

ISSUE 75

LAST CONTACT (see page 6)

# CONTACT

AIR LAND & SEA

DECEMBER 2022

*the* Australian military magazine



## WINGS OVER ILLAWARRA

+ PITCH BLACK – KAKADU – MACH 75  
– RETROSPECTIVES – 118 PAGES



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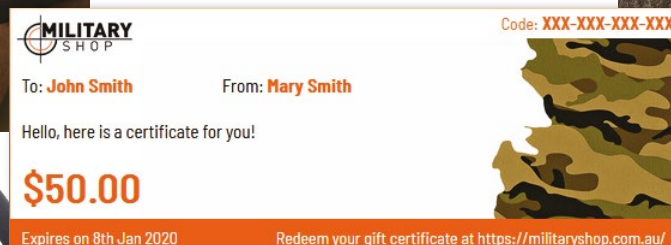


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Issue 75 – December 2022

# CONTACT

AIR, LAND & SEA



## WINGS OVER ILLAWARRA

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Starts page 40

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I have chosen to slow down in my 'old age' – so this will be the last regular issue of **CONTACT Air Land & Sea** magazine. There may be more in the future, if I get bored or run out of things to do in my retirement.

And, of course, **COMBAT Camera** magazine [of which I have published 18 issues] may also make reappearances, especially following our anticipated big presence at Avalon Airshow next year.

Before you panic, though, let me assure you that **CONTACT** magazine is the only thing affected by this announcement – our web site and weekly newsletters will not only continue, but will likely flourish because of this freeing up of brainspace.

There are hundreds of people I should thank for their support, encouragement and loyalty over the past 18 years – too many to name them all, but I will name a few...

To my wife Rosie first and foremost, not only for her invaluable assistance with account keeping, invoicing, subscriptions management, trade-booth attending and myriad other support chores, but also for allowing me to start on this mad venture in the first place and supporting and encouraging its continuation for so many years – with apologies for not getting that new kitchen she dreamed of, the loan for which was diverted to become the start-up capital for **CONTACT**.

I also want to thank all the fine men and women of the Australian Defence Force whom I met over the years. I always felt warmly welcomed into your presence in barracks, on exercises and especially on operations. Your work and your exploits were always an inspiration to me and you always made it easy for me to tell great stories about your work.

However, the last time 'I went bush' with some of you didn't go so well. I experienced my first ever PTSD panic attack while visiting a unit on a live-fire exercise at Cultana, South Australia. I didn't recognise it as a panic attack at the time, but knew I had to make excuses and get out of there.

That loss of confidence to immerse myself in your world was surely the beginning of the end for **CONTACT** magazine, which was all about in-depth reporting from the field. Relying on others to write **CONTACT**-worthy stories was always difficult – with some notable exceptions – and relying on the ADF to supply sufficient info for me to write remotely was hopeless.

I persevered for a couple of years after that Cultana episode, in the apparently forlorn hope that I'd find my mojo again or 'snap out it'. But it wasn't to be.

Among the other names I will mention for thanks is then-WO1 now Major (retd) Darryl Kelly, who is the longest-serving external member of the **CONTACT** family, contributing his 'Almost VC' and 'Just Soldiers' stories every single issue from number 1 right through to this, the 75<sup>th</sup>. Thanks a million Darryl.

Former sergeant Troy Rodgers is another who deserves much thanks. Troy contributed generously over the years and, in fact, was at the very first **CONTACT** planning meeting when the collusion could have been considered a chargeable offence and was thus conducted very secretly :-). Troy has also been a great personal friend since we served together in East Timor in 1999/2000 and, despite his own challenges, assisted me greatly in my own DVA journey in latter years.

Wayne Cooper is another dear friend whose contributions were, and friendship still is, a solid bedrock on which **CONTACT** and myself have leaned heavily from the beginning. Wayne wrote brilliantly about his soldiering experiences in Somalia for the first 16 issues of **CONTACT**. Later, Wayne was my boss and mentor during a particularly tough period – and a true friend to this day.

Ash Shinner, who took over the long-running Somalia series, was another great friend of **CONTACT**. I regret I didn't know him while we were both in uniform.

Don Stevenson, **CONTACT**'s fitness writer for many years was another top bloke I came to know through these pages – and his books (still available on our web site) have been a great benefit to many would-be commandos and to me personally.

Thanks also to Damien Ewin and Stephen Davie for their long-term support and friendship.

Another friend I picked up thanks to his involvement in **CONTACT** is Tony Kelly – who is single-handedly responsible for the very professional look and 'feel' of this magazine. His input, assistance and education in the fine art of layout and design has influenced these pages long after his direct involvement ended.

Finally, at the risk of forgetting a name or 10, I say to the many others who contributed, aided, abetted, assisted, encouraged and supported **CONTACT** over the years – thank you, thank you, thank you.

And even to the doubters, haters and roadblockers, without whose obstructionism this stubborn Irishman would never have started or may have given up a lot sooner – thank you too (he says cynically).

For those who don't know why I say that cynically – when Army HQ allowed ARMY Newspaper Unit to be civilianised at the officer level, the change spelt the death knell for ARMY Magazine. When the new civvie editor threatened to kill that off, rebellious junior NCOs went behind his back 'to show him' – and **CONTACT** was born (in secret).

Way back then, my yardsticks for success were, that **CONTACT** should be better than the predecessor it was modelled on and that it should last longer.

I think I won on both counts – **CONTACT** was definitely a better product (if I do say so myself), and it lasted 75 issues against 54 for ARMY.

Which brings me to one last thank you (again meant cynically :-)) – to the Defence and Defence Force Recruiting officials whose mantra "he's already doing our job for us, so why should we pay him [via advertising support]" – I hope you see the error of your shortsightedness as I shut down your best asset just as you face your largest recruiting challenge since Vietnam.

In this, the last issue of **CONTACT Air Land & Sea** magazine, and in the spirit of looking back on what was a brilliant beacon for the Australian Defence Force and all who sail in her, some of this magazine will look back on my favourite stories of the past 18 years – stories that showed the lives and work of Australian sailors, soldiers, aviators and occasionally police in the best possible light.

Many of these stories also demonstrate another aspect of **CONTACT** that I am most proud of – the respect and trust shown to **CONTACT** by uniformed men and women willing to tell their sometimes harrowing stories, to this audience through these pages.

Before I go, I do want to reiterate that this is not the end, but the beginning of a new chapter in the wider **CONTACT** story. Only the prestigious quarterly magazine is bowing out. The many other facets of this 'media empire' remain – and will hopefully flourish from the extra attention.

If you aren't already a subscriber, please do subscribe free via [aussiecombat.com](http://aussiecombat.com) – and, if you are already a supporter, well, let's crack on.

Sincerely,

Brian Hartigan,  
Managing Editor





# Poppy Mpressions

WHERE THE POPPIES GROW

The latest in the Poppy Mpressions line, this sensational collection features the vibrant artwork "*Where the Poppies Grow*" by emerging Australian artist Adriana Seserko.





# WELCOME HOME

New Zealand Army recruits come to attention during their march-out parade, stomping in melted snow, at Waiouru Military Camp on New Zealand's North Island.

Friends and families of the graduates attended the ceremony in which they witnessed the troops conducting displays and drill on the parade square.

Waiouru, meaning 'River of the West', has a history as a walking route for Maori, an 1880s sheep station, and as an army training area since WWII.

Waiouru Military Camp can be found in the central North Island, with Mount Ruapehu as its backdrop ensuring a rugged and challenging environment.

All New Zealand Army soldiers complete their 16 weeks of basic training at The Army Depot at Waiouru, with intakes occurring several times a year.

Every soldier comes to know this camp well and, at some point, calls Waiouru home – home of the New Zealand soldier.



# BOOM

*An M1A1 Abrams main battle tank engages a target at the Puckapunyal Military Area, Victoria.*



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My heart is pounding in my chest. It feels as though someone has a hold of it and they are bashing it on the inside of my rib cage. My head hurts from the sound of my heart beating so loud. Surely if there are any Talibs on this hill they are going to hear my heart, it is so loud.

Mick is behind me with the gun. That gives me a bit of solace. I know he's switched on and that's mitigating the shot threat. But still, I'm shitting myself.

It's night time and there is no illumination. Two weeks ago I could shoot in the moonlight with my S'n'B with no aids – it was that bright. Not now though. Now all I can see is the small, round, green TV screen projection that is my NVG – my eye in the blindness.

My head is down. I'm looking at the ground. Looking for any disturbance as my borrowed Mine Lab sweeps over the second of three tracks we have to cross before we start our ascent.

This goes on for the next five or so paces. Then I stop to look up. Check my surroundings, check the skyline of the feature we're about to climb, and then back to Mick. He's still got his gun up at the ready, watching my arse.

I look back down and start to sweep with the mine lab. And then it squeals. A massive hit.....

Published in Issue 32, December 2011, this was the first first-hand feature-length story from Afghanistan trusted to CONTACT.

# THAT FIRST PATROL

WORDS: LANCE CORPORAL BILL MILLERICK  
PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY: LANCE CORPORAL MILLERICK, AND ADF





Brothers in arms – Bill, Matty and Mick

## G'day, my name is Bill and I'm a sniper with MTF-3.

**A**s I write this, it has just been a few days since I lost my good mate and No. 2 to an IED. This short article is about my experience, my first patrol after the IED strike that claimed my mate. And it's about my own coping mechanisms since.

I'm jotting this down just to let you all know what it's like to go through something like this. Hopefully it will never happen again, but for anyone who may have to experience something like this, they may be able to draw a few tips from what happened to me and the mistakes I made coping with that first patrol back out.

To set the scene, Matty and I have been mates for a while. We did our basic sniper course together. We both had a cool-off period after our course, which we spent in Timor. Unfortunately, we were posted to different companies, but we still saw each other every now and then.

After Timor, I was fortunate enough to find a home in the sniper cell. Matty had to mark time for a little longer until he got his run, but eventually a spot opened up and across he came.

In the year before Matty got into the cell, I was panelled for sniper team leader. After completing team leader's in Singo, I came back to battalion and we ran a basic course. Matty was pulled across to wet his feet in the cell whilst helping out on the course. As soon as he came across, we all agreed we wanted him in the cell and I got him as my opo, my No. 2.

We pretty much spent every hour at work from then on within earshot of each other. The year from then on was flat out in preparation for the Afghan deployment, and we probably spent more time together than we did with our missus' (which definitely pissed them both off, especially when we'd come back from bush and the very next weekend be around at each others places painting kit or building rigs or any other nature of gear-queering that we thought to be imperative). Anyway, we were close.

Fast forward to 22 August. We were out on what would be called 'A directly mentored joint patrol in the Khas Uruzgan area'. We had already patrolled over a massive yama and across the green. It was dark. Not pitch black though. There was a fair amount of illumination even though the moon was waning. We were looking up at the imposing feature that was to be our OP. Matty was searching us in, scouting the patrol up a hill that would have eventually put us higher than Mt Kosciuszko.

And then the unthinkable – that earsplitting explosion.



Private Matthew Lambert field-firing a 7.62mm HK417 marksman's rifle. Matty was killed by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan less than a week after this photo was taken.

.....Mick also hears the ominous squeal of the mine lab. He looks at me and I signal him to stop, although he's already taken a knee. I sweep the mine lab over it again, this time in a flower pattern, just like the engineers showed me to, and its singing like a bird.

It takes what seems to be an age for me to get my wits back, but in reality it would have only been a few seconds – and then the training kicks in.

'Search your way out' – the voice in my head says. I turn north and begin to sweep. No sound. Six, maybe seven paces and nothing – and my heart starts to slow.

I drop an IR cylume on the ground and signal the rest of the lads to walk to the left of it. The last bloke in our quad will pick the cylume up so as not leave any discardable sign.

We keep pressing on, it's only a few more metres and I'll have searched through this VP and we can start heading up the bloody steep feature in front of us.

Five more paces, swinging the mine lab, look up, look back, good to hook. Another five and we're out of here.



We pretty much spent every hour at work from then on within earshot of each other... we'd come back from bush and the very next weekend be around at each others places painting kit, building rigs or any other nature of gear-queering that we thought imperative. Anyway, we were close.



*My ticker seems to calm down as I reach the embankment which signals the start of our climb and the end of the IED threat, at least until we get near the top of this feature and our OP loc.*

As it turned out, Matty stepped on what the ginger beers tell me was a LMCP. The poor bloke had the odds stacked against him, as the chances for finding that, especially at night, were pretty slim.

Post blast, everything that could be done for Matty was, but unfortunately we lost him. We put Matty on the AME bird, then, because of our small call sign, enacted an RTB plan – a single battle casualty triggering our abort criteria.

Upon abort, we either had to stay in loc and fight while awaiting extraction or 'foot falcon' at best tactical speed back to base.

As luck would have it, though, there was a parallel SF insertion going on close by and they lent us a Chook for an immediate extraction.

The next few hours were a blur.

It was easy to stay switched on while I was out, but as soon as I got back in base, into a safe area where I could switch off, everything started to hit me.

My mate was gone.

It's hard to explain everything I felt. Most of it I can't even remember.

A few things I do remember still perplex me. I remember feeling like I should cry but couldn't. Then, two minutes later trying to talk, to console Mick, and only being able to sob and cry (the psych later informed me that these reactions are normal, including short-term amnesia post any traumatic event, and that it was nothing to worry about).

I've read somewhere that there are five stages of grief. I think denial is one of them, I never experienced this.

Perhaps this is normal though for a combat soldier where

most of the world is black and white. As a sniper you have to call everything as it is, there is no place in an OP log for maybe's or imagination. It's all clear cut. I saw what happened and knew the consequences. I watched my mate being killed in action and was never in denial about what happened to Matty.

I'm pretty sure that anger is another stage. This I did feel – still feel it now. I think a little bit of anger is good for a soldier. It is definitely a motivating emotion and I believe helps a bloke want to stay out in the heat and red space where the insurgents like to congregate. Honestly I'd be happy to spend the rest of my trip outside the wire hunting insurgents, although in saying that, we were sent over here to do exactly that.

The only thing anger isn't helping any of us with is IEDs. You can rage and hate as much as you like during a firefight, but when it's quiet and dark you have to turn the anger down and switch on lest you become a burden on the rest of the team.

Bargaining is another emotion I didn't get to feel, but I suppose if you have come to terms with what has happened, what is there to bargain for? I think this ties in a bit with denial and I never felt this.

Depression and acceptance are the last two.

The next few hours were a blur.

It was easy to stay switched on while I was out, but as soon as I got back in base, into a safe area where I could switch off, everything started to hit me.

My mate was gone.



Some of the hardest and most depressing things I've done here have been telephone conversations. Trying to help loved ones back home to grieve when you don't really have time to grieve yourself can really get you down.



One of the benefits of being busy is there is not much time to slow down and feel sorry for yourself. Despite this, though, there is always a little quiet time where I can reflect and start to feel sad – usually on picket.

The only other time I feel a little sombre and uneasy is on the phone. The girls back home are trying to deal with this terrible time as well, and they grieve different. Some of the hardest and most depressing things I've done here have been telephone conversations. Trying to help loved ones back home to grieve when you don't really have time to grieve yourself can really get you down.

Acceptance. I suppose acceptance was putting Matty on the Herc – then stepping off on patrol two days later. That first step on that next patrol was for me the acceptance that, despite all that has happened, the job is still on.

*We walk back into the FOB, all safe and sound, except for maybe my heart, which feels like it's burnt out.*

*A few hours later and I'm still wired. Usually it takes an hour or so to de-tune after a patrol – but usually not this long. Perhaps it's because we are all on reverse cycle. It's always hard to sleep during the middle of the day.*

*A few hours more, still no sleep, and it's time to radio check for the next patrol – an ambush. All pre-patrol done, it's now pitch black – no moon – and time to step off again.*

*The next morning and the patrol is back again, all looking ragged. I feel like shit. I'm pretty tapped out – haven't slept in almost 72 hours. Youngy can see we all look the same – even himself. He pulls us in for a pow-wow.*

*After all getting together and having a chat about why we're all so buggered, we find out the whole patrol is feeling the same. Mick's nerves are almost as shot as mine and Youngy is ducking and weaving from every rock and bit of disturbed earth. We talk for probably 45 minutes about everything that is scaring the shit out of us since Matty's incident.*

*It helped 10-fold and was probably something we should have done before we first stepped off. How were any of us to know that the others were scared or doing it tough too, when we were all pulling the tough-man face.*

This brings me to the purpose of this little article – a few tips for anyone who might experience this God-awful shitty situation.







The biggest one is, don't try to tough out an incident like this. We are lucky in the sniper cell because we are so close. We all had each other to lean on. In situations like this, there is nothing wrong with wearing your heart on your sleeve. In line with this is, before you step off after an incident, talk to your lads (or, if you're one of the lads, talk to your PC) about your (and the collective) fears and concerns for the next patrol. Be specific. Everyone is going to get the 'OK lads, here we go again' speech, but it is beneficial to sit down and talk specifics.

Our major collective concern that played on all our minds during that first patrol was IEDs – and every mortar or 155 round we heard during that patrol was another IED just like Matty's and gave all of us heart attacks.

This little point needs to be emphasised.

After we had our little chat, the next patrol was easy – or as easy as a fighting patrol in the 'Ghan can be.

The next one is – try not to be alone for the first little while afterwards. Everyone will need alone time, but try not to spend too much time by yourself. Your mates will be pillars for you even though it's a terrible situation for them as well and, in turn, you'll naturally be a pillar for them.

Another one is – and, despite how cruel it may sound – explain to your loved ones that, although you do care about them and their grief, sometimes you have to be cold and get on with the job.

I promised my missus I'd write everything in a diary – all my experiences and feelings – that she can read when I get home, so I don't have to tell her while I'm here.

This way I can tell her everything (within reason) without compromising OpSec – and it stops her from asking questions I can't answer.

The last point is – get back on the horse as soon as you can.

We grieved for Matty, put him on the plane and then pushed to get back out. It's what he would have wanted.

Everyone needs time to grieve but you have to push on and, once you're out fighting the enemy again, all the world's worries seem to go away and you can focus on one thing – the task at hand.

I think it's a lot calmer on the mind when you know and are only concerned about the task at hand. Doing our job to the best of our ability, taking the fight to the enemy, is the best way we can honour Matty's sacrifice and, in turn, also helps us to deal with his loss.

I hope this helps anyone who ever has to cope with anything like this.



Matty – rest in peace brother.  
Lest We Forget



Private Matthew Lambert, in the rear shooter's hole of a Bushmaster



A sniper's farewell – Private Matthew Lambert, KIA 22 August 2011



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# PITCH BLACK

Exercise Pitch Black is a biennial, three-week, multi-national, large-force exercise conducted primarily in the Northern Territory. The exercise is the Royal Australian Air Force's most significant international-engagement activity with this and other exercise pivotal to ensuring the RAAF remains ready to respond whenever the Australian government requires. The training and integration of forces that occurs during Pitch Black directly supports RAAF's ability to conduct operations. Activities such as Exercise Pitch Black recognise Australia's strong relationships and the high value it places on regional security and fostering closer ties throughout the Indo-Pacific region.



