

"It is with deep regret the Australian Defence Force announces the death of Corporal Richard Edward Atkinson during operations in Afghanistan" – the all-too familiar words sitting heavy with the Acting Chief of Defence Lieutenant General David Hurley as he delivered the news to a small audience in Canberra on 3 February.



supporting the families of those involved in the incident.

Lieutenant General Hurley said that despite successfully discovering several insurgent caches, including large amounts of explosives, in the Tangi Valley in the weeks leading up to the incident, Australian and Afghan soldiers would continue to face a difficult and dangerous mission.

"In the past few weeks, Australian soldiers have been working with their Afghan partners from new Patrol Base Qarib in the Tangi Valley.

"Despite small but significant successes, we must not forget that Corporal Atkinson's mates face difficult days ahead as they prepare to send him home to his family.

"Yet I know they will continue their mission with courage and honour."

In a statement, his family said, "Rich was the funny man, always putting smiles on other people's faces.

"He was hoping to start a family this year with Dannielle.

"He was a dedicated soldier with long career aspirations.

"He was a family man who was very close to each of his relatives and was looking forward to coming home at the end of his tour to spend time with them in Tasmania.

"He shared a strong mateship with those he left behind in Afghanistan and all his mates in Australia.

"He will be missed by all and not a day will go by that he won't be thought of."

Corporal Richard Edward Atkinson was the 22<sup>nd</sup> Australian soldier killed in Afghanistan since the ADF commenced Operation Slipper – and his colleague, the 168<sup>th</sup> soldier wounded in action since 2002.



# A DEDICATED SOLDIER



Corporal Richard Atkinson, aged 22, from the Darwin-based 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Engineer Regiment was killed by a roadside bomb in the Tangi Valley in the Deh Rawud region of Uruzgan Province on February 2011.

A second Australian soldier was seriously wounded in the same blast, which occurred during a foot patrol with partnered Afghan National Army soldiers.

This was Corporal Atkinson's first deployment to Afghanistan. He had previously deployed with 1CER to Indonesia on Operation Padang Assist, a humanitarian assistance mission.

He was described as an exceptional soldier who was progressing through the ranks very quickly.

Commander 1st Brigade Brigadier Gus McLachlan said, "I wish I could clone him and make 100 of him."

Born in Hobart in 1988, Corporal Atkinson leaves behind a fiancé, Dannielle, parents Ross and Kate, brother James and sister-in-law Sumah.

He joined the Army in 2007 and completed recruit and combat-engineer basic training before being posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Engineer Regiment based in Darwin.

He was promoted to lance corporal less than two years later and displayed strong leadership in bringing his section together during preparation for operations in Afghanistan.

His dedication to his section was rewarded with a promotion to corporal just before deployment.

Corporal Atkinson was leading his combat engineer section as a search commander when he was killed in action.

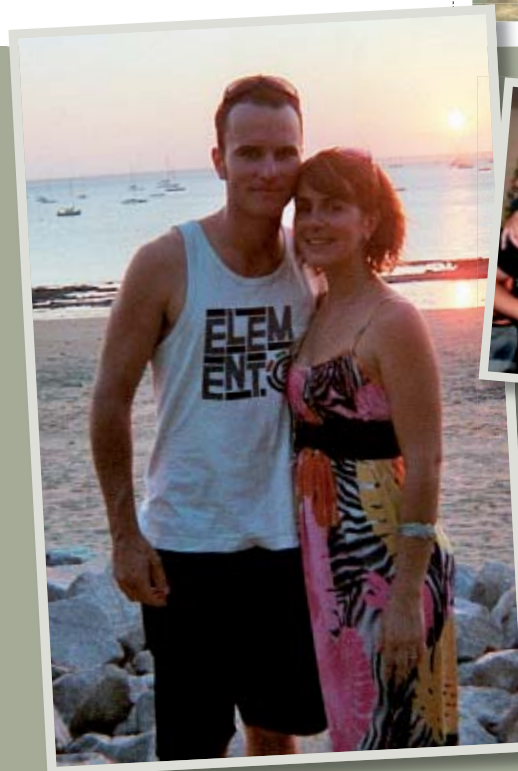
Lieutenant General Hurley said, at the time of the blast, weather conditions in Uruzgan were extremely poor.

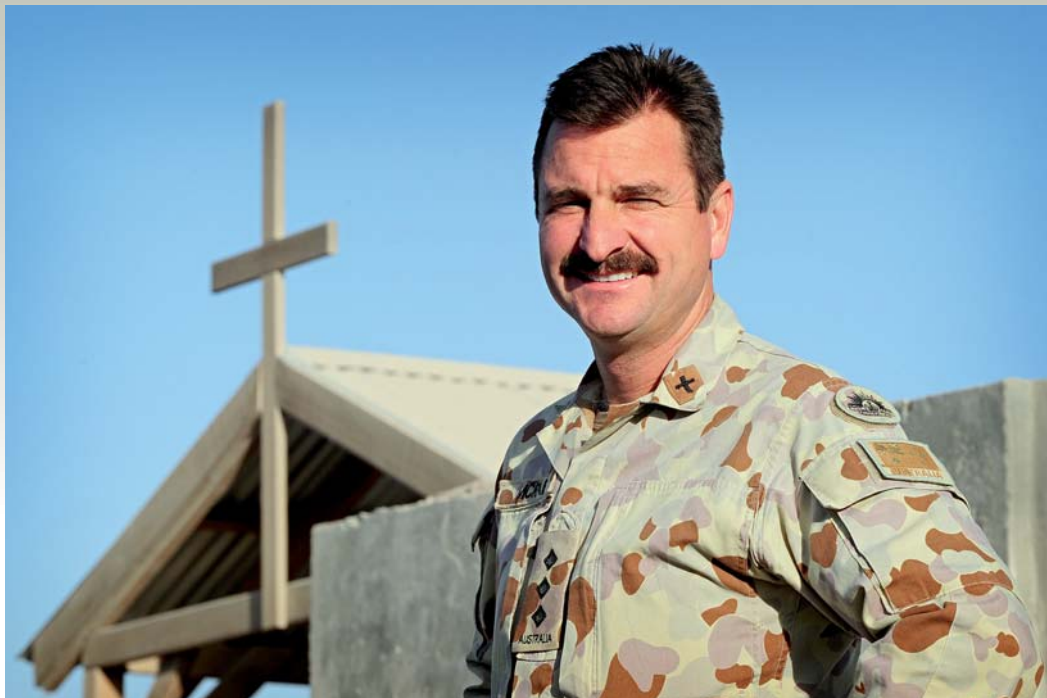
"Immediately after the blast, Australian and Afghan soldiers moved to secure the scene and do everything they could to help their mates," he said.

"Rain, low cloud and large dust storms significantly reduced visibility, creating some initial difficulty launching the aero-medical evacuation helicopter – but the US air crew persevered in dangerous conditions to get the aircraft off the ground within a few minutes.

"The aircrew's actions meant the casualties reached medical facilities within an hour of the blast."

In the days following the incident, the wounded soldier was in a satisfactory condition and Defence was focused on





# Tackle life's challenges

WORDS US ARMY SPECIALIST JENNIFER SPRADLIN PICS ADF

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."