

WORDS AJ SHINNER PICS US AIR FORCE & SHINNER COLLECTION

EXIT STAGE LEFT

If, on arriving at the pearly gates, I am asked to define my existence in a few simple words, I would have to say husband and father (obviously) followed by soldier, artist and photographer. Of course, at only 40-something years of age, I'm not remotely ready to hang up my hat yet – there's still too much living to do.

The soldier in me still hopes to one-day make pilgrimages to places like ANZAC Cove, Kokoda and Long Tan to try and fully

unfinished. As an artist, I feel I'll never be brave enough to put brush to canvas to properly depict that part of Africa. And, as a now more technically proficient photographer, I am tormented by not being able to reproduce the emotions evoked in me by some of my images from Operation Solace that were so shoddily taken back then.

There will be no returning to Somalia, no plaques or dawn services on that particular foreign soil and, ultimately I'd

understand the sacrifices that were made in those places by those who went before us. The artist in me still wants to produce that one exceptional piece of art that will outlive me, as well as evoke emotion in all who view it. And the photographer in me still dreams of one day snapping off that one special shot that speaks the proverbial thousand words.

Seated firmly in each of these segments of my psyche are the sights, sounds, smells and emotions associated with Somalia. As a husband and father I will always remain disappointed that I will never be able to adequately describe and explain those four months of my life. As a soldier, I will always be frustrated that we were ordered home with the job so clearly

wager, no pilgrimages in years to come by our inquisitive sons and daughters.

There will be no chances to retrace our steps, retake photos of familiar landmarks, no seeking closure or even confirming in our own minds that we had actually been there at all.

So, you might well ask, where does this rambling lead my relatively insignificant series of yarns about Somalia?

If I'm not articulate enough to delve into the aftermath of Operation Solace – the PTSD, bitterness and indifference that has plagued many Somalia veterans – then I guess the only thing left to tell is the actual end of the physical deployment – our "exit stage left" if you will, which inevitably has led into an eternally uncloseable book for the Diggers who served there.

The story of Australia's involvement in Somalia is not fully told or understood as yet, but this series surely goes a long way towards bringing it home.

This is actually installment number 29 of our Somalia series, counting the seven-page chapter in the infantry-only special issue we produced in November 2008. It is also – very sadly – the final installment, at least in CONTACT.

I want to take this opportunity to publicly and profusely thank Wayne Cooper, my long-time best friend, for writing the first 16 installments of this series – and my new good friend, AJ Shinner, whom I only met through this endeavour, for taking over the reins in March 2008.

Individually, each of the 29 installments beautifully encapsulates a little bit of Somalia through diggers' eyes – but collectively, they are surely the makings of a much needed book on one of the first campaigns in the Australian Army's current era of high operational tempo.

It is my fervent wish that Wayne and AJ one day collaborate to bring their expanded memoirs together as a single book. I hope they both can see that, through CONTACT, they have made a massive start and, in more ways than one, a massive contribution to Australia's recent history.

Thanks boys – Brian Hartigan