A Royal Singapore Air Force F-16 comes in to land after a sortie on Exercise Pitch Black 2022.





**TOP:** Luftwaffe E-2000 Eurofighter with special Pacific-tour livery.  
**BOTTOM:** A RAAF F-35A over Mindil Beach, Darwin, during a public air display.

## SHEDDING LIGHT ON **PITCH BLACK**

2022 was a shining light in the history of 'Pitch Black' for the Royal Australian Air Force

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
BARRIE COLLINS

**Exercise Pitch Black first started at RAAF Base Williamtown, New South Wales, in 1981 and has since moved permanently to RAAF Base Darwin.**

In the early years, PB was an all-Australian exercise. However, in 1983 the United States took part, and in 1984 New Zealand was invited.

The Republic of Singapore Air Force joined PB in 1990 and has attended every exercise since.

The Royal Thai Air Force first participated in 2004 and the Indonesian Air Force six years later,

in 2010, with other regional and international air forces queueing up to take part.

Fast forward to 2022 and 17 nations saw Exercise Pitch Black as a rewarding and worthwhile undertaking.

Exercise Pitch Black aims to strengthen regional partnerships and improve interoperability between nations, thus promoting regional security.

Participants were divided into two opposing sides – basically, aggressors and defenders.





## PARTICIPANTS:

<b>Australia</b>	EA-18G Growler, F-35A Lightning II, Hawk 127, C-17 Globemaster III, Hercules C-130J, E-7A Wedgetail, KC-30A MRTT and Learjet 35A
<b>United States of America</b>	F-35B Lightning II, F-15C ( 'Fighting Cocks' from 67 <sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron Kadena, Japan), C-130J Sumo and C-17 Globemaster III
<b>United Kingdom:</b>	E-2000 Eurofighter Typhoon, A400M Atlas and KC-30 Voyager MRTT
<b>Republic of Singapore:</b>	F-15SG Strike Eagle, F-16C/D Fighting Falcon, G550 AEW, Hercules C-130 and A330 MRTT
<b>Republic of Korea:</b>	KF-16U Falcon and A330 MRTT
<b>Japan:</b>	F-2A/B Viper Zero and Kawasaki C-2 transporter
<b>New Zealand:</b>	P3-K2 Orion
<b>France:</b>	Dassault Rafale B, A330 MRTT Phénix, A400M Atlas and CASA CN-235 transporters
<b>Germany</b>	E-2000 Eurofighter ( TFW74 'Bavarian Tigers'), A330 MRTT and a A-400M Atlas Transporter
<b>Indonesia</b>	F-16A
<b>India:</b>	Sukhoi Su-30 MKI, Hercules C-130J and C-17 Globemaster III transporters
<b>Netherlands:</b>	NATO MRTT
<b>Canada, Malaysia, Thailand, The Phillipines, United Arab Emirates</b>	



**TOP:** French Air Force Dassault Rafale C.  
**BOTTOM:** French A400M Atlas.

As mentioned, in previous years Pitch Black has had a number of overseas participants, however 2022 was very special with additional involvement from countries such as Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Republic of Korea.

Not only did we see the addition of new countries, we also saw new aircraft types in the skies over RAAF Bases Darwin, Tindal and Curtin.

Being a joint international military exercise, there were a number of hurdles to get over – the first being logistics and the second – language.

The British, French and German contingents had to travel more that 14,000km to take part.

The journey was not without its mishaps, with one of the German Eurofighters delayed due to technical issues forcing it to land in the United Arab Emirates for repair.

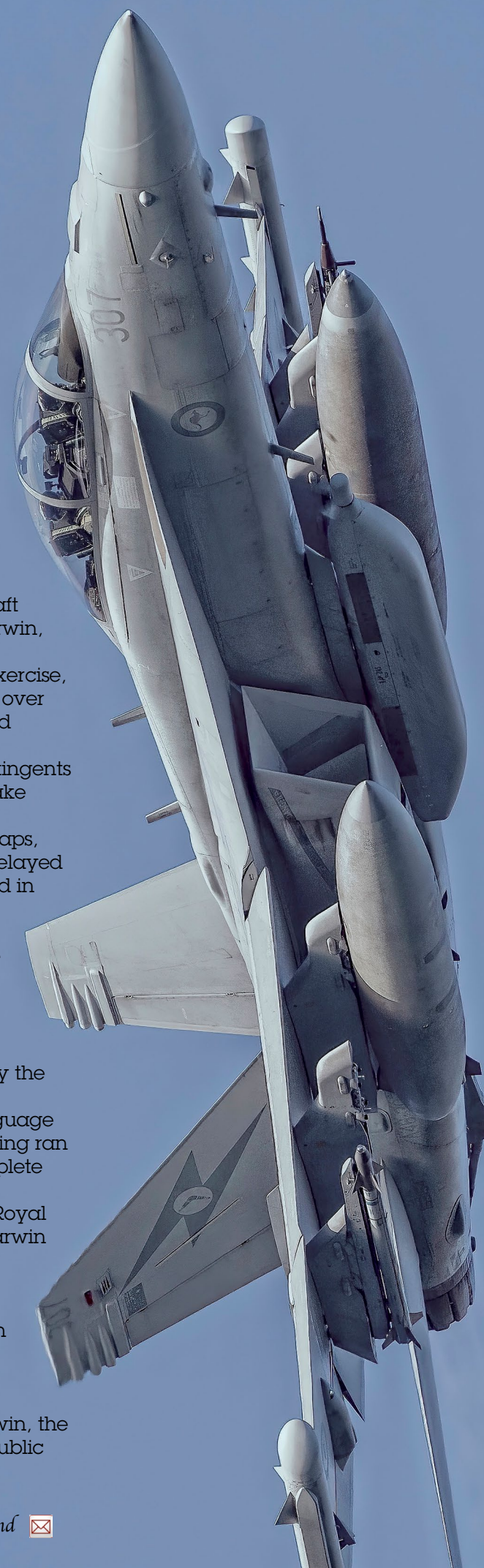
However, the specially painted aircraft managed to catch up with the main party a few days later.

The new livery on this aircraft depicted the route taken by the Luftwaffe, with the flags of countries participating and those to be visited by the contingent.

But, with just a few hiccups and language issues during the early stages, everything ran smoothly and the exercise was a complete success, according to all concerned.

Pitch Black 2022 was hosted by the Royal Australian Air Force at RAAF bases Darwin and Tindal in Australia's Northern Territory and was conducted mainly in the skies over the Northern Territory and as far west as RAAF Base Curtin in Western Australia with further support from RAAF Base Amberley in Queensland.

As a thank you to the people of Darwin, the Pitch Black organisers arranged two public events.



*Australian  
F/A-18G Growler*



The first was an hour-long fly-past by some of the participating aircraft over the foreshore of Mindil Beach in conjunction with a beautiful Thursday-evening markets.

The United States Marine Corps showed the public the handling capabilities of the F-35B 'Lightning' and the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft.

A handling demonstration by an RAAF F-35A Lightning had the crowd in awe of the capabilities of our newest very-fast jet.

On the Saturday following, RAAF held an open day at RAAF Base Darwin, allowing the public to view aircraft up close, talk to pilots and support staff and see other aspects of air-force life.

Pilots from the Armée de l'Air (French Air Force), flying Rafales, the JASDF (Japanese Air Self Defence Force) flying modified F-16's called Mitsubishi F-2s, the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) flying the EL 200 Eurofighter and the ROK (Republic of Korea) flying their KF-16Hs as well the RAF (Royal Air Force) flying their version of the Eurofighter; all loved flying in the skies over the Northern Territory unhindered by the flight restrictions common to their home airspaces.

All going to plan, the next Exercise Pitch Black will return to the Northern Territory in 2024.

**TOP RIGHT:** Indonesian Air Force Sukhoi Su-30 Flanker.

**BACKGROUND:** RAF A330 MRTT with E-2000 Eurofighter Typhoon.

**RIGHT:** US Marine Corps V-22 Osprey.

**FAR RIGHT:** Singaporean F-15SG Strike Eagle.



Published in Issue 33,  
March 2012, this first-  
hand account stands out  
as one of my favourite  
instances where a soldier  
trusted **CONTACT** with  
his own very-personal  
war story.

# I SURVIVED 4 IEDS

I am originally from Canberra and, having family and friends in Defence, I knew at a young age I wanted to join. I joined the Royal Australian Navy in January 2006 as a boatswains mate and spent four years on patrol boats in Darwin and was part of the boarding party team for Aware One. After four and a half years in the Navy I decided to transfer to the Australian Army and the armoured corps. I was posted to B Squadron 3rd/4th Cavalry Regiment in December 2010 and deployed to Afghanistan six months later.

WORDS TROOPER DAVID NICOLSON PICS TROOPER DAVID NICOLSON AND ADF

Troopers Ayles and Nicolson front car, and Corporal Tutton and Trooper Moyle second car, ride out the blast of an IED blown in place.  
Pic by Lance Corporal Bayley



# 1ST INCIDENT – JULY 2011

A small group of us in Alpha Company (Coy) were at a patrol base in the Mirabad valley. We had been in Afghanistan for about a month. For most of us it was our first deployment but for others it was their 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> – but we were all keen to be there and to start the job.

So, there we were, getting ready to step out on one of our first small jobs, a troop transfer to another patrol base. It was approximately 0730 when we headed off into the 'dasht', avoiding the major route. As our Bushmaster patrol approached a ridge just south of the patrol base, my vehicle halted to allow the engineers to clear the path down the ridgeline and towards the green zone. Our call sign (CS) made it into the green zone without incident but, as we went down the road, about 200m from our destination, our engineers, who were about 20m in front searching for improvised explosive devices (IEDs), had a burst of automatic fire go over their heads. They dropped down and held a position while we moved up to provide support. The engineers had another two rounds fired at them and they returned fire. With my CS in support, my crew commander put down a burst of Mag 58 and, with that, it was over.

The infantry CS went out to exploit the area but did not find the weapon or the enemy, so we continued towards the patrol base and eventually dropped off the personnel.

While waiting in the base, we had a Bushmaster and an infantry CS providing overwatch into the green. Heading back outside the base we picked up the boys on the way



Pic Petty Officer Damian Pawlenko

**We were in an old riverbed turning to go up to the ridgeline when there was a BOOM! We had hit our first IED of the deployment.**

Sappers White, Moore and Moss, Corporal Martin and EDD Flojo search a ridgeline ahead of a Bushmaster. Pic Trooper Nicolson



through. The overwatch vehicle and infantry CS mounted up and moved to our position approx 10m from the green zone.

We were in an old riverbed turning to go up to the ridgeline when there was a BOOM! We had hit our first IED of the deployment.

I was shocked and turned to my left to see if my crew commander was OK. He had been standing up out of the cupola with most of his body exposed. The force pushed him down from a standing position and in to the back of the Bushmaster. He was OK and already on to communications, reporting straight away that all personnel inside the vehicle were uninjured.

I yelled out to see if the engineers were OK because we had one of them up in the rear shooter's hole. Lucky for him he had ducked down just a moment before the IED exploded.

The engineers got out to clear around our vehicle to make sure there were no secondary IEDs. After just being hit with an IED and then following up by getting out to secure the site takes guts and I take my hat off to the combat engineers who are over there.

They eventually secured the area and another vehicle moved to an overwatch position to our right and an infantry CS to our high left in case of a follow up attack.

We then waited for the explosive-ordnance disposal (EOD) boys to get to the site to collect evidence.

While waiting, we checked the damage to our vehicle. The IED struck our rear right wheel, which was gone, the stowage bins were bent and busted and some parts were missing. The boys found bits of tyre and metal as far as 150m away. The blast itself lifted the rear of the Bushmaster and pushed it about 2m to the left and about 1m in front of where the device had been.

When EOD eventually showed up, they brought a tow truck with them.

Back in the patrol base, the medic asked questions and gave us a test (all personnel are tested after each blast) to see if we had any memory loss. We all seemed OK and just wanted another vehicle to get back doing our job. We headed to Tarin Kot (TK) and picked up our new vehicle and, after a bit of stick from the lads about losing one so early, we were on our way back to our patrol base.

Over the next few days we talked about what happened and we were not keen for it to happen again. Little did we know, Mirabad valley had a lot more IEDs waiting for us.

# 2ND INCIDENT – AUGUST 2011

Our Bushmaster CS was taking out the infantry and engineers to conduct a mentoring patrol with the Afghan National Army (ANA), who were from another patrol base in our valley. We left our patrol base and headed to the ANA patrol base, with the engineers searching the way. We got to there without incident and the infantry and engineers took the ANA out the gate and on a patrol that lasted about two hours.

It was summer and extremely hot, so when the boys returned they rested for a bit to cool down while the infantry sergeant gave the ANA commander a debrief about the foot patrol and checked if they needed anything on the base fixed. All in all the mentoring patrol from Alpha went well and we mounted up to head back to our own base.

About 1km down the road we had to pass a small built-up area. The first two vehicles got past with no problems. Then, over the radio, we got a report from our rear vehicle that they had a Molotov cocktail thrown at them, but it missed the Bushmaster and failed to burst in flames. It was lucky it was faulty as they had a rear shooter up out of the hatch.

We only had about 50 to 60m left of the route before heading into the dasht. With about 20m before the turn-off point there was massive explosion. It felt bigger than the last one, and everything went silent and black for a few seconds. I looked to my right and my window was spider-webbed from four different hits. I looked left for my crew commander, but he had been thrown in the back and had a fresh scratch on his helmet from shrapnel. The boys in the back were uninjured, so the crew commander sent them out the rear hatch to provide security.

The vehicle was still operational – just. It was strange that it was still working as the blast felt a lot bigger than our first hit and we lost a wheel in that first one.

The infantry and engineers stayed back to exploit the area and search the building where the Molotov cocktail

Sergeant Engstrom and Trooper Banks watch as an IED is blown in place. Pic Trooper Nicolson



had come from, while we limped out of there onto an overwatch position to assess damage.

We had been hit on the front right side by a command-pull, directionally focused charge (DFC) in the wall of the building. The force from the blast pushed the front of the Bushmaster to the left about 2m and had peppered us with rocks and shrapnel all along the front right side, up the side of my window and straight up to where my crew commander had been standing. It blew some side stowage bins out of shape and put some big holes in the metal on the side of the vehicle and punctured holes in the front tyres. The force felt so strong because the wall from which it came was only about 1m away from us.

After the boys came back from searching, our troop commander decided we could make it back to our patrol base and get fixed up there. At base we changed the tyres so the Bushmaster could move again, but it needed to go back to TK for new bins, plating and a window. They also needed to check it over to see if the armour suffered any cracks.

So now we were on Bushmaster number three. And, along with the new car came some more stick, but we had a laugh and headed back to our patrol base. Once again, the Bushmaster held its own and nobody was hurt.



Pic Petty Officer Damian Pawlenko



## 3RD INCIDENT – AUGUST 2011

**W**e had been coming back from TK, escorting a Mog full of the good stuff (mail) and other bits and pieces for an upcoming build in Charmistan. We were heading up a hill to get on a ridgeline about 700m away from our patrol base. It didn't work as planned and, wouldn't you know it, we hit another IED.

Lucky for us the anti-personnel mine that was used for the initiator blew up and cut the wire to the main charge that ended up low-ordering (partial blow). We stopped the Bushmaster and the engineers again cleared the way back to the site. We had our EOD team with us and this made the time to blow in place (BIP) a lot faster. We waited for them to get the robot out and put in a slab of explosives to detonate the left-over charge. When they BIP'd the site, it was massive – bigger than the previous two by far. We waited the allocated safe time and the EOD boys went back out to see the hole, collect evidence and take the pictures they needed. When I looked back and saw the sergeant of the EOD team in the hole taking pictures, I realised how lucky we were – the hole was waist deep. He later confirmed it was much larger than the previous device. If the full charge had gone off it definitely wouldn't have been a good day.

The vehicle had to be inspected, so we now got another Bushmaster – number 4.



*Pic Petty Officer Damian Pawlenko*

## 4TH INCIDENT – AUGUST 2011

**T**his was the day Alpha Coy and attachments moved out to build a patrol base in the Charmistan area. It was a long drive with a large convoy. The entire way was searched and about six hours later, we were almost there, with our Alpha Coy moving off the route to establish an overwatch position to the west of the build site.

We moved off with our engineers leading the way, up the hill and along a very long ridgeline, heading east. We made it to the ridgeline that shoulders the Charmistan valley heading north to our overwatch position. We stopped and the go-ahead for a short trip without searching was made as it was a huge ridgeline with large open areas.

Further down, the engineers dismounted and searched where the ridgeline got narrow and they searched the rest of the way.

On this convoy, I was third in line and the two Bushmasters in front moved down slowly. At the bottom of the hill, they skipped over the main track to the other side where they could continue. I took off behind them. But, it was not my day – again.

As I went to skip over to the other side, we hit our fourth IED. This time, I blacked out for just a second or two and didn't quite hear the blast.

Once we hit the ground, I was still a little shocked and looked around to see if we had any injuries, especially because we had a rear shooter up. But again, he had dropped down to say something to a mate just before it went off.

My crew commander copped a lot of force, which put him in the back of the Bushmaster and he was a little bit worse for wear on this one, but still OK with no visible injuries.

One of the boys had to help me out of my seat because I had corked my leg. But all was good, though this time I felt bad because I had two explosive-detection dogs (EDDs) in the back of the car and they didn't look too happy with what I just hit.

Once again, the Bushmaster held its own and everyone was good. We had been hit on the front left-hand side and the force put the front of the Bushmaster in the air. By the time we landed, the rear wheel was in the blast crater – so this one had some force behind it.

*Pic Leading Seaman Andrew Dakin*

Damage again was relatively minor, with the front side stowage bins busted and covers blown off. We also had no left tyre and the hub and the wheel station were bent and cracked.

The engineers in the lead vehicle came back and searched the area for secondaries. After it was deemed clear, the EOD did their thing. We all jumped in another bushmaster and moved up the hill to provide cover and watch over our vehicle overnight.

The next day, the blown Bushmaster was moved and we were on our way back to a patrol base.



*Lance Corporal Bayley and Trooper Keshan's car waits as an IED is blown in place.  
Pic Trooper Nicolson*

*Sergeant Engstrom and Trooper Banks in the front car and Troopers Wunsch and Nicolson in the rear car as an IED is blown in place.  
Pic Trooper Lewin*

**When I looked back and saw the sergeant of the EOD team in the hole taking pictures, I realised how lucky we were – the hole was waist deep.**





Pic Leading Seaman Andrew Dakin

I still cop a lot of jokes about the strikes. Being ex-Navy on patrol boats, I keep getting told "maybe you should go back to boats, at least you can't hit any IEDs out there" or "you're not an engineer, so stop finding IEDs the wrong way". But it's good humour and we all joke around.

