them home – all of them – and as I said to our diggers in Afghanistan on ANZAC Day 2016, we cannot, must not, allow our longest war to be followed by our longest silence.

All gave some. Some gave all. It was duty nobly done. ●



Matt Anderson was Australian Ambassador to Afghanistan, 2015–16. He has been the Director of the Australian War Memorial since 2020.