

fish out

WORDS: LIEUTENANT TODD AUSTIN
PICS: ADF AND BRICKACEK COLLECTION



of Water

Looking at images and footage of ADF troops on the ground in landlocked Afghanistan, you could be forgiven for thinking it was an all-Army affair. But that's not always the case.

Working in the deserts and green zones of Afghanistan is a far cry from working under water, but for Navy clearance diver Richard Brickacek, that's exactly what he did for most of 2010.

Richard, a lieutenant in the Royal Australian Navy, worked as an explosive ordnance disposal member with the 1st Mentoring Task Force in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan.

His job was to exploit or destroy improvised explosive devices discovered by Australian patrols.

"As clearance divers, we are trained to dispose of all types of explosive ordnance, including IEDs, above and below the waterline," Lieutenant Brickacek said.

Whether you're in Afghanistan or the Indian Ocean, a bomb's a bomb, so transferring his skills to the army's domain wasn't as big a stretch as might first seem.

"Basically, I would take on the role of on-scene commander, set up a cordon to ensure the other members of the patrol were in safe areas and dismantle or dispose of the explosives.

"Most of the things I did were manual, hands-on work.

"In areas such as the green zone, it was pretty difficult to get a car or robot to where the IED was because of the terrain, so a lot of the work was done by hand to render the area safe."

Richard Brickacek joined the Australian Defence Force in 2004 as a seaman officer in the Navy. He completed his bridge watchkeeping certificate on HMAS Warramunga while deployed to the Middle East in 2006. He joined the clearance diving branch in 2008. Lieutenant Brickacek's latest deployment

was his second to the Middle East – but this one was very different to his first, water-based tour.

Patrolling through the area of operations was quite tough at times for Richard and his army mates, who included infantry, engineers, explosive ordnance disposal crews and, of course, Afghanistan National Army soldiers, whom they were mentoring.

Days varied wildly in how busy things could get.

"We could not predict when work would crop up.

"IEDs could be laid anywhere and at any time.

"There were days when we would come across nothing at all while on a patrol – and then there were periods when my team had to deal with four IEDs in a day and still get to a safe area that night, then, the next day, deal with another two devices," Lieutenant Brickacek said.

Extreme focus and awareness was required on every encounter, regardless of how tired, fatigued, hot or cold the team were. It was a matter of getting the job done – and of survival.

In the winter months, the temperature could drop to 10 below zero with wind chill and patrols had to cross rivers and muddy terrain in rain or snow – then deal with an improvised explosive device or arms cache.

Or, on a few occasions, engage the Taliban in a firefight.

Or, on a bad day – all of the above.

During the summer months, the temperature could nudge 50C forcing most patrols to set out very early in the morning, using night-vision equipment.



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