On the psych side – being hit four times, I did get a little nervous whenever we drove over a vulnerable point, just waiting for another big bang, even if it had been searched. But the feeling eventually went away and I was still happy to get out there and do the job with the boys.

It did play with my head though, with all the kids and locals acting happy and waving, and then 200m later, or even less, you're hit, or find an IED, knowing they know something was placed there. Or, knowing that some of the locals watching were in fact the enemy, acting as 'farmers', checking out what they had achieved.

The old 'what ifs' came out now and then too. But, when talking to the lads, we brought out the funny side of things and you forget about the bad side of what could have happened.

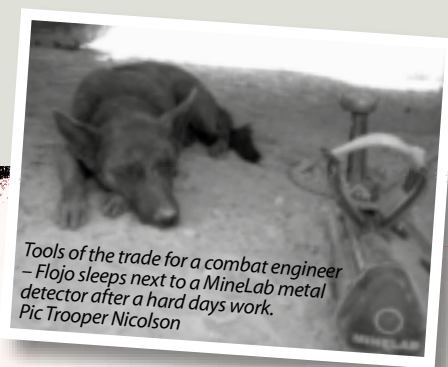
Yes, it could have been worse – but it wasn't, and all is good [Trooper Nicolson came home safe in January].

My strikes weren't the only IEDs for Alpha Coy though. We had six Bushmasters, a truck and some ANA vehicles hit, and a number of other vehicle IEDs that luckily low-ordered (partial detonation).

The engineers and our EDD team also found bulk IEDs on the road and in the green zone that saved many vehicles and personnel from being hit. They also found a great number of caches. The infantry boys, along with the engineers, also had some close and very lucky calls with IEDs and were in a number of contacts.

Unfortunately, Alpha Coy did sustained a number of wounded and injured personnel, but the boys of Alpha Coy kept their heads high and got on with the great job, mentoring the ANA and Afghan National Police.

It was a great trip and I believe, from my point of view as a digger, we as Alpha Coy did a great job within our valley. I hope the MTF-4 guys who took over can have a safe trip and I wish them the very best.



Tools of the trade for a combat engineer  
– Flojo sleeps next to a MineLab metal  
detector after a hard days work.  
Pic Trooper Nicolson

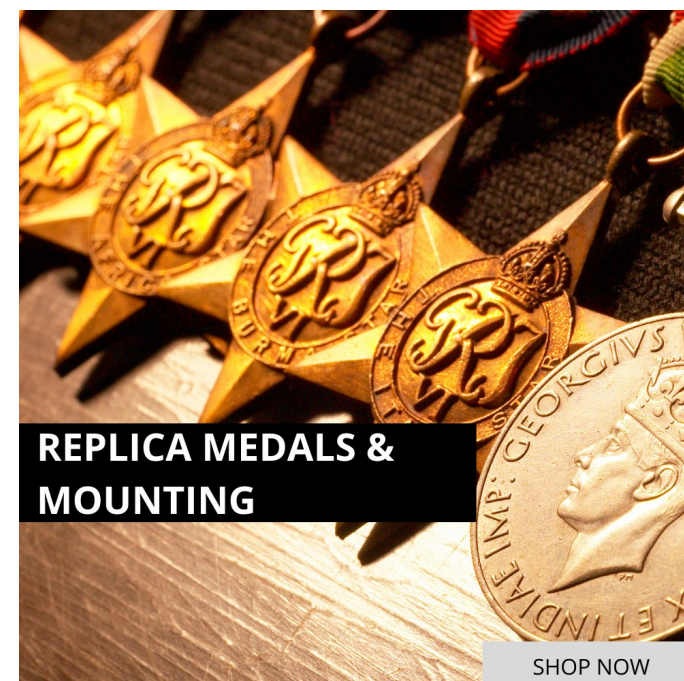


Sgt Lane and Spr Smith in  
the EOD Bushmaster.  
Pic Trooper Nicolson



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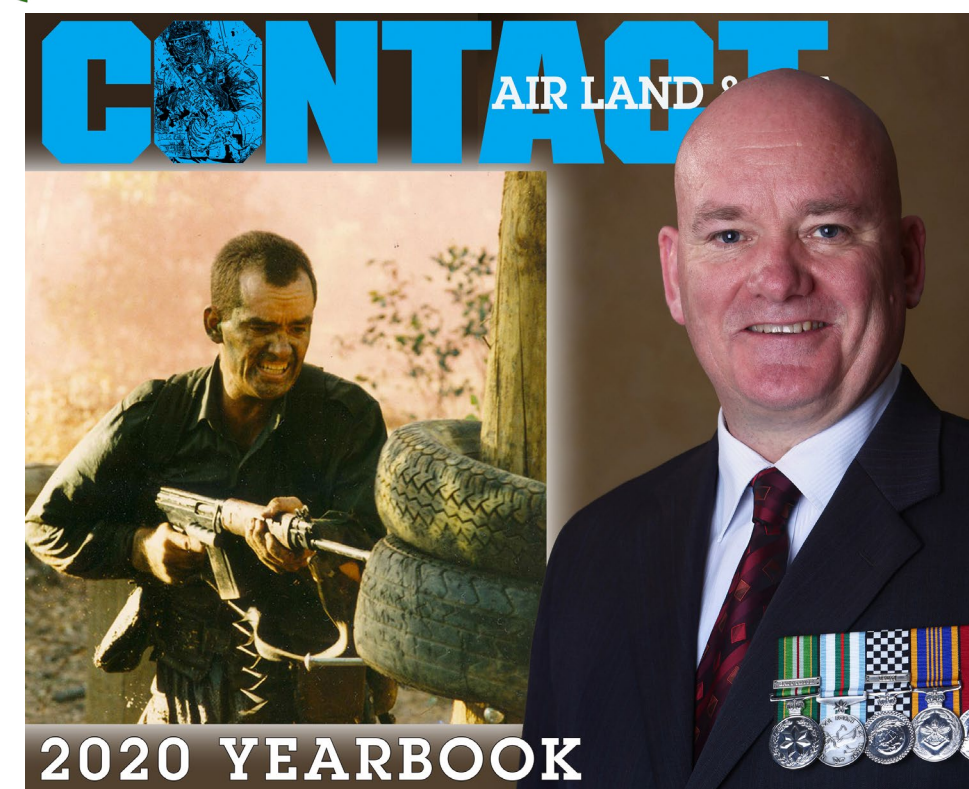




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*This example shows CONTACT Editor Brian Hartigan at Kapooka in 1990, and on ANZAC Day 30 years later*

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WINGS OVER

# ILLAWARRA



PHOTOS BY  
BRIAN HARTIGAN





**The might and nostalgia of some of Australia's military air power past and present was on show at the 2022 Wings Over Illawarra air show at Shellharbour Airport, near Wollongong NSW, over the 12-13 November weekend.**

A goodly array of flying and static displays thrilled the crowd of more than 35,000 people who flocked to the small regional airport just 90 minutes south of Sydney to attend Australia's largest annual air show.

Undoubted highlights of this year's Wings Over Illawarra air show included a comprehensive aerial handling display by

a RAAF F-35A Lightning II as well as historic aircraft flown by RAAF's 100 Squadron out of Point Cook and Temora, with loads more modern and historic aircraft flown and or displayed by the on-site Historic Aircraft Restoration Museum (HARS), and others.

100 Squadron Commanding Officer Wing Commander Philip Beanland said participating in the air show gave the Royal Australian Air Force a great opportunity to engage with the community.

"Showcasing to the public – especially the next generation – provides awareness of what we do every day in the ADF," Wing Commander Beanland said.







"Who knows – some of the younger members of this crowd may one day become aviators of the future."

The RAAF Roulettes once again proved to be crowd pleasers with their jaw-dropping six-ship routine, while on-the-ground attractions that piqued air-show patrons' interest included a RAAF C-130J Hercules, Navy's Airbus EC135 helicopter and a couple of unmanned aircraft systems, and Army's Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle with attendant tooled-up soldiers to draw attention, protect the assets and answer numerous questions.

The Air Force Drone Racing Team and Army Drone Racing Team also attracted a lot of attention with an impressively-sized, fast-action display marquee.

There were also flight simulators, military working dog demonstrations and Air Force Band performances.

For Pilot Officer Maylee Neary, attending the Wings Over Illawarra 2022 Careers Open Day in the lead-up to the air show provided a unique opportunity to share her experience as a young RAAF aviator.

Pilot Officer Neary, from Western Sydney, graduated from Arndell Anglican College in 2021 and joined the Royal Australian Air Force in February this year. She graduated from Officer Training School in June and has been panelled for a pilot's course.

As a highly-valued member of the RAAF Aviation Motivation Team, she talks to young people about officer aviation-career opportunities.

"We inform the younger generation about aviation roles in the Royal Australian Air Force and motivate them to consider a career in the RAAF," Pilot Officer Neary said.

"The careers day on Friday was a really busy day with a lot of enthusiastic young people interested in RAAF.

"They were able to get a taste of what it is like to be an air-force pilot in our simulators.

"It also provided them a great opportunity



to talk one-on-one with us about daily life in aviation."

More than 1500 school students from across New South Wales took the opportunity to find out about the range of aviation careers in the Royal Australian Air Force during the careers day.

"Having just gone through recruitment and initial training myself meant that the information I provided to the young students was current," Pilot Officer Neary said.

"I genuinely hope the information and advice I provided helps inspire some of the students to consider a career in aviation."

Always a worry at this event is the weather, but this year, the weather gods smiled benevolently,

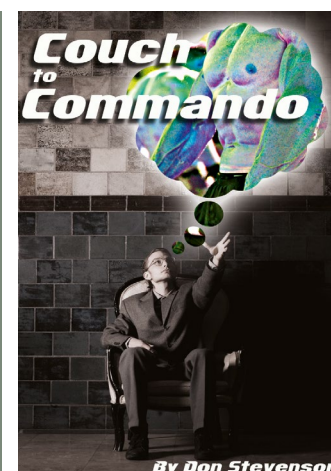
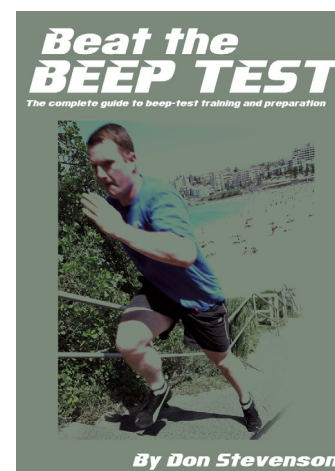
though with some teasing. Saturday was hot and sunny – great for ice cream sales. On Sunday, despite dire forecasting, predicted rain mostly stayed away – or spent itself on the nearby escarpment – and the show went on.

All in all, organisers, participants and spectators alike had a lot to be thankful for in the success of Wings Over Illawarra 2022.



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# THE INNER SANCTUM

## AN AUSTRALIAN POLICE SNIPER

BY JASON SEMPLE

**I AM CONVINCED THAT THINGS HAPPEN FOR A REASON – PEOPLE WE MEET, CHOICES WE MAKE AND THE EXPERIENCES WE HAVE IN LIFE. SOME THINGS I HAVE EXPERIENCED, BOTH OPERATIONALLY AND PERSONALLY, I LOOK BACK AND FEEL I WAS UNKNOWINGLY PREPARING MYSELF FOR THE WHOLE TIME.**

It's 10.45pm on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1998. It's a warm evening and looks like rain. But I am not worried about the weather. I am worried about the two stab wounds I have in my chest and abdomen. Even though I am pressing my hands on the wounds, I can feel a river of blood escaping. My only other first aid option is to try and keep calm and not panic, but that's hard work!

I am in Ultimo, Sydney. I've been in the NSW Police Force (or Service back then) for exactly two weeks and I am lying in the gutter completely sure of my impending death.

A courageous police officer, Pete Forsyth, is lying on top of me, but he has already died from his wounds. He suffered two fatal stab wounds to his heart, but before succumbing, he was in the process of giving me first aid. He was a proper hero to the very end.

Unfortunately Pete would not be the last mate lost in the line of duty, with four more killed in the years to come.

Against all odds, I survived. "Never give up" as they say.

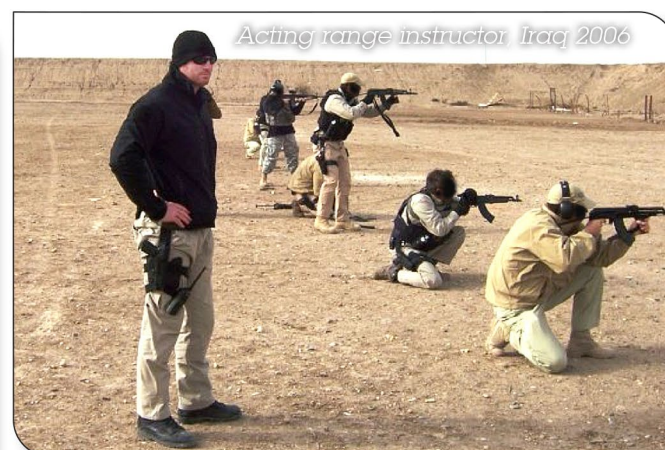
From that night onwards I promised myself I would take every opportunity to improve myself in life and take on every challenge I could. I had to make it count. I owed it to Pete, to myself and to those who worked so hard to save my life.



The opening paragraph of this story, published in Issue 47, September 2015, shocked me with its rawness – and commenced a long-standing bromance with the author



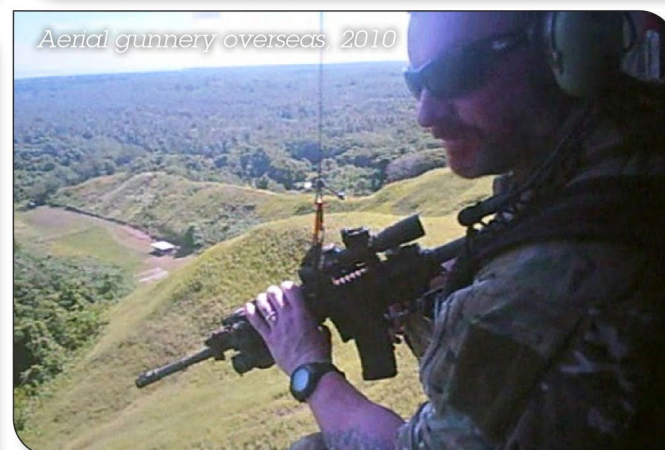
The author, Jason Semple



Acting range instructor, Iraq 2006



Iraq 2006



Aerial gunnery overseas, 2010

The result, 17 years later, is a life spent in Specialist Police Tactical Operations in two Australian police organisations – the NSW Tactical Operations Unit (TOU) and the AFP's Operational Response Group (ORG). Between the TOU and AFP I enjoyed a period of private contracting for companies representing the US DoD and am currently employed as a specialist advisor/mentor in the Middle East.

In this article and others to follow I will try to articulate a little about me, and share what has driven me to where I am today. I look forward to sharing my experiences and the inner sanctum of the group of specialists I worked with who push themselves in everything they do.

The road I have travelled has been one I would not trade for any other. I have met some of the finest men and women in policing and military circles, as well as certain other agencies closely aligned – men and women who decided their calling was to protect their countrymen, both domestically and abroad. Brave men and women, some of whom paid the ultimate price for their life choice.

During my professional life I was lucky to have met and worked with such a broad cross-section of brave people from all over, each having an impact on who I am today. They are Australians,

Americans, Emiratis, Pommies, Philippinos, Solomon Islanders, Timorese, Iraqis, Afghanis, Somalis – all with different cultural beliefs and values, but all aiming at the same collective goal of peace and security.

Whether you serve in the military or police the ethos is very much the same. You want to protect those who cannot protect themselves, domestically and overseas. You want to bring justice or penalty against individuals who prey on those who prey on others. The methods and delivery of this intent may differ, but the endgame is a shared one. The Green Beret motto sums it up nicely. 'De Oppresso Liber' – 'To Liberate from Oppression'.

In this article I hope to connect with you and share the commonality I have with you as a reader of CONTACT magazine.

Why write articles for this magazine? What are my motives for reaching out to you as a reader?

Over a number of articles I hope to accurately and informatively share the world of police tactical group snipers, and touch on topics related to this field of endeavor.

But I want to make one thing clear – I am not special and I do not write these articles to beat my chest. I write to share with you the work of some talented and dedicated people who have been working to keep all our families safe from harm.



I am merely one of these guys and would have been ineffective without my team by my side.

I would like to respectfully show how much the sniping skillset has evolved, especially over the preceding 10 years. There has been a quantum leap in sniping like never before in history. The leaps we have seen in ballistic software, our understanding of the contributing factors of internal and external ballistics and the equipment at hand is remarkable.

A good sniper now is literally a ballisticsian and physics guru. We know exponentially more now than we did even in the early millennium. It's my goal to share some insights on that progression.

This quantum leap came about with technology and also due to the fact that sniping is a brotherhood where we as specialists coexist and share our knowledge with other snipers to progress the skillset as a whole. The level of acceptance and camaraderie between snipers from different military, police and other agencies creates a powerful synergy. I intend to share some of this synergy.

In my next article I will examine the evolution of PTG sniping that I was exposed to during my tenure in the two separate police tactical teams and some of the key people who allowed us to progress to the levels we did.

For now I'll explain a little about the two PTG units I worked for and the type of work these units conduct on a daily basis, to give you some background on my training and experience.

Even though I did many deployments overseas with the AFP, the backbone of my tactical experience came from the constant high-risk policing with the Tactical Operations Unit, State Protection Group, NSW Police.

The State Protection Group was established in 1991 to deal with a wide range of extraordinary policing responses to situations, which are beyond the scope, or capacity, of police generally.

SPG directly support operational police in high-risk incidents such as sieges with a specialist tactical, negotiation, intelligence and command-support service.

The command also provides support with rescue and bomb-disposal operations, operations requiring the services of the Dog Unit. The SPG is also responsible for the delivery and maintenance of the Police Service firearms capability through the Police Armory.

The core responsibilities I had as an operator in the TOU SPG were; provide a police tactical group counter-terrorist-response capability in accordance with the Australian National Anti-Terrorist Plan; conduct site appreciation/surveys and tactical reconnaissance; daily domestic duties including providing a 24-hour response capability to the New South Wales Police, in resolving high-risk incidents across the State; hostage rescue; arrest of armed and dangerous offenders; protection of undercover agents/intelligence-agency personnel; witness protection and escort; high-risk vehicle intercepts; VIP protection/escorts, counter-assault and counter-sniper team; suicide intervention; high-risk search-warrant assist; escort of high-risk prisoners; siege resolution; operational support for major law-enforcement operations; navigation and specialised rural operations; hostage survival and evacuation plans; sniper/counter-sniper duties including hostage reception duties; and, remote-area first-aid and casualty evacuation.

