

Job's Done

WORDS AND PICS NAKED ARMY

In 2006 Special Operations Command (SOCOMD) approached Naked Army with a view to commissioning a collectable sculpture representing a member of the unit on operations – a commando operator returning from a successful direct-action mission. At the time the working title for the project was 'Job's Done'.

Later, in 2010, the CO of 2nd Commando Regiment (2 Cdo Regt), Lieutenant Colonel Craig Shortt, decided his unit would like a more appropriate memorial to honour east-coast SOCOMD units' fallen. To be included within the design of this memorial would be a monument-sized version of the now popular 12-inch sculpt – which had become known as The Operator – as a central fixture and focal point.

The original process was very collaborative, with SOCOMD's team giving significant input on the technical side, including extensive photography of a 2 Cdo Regt member in the tactical gear to be portrayed. In turn, 2 Cdo Regt provided additional reference photography to bring the figurine up to spec.

When 2 Cdo Regt approached Naked Army several years after the initial SOCOMD commission with the idea of creating a permanent monument with a life-size operator sculpture as its centerpiece in a memorial garden (the latter still in development), we were honoured to participate and relished the challenge.

The scaled-up sculpt incorporated some details not featured on the original 12-inch figurine. Details on the M4 carbine were updated to better reflect more current technology, with some details changing and replacement of hardware components on the M4's RIS (rail interface system). Some details on the original sculpture were also crafted more formally, to look slightly less 'lived in' and better suiting its eventual usage as a memorial.

Scott Edwards, Naked Army's director, said The Operator was actually one of Naked Army's first modern sculpts.

"We had previously worked a lot on WWI, WWII and Vietnam-era sculpts but this was effectively our first pass at a contemporary subject," Mr Edwards said.

"Not only that, but it was created while the unit was still deployed on operations, rather than years after the fact, which was pretty special.

"Of course, this meant we could get accurate reference material and technical accuracy straight from the source – in real time, as it were.

"It gave the unit full ownership of the technical side too, and saved our team many hours of research.



"Then, when it was time to do the large-scale sculpture, we already had the 12-inch sculpture developed for SOCOMD, so we could scale up the existing sculpt, and save a lot of development time by doing so."

Mr Edwards said that before the large-scale statue was cast, all the technical refinement was done at the smaller scale, an approach that had long been used by sculptors to refine the anticipated result before committing to a full-size, expensive sculpture.

"We tend to sculpt hyper-real. In other words, we approached the sculpture as an exact study, historically and physically accurate, rather than being a stylized interpretation.

"However, we sculpted The Operator at around 115 per cent of the real size of a man – which made him more than 2m tall.

"We did this to allow for the shrinkage you get when you cast from an original sculpt.

"If we didn't, I think the result might have felt somewhat less than 'monumental' in size."

Although modern in its subject matter, the sculpture was totally traditional in its creation – even the M4 carbine was sculpted, by hand, in clay.

No computer wizardry was employed at all, even for hardware or weapons.

"With organic subjects, traditional sculpture is probably the only way to go about getting a monumental result," Mr Edwards said.

"There are no shortcuts with our style of sculpture, which is highly accurate rather than impressionistic.

"Projects like this can't be rushed, short-changed or done on the cheap.

"You can't, for instance, spray a dressed mannequin with plaster and hope it's going to look 'monumental' when it's finished – although, unfortunately, there are examples of this approach out there in the world.

"We also gave the sculpture's surface a stippled finish, to give it a slightly 'rough-hewn' feeling, similar to what you'd see on an older, more traditional sculpture.

"For example, the AIF and RAN sculpts at The Cenotaph in Martin Place, Sydney, are great examples of this technique.

"The surface texture on a piece this size often looks great too if you leave some tooling marks behind to give a subtle indication of the process – so, certain focus areas such as the face and parts of the uniform might be more finished than others.

"It's kind of like an artist's sketch that is partially detailed further to add excitement and balance to the work," Mr Edwards said.

The Operator was cast by Naked Army's affiliate, Australian Bronze, in Manly, NSW, using silicone bronze, a material better known for its use in the nautical industry, typically in propellers and similar applications where corrosion and wear are factors.

Australian Bronze director Clive Calder said The Operator was actually rather complex to execute – particularly all the tactical equipment.



"Like the sculpture itself, the cast also used very traditional techniques, although of course, with modern materials," he said.

"For instance, although silicone molds were taken to replicate the original sculpture, the casting process involved an age-old technique called 'lost wax' where molten wax is poured into the mold cavity and allowed to harden.

"The wax is then removed and dressed to hide any imperfections, until it looks like the finished piece. Wax pieces molded separately can be heated and attached and a final mold is then made around the wax, and the wax is melted out again, creating the master mold for the sculpture component.

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