



# Tackle life's challenges

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A call to service can lead an individual in many directions, but for Padre Ren McRae, service has gone full circle – from a young man who served in the elite Special Air Service Regiment during the 1980s to an older, wiser man deployed to Afghanistan as an Australian Army chaplain.

After attaining the full heights of his military goals, McRae stepped away from the uniform to spend time as the pastor of a church and became both a husband and father. It is this unique blend of soldiering, ministry and civilian experience McRae now brings back to the soldiers he advises.

McRae is the primary chaplain for Mentoring Task Force Two (MTF 2), which is responsible for the mentorship of the Afghan National Army.

"A lot of my time is taken up by just being with the troops. It doesn't matter where they are. Getting to know them, talking, being there, being a presence for them," Chaplain McRae says.

"I learn what their problems are and what issues are affecting each individual, which has relevance to the morale and welfare of the troops as a whole."

At Multi National Base Tarin Kot, Chaplain McRae can be found in his office or performing services at the chapel facility. However, he often travels to visit Australian troops at 10 forward operating bases throughout Uruzgan province.

It would be impossible to create a relationship with the soldiers if he did not get out there and live where they lived, eat what they eat, and become a part of their team.

He says each location has its own unique challenges and dynamics.

"It's critical that I get into their workspace and try to get to know them, because soldiers won't seek me out if I'm a stranger – and they might slip through the cracks otherwise."

Sometimes soldiers are reluctant to handle issues through their chain of command, because of embarrassment or an inability to articulate



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what is bothering them. Consequently, the chaplain has become an instrumental link in helping soldiers cope with issues that might otherwise go unresolved.

"Often they will come to me because they aren't sure where else to go.

"I'll ask a lot of questions to define what the issues are so that I can give them a bit of framework as to how they are going to manage it," Chaplain McRae says.

"It's a common thread in life where, once someone has talked through something, a great burden can be lifted and that may be all that's needed."

Chaplain McRae also has at his disposal a list of contact names and information to help soldiers work through specific issues, such as finance worries or relationship problems.

Occasionally, a soldier may require additional help and will be referred to physiological support.

Chaplain McRae explains that chaplains are part of an overarching team, well established, to help with soldier welfare.

Faith can be an important avenue to handle stress, but Chaplain McRae says that any belief system can be tapped in to to help a soldier through tough times.

"The more a soldier has a defined belief system the more they draw upon the strength in that.

"Having something to believe in and a framework that allows your moral and ethical decisions to be made, is always going to allow a soldier to deal with issues that come up."

One of the unique aspects of being a military chaplain is interacting with soldiers of all faiths and finding a common ground to help them find peace and resolution, especially when dealing with larger issues of death and meaning.

"If I am ministering to an Islamic soldier or a Jewish soldier, the same principals apply, without letting doctrine get in the way.

"The chaplain's position is one that recognises that we're all human, we're all frail, and the basis for a lot of our faith is very similar.

"The greatest strength I have experienced as a chaplain is that the walls that tend to divide us in the wider world are generally not present in Defence," Chaplain McRae says.

"I'm a minister to everyone, regardless of faith – and even those with no faith."

Chaplain McRae says that he always knew he would end up a chaplain. He had a calling when he was just 16 years old, but it was a personal journey that developed over time and for good purpose.

"This has been beyond anything I would have anticipated and not just because this is a new age and a new era for the Australian Army, but more a feeling of contentment," he says.

"This is where I'm meant to be. It's a coming together of the heart and the head.

"It feels very comfortable being back in uniform.

"The past 20 years have prepared me well for this, and this is where I am."



# More than just supplies

Living conditions at a forward operating base in Afghanistan can be rough for soldiers of Mentoring Task Force Two (MTF 2), but after a lot of hard work they are getting better.

Major Roy Henry, officer commanding Delta Company, MTF 2, says there are a lot of things at the patrol bases that are different from home, but the more comfortable we can make the bases, the better off the soldiers will be.

Soldiers of the Logistical Support Company (LSC), MTF 2, understand this all too well. This is why they are constantly out on the roads in Uruzgan conducting supply convoy missions.

The bases they service are temporary homes for MTF 2 soldiers who are deployed to Afghanistan to partner with and mentor the Afghan National Army (ANA).

These bases are supplied on a regular basis by a special supply convoy called the 'shojo'. And this convoy brings much more than just supplies.

The shojo also brings tradesmen, like plumbers and electricians, to conduct repairs and inspections on equipment needed for life sustainment.

Without these experts, equipment would break down and overall health, welfare and morale at the forward operating base would break down with it.

Shojo commander Warrant Officer Class Two Jake Donnelly says maintaining the

bases is just as important as resupplying the ammunition and fuel the soldiers need.

"There is also effort put into improving the overall standard of living for the soldiers," he says.

"Something like installing electricity into the soldiers' living quarters to power personal items such as laptops, makes a big difference to morale.

"Morale is a big factor. If morale is high then everything else gels.

"So, the more amenities we can provide, the better."

The Australian accommodations aren't the only focus for the LSC – they also resupply and maintain the Afghan National Army (ANA) side of the bases.

Major Henry says the Australians have been installing numerous upgrades into the ANA living areas – items such as generators, flushing toilets and showers – items many Afghans simply do not have access to.

The overall mission for MTF 2 is to prepare the ANA to take over security operations in Uruzgan when international assistance is inevitably withdrawn – and this includes conducting resupply missions.

To achieve this objective, MTF 2 has been partnering with and mentoring elements of the ANA on how to conduct logistical operations.

"Not only are we able to supply our own soldiers at the bases, but the ANA have been able to partner with us and resupply their own people too – and get all that experience of major road moves in a dangerous environment," WO2 Donnelly says.

While these remote bases don't have the same comfort levels most Australians are normally used to, the soldiers of the LSC are doing their part to make that gap as small as possible for the members of MTF 2 and their Afghan partners.