As you can see there was a high expectation on our members to have high levels of skills in a number of areas. The unit was involved in hundreds of operations per year, which provided its members with a rich pool of experiences.

To enable myself and my fellow operators to do the work expected of us, we were given extensive training in a number of skills and tactics.

Listed below are many of the qualifications I gained in the past 15 years, provided by both



Rob Maylor, Mike Brookes-Jones, the author Jason Semple and Daniel Keighran VC, in 2015.

the TOU and ORG; Command and Control Course C3 Australian Federal Police; Diploma of Policing (Charles Sturt University); OST Instructors' Course/Special Weapons Instructor course; Instructor Rural Surveillance Program Philippines (jungle warfare and operations management); Combat Tracking/Tactical Tracker Course level 1 and 2; senior sniper/counter-sniper instructor; breaching instructor; explosives user/shot firer qualification/diploma (commercial licence); Image Capture and Transfer Instructor courses; international deployment/pre-deployment training; remote-area first aid; Early Trauma Management Course; AFP Operational Safety Trainer Instructors' Course/special weapons instructor; Federal Agent Lateral Program; NSW High Risk Police Driving Course; Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment/Train Small Groups; National Counter-Terrorist Committee Skills Enhancement Course, sniper, sniper team leader; firearms trainer; Helicopter Operations and Insertion Course; airborne rappelling, fast roping and winch rescue; Senior First Aid (Level 2) St John Ambulance Australia; Certificate in Laser Safety, Laser Safety Officer class 2; Blaser Long-Range Sniper Course; Aerial Gunnery Course; HUET (helicopter underwater escape training); SE400 CBR Course

(chemical, biological, radiation); Water Operations Counter-Terrorist Course; Aircraft Operations Counter-Terrorist Course; Method of Entry Course – mechanical, manual and dynamic; NSW Police Tactical Operations Operators Course CT; and, National Counter-Terrorist Committee Explosive Breaching Course.

After a number of years with the TOU, I resigned and undertook private contracting work in Iraq training Iraqi Special Police Commando's in north Baghdad until returning to Australia in early 2007.

I returned to undertake duties with the AFP and its new tactical unit. There I would ultimately be responsible for building its sniper team alongside an ex-SAS member who had also come on board.

In 2006 the Australian Federal Police formed a tactical group that could provide assistance both domestically and internationally to AFP operations and the protection of government assets and personnel abroad. It was initially made up of current and ex members of nearly every police tactical team across Australia, bringing with them an awesome cross-section of skills and experience.

This group was called the Operational Response Group, and was placed at the disposal of National AFP investigational teams and the International Deployment Group (IDG).





The Operational Response Group was AFP's permanent specialist tactical and stability policing capability, able to rapidly respond to civil disorder and international crisis, both nationally and internationally, within 24 hours.

The Operational Response Group was defined as a police tactical group within the National Counter-Terrorism Committee arrangements, providing the Commonwealth of Australia an offshore specialist and tactical policing response capability.

The unit provided similar capabilities to the AFP's Specialist Response and Security Team but focused on national and international deployments outside of the Australian Capital Territory, where the SRS had responsibility.

The ORG was created to enhance the operational policing capabilities of the AFP's International Deployment Group (IDG) operating predominantly in the Pacific region.

ORG provided the AFP with a specialist tactical policing capability which included; effect high-risk searches, search warrants and arrests; support to public-order policing; remote rural patrols; protection of people in high-risk situations; support to the security of members deployed to missions such as RAMSI; advanced training in specialist weaponry and less-lethal capabilities;

rapid response for containment of civil disorder and restoration of order; tactical negotiations, communications and marine-operations support; remote and covert surveillance; prison-riot response; and, major civil-disorder interventions, and capacity building in other specialist police units overseas (such as Solomon Islands and Philippines).

My role in the ORG was as a senior sniper in the Marksman Reconnaissance Team (MRT). As I said earlier, myself and another federal agent (ex-SAS) were tasked with building this team from scratch.

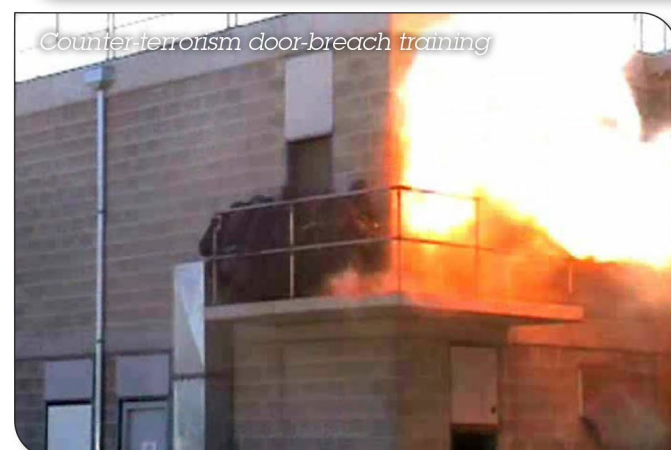
We built it all right, with some exceptional men and the best weapons and equipment money could buy.

The AFP allowed us to create a sniper team that was cutting edge and extremely well trained. I will always be grateful for the support and foresight of certain senior AFP officers who allowed us to get on with creating something unique. I will also be grateful to have worked with teammates who were genuine innovators and guys I will always respect and admire.

If we didn't know a skill, we would hunt down the most proficient expert and get them to come and train us. Guys like Glen Roberts of WA TRG in long-range shooting, expert tactical trackers like David Scott Donelan and a host of other renowned



Counter-terrorism sniper training.



**Jason Semple is a firearms trainer on the following weapons:**

- Beretta 92F
- Sig Sauer 226
- H&K USP
- Glock pistols

**He is also a specialist weapons instructor on the following weapons:**

- M4/M16
- Glock 17, 19, 22, 26 pistols,
- Remington 870P shotgun
- 40mm grenade launcher
- Accuracy International .308 and .50
- Remington 700
- Blaser .308/.338
- H&K MP5/SD6/KA1 machine gun
- Knights Armament SR25/M110 .308
- AMD
- AK-47
- RPK
- PKM
- Minimi
- Maximi
- Mag58

experts in their fields. I will talk further about these guys in future articles.

Our expanded roles required the use of all the skillsets we had developed over our careers. We had an excellent and valued relationship with Australian Special Forces both from the east and west of Australia. We would not have many of the skills without that help from our military brothers and we will always be grateful and in their debt. I am hoping these guys knew we were there to protect their families, while they deployed overseas to ultimately protect us all.

Our domestic and overseas work required a new level of tactical application. Fast roping/rappelling into jungle locations, swim-up assaults through crocodile- and shark-infested waters, horrendous jungle stomps, long-term jungle observation posts, continuous close-target reconnaissance tasks in hostile and inhospitable environments.

We often found ourselves coming out of jungle operations and rolling straight into urban counter-terrorist and major criminal operations in Australia's capital cities. This required experienced members to make these transitions quickly and effectively. It also required a level of maturity, as you could be sneaking into a village under NVGs one day, and 48 hrs later you were in the Melbourne CBD on another, highly visible task.

During later articles I will describe what it was like and some of the ordeals we faced during these operations. I will be restricted on some information due to the Commonwealth Secrecy Act, but I will be able to explain some skills and personal experiences.

I will also write articles on the latest weapons, equipment, ammunition and specific sniper training. I will provide expert testimonials by fellow Australians in the industry and also American and British Special Forces I have worked with.

I will do my best to accurately portray the work and the type of men who actually conducted the operations. I will try to capture the human side as well, – the humor, the personal sacrifice, and the pain that came with both arduous activities and the injuries we sustained on the job.

I look forward to sharing all this with you as the reader and for you to get an insight into our world.

**CONTACT was extremely excited to have Jason Semple on board for what was a very enlightening series of articles over the next several issues.**





PHOTOS BY  
CHRISTABEL MIGLIORINI

On 14 October 1947, the Bell X-1 'Glamorous Glennis' became the first airplane to fly faster than the speed of sound – Mach 1. Over the next 15 years, Machs 2 through 6 were achieved above the Mojave Desert in California, catapulting Chuck Yeager, Jack Ridley, Robert Cardenas and Jack Russell into aviation history books.

75 years to the day after US Air Force test pilot Captain Charles 'Chuck' Yeager proved that the sound barrier was no more than an engineering challenge, more than 12,000 school kids (and 100,000 adults) gathered at Edwards Air Force Base, California, to celebrate the milestone and, hopefully, be exposed to and excited by the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) that de-mistifies the 'magic' of flight.

The Royal Australian Air Force's Research and Development Unit (ARDU) and No. 33 Squadron were also on hand to celebrate the milestone, taking time out of a scheduled allied co-operation test and evaluation program to take part in the Aerospace Valley Air Show at Edwards AFB.

The KC-30 and crew from RAAF Base Amberley, which can now refuel most United States Air Force combat aircraft, had been at Edwards to complete a test program with the USAF strategic bomber force.

During their visit they were asked by the USAF to join close to 60 static 'STEM displays', which also included the Top Gun: Maverick movie prop 'Darkstar' designed by Lockheed Skunk Works, alongside its 'father', the SR-71 'Blackbird'.

In 1947, a small team of engineers, pilots and maintenance personnel went to the Mojave Desert in California to attempt to overcome the so-called sound barrier.

On its ninth powered flight, the Bell X-1 surpassed the speed of sound (Mach 1) in level, controlled flight.

During this year's 75th anniversary ceremony to celebrate that accomplishment, Commander of the 412th Test Wing Brigadier General Matthew Higer renamed Edwards AFB's High Altitude Supersonic Corridor to the Bell X-1 Supersonic Corridor, saying he did so "in honour and in memory of the team of Big-A airmen whose individual and collective contributions coalesced into something much more powerful than they could have ever imagined".

Shortly after the first sonic boom in the newly renamed Bell X-1 Supersonic Corridor thundered above them, thousands of young students went on to participate in "the world's largest field trip".

# MACH 75



**RIGHT:** The SR-72 'Darkstar' — a non-flying, full-scale concept aircraft designed by Lockheed's Skunkworks in collaboration with the producers of Top Gun: Mavrick.

**BELOW:** Skunkworks engineer and lead designer on the Darkstar project Brian Hershberger.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** SR-72 'Darkstar' — also known as son of Blackbird — stands in front of a real SR-71 Blackbird at Edwards Air Force Base, California, during the 2022 Aerospace Valley Air Show.











**FAR LEFT AND ABOVE:** RAAF No. 33 Squadron KC-30, A39-003, makes a guest appearance as one of nearly 60 static displays at the Aerospace Valley Air Show at Edwards Air Base, California.

**TOP:** SOFIA – a Boeing 747SP-based Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy, armed with a 2.7-meter (106-inch) reflecting telescope, does a fly-by at Edwards AFB.



# AUSSIES UNDER FIRE 'LIKE RAIN ON WATER' IN AFGHAN ANVIL

On 26 August 2008, 1 Troop SASR, made up of four six-man patrols, flew 80km to American Forward Operating Base Anaconda near Khas Uruzghan intent on finding a Taliban leader they thought was in the area. No sooner were they on the ground than intelligence came in that their target had been spotted elsewhere – and the Aussies were stuck at Anaconda for several days waiting for a return flight. Rather than kick back and relax, however, the Aussies asked their American hosts if there was anything they could do to help.

Among those Aussies was SAS team leader Sergeant Troy Simmonds.

SASR Sergeant  
Troy Simmonds  
heads off to catch  
the chopper that  
would take he and  
his men to a date  
with destiny  
– 26 August 2008

Ana Kalay, scene of  
fierce fighting

In truly understated Aussie fashion, Sergeant Troy Simmonds, a veteran of Somalia, East Timor and Iraq, recalls asking the soldiers from the American 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, "We're here for a couple of days – where's your hot spots?"

"Well, we have these two valleys we can't get into," came the reply.

Up for anything, the Aussies said, "We'll have a go at them – make ourselves useful while we're here".

So, 'a plan was hatched' Sergeant Simmonds says.

The plan would see a sniper patrol clandestinely sent out on foot under cover of darkness to reconnoitre and set up an ambush and wait for a vehicle patrol that would overtly go out the next day.

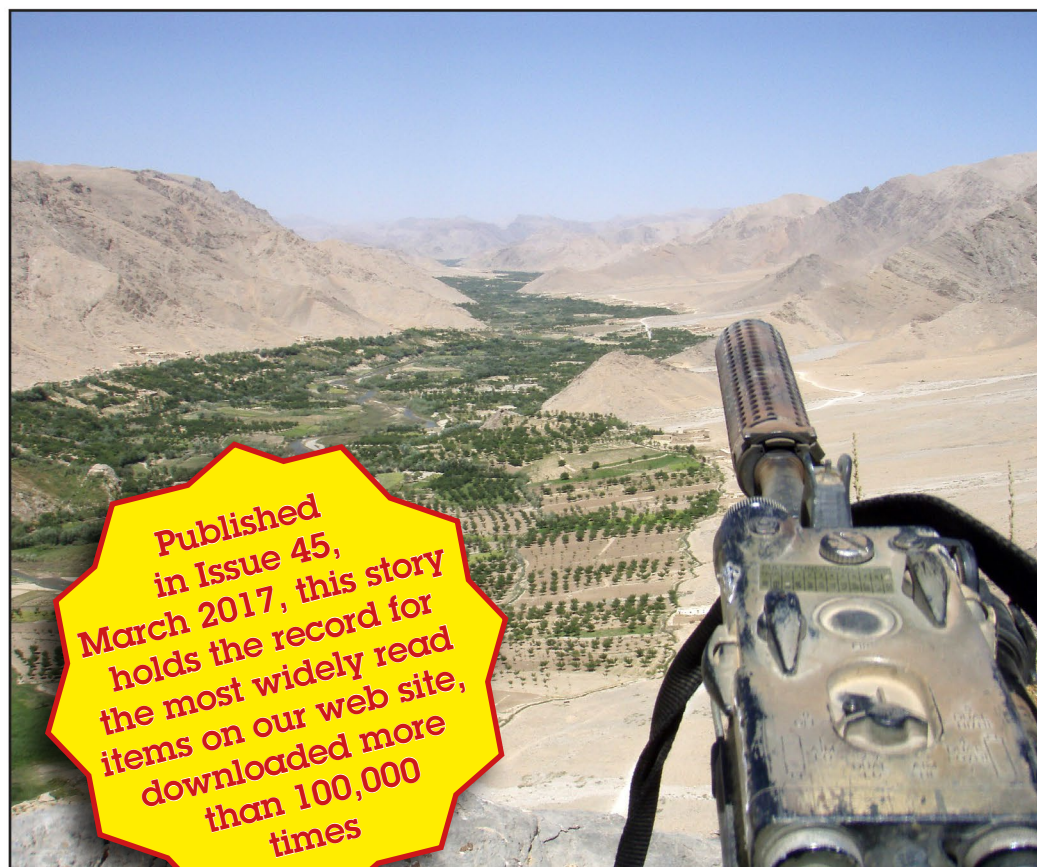
As planned, five Humvees set out for one of the troublesome valleys, heretofore designated a no-go zone, to stir things up.

It didn't take long.

The snipers spotted three Taliban moving into what was thought to be a command position some 500m away, and took them out.

When a heavily armed 'technical' arrived to collect the bodies, the combined Aussie/American patrol fought through using rifles and grenade launchers, aided by the snipers.

A follow-up battlefield clearance confirmed 11 enemy down.



Published  
in Issue 45,  
March 2017, this story  
holds the record for  
the most widely read  
items on our web site,  
downloaded more  
than 100,000  
times







**The US/Australian/Afghan patrol stops to talk to locals.**



**The patrol heads into badlands.**



**An Aussie sniper overlooks the Ana Kalay valley.**

That night, with the tactic proven, the SAS sent out two foot patrols to the second valley.

At 0400hr on 2 September, 12 SAS plus two Aussie engineers and explosives detection dog Sarbi joined 10 Americans aboard the middle three of a five-Humvee convoy. The first and last vehicles contained 10 Afghan soldiers each.

Near the mouth of the valley, the Aussies hopped out of the vehicles and clambered up into the hills to set up yet more ambush positions while the vehicles waited in the green zone before moving into the narrow valley.

The convoy quickly attracted attention, but their movement in turn only brought the enemy to the attention of the waiting Aussies – as planned.

Another seven enemy were killed in short order.

Sergeant Simmonds' patrol spotted another nest of Taliban, armed with rifles and RPGs about 800m away, but this group had children among them, so they were not engaged.

As the day wore on, the decision to return to base was made. The 12 Aussies who rode out with the vehicles married up with the Hummers while the two sniper teams went back over the mountains and started their long walk back to base.

The valley was so narrow and rough that the vehicles had to simply turn around and go back along the same track they had used to get into the valley – tactically not an ideal choice, because the hornets' nest had been well and truly kicked.

**KILL THEM  
KILL THEM ALL**

It was 3pm and the Taliban were pissed. Enemy radio chatter rallied all available men to, "Kill them – kill them all".

Mortars began to rain down, quickly followed by hails of bullets and rocket-propelled grenades.

On foot, using the vehicles for cover, the allied patrol returned fire with everything they had – rifles, grenade launchers, 7.62mm and .50cal machineguns, and 66mm and 84mm anti-armour weapons.

But the enemy were in much better positions – high ground, good cover and concealment, estimated at about 200 strong and "pouring a shit-tonne" of ordnance down on the convoy.

The rough ground and the dismounted troops meant progress was agonisingly slow.

An American soldier firing a .50 cal machine gun was hit in the arm early in the fight and, after rendering first aid, an Aussie jumped up behind the weapon to keep the big gun going.

Close air support was called and 500lb bombs silenced the mortars and slowed the bullets just a little.

**SASR snipers trek to an ambush position.**







**Sergeant Simmonds, happy with an air ordnance drop.**



**Sergeant Simmonds in rough country.**



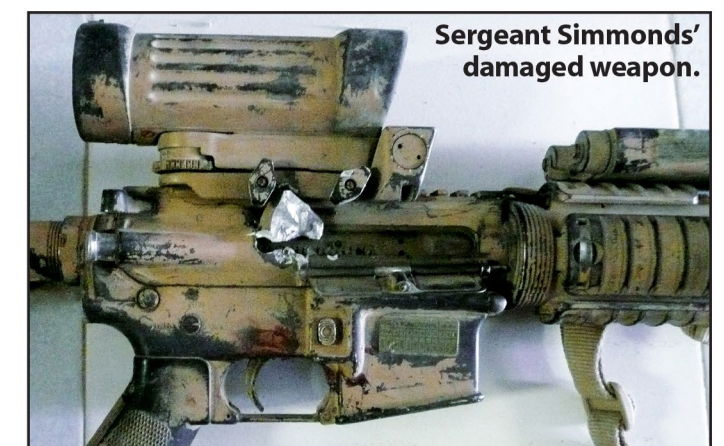
**An Australian SOTG patrol prepares to depart Forward Operating Base Locke.**

But the convoy was far from saved. Having moved just 1km from the start point, they were still under heavy fire from at least two directions. American Sergeant Greg Rodriguez was next to go down – shot in the head and killed outright. Even while two Aussies carried his body to a Humvee the already-dead sergeant copped another two rounds in the back, missing his Aussie aides. About then, a Chinook helicopter was spotted flying past at some distance and everyone knew it would have Apache escorts. Australian joint terminal attack controller Corporal Gibbo attempted to call them in, but the Dutch Apaches were reluctant, citing rules of engagement. Corporal Gibbo decided to move to higher ground to assist the pilots to pinpoint targets, but he was shot in the chest and was in a bad way. The Apaches were eventually and unceremoniously told to “Fuck off then” if they wouldn’t help. About now, the lead Afghan Hummer stopped, the Afghan soldiers trying to use its bullet-proof glass for cover – effectively halting the entire convoy in the kill zone. Another American went down with gunshot wounds to the legs – then another Aussie – and another.

Sergeant Simmonds was on one knee, beside an American, returning fire in the direction of muzzle flashes, which was all he could see of the enemy on his side of the vehicle. “At that stage we were getting shot at from all directions, so there wasn’t anywhere you could really hide,” he says. “Bullets were landing all around us – it was kind of like rain on water in the dust. “One of those bullets landed very near me and ricochet’d into my calf. “I turned to the guy next to me and I said, “I just got shot”.” “God damn, so did I,” the Yank yelled back. Sergeant Simmonds stayed upright however – thanks to adrenaline, training and a desperate desire to live through this. Moments later, while ordering two of his men to go forward to get the lead vehicle moving again, an RPG landed directly between Sergeant Simmonds and the two other Aussies. The explosion blew all three off their feet and everyone who witnessed the explosion were certain their sergeant and colleagues were dead. Lying on the ground, peppered with shrapnel all up his left side and with a massive ringing in his ears, Sergeant Simmonds says he couldn’t feel his left arm, like it was numb from sleeping on it.

“I couldn’t see a thing with all the dust the RPG had kicked up and I was actually afraid to feel for my arm because I was scared it wasn’t there. “But I eventually reached over and was relieved to find my arm was still attached – and the feeling started to come back into it.” The other two Aussies, although also wounded by shrapnel, got back on their feet and went forward to the lead vehicle as instructed. One banished the Afghan driver to the back and jumped into the driver’s seat, taking direct control of the situation. Sergeant Simmonds got up and attempted to move to where the American commander was, to appraise him of the situation and why his men were going forward, but was shot at from close range by two Taliban behind some rocks. He began to shoot back. Suddenly, his own rifle, which he had in his shoulder with his cheek on the stock, carefully aiming, kicked up and smashed him in the face. It had caught a round in its ejection port, undoubtedly saving the sergeant’s life. His weapon was now useless. Seconds later Sergeant Simmonds felt another massive pain in his lower body, which again knocked him down. “I didn’t actually know where I’d been hit because I was already covered in blood anyway.

“What had happened, I found out later, was the bullet went through my right bum, past my bowels and my bladder and lodged in my left hip joint. “In surgery later they had to leave it where it was – it would have been too complicated and dangerous to take it out. “The surgeons said I was extremely lucky with that shot. They said they tried to push a rod through the entry wound to where the bullet was, without going through my bowel or vital organs – but couldn’t. “But somehow the bullet had gone through one side of my body to the other without nicking anything vital.



**Sergeant Simmonds’ damaged weapon.**





**Sergeant Troy Simmonds (right) with an Aussie and an American colleague, in a sniper position.**



**Aussie snipers lie in wait**



**The snipers exfiltrate from Ana Kalay.**

"Anyway, at the time, I thought I was just winded, so I got up and went to the American captain in the Humvee.

"I was sort of dodging bullets all the while because there were bullets hitting the car all over.

"I opened the door and the captain was sitting there with a radio to both ears, talking to two different people.

"I told him that my guys were going forward to get the lead vehicle moving and assured him that everyone else was on or near a vehicle and ready to move.

"As I closed the door, a burst of machinegun fire hit the back of the car, so there was no way I could go that way.

"So I dropped on my back and actually shuffled underneath the car.

"I was surprisingly calm under there and had a little time to go over our situation in my head."

Suddenly the Hummer started to move and Sergeant Simmonds grabbed a hold of something to go with it.

But the ground was too rough to get dragged over, and he eventually had to let go – and try to avoid being crushed between the rear diff and the jagged rocks.

Clear of the vehicle, which was still moving at walking pace, badly wounded in the both hips, with

the rain of bullets still dancing in the dust all around him, Sergeant Simmonds "hobbled like an instant old man" after the Hummer.

As he got close, another RPG burst above the vehicle knocked him down again and sprayed the men inside with shrapnel.

Some shrapnel from this RPG also sliced through the leash tethering Sarbi to her handler, Corporal David 'Simdog' Simpson.

Sarbi took off – and 14 months later stamped her own pawmark on the pages of Australian military history when she was recovered during an American SF raid on a Taliban compound, returned to her super-grateful owners and eventual retirement in Australia.

Catching up with the Hummer, Sergeant Simmonds found there was no room for him inside the vehicle nor were any of the men in it in a fit state to help him, so he staggered around the front where he managed to lodge himself in the gap between the radiator and the bullbar.

Just then, another RPG airburst above the back of the vehicle peppered those inside with even more shrapnel.

One of those wounded this time was an Afghan interpreter, who was badly hit in the head and thrown out of the vehicle – and saved by Trooper Mark Donaldson who was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.

Four other gallantry medals were awarded for surrounding events, including a Medal for Gallantry to the Aussie who took control of the lead vehicle.

Curled in a foetal position on the front of the Hummer, Sergeant Simmonds became a deliberate target again. Rounds started peppering the bonnet and the bullbar, inches from the badly wounded, almost deaf, covered in blood, armed with a useless weapon and all but helpless Aussie, who was wearing only the shredded remnants of what was once a uniform.

"I thought it was just a matter of time before I got hit again," he says.

"I remember actually thinking, 'I've been hit in the body already and I think I'm alright, but if I get hit in the head then it's all over'."

"I didn't have a helmet on so I was quite worried about my head.

"Then I spotted the heavy tow chain wrapped around the bullbar, so I unravelled that and wrapped it around my head – while bullets were still pinging on metal all around me."

But now a new danger seeped into his mind. The patrol had a strong suspicion that the enemy may try to cut them off by planting an IED in the pass up ahead, which would really finish them off.

"It was a very narrow pass – not much more than a vehicle width, with rock on either side.

"Anyway, my guy who was now driving the front vehicle did a bit of a dynamic move and went through the pass sort of up on an angle, with one set of wheels up on the rocks, and he got through.

"So all the other vehicles did the same thing, following in his tracks, and we all got through – under a huge amount of fire.

"They had machineguns on us from every angle, but we got through and gradually the fire started to ease off – and that's when I got really nervous.

"I was thinking, 'OK we got away with that – now we'll probably hit an IED or something'."

"And riding behind the bullbar is probably not the best place to be when a vehicle hits an IED."

Reflecting on the ambush years later, Sergeant Simmonds says it was probably a bit selfish worrying about himself instead of his men, but concedes it was probably human nature too – and there wasn't a lot he could have done for anyone in his precarious, exposed position anyway.

But, as luck would have it, there was no IED on the route back to base and the convoy rumbled into FOB Anaconda to the waiting arms of a plethora of colleagues eager to triage the wounded and get the worst of them evacuated as quickly as possible.

"The triage all went very well. They grabbed us and put us on stretchers and took care of us really well.



"They flew me and a couple of others to Tarin Kot, where there had just been a turnover of surgical teams and so the surgeons who worked on us were a collection of top people from Melbourne and Sydney – all reservists.

"The bullet in my lower leg wasn't a big issue. It was a ricochet so it had broken up before going in. So they took out all the pieces easy enough.

"Those wounds took a while to heal up though.

"Like I said, the bullet in my hip had to be left in place – and I was also shitting blood for about 12 months from all the trauma around that area – but otherwise my recovery was fairly OK."

Sergeant Simmonds made a good recovery and was posted to the training squadron at Campbell Barracks, Swanbourne, home of the SAS, to help on the SASR selection course and train new guys in the basic skills of the SAS soldier.

He says he really enjoyed that role for a couple of years. He also enjoyed plenty of time recuperating and spent lots of time with his wife, who had only seen him for three or four months a year since he joined the SAS.

Inevitably, however, he was posted back to an operational squadron and again deployed to Afghanistan.

"I had some trepidation going back there, but this time I wasn't going outside the wire.

"My job on this trip was helping to plan missions and assist and advise young officers in how the SAS does business."

Now retired from the SAS, Troy Simmonds says he feels no ill effects from his service generally nor from the ambush that almost took his life.

"I saw some pretty bad stuff over there, but I think I have the capacity to put things in perspective and to compartmentalise them.

"It's almost like I can look back on that part of my life and see that I was like acting a role at that time, and now I'm in a different role.

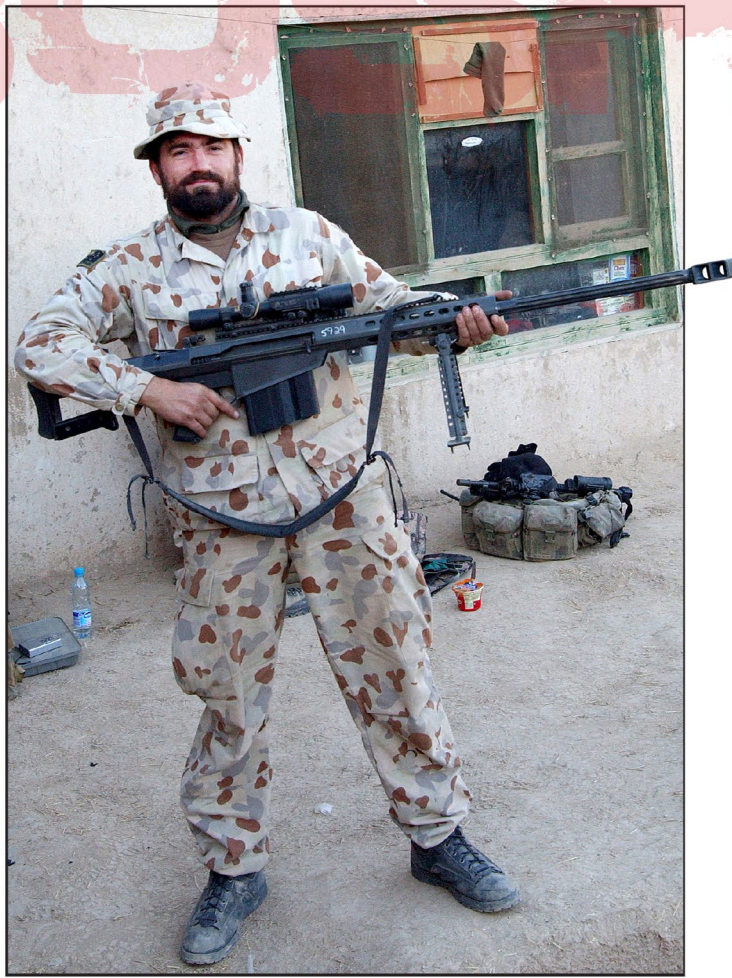
"I know some blokes do suffer from psychological issues after something like that, but I don't – or I don't think I do.

"I can think about it and talk about it and look at photos or videos from over there and it doesn't have a massive emotional affect on me."

Troy Simmonds spent 22 years in the Australian Army and did six tours of Afghanistan with the Special Operations Task Group.

The Battle of Ana Kalay lasted about two hours and resulted in one US KIA, with one wounded. Of nine Aussies wounded, one was considered life threatening at the time, but all survived.

After-action assessments put the enemy death toll at about 80.



**SAS Sergeant Troy Simmonds is now retired.**



**Wandering Warriors** is a charity dedicated to providing care, support and opportunities to veterans and their families through mentoring, education, employment, events and other services.

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[www.wanderingwarriors.org](http://www.wanderingwarriors.org)



# SPIRIT IN THE SKY

PHOTOS BY CHRISTABEL MIGLIORINI

**Two United States Air Force B-2 Spirit stealth bombers were spotted heading in to RAAF Base Amberley in July by CONTACT's Queensland stringer Christabel Migliorini.**

The combat aircraft were from the 509<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, based at Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri.

B-2 Spirit is a multi-role bomber capable of delivering both conventional and nuclear munitions.

Its stealth characteristics give it a unique ability to penetrate very sophisticated defences.

Introduced into service in 1997, the aircraft remains a cutting-edge technology, providing a strong and effective deterrent and combat force.

July's visit was only the second time B-2 Spirits have visited Amberley – the first time being March this year.

393rd Expeditionary Bomb Squadron commander Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Kousgaard said the B-2 deployment to Australia demonstrated and enhanced the readiness and lethality of US long-range penetrating strike forces.

"We look forward to training and enhancing our interoperability with our RAAF teammates, as well as partners and allies across the Indo-Pacific as we meet PACAF objectives," Lieutenant Colonel Kousgaard said.

A US DoD spokesperson said the US Strategic Command routinely conducted Bomber Task Force operations across the globe as a demonstration of US commitment to collective defense and to integrate with Geographic Combatant Command operations and activities.

"This deployment is in line with the National Defense Strategy's objectives of strategic predictability and operational unpredictability.

"Bomber Task Force enables different types of strategic bombers to operate forward in the Indo-Pacific region from a broad array of overseas and continental US locations with greater operational resilience."

The Australian Department of Defence added that several PACAF KC-135 Stratotankers supported the B-2 Spirits, providing refuelling capability for the visiting bombers while they integrated with the Royal Australian Air Force to conduct various training exercises and activities.





# Gallipoli OPEN DAY



## PHOTOS BY CHRISTABEL MIGLIORINI

About 20,000 people registered for this year's Gallipoli Barracks Open Day and were treated to a huge range of dynamic and static displays.

A section attack from the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, and an RAAF C-27J Spartan flyover were two popular displays.

Private Dylan Flemming was part of the 8/9RAR demonstration and said it was awesome to see how many people were interested in the way things were done.

"It's really good to see families come to the open day and witness how we work and operate as a team," Private Flemming said.

"We all really enjoyed putting on the show."

Captain Henry Swindon, HQ 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade, was responsible for much of the day's planning, and was pleased with how it panned out.

"Community support has been great, as has the assistance from Defence community organisations, the RSL and plenty of other stakeholders," Captain Swindon said.

"It's been fantastic to see how many people want to come and help.

"We catered for families, and the kids were stoked with the rides and food, plus there were lots of displays they could jump on and have a look at."





# CNN THE NNT



**Whatever about the western front,  
you can't say it's all quiet in Darwin  
– from a military perspective that is**

**PHOTOS BY BARRIE COLLINS  
WORDS BARRIE COLLINS AND BRIAN HARTIGAN**

**N**ot only did the Northern Territory see the largest United States Marine Corps contingent yet during their annual rotation, the Territory also saw MRF-D hosts, the Australian Army, out in force during numerous unilateral, bilateral and international exercises, with Territorians and visitors alike seeing columns of military vehicles streaming along the Arnhem and Stuart Highways.

Then they had their skies filled with aircraft during Exercise Pitch Black 22, The Royal Australian Air Force's biggest biennial warfighting exercise.

Not long after that finished, the port of Darwin played host to a number of Australian and international naval vessels for the Royal Australian Navy's Exercise Kakadu 2022 – or K22 as it has been abbreviated too – the largest naval exercise in Kakadu's 30-year history.



Kakadu is also a biennial exercise – though the 2020 iteration was cancelled because of the pandemic – and was developed to bring together the Navies of close neighbours such as Singapore, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia as well as those from further afield, which this year included the United States, Great Britain, Canada and others.

K22 commenced on Monday 12 September and closed on the 25th and saw 20 countries, 3000 personnel and 17 naval vessels participate, including warships, supply ships, patrol boats and a submarine.

Some aircraft from Pitch Black had also remained in Australia to support the RAAF with their interdictions to create a top-class maritime-warfare environment – most notably the Eurofighters from Germany's Luftwaffe.

Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Mark Hammond said the theme for K22 was 'Partnership, Leadership and Friendship', demonstrated over 15 days of intense activity at sea and ashore.

The opening week-long harbour phase included briefings, an opening ceremony, a fleet-commanders' conference, sporting events and social activities.

With preparations complete, the fleet then put to sea to test and enhance skills in activities ranging from constabulary operations to high-end maritime warfare.

Destroyers, frigates, corvettes and littoral-combat ships of varying designs and capabilities sailed in two task groups to undertake training activities to ensure task groups could work together effectively.

In the opening days of the sea phase, ships undertook gun firing and defending themselves against fast-jet fighters simulating guided missiles from sophisticated P-8 maritime patrol aircraft or from a submarine.

The latter half of the nine-day sea phase pitched the two task groups against each other in a tactical warfare scenario, testing the full capabilities of each ship and crew.

Meanwhile, a third task group comprising smaller patrol boats conducted boarding-party training to prepare them for fisheries enforcement, border protection and other maritime law-enforcement duties.

CONTACT's man in the north, Barrie Collins, went to sea for a day with the crew of Armadale-class patrol boat HMAS Broome on a mission to conduct a joint boarding exercise with the Fijian Navy's RFNS Saveneca, a Guardian-class patrol boat.

The boarding party from Broome were lowered into the sea, seated in their rigid-hulled inflatable boat (RHIB) and, once the lines were detached, they were off to board MV Discovery III, which played the part of a suspect vessel.

Once boarded, contain-and-search orders were given and the combined boarding parties went about their business.

Monitors and observers were on board to witness the process and provide feedback, and this small piece of Exercise Kakadu was deemed a complete success.

**TOP RIGHT:** *INS Satpura*, India's multi role frigate.

**CENTRE RIGHT:** *Singapore's stealth frigate RSS Steadfast*.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** *Bhumibol Adulyadej* from the Royal Thai Navy.

**MAIN:** *Australia's own Anzac-class frigate, HMAS Perth*.







**ABOVE:** HMAS Broome's boarding party head into action.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Fijian boarding crew returning to RFNS Savenaca.

**MAIN:** RFNS Savenaca heads back to the Port of Darwin.

**FILM STRIP (from left):** RAN boarding party boards MV Discovery III; Aussie sailors help their Fijian counterparts onto the suspect vessel; Rounding up the crew of the MV Discovery III; Discussing issues with crew of MV Discovery III; RFNS Savenaca and Fijian and Aussie RHIBs stand by off MV Discovery III; HMAS Broome's boarding party are recovered.







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# A NEW DAWN

DUAL BATTLEFRONTS IN THE MEAO

WORDS AND PICS BRIAN HARTIGAN

Spread over three issues from Dec 2006 to June 2007, these were my reports from my first (of three) trips to the Middle East, walking in the footsteps of Aussie servicemen and women on operations.

As the sun begins its long, slow climb over the high peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains in Afghanistan, and marches relentlessly westward across the cradle of civilisation, a new and dangerous day in the lives of our diggers on operations has already begun.

Over the next few issues, CONTACT will take you into the heart of both Operations Slipper and Catalyst to see our service men and women in action. We start, this issue, in Afghanistan, then follow the sun westward to Iraq.





## MAKE NO MISTAKE – WARFIGHTING IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN IS FAR FROM FINISHED

ollowing a time-worn pattern, major conflicts (or natural disasters) are inevitably followed by a usually much longer period of healing and reconstruction. In the case of Afghanistan, however, the reconstruction phase has started early – even before the fighting has ended.

Torn by 29 years of all-but continuous warfighting, coupled with recent devastating drought, the countryside and the people of Afghanistan are weary and desperate for assistance.

For the people of Tarin Kowt in the southern Oruzgan province of Afghanistan and other regions, help could not have come too early. But for those charged with the responsibility of rebuilding a seriously damaged community, the inherent challenges of the task are complicated all the more by the need to balance personal safety against mission goals and expectations.

Those expectations – apart from the obvious rebuilding of public infrastructure, institutions and governance frameworks – includes the expectation of the Australian public, and the fervent hope of the Australian government, that our soldiers and airmen will all come home safe and well.

And therein lies a key dilemma. Our Special Forces Task Group had dominated the same area of operations over the previous 13 months with aggressive, seek-and-destroy patrols that kept the enemy on the back foot (see story starting page 32). But the over-stretched and over-worked SFTG was, in the eyes of our government, in need of a rest and in September/October withdrawn from theatre while the war effectively still raged. The danger now is that replacing the SFTG's aggressive tactics with the purely defensive, albeit, capable, tactics of a large, well armed and well equipped reconstruction-focused task force, the enemy may find the time and the wherewithal to regroup and resume large-scale operations.

Dutch contingent commander Colonel Theo Vlaugels, an

infantry officer, agrees that the enemy is both showing signs of reorganising and flexing their muscles in what he says is probably a push to get them into better position for a spring offensive.

"In this country, though, it is very important to show that you are the strongest guy on the field – and we are strong enough," he says.

"We are strong, but we will only use necessary force."

As a reasonably keen observer of military affairs, I was surprised by what I saw in Afghanistan. A fleet of 12 Apache gunships, long-range Panzer Howitzer 155mm self-propelled artillery and other very heavy-duty defences piqued my surprise a little – especially given that this is, after all, billed as an engineer-based reconstruction mission. But then, the sight of two A-10 tank killers circling an area barely outside the camp's wire for 30 minutes before breakfast, and anecdotes of missions involving B1 bombers and Spectre gunships, set me to asking some deeper questions.

Make no mistake – warfighting in southern Afghanistan is far from finished. This is not a peacekeeping mission after the fashion Australia has become used to over recent years. There should be no doubt that our soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan are engaged, or could be engaged in, direct action against well-armed and determined enemy combatants who patrol the hills and valleys in groups of 100 or more.

As the Aussie commander on the ground, Lieutenant Colonel Mick Ryan, puts it, "This is a counter-insurgency operation, not peacekeeping. But it is intelligence led with the right balance of kinetic and non-kinetic effects."

"That means we balance between proactive defence, robust response to attack and employment of effective fire on the one hand, versus quality interaction with the population and the government,

collaboration with our Dutch partners and choosing the right engineering projects in the right place at the right time," he says.

"But, we are facing a very dangerous enemy here, and there are security challenges, but we are well equipped to deal with that."

In the end, Lieutenant Colonel Ryan is confident that the mission will be a success because it is designed to "kick the Taliban where it hurts most" – by winning over the support of the people. To that end, he says, they aim to provide the people with the things they want, not what the foreigners think they want.

"We meet regularly with local engineers and planners, develop personal relationships with them and find out what exactly they need in the town."

"The local town planner is an intelligent, very-well educated man, who is very keen to see the lot of his people improved."

While the Aussies' mission is clear, they are nonetheless working in austere conditions and a very hostile environment. Far from playing down the conditions or the danger, however, Lieutenant Colonel Ryan says it is important that the Australian people can see what their sons and daughters are doing.

While I was 'promised' some indirect rocket or mortar attacks during my visit to Tarin Kowt, I was not so 'lucky'. Nonetheless, the camp had been attacked at least twice in the preceding week. Just days after I left (but still in the MEAO) another incident not far from the base saw 70 suspected militants killed and a number of friendlies wounded. Two days later, in neighbouring Zabul province, one NATO soldier was killed in a six-hour battle that left about 55 militants dead and 20 more wounded.

While body counts are played down by our politicians and military leaders, and may well be a poor indicator of success or progress, they do point to the fact that large numbers of armed and dedicated militant fighters still patrol – if not control – the mountains, towns and villages in the same areas that our engineers are doing their duty.

During my visit, I was taken on a 'normal' Australian patrol that gave some indication of the seriousness of the mission in Tarin Kowt. The patrol involved a simple visit to the local hospital to deliver some medical aid packages and to take some last-minute measurements before a refurbishment and expansion of facilities could commence. Under any other circumstances, this would involve no more than the few medical staff, tradesmen and interpreters required for the task – but in Tarin Kowt it was a military excursion of significance 'outside the wire'.

More than 60 heavily-armed personnel and a dozen vehicles, including ASLAVs and Bushmasters were involved. While it may be safe to assume that the show of strength was a little heavier than normal because of the media presence, there was no doubt that any venture outside the wire is cause for serious military planning.

Notwithstanding the clear and present danger to our soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan, it is fair to say that our military personnel are well equipped, well trained and more than capable of handling themselves in a scrap. Naturally, the soldiers' training and preparedness sees them well placed to handle allcomers, while the capability of their Bushmaster and ASLAV fleets are beyond reproach.

I am happy to report that they are also in good health and morale is high – save for a few 'minor' complaints.

The Australian contingent (referred to as the Reconstruction Task Force (RTF)) consists of more than 400 mostly army personnel working as part of the Dutch-led Provincial Reconstruction Team, itself part of a wider NATO International Security Assistance Force.

1st RTF is a mix of engineers and security personnel deployed for up to two years to work on reconstruction and community-

based projects. The core of contingent members are drawn from the Darwin area – combat engineers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians and plant operators from 1st Combat Engineer Regiment (1 CER). Security is provided by Brisbane-based motorised infantry of the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6RAR), equipped with Bushmaster vehicles, and 5th/7th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (5/7RAR). The heavier armour of Darwin-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment with its ASLAVs will add much-needed weight to the firepower of the force. Other command, logistics and support elements have also come from the Darwin based 1st Brigade.

Operating under the umbrella of the Dutch mission, the Australian contingent share a huge, forward operating base at Tarin Kowt. Aptly named Kamp Holland, this is home away from home for the Aussies on their standard six-month rotations. The base, at 1400m (4600ft) above sea level, sits roughly in the centre of a massive, natural amphitheatre surrounded on all sides by mountains, soaring to more than 4000m. This amphitheatre, of about 60km diameter also contains the town of Tarin Kowt – a population centre of about 7000 – and numerous small hamlets and homesteads,







HESCO Bastion Concertainer® has provided force protection since the '91 Gulf War, and is now used around the world. It is a prefabricated, multi-cellular system, made of galvanised steel mesh and polypropylene geotextile liner. Elements are delivered flat-packed on standard skids or pallets. Units are extended and joined, then filled with local material. They can be stacked or used in depth to add effectiveness against specific threats, to the level of protection required. It has been tested against small-arms, cannon, RPG and other attacks as well as blasts from up to 9 tonnes of explosives.

some very recently built within close range of Kamp Holland's outer perimeter.

The base is a sprawling, dusty affair contained within thick, heavy walls of Hesco fencing. Hesco is a relatively new design, invented – word has it – by a British soldier sick of filling sandbags. It is essentially a heavy steel-mesh basket with cloth lining that is filled in a few minutes by a front loader, skid-steer or other mechanical means, making a bullet-proof barrier about 1.5m tall and about as thick. Make the wall two baskets thick and add another single layer on top, pyramid-like, and you have a ready-made fortress, complete with parapets. Imagine, if you can, trying to complete the same task, to anywhere close to the same effectiveness, with hand-filled sandbags – especially given that the outer perimeter (not counting the addition of several inner fortifications and local enclosures) is somewhere in excess of 10km long.

Inside the base is home to the Dutch task force, it's supporting Aussie contingent and a smattering of other coalition representatives.

Life in Kamp Holland – in relatively early stages of development when I visited in mid October – feels very much like 'groundhog day'. Working days start early, with a shower, shave (for the males) and basic breakfast (more on that later), before setting to the myriad jobs relevant to each trade or mustering. Also, of course, doing one's share of guard duties at various posts during the day – and night. And, with work progressing seven days a week – only some people benefiting from 'reduced activity' on Sunday – having no 'weekend' only adds to the sameness of each day. One young digger almost missed his scheduled 3pm guard duty one Thursday because his mind's clock was still ticking through Monday morning.

Kamp Holland itself is essentially a dust-covered, working military base-cum-construction site.

First, the dust is worth describing. It is of the finest, silkiest texture imaginable – more fine than good-old Aussie bulldust – so fine it feels like a silky lubricant under foot. While I witnessed the camp at its driest, it doesn't take a huge leap of imagination to envisage

the quagmire-to-come when, or if, rain is added to the mix.

Speaking of weather – summer temperatures frequently rise above 50 degrees centigrade, while winter's mercury can drop below the -20C mark. I, however, was more than happy to see it in a very tolerable autumn phase.

Base accommodation and working facilities are impressive. While construction – or rather, instillation – of our soldiers' accommodation blocks was not yet complete, when they are finished and occupied, Aussie mums and dads can rest assured that while their boys and girls are tucked up in bed at night, any amount of rocketing or shelling will barely disturb their sleep, let alone do them any physical damage whatsoever.

Called Feldlagers, they are essentially armour-plated shipping containers – further protected by yet more Hesco walls. These modular, air-conditioned accommodation units can protect against large-calibre ammunitions and explosions, and they can be used for just about anything – living, working, recreational, messing or medical facilities. If the base receives rocket or mortar attacks while our soldiers are enjoying a Dutch-prepared meal in the mess, for example, at the press of one button the whole facility is sealed tight and the soldiers simply remain inside until the all clear is given.

The mess – which opened the day I left – is constructed from about 50 or so Feldlagers bolted together (with numerous, seriously large bolts), with internal walls removed to make one, large, open-plan room. Recreation rooms (similarly constructed) are lavishly appointed and equipped with lounges, TVs, Internet computers, books, dart boards, pool tables and other games etc, to standards far-and-away better than most home-based soldiers' clubs I've seen.

I mentioned both food and morale earlier and, as is often the case, the two are inextricably related. But before I get into the food, though, two other issues I found that were affecting soldiers' morale were cameras and medals.

Our soldiers in Tarin Kowt are banned from using personal cameras, "for security reasons". This, I found, was the number one issue affecting morale across the board. While the soldiers ostensibly have access to an official Defence PR photographer, this over-stretched member cannot hope to cover all photographic requests. And, in the mean time, diggers watch moment after historical moment pass them by without being recorded. It was suggested by some that if they were allowed to take photos, they would be happy to submit them to a central collection point for vetting and clearance. In the interests of soldier morale and the recording of history, CONTACT fully supports this proposal and encourages Defence to consider it before it's too late.

Medals are always a contentious issue on operations. While our soldiers are entitled to the Australian Active Service Medal and a specific campaign medal, they have also been offered a NATO medal. However, Honours and Awards back in Canberra has decreed that while our soldiers may accept this medal, they may not wear it. Representations are afoot to rectify, or at least clarify this contentious issue – especially in light of precedences having



SUMMER TEMPERATURES FREQUENTLY RISE ABOVE 50 DEGREES CENTIGRADE, WHILE WINTER'S MERCURY CAN DROP BELOW THE -20C MARK







been set in other conflicts – but, at time of writing, our soldiers in Tarin Kowt watch as their Dutch brothers get the medal pinned to their chests on parade while the Aussies put out their hands to receive the medal that then goes in the deep dark recesses of trouser pockets.

But, back to the menu – at Tarin Kowt, catering is provided to the Australians on a contract basis by the Dutch who lay on four sittings a day at their well-appointed armour-plated mess. Trouble is, Dutch pallets and tummy sizes seem to differ slightly from Aussie ones. Being, perhaps, a more multi-culturally diverse society in Australia, our guys are more used to a wider range of tastes, textures and flavours and are spoilt for choice on the home front. The Dutch, on the other hand, seem to prefer simpler tastes, smaller portions and the same-old same-old day in and day out – adding to the sense of ground-hog day.

Morale in this regard is especially low for the Aussies first thing in the morning when the Dutch are satisfied by a light, cereal-based breakfast, while the Aussies hang out for a few slices of fatty bacon and a couple of fried eggs. As at time of writing, however, I can report that the contingent catering officer is working very hard, through fair means and foul, to rectify this shortcoming.

Culinary differences aside, though, every Aussie I asked said they loved working with their Dutch counterparts. Why? “Because they are exactly like us – if anything, they are even more laid back – and always up for a laugh. They are also very professional in what they do and there’s no bullshit about them.”

Not all of the work in Afghanistan is left to the foreigners, however. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is included in most missions, from warfighting to engineering tasks. They participate as partners and, where appropriate receive extra training along the way as well. My visit to Tarin

Kowt coincided with the start of a basic engineers’ course conducted for an ANA engineering unit brought in from Kandahar. From day one, as is the wont with the Aussie Army, the students sat through the fundamentals of basic first aid; occupational health and safety; selection, use and care of appropriate tools; basic theory of building construction and so on, even though many had been working in the field for years – better to take nothing for granted than to assume too much prior knowledge.

But as engineer Major Meggitt, who designed the course, says, “We have as much to learn from them as they do from us. They have been here forever, they know the lay of the land and may have more expedient ways of doing things.”

He also says that the training delivered now would not only help the ANA engineers to help the Aussies help the local

community, but would leave a legacy for when the foreigners do inevitably leave.

“Incorporating the ANA into the RTF where possible will show the Afghan face in the community and thus we can help bolster community opinion of its own army so that when we leave we will, hopefully, have established the ANA’s credentials.”

Another way the Aussies hope to leave a legacy is by building a TAFE-style college in Kamp Holland to teach locals the fundamentals of carpentry, plumbing, electrical, masonry and small-engine maintenance.

Warrant Officer Class Two Jed Watson – a self-proclaimed museum piece – casts an expert eye over construction of the trade training school and says he is “super impressed” by the brickwork of the local contract labourers assigned the construction task.

“While I think the Aussies can teach the Afghans a lot, the learning definitely goes both ways,” he says.

“I think we can teach the old dog a few things to polish up his old tricks, but this is great work they are doing. Rather than show them how we do it we’ll simply help them improve their own methods and then help them to teach new tradesmen.”

While he was a brickie by trade before joining the army, Jed confesses he never really mastered the art of rendering and became very excited when he sought and got permission from the building foremen to learn from the local tradesmen, who were true artists in cement finishing.

Abdul, the foreman – a man who had seen many years – took time out to tell me how happy he was that the Australians, the Dutch and the other coalition participants were here to help his country. Through an interpreter he said, “We do not see this as an invasion – an invasion is when one country comes here. We know the coalition is here to help us and we very much appreciate that.”

He also told me that he very much respected the Australian lady engineering officer who bossed him around a lot – “She even made us dig up a foundation that she said was not good enough.”

“If a woman like that leaves the comfort of her own country and her family to come to my country, then I am sure that she has come here to help the Afghan people.”

Many of the soldiers on this mission have had a very busy life of late. Iraq, Pakistan, Aceh, Solomon Islands, East Timor, Innisfail and the ongoing ATSIC Army Community Assistance Program (AACAP) – most have had a hand in one or more of these, especially the hardworking engineers. But as one young sapper, who had been involved in AACAP and Aceh deployments in the past 18 months told me, “those were good for getting away to help others in need, but this is what every soldier wants to be doing – this is the real deal – on a fair-dinkum operation overseas.”

PART 2

WORDS AND PICS BRIAN HARTIGAN

# ANOTHER CHAPTER

## DESERT PATROLS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

As the RAAF C130J Hercules thundered down the dusty gravel runway in Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan, I swing between sadness and excitement – sad to be leaving a ‘fair-dinkum operation with your mates’, but excited to be heading west and heading into who-knows-what.

Operations in Iraq have somewhat overshadowed those in Afghanistan for a long time, and prolific media attention has not painted a pretty picture.



In the flight that took me from one war zone to the next, I had the most surreal moment of all my 15-year’s experiences with the ADF. Sitting in the jump seat, smack bang in the centre of the relatively spacious cockpit, I chatted with the two very level-headed young men in the forward seats as we chased the Sun westward over the Persian Gulf. As the natural light outside dimmed to match the subdued cockpit lights on the inside, I watched Palm Island (construction of which I had learned about on Discovery Channel just two weeks earlier) and dozens of flame-throwing oil derricks in the inky blackness drift below us. But that wasn’t the surreal bit. What struck me hard – and I couldn’t shake it – was an unnatural, unnerving and yet wholly satisfying sense of being actually and physically inside either a video game or a movie set. This feeling grew stronger the darker it got outside and the closer we got to landing. And that bit – holy cow! – what a thrill!

But enough of that – fleeting moments of personal euphoria aside, this really is a theatre of war and our soldiers need their story told.

Our first port of call between the two theatres was a place all Australians (except, perhaps, shipboard Navy personnel) in the MEAO will visit at least four times during their six-month tours of duty – the Force Level Logistics Asset-Middle East Area of Operations (FLLA-MEAO). Located within a much bigger American distribution base, the FLLA-MEAO is the central Aussie logistics hub through which everyone and everything going into or coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan must pass. It feeds it’s materiel to the troops on the ground through other similar, but smaller, FLLA hubs in each location (for example FLLA-B (Force Level Logistics Asset-Baghdad)).

Initially, all Aussie personnel stop at the FLLA-MEAO for at least four days of in-theatre briefings and training. They receive lectures on everything from pay and entitlements to cultural briefings. They also spend time on the best, most realistic (read fun) weapons range they are ever

likely to see, zeroing weapons and chalking up accuracy scores that leave American observers gobsmacked and insanely jealous. Those who go deeper, either into Iraq, Afghanistan or any of several other outlying support hubs, will pass through here again on their way out and back for two weeks of ROCL (relief out-of-country leave), and again on final exit.

By the way, the cultural brief I mentioned was all about how to live and operate in close proximity to – Americans!

The Americans really are a breed apart and, as with any education, first-hand encounters teach the greater lessons. But the ‘cultural awareness’ lecture certainly came in handy. Individually, they are nice guys in the main, always up for a chat or a ‘how-you-doin’?’ in the DFAC (dining facility) queue. Over all, though, the culture is eye-opening – the scale of their logistics, their attitude to the war, life and religion, and their penchant for the ‘finer’ things of home – McDonalds, KFC, Subway etc etc (but more on that in the next issue).

Of course, the FLLA-MEAO is also home to a great bunch of Aussie logisticians, keeping







the mail and the thousands of tonnes of other supplies and equipment flowing. People like Private 'Tommo' Tomkins from Townsville. Aged 29 with three-years service under his belt, Tommo joined the army to do his bit for his country. His grandfather, whom he never met but is very proud of, was a member of the famous 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion that held the Japanese on the Kokoda. The older Tomkins survived the Japanese only to be killed by a drunk driver, one Anzac Day, back home. And, as Tommo served on the other side of the world, his first child was born, and was proudly christened with the old digger's name – Jack.

Ops Officer Captain Megan Bruhwiler, also

from Townsville, says the FLLA-MEAO is like a giant post office with lots of freight and people moving through it, almost daily.

"It's not rocket science, but there are a lot of moving parts," she says, "and when something goes wrong, it's the movers who cop the blame."

But, with tongue firmly in cheek, she adds that it's always the RAAF's fault!

Jokes aside, though, I did see Tommo cop a mouthful from a disgruntled officer when he announced that a flight had been cancelled because of a problem with the airplane. With typical laconic humour, the expert mover diffused the moment with a quick, "Sorry, ma'am – bird flu".

When the next healthy 'bird' did come, we were off to Iraq, specifically Baghdad.

Our arrival at the military side of Baghdad International Airport and the subsequent ride to the headquarters of Joint Taskforce 633 – the headquarters that covers all Australian personnel in the MEAO, including Afghanistan – was uneventful, yet quite interesting.

The 'arrivals hall' was a small, weedy paddock off the side of a very large concrete apron, alive with the activity of a major airbase. Photography here, as in most American-controlled sectors, was strictly prohibited. In fact, it was a photographic incident a couple of days later that brought on our scariest moment of the whole trip (but, tease that I am, I'll say no more on that 'till Part 3).

Fully kitted up in 18kg of body armour, carrying 14kg of cameras, batteries etc and lugging a civilian-styled and -coloured backpack containing the bare necessities for a three-week trip into the relative unknown, I was glad (for the thousandth time) that I didn't have the added burden and responsibility of a weapon and webbing.

The ride to HQ took what seemed like half an hour (I didn't time it) but didn't take us 'outside the wire'. We actually passed through two or three different American bases on the trip, but they have grown so large they are now essentially one super base.

Aussie HQ is picturesquely situated in one of several palaces on the side of a massive man-made lake. It is said that when the lake was constructed, Saddam turned off the water supply to the whole city for a month while his new lake filled up.

As with most Iraqi palaces, though, outward appearances and the craftsmanship of finish belie an underlying shoddy construction. Beautiful marble tiles hide structural concreting that would not nearly meet 'Western' construction standards – support pillars too thin in the first place are made of crumbly concrete, riddled with air voids and using chicken wire or little better in place of proper iron-bar reinforcement.

History and construction notwithstanding, if you really must visit one of the world's worst contemporary war zones, Aussie HQ in Baghdad is a relatively nice place to stay. And, possessing the only functioning swimming pool – Saddam's own swimming

pool – it is the envy of all, and a very popular place for the American neighbours to drop in to. This fact alone means you could never get truly lost on this American super base – just ask anyone how to get to the swimming pool, and you're set!

Headquarters Joint Task Force 633 is home to the Australian task force commander, Brigadier Mick Moon [since replaced by Brigadier Michael Crane], who commands Operation Catalyst – the ADF's contribution to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Iraq – as well as Operation Slipper – Australia's contribution to the international coalition against terrorism, which currently includes the Reconstruction Task Force and CH-47 Chinook detachments in Afghanistan. He also commands other Australian personnel and assets that are 'dual-assigned' to both operations – HMAS Warramunga [since replaced by HMAS Toowoomba], patrolling the Persian Gulf, two PC-3 Orion maritime surveillance aircraft and the aforementioned FLLAs and C-130s.

On our first evening in Baghdad – quiet, save for the half-hourly passage of two Black Hawks on their regular shuttle service around the eight-or-so heliports in central Baghdad – we visited FLLA-B, a small piece of Australia, complete with fully grown gum trees, and got the usual briefings on how the soldiers fill their day. Apart from the interesting statistics that pointed to a very busy schedule for a small bunch of people, the most interesting thing for all four journalists on our tour was to sit in their 'bunker' and just imagine what it must be like to ride out an 'incident' in such confined quarters. Essentially the bunker was a square concrete drainage pipe (of the type you'd see holding up a road over a small gully) not

big enough for a tall man like me to stand up in, and furnished only with a couple of army stretchers for seats and a telephone to make reports and receive the all clear. Cooped up in here for a couple of hours at a time and on an almost daily basis (they had reason to do so six hours before our visit and 12 hours after), their busy work schedule, in offices located just metres away, gets no relief. But far from being a simple encumbrance, the necessity for cover has been made all too obvious on a couple of occasions when members were forced to scurry across the open yard with bullets skipping in the dust just metres away.

Flight Lieutenant Wendy Walker, officer in charge, says "nothing is directed at us, per say, but when trouble breaks out in the neighbourhood, we take the sensible precaution of heading for the bunker."

"There's lots of weapons out there and not all of them are fired in anger, but what goes up must come down."

The Aussies usually stay holed up like this for at least 20 minutes after the last shot is fired.

Day two in Baghdad saw us visit what is probably the furthest forward on the 'front line' any of our soldiers go – the Australian Security Detachment, 10<sup>th</sup> rotation – SECDet X. These guys are responsible for the day-to-day security of the Australian ambassador, his embassy and staff.

While they live within the relatively safe International Zone – commonly referred to as the Green Zone – in central Baghdad, the work of the ambassador takes them outside, into the Red Zone, as many as three to four times per week.



ANOTHER BOMB GOES OFF IN BAGHDAD – RANGE 1300M





IRAQ

**IN AUGUST THIS YEAR, FOUR SOLDIERS FROM SECTDET IX WERE INJURED WHEN THEIR ACCOMMODATION WAS HIT BY A 122MM ROCKET – ONE OF THREE RANDOMLY FIRED INTO THE GREEN ZONE.**

SECTDET X is a combined-arms combat team at its core, with armoured, infantry and military police elements doing the actual front-line duty, ably supported by six other corps – intelligence, signals, RAEME, medical, logistics and catering.

Their area of operations is geographically ill-defined, however, with their brief of protecting the Ambassador taking them anywhere and everywhere he wants or needs to go. Therefore, traveling in ASLAVs, they may find themselves ranging over urban, rural or desert territory.

With a brief for VIP protection, and a wide range of travel throughout one of the most dangerous cities in the world, SECTDET X often see trouble on the street – but they do not engage.

“We don’t pursue attackers – we are not here to fight. We have a job to do and we just get on with it,” officer commanding SECTDET X Major Terrence Cook says.

“Small-arms fire directed at an armoured vehicle just doesn’t bother us.”

While the mission to date has been relatively quiet for SECTDET X, previous rotations have come under attack. In October 2004, two civilians were killed and three Aussie soldiers injured when three ASLAVs were hit by a car just 350 metres from the Australian Embassy. In August this year, four soldiers from SECTDET IX were injured when their accommodation was hit by a 122mm rocket – one of three randomly fired into the Green Zone. One of these soldiers – Corporal Sarah Webster – required evacuation to a US military hospital in Germany for treatment of head and lower

limb injuries before being repatriated to Australia for recuperation.

Notwithstanding the relative quiet for the Australians, October was one of the worst months on record for the Americans with more than 100 killed.

As well as close personal protection of the Australian Ambassador and embassy staff, SECTDET X is also responsible for static security of the embassy building. They also maintain a security overwatch of the city from an elevated position close to the heart of the action. Soldiers in this elevated post are tasked to scan the city for signs of trouble and report it when they do see something. This report – complete with distance and bearing readouts taken through laser range-finding binoculars – when combined with reports from other locations, helps authorities to triangulate the exact location of the trouble and dispatch ready reaction forces to deal with the aftermath.

As if running to a script designed to impress the visitors, immediately after I photographed the two soldiers on duty in their lookout, a bomb went off a couple of blocks away. The pair, non-plussed by the disturbance, quickly reported it was 1300 metres away. Without fuss or fanfare the report was sent and logged and everyone went back to what they were doing. All the while, the monotone chant of the local mufti echoed through a poor-quality speaker system as he led lunch-time prayers at the mosque, and an F16 thundered overhead – but he was just passing.

Less than ten minutes later, automatic gunfire was heard in the neighbourhood of the bomb site and was still running as we

departed the observation post. It was time for lunch.

SECTDET X is self-sufficient in all respects. While they travel in their armoured convoy to the FLLA-B once per week to pick up supplies, they are capable of operating independently for at least three weeks.

I am pleased to report that their kitchen is staffed by a good-old Aussie Army cook, who served up one of the best lunches I had in the whole MEAO.

With just a couple of days spent in Baghdad (which was probably enough), we were in the air again, traveling south to Dhi Qar province, home of the newly formed Overwatch Battle Group-West (see page 18, issue #11).

Housed on the largest military air base in Iraq, and right next door to the ancient city of Ur, these are the guys living and working in the very heart of the ‘cradle of civilisation’. I’ll go into this more in next issue’s wrap-up, but understand that the 5000-year-old city of Ur is where the first form of writing was invented, the Garden of Eden is thought to have been and the house where Abraham was born still stands (albeit without its roof). I recommend a quick read in Wikipedia for the full story.

Today, however, Tallil is a significant air base, home to another major American logistics hub. It was once one of Saddam’s major air-force bases. With parallel runways and copious hardened aircraft shelters (now severely bomb damaged) it is second in size only to Baghdad International.

The 500-strong Australian Overwatch Battle Group-West is Australia’s largest single



contribution to the multinational force in Iraq. It is responsible for an area covering 72,000sq/km and more than 2 million people across al Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces. The mission of the battle group is to support Iraqi security forces, support the local government and to maintain situational awareness in both provinces. This means that, while they do participate in mainly reconnaissance patrols over vast and diverse terrain, they do not get directly involved in either security or governance issues. They maintain an ‘overwatch’ and would only get involved in military action in necessary self defence or if called upon by the Iraqi government to help out in dire circumstance.

To help the Iraqi’s help themselves, elements of OBG(W) conduct training for the Iraqi Army and expend a good deal of time and effort in helping the local civilian communities through the provision of civil/military liaison projects.

While Tallil airbase has come under indirect rocket attack on occasion, the last previous occurrence was some six weeks before my visit. Heavily armed and highly protected in ASLAV and Bushmaster vehicles, the Aussies have not, however, come under direct attack.

Officer commanding A Squadron 2/14 Light Horse Regiment (Queensland Mounted Infantry) Major Shane Wakley says that the ASLAVs under his command (35 in all) are ideally suited to the terrain and are well protected for the mission.

“While many of the vehicles are fitted with bar armour, we don’t actually know if it works because we have never been hit,” he says, “and, to be honest, we are more than happy to continue just believing that it works.”

Despite being on operations, soldier training continues. In fact, being on operations may offer the best opportunity to complete specialist courses such as qualifying members on the 84mm Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle. With wide open spaces on which to lay a range template and greater availability of ammunition, more soldiers than normal can be run through such training. It was also the first time I had seen one of those things go off – and it was pretty damn cool. I also got to sit on the roof of an ASLAV as the 30mm Bushmaster

cannon ripped into a hapless old Russian BMP. I didn’t know it before, but the ASLAV’s ammo self destructs if it tumbles off course after a ricochet, dying in its own little fireworks display.

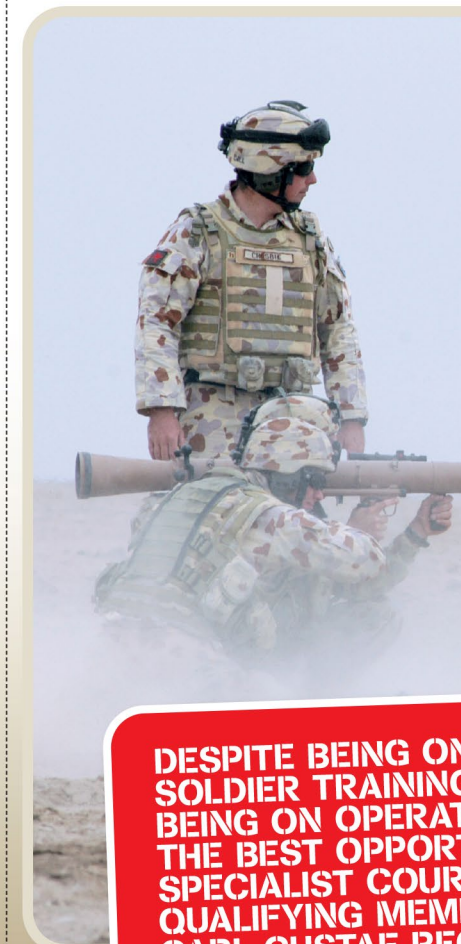
Tagging along with elements of OBG(W) as they conducted normal operations was

insightful. After our visit to the weapon’s range on our first full day in loc, we were out again the next day, this time to visit with the local police commander for a regular chat about his issues, concerns and needs in terms of support. After a fairly lengthy meeting in which not a lot of actual business was conducted (thanks to the local custom of discussing family and other preliminary issues over a glass of strong, very sweet tea) the police chief relayed that he was pretty happy and had a good class of keen new recruits nearly ready to march out.

Then it was off to the local army barracks for more business, before heading out into very dry countryside to meet villagers who had recently benefited from an OBG(W) civil/military liaison project. Designed to install new power poles and a transformer to deliver a more reliable electricity supply to the small community, the actual work was conducted by local contractors. This in itself

is designed to inject money and activity into the economy to aid in the general recovery process for the country, but for this small community, it means a huge improvement in delivery of the very basics of life that we in Australia take for granted.

At the end of the day (and the end of my trip) I was left with a sense of the enormous scope of activity and responsibility heaped upon the shoulders of Australia’s military men and women. Operating in countries half a world from home, the same people are soldiers one day – trained to fight and kill – and diplomats the next – naturally empathetic and innately compassionate. I felt privileged to walk among young diggers, threading the deserts of the Middle East and writing their own chapter in Australia’s proud military history.



**DESPITE BEING ON OPERATIONS, SOLDIER TRAINING CONTINUES. IN FACT, BEING ON OPERATIONS MAY OFFER THE BEST OPPORTUNITY TO COMPLETE SPECIALIST COURSES SUCH AS QUALIFYING MEMBERS ON THE 84MM CARL GUSTAF RECOILLESS RIFLE**



# AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN...

WORDS AND PICS  
BRIAN HARTIGAN

It was my very great pleasure to meet the men and women of the Australian Defence Force on duty in various locations around the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO) in October/November last year. In the previous two issues of CONTACT I reported on the activities and circumstances of those I met and, hopefully, gave you the reader, some sense of what day-to-day life is like for Australian service men and women on very foreign soil.

In this final wrap-up of my experience, I want to relate some of the things I found a little more exciting, interesting, unusual or noteworthy, but didn't necessarily fit into the flow of the previous reports.

I caution that much of what is to follow is personal observation, opinion and hearsay and not necessarily verified or verifiable, but nonetheless interesting – at least to me.

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story, as they say!



When I was asked if I'd like to go to the MEAO for three weeks on a guided media tour, it took me about a nanosecond to decide – followed by several hours of fast talking to get permission from the home front! What was the big deal I thought? It's not like it's dangerous or anything. No Aussies have been killed by enemy action over there yet.

My personal philosophy was, as always, if it's good enough for others, then why should I shirk my responsibility? And, yes, I do see it as a responsibility to tell their story as best I can. I chose this job, after all, and I can't just pick and choose the easy bits.

Besides, think of the stories I can tell around the barbie. "Did you go anywhere special on your holidays, Brian?" "Just Iraq and Afghanistan," I reply, casually.

Waiting at another airfield one hot dusty evening, I met one very large, very nice, African-American gentleman with a really cool story he felt he just had to tell us about the exploits of our own SAS.

With great glee and obvious admiration he told it like this...

"Our (US) airforce guys had this UAV they were using. Every day, they patrolled up and down this valley and never saw a damn thing. Eventually they gave up and decided to fly it somewhere else. That same day, human intel came in suggesting that the valley they had just given up on was swarmin' with Taliban. Reluctantly, they sent the UAV up the valley for another look-see. Anyway, sure enough, there in the valley where it was empty for weeks, were about 200 blokes in traditional dress and obviously heavily armed. Our guys sent the UAV back for a second look, and on this pass the damn thing got shot down. Well, our air force guys were in a quandary. They didn't want the bad guys to get their hands on all that technology and intel, but their own ground-forces guys were off somewhere else on another task. So they asked some special forces dudes, from a country I won't name, to go out and get the bird back. These guys said, 'Hell, no – we saw what was on that video feed. We ain't going out there. No way.' So our USAF guys went and found an Aussie real quick and told him

what happened and asked if they could go get the plane back. So this Aussie says, 'Sure, mate. We ain't doin' much at the moment.' So they did!" he finished, with a huge white-in-black smile, leaving the finale to the listeners' imagination.

Keen to find out a bit more about the places we visited, we found some people were willing to step outside the prescribed message. In Baghdad, two men – one Australian the other Iraqi – attempted to educate us a little deeper than the here-and-now of the next headline.

The Australian – an officer, more than adequately qualified to comment on the history of Iraq – told us it was important to understand that Iraq was a very violent country long before any western involvement. He said the country had more than 150 tribes as well as the various religious divides. Aside from the various Muslim sects, Christianity is also prevalent – and there's even a group in the far west of the country that worships the Sun. It is also important to understand that most Iraqis are tribal first, religious second and patriotic third.



WO2 JED WATSON BUILDS ON THE WISDOM OF KEEN AFGHAN ENGINEERS

## SCARY STORY

Seeing and hearing a bomb go off just three blocks from where I stood – awaiting the 'promised' rocket attack in the middle of the night – standing, exposed on the roof of the old Baath Party Headquarters in downtown Baghdad – these things did not scare me. But one incident in Talil, southern Iraq, did cause my heart to try and escape through my mouth.

At the end of a long day, we had stood atop an ancient archeological site and taken photos of each other in a perfect sunset – necessitating the use of flash.

After piling into our bus, we had just started to move when, out of the darkness, four American Hummers appeared, without lights, and formed an instant roadblock in front of the car in front of us.

At first I was concerned for the car driver – the shopkeeper at the trinket stall who had just sold us our souvenirs – a local.

But then it suddenly dawned on me that the machineguns in the turrets on top of the Hummers were pointed at us, and I was not at all comfortable sitting in a soft-skinned vehicle with heavily armed Americans staring at me.

Nothing happened for what seemed like a long time – no shouting, no instructions, no gestures. Eventually, our guide, the Australian Army chaplain said, "bugger this" and went to find out what the problem was.

After a considerable time he came back to report that the Yanks had seen our flashes and were sure we were photographing 'their' base – which we all knew was a no no – and they had insisted on confiscating our cameras. The padre, naturally, didn't accept the demand, which was at first downgraded to confiscation of all tapes, film and digital storage cards. But, eventually, they agreed to simply view our photos and have us delete any that contravened their security policy.

So, there we were, on the side of the road with angry Americans looking at our slide shows while the padre took his only photo of the day – of angry Americans viewing Aussie slide shows on the side of the road!



OFFENSIVE PHOTO? APART FROM THE UGLY MUG, I DON'T THINK BASE SECURITY WAS COMPROMISED, DO YOU?



Despite the difficult and dangerous conditions and despite the problems the country was facing, most people he knew, including Americans, were passionately and genuinely concerned for and empathetic to the plight of the Iraqi people, and were determined and willing to work hard to make what little difference they could.

On a personal note, he told us how he felt frustrated and angry with family and friends when he went home on leave because they seemed to obsess over relatively trivial things. It took a lot of soul searching and some help from a psych to realise how lucky we are in Australia exactly because it is trivial things that concern us.

The Iraqi – a senior advisor at the American Embassy – had a much tougher message for us to swallow.

Agreeing that Iraq was a complicated country, he explained that the current unrest in Iraq was as much a legacy of Saddam as it was a direct consequence of poor early tactics by the allies.

When Saddam realised his days were numbered he put money and orders in place to ensure the failure of his successors. He also let all the criminals out of jail to add to the mayhem.

On the other hand, when the allies invaded Iraq and dissolved the armed forces, they instantly made four or five million new enemies, when the extended families of those affected were counted. Also, with no defence force to guard the borders, there was an uncontrolled influx of money, weapons and people from countries that desperately wished to see a democratic Iraq fail.

However, with the past in the past, Iraq and its allies must look to the future.

This senior Iraqi advisor agreed with US General Casey who was reported as saying, about that time (October '06), that the Iraqis would be capable of assuming control of their own security within the next 18 months.

He said, in his opinion, that for any new Iraqi government to succeed, it must rule with an iron fist and this would, inevitably, cause a blood bath in the short term.

"But, it is better to kill half a million now than to let it drag on, killing two or three million in the long run," he said.

"This iron-fist approach is the only solution that can fit with the culture of Iraq."

He said that while the Americans and their coalition partners were aware of his theory, they weren't at all comfortable with that line of thinking, but, he believed, they were resigned to the inevitability of it.

Do the Yanks really take McDonalds to a war zone? This and other important questions abound around Aussie barbies.

Well I can tell you, yes, they do – and KFC, Subway, Pizza Inn, Hole-in-One Doughnuts, Green Beans Coffee, barber shops, beauticians, tailors, supermarkets (PX stores), banking facilities, gymnasiums, libraries and much much more.

Before you scoff, though, there's a very sound logic behind it. Apart from, 'because we can', it also makes the soldiers feel more at home.

Given that most American soldiers are over there for at least 12 months and that they get no extra pay or allowances for being there, making them feel more at home during downtime makes a lot of sense.

"Junkfood Alley" isn't the only place to go for a feed, though. The DFAC (equivalent to our mess) is the place to go for a free feed. Well, when I say equivalent, I mean in theory, because the sheer size of these things (and there are dozens of them) puts our mess' in a whole different (little) league.



There were other statistical tidbits over there I just had to write down and bring home too. Like, the American superbase in Baghdad I mentioned last issue is so big it has 32 bus routes on it. There are more than 150 American chaplains tending their flocks in theatre – covering every imaginable religious denomination, including Jedi. There are 30,000 HMMWVs (Humvees) in Iraq. I saw a car park that, I was told, held more broken-down vehicles awaiting repair than there are good vehicles in all of the ADF. The war effort in Iraq alone costs the US \$6billion per month to run.

And, the month I was there, 100 American soldiers were killed in action. RIP.

P.S. In the Scary Story on the previous page, the angry American was actually a very petite, apologetic female sergeant – "Just followin' orders, sir".

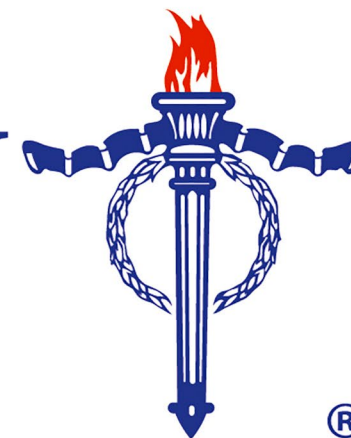
P.P.S. While my colleagues were showing their photos to the petite sergeant (and having several of them deleted), I was at the back of the queue swapping out my near-full Compact Flash Card for an empty one.

The first evening we used the DFAC we got lost. Literally. We had to send out search parties, and coordinate a rendezvous point and time, to round up the hapless stragglers. The second time we used it we were much more organised and had a plan in place to prevent such disasters.

I'm not joking either.

One evening I noticed a Dyna-tape label on the wash basin I used for pre-dinner hand washing that said 'Washhand basin number 562' – and it wasn't the last hand basin in the line.

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# TOP TROOPS

Words Corporal Jacob Joseph  
Photos Corporal Madhur Chitnis

After a two-year break in competition because of COVID-19, a section from 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, were crowned the new champions of Army's premier military-skills competition, having secured the Duke of Gloucester Cup for 2022.

3RAR section commander Corporal Liam Reynolds said the team was confident it had done everything they could to win it.

"We went down there to win – we had a winning mindset and I think it paid off," Corporal Reynolds said.

Seven sections from the Royal Australian Regiment competed for this year's Duke of Gloucester Cup, with each team judged on physical endurance, infantry tactics and teamwork over six days of intense competition.







Corporal Reynolds said 3RAR proved best overall after putting in strong performances across all stands.

Beginning with marksmanship and combat shooting, sections then navigated into the bush, where they were tested on their knowledge of heavy weapons and medical procedures, and were faced with complex problems such as identifying enemy from civilians.

Organisers introduced new elements to the competition this year, such as the use of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence equipment during the section attack, and paint rounds in the urban stand.

Corporal Reynolds said changes to the adjudication system led to a fairer competition.

"Having a directing staff from a different battalion attached to each of the patrols made sure the scoring was done properly," Corporal Reynolds said.







As well as the Duke of Gloucester Cup, 3RAR also received the OSCMAR Trophy for battle endurance. 5RAR's Corporal Max McCulloch took out the Regimental Sergeant Major's Trophy for best section commander and Private Jack Willoughby, 6RAR, was named the best soldier in the competition, taking out the DSM Roche CSC Memorial Cup.

As champion section, the 3RAR team travelled to the United Kingdom in October to compete in the Cambrian Patrol, where they picked up a Bronze Award.

Cambrian Patrol is a 10-day military-skills assessment, hosted by the British Army, with 96 UK and international teams participating this year.





# Duke of Gloucester Cup





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# FROM THE JAWS OF FIRE

## WARRANT OFFICER CLASS ONE THOMAS JAMES CARMODY MSM AND BAR

**Tom Carmody was born in the rural city of Ballarat in May 1892, to parents Michael and Mary. His brother Laurence (Larry) followed in November the following year and baby sister Margaret, commonly called Rita, was born in 1900. Sadly, Mary passed away that same year<sup>1,2</sup>, leaving Michael to care for his young family.**

The family were again devastated when Rita passed away, aged five, and was laid to rest with her mother in Ballarat Cemetery.

Thomas and Larry were bright lads and undertook schooling at St Patricks College as boarders. On leaving school, Tom took on work as a telephone mechanic<sup>3</sup>, while Laurence became an apprentice blacksmith/coach smith<sup>4</sup>.

Tom joined the local militia unit, the 11<sup>th</sup> Light Horse, and served with distinction for four years<sup>5</sup>. He married Elsie<sup>6</sup> and started to plan a family of his own.

Laurence was a militia gunner in the Warrnambool Artillery<sup>5</sup> and remained a carefree bachelor<sup>4</sup>.

With the onset of war, both lads contemplated their future. Larry was the first to enlist, on 9 August 1915 and, with his militia background, was immediately allocated to the 10<sup>th</sup> Battery of the 4<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade as a reinforcement<sup>4</sup>.

Saying goodbye to his brother, Tom knew it was only a matter of time before he too would be required to join the uniformed ranks, but, with a baby on the way, he had to bide his time.

Tom enlisted in the AIF on 8 September 1916 and was allocated to the fledgling Australian Flying Corps' (AFC) 2 Squadron with the rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Mechanic on 25 October 1916 and, with his leave complete, said his final goodbyes to Elsie, his baby son and his father, and boarded the troop ship Ulysses, bound for war<sup>6</sup>.

Arriving in England on 23 December he was dispatched to the 69<sup>th</sup> Australian Flying Squadron, Royal Flying Corps, and onto Farnborough, for further training in the mechanics of wireless<sup>3</sup>. The art of wireless communication coupled with his background in telephone, fascinated him and he was exceptionally good at his trade.

On 18 June 1917, Tom was chatting with mates at a training field, when their conversation was interrupted by the drone of a RE8 reconnaissance/trainer. The aircraft, with a student pilot<sup>7</sup> in command, looked and sounded in trouble. The plane slipped into a low turn, speared into the ground and burst into flames.

# JUST SOLDIERS

BY MAJOR DARRYL KELLY



As he read the note, the words 'Killed in Action' took his breath away as he realised his brother Larry was gone

Running to the scene, Tom and his mates Sergeant Vince Smith, 1<sup>st</sup> Air Mechanic Cyril Lee and Sergeant Abner Dalzell could see the trapped pilot struggling to get free as the flames took hold on the highly flammable canvas-and-wood frame.

The men made repeated sorties into the flames and, on their third attempt, were able to pull the badly burned pilot free. Sadly, his injuries were so severe he would not survive the day.

For their courage and determination that day all four members were awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for Gallantry<sup>8,9</sup>.

Re-joining the 69<sup>th</sup> Squadron it would be August before he and his squadron would be dispatched across the channel to the front lines<sup>3</sup>. Promoted to corporal, Tom was assigned as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron AFC.

In late September 1917, he was told to report to headquarters. As he entered, he noticed strain and despair on his officer's face.

Handing over a folded piece of paper, the officer said "I'm sorry Tom". As he read the note, the words 'Killed in Action' took his breath away as he realised his brother Larry was gone<sup>10</sup>.

In March 1918, Tom's unit was stationed on the Ypres Salient and Tom tried to make a search for the temporary cemetery where Larry was buried. With the enemy holding some of the high vantage points, movement around the Menin Road area was susceptible to artillery.

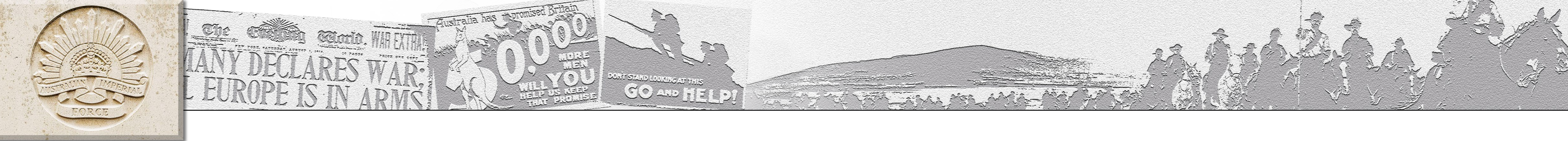
While he searched among the crosses, Tom attracted the attention of German observers who sent a couple of high-explosive rounds his way. Erring on the side of caution, Tom was on his way 'toot-sweet'!

The recent collapse of Russia allowed the Germans to redeploy tens of thousands of fresh troops, along with 1000 heavy guns from the Russian Front to attack the allies on three sector fronts in the west.

It was the German's golden opportunity to drive wedges right along the line and seize vital ports and transport hubs, thus isolating the allies from reinforcements, casualty evacuation and resupply. Dubbed 'Operation Michael', the thrust was aimed at the British/Australian front with the 'prize' being the strategically vital city of Amiens and its massive rail hub.

The Australian's had no thought of defeat as they held their ground and counterattacked around the key village of Villers-Bretonneux and at other points along their line.





ABOVE LEFT: A flight of bombing planes, 1st Australian Flying Corps, Palestine, 1914-18. Image from State Library of NSW.

ABOVE RIGHT: Two Bristol fighters of the Australian Flying Corps. AWM B02209.

FAR RIGHT: A Bristol fighter F.2B, two Martinsydes and a B.E.2 of the Australian Flying Corps photographed from inside a tent hangar in Palestine. Photo by Frank Hurley. AWM P03631.018.

PREVIOUS PAGE: R.E.8 aircraft and personnel from 3 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps. Photo via Wikipedia.

For the pilots and observers of the Australian Flying Corps, their tasks were many and varied, from dogfights to reconnaissance, strafing enemy troop concentrations to spotting for artillery and reporting on enemy troop dispositions. For Tom Carmody and those on the ground, their mission was to keep the pilots and planes in the air, where they would do the most good.

By May/June the tide of battle had slowly swayed in the allies' favour and they could now plan to carry the offensive to the enemy. This culminated on 8 August 1918 when the Australian and allied forces breached the seemingly impregnable Hindenburg Line, of which German General Ludendorff wrote that this was 'the black day of the German Army' – the day they lost the war!

In September 1918, Tom was re-mustered to become a wireless operator and was pleased to remain with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron<sup>3</sup>.

On 5 November 1918, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron was operating out of an aerodrome at Premont. It was around 1800 hours on a cold, dark night when Tom Carmody saw a Bristol Fighter on fire in one of the canvas hangars.

By the time he got to the hangar the aircraft was fully ablaze and live ammunition was detonating from the heat, firing in all directions.

Assessing the danger and with disregard to his own personal safety, Tom laced up the hangar flap to prevent the wind from spreading the flames to the other hangars and precious aircraft.

As others arrived on the scene, Tom quickly organised them into groups to push adjacent aircraft to safety, while he sought to retrieve vital wireless equipment from the burning hangar before it was lost.

In diminishing light, faces – and, in fact, ranks – were barely recognisable, but, undeterred, Tom allocated men to tasks so efficiently that the damage and losses were limited to the original aircraft and hangar.

As the burning hangar finally collapsed, he organised a fire-fighting party made up of all hands to finally extinguish the flames.

For his outstanding courage and leadership during this action, Tom Carmody was awarded a Bar to his Meritorious Service Medal<sup>8,11</sup>.

With war's end and troops awaiting transport space to take them home, promotions became more frequent as unit manning began to shrink. Tom, who had been promoted to temporary sergeant before his action of 5 November, was now confirmed to substantive rank<sup>3</sup>.

We can be almost certain that during the lull in operational activity, Tom would have visited his brother's grave to pay his love and respects.

In early March 1919, Tom was ordered back to England and marched into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Training Brigade. In the latter part of April, he was transferred from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron to the AFC Education Staff with the rank of temporary warrant officer class one<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, orders came to board the transport Kaiser-i-Hind bound for Australia and home, where he arrived on 16 June.

Waiting on the dock was his beloved wife Elsie and his father. It would have been a bitter-sweet reunion, thanks to the loss of Larry.

Tom and Elsie settled down and rebuilt their lives after the long absence. Tom returned to his communications trade with the Post Master General's Department (PMG).

They concentrated on starting a family, with a son Alan born in 1920, Francis in 1921, Thomas in 1923, plus a daughter, Joan<sup>1</sup>.

With the onset of the Second World War, the Carmody family again answered the call. Alan Carmody was already serving in the militia forces, as an army private in the Melbourne University Rifles. He sought and was granted a transfer to the Royal Australian Air Force by discharging from the Army and re-enlisting in the RAAF on the same day – 23 March 1942. At war's end he took discharge as a flight lieutenant<sup>12</sup>, specialising in radar.

Frank was firstly in the Army militia before transferring to the AIF, as a sergeant in the 19<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Battery. He transferred in 1943 to the RAAF, rising to the rank of flight sergeant as an instructor at an Observer School<sup>12</sup>.

Tom (Jnr) was a gunner in the 104<sup>th</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment, before also heading across to the Air Force. He also finished the war as a sergeant<sup>12</sup>.

Sadly, Thomas James Carmody MSM and Bar, a most gallant and seemingly fearless soldier, passed away on 12 March 1955<sup>1</sup>. He now lays at rest in Canberra's Woden Cemetery.

#### Lest we forget

*As a sidebar, I would like to highlight the great work done by those who run the Virtual Memorial Australia. This is a tremendous resource where you can record your own or a relative's military service. Also, to the relatives who contribute to the respective sites, especially Julianne who populated the information on Thomas and Laurence Carmody.*

#### Notes:

1. Virtual War Memorial Australia, 6323 Laurence Francis Carmody
2. It's not known if Mary died in childbirth
3. National Archives of Australia: WWI Service Records, 530 Thomas James Carmody
4. National Archives of Australia: WWI Service Records, 6323 Laurence Francis Carmody
5. AWM 145 Roll of Honour Cards 1914-1918 War Army – 6323 Laurence Francis Carmody
6. AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Rolls, 2nd Australian Flying Squadron 1 – 4 Reinforcements (October – December 1916)
7. The student pilot was Sergeant Alfred Stephen Holmes of No 61 Training School
8. AWM28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914-1918 War
9. National Archives of Australia: WWI Service Records, 666 Albert Gilchrist Dalzell's file holds a copy of the recommendations for all four members involved in the action of 18 June 1917
10. Killed in Action 25 September 1917
11. One of only seven such awards across the Commonwealth forces and the only Australian to do so
12. Department of Veterans' Affairs Nominal Roll
13. Tom passed before he could see his eldest son Alan become a senior and most respected public servant, decorated firstly with the Order of the British Empire and later becoming a Knight Bachelor. The Canberra suburb of Casey has Carmody Street, named in the honour of Sir Alan Carmody. Wikipedia



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# TIGER

An armed reconnaissance 'Tiger' helicopter from the 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation Regiment fires a Hellfire missile during Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2022.  
This image has been digitally manipulated.







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