

# 4

## **Australia's intervention in Afghanistan, 2001–02**

Dan McDaniel

I met the former US Senator Charlie Wilson at midnight in Kandahar when it was 30 degrees Celsius. Standing outside in the dark with three US officers, Charlie said to us, '[Y]ou boys are finishing off what we started, but you're doing it a whole lot better than we ever did.' Privately, I disagreed. It was now 2009, I was on my third tour and the coalition did not seem to be winning a counter-insurgency that was quite different from the counter-terrorism mission I was sent to fight in 2001–02.

Back in Charlie Wilson's day, in response to the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in 1981, the United States supported the Afghan mujahideen to fight the Soviet forces efficiently and effectively, famously providing them with a Stinger missile to shoot down Soviet helicopters. US support for the mujahideen largely ceased once the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan and the United States judged that it had achieved what was in its primary national interest.

Twenty years later, the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the operations immediately following were similarly well focused and fairly well executed under the circumstances. Al-Qaeda was the enemy, the Taliban its support. While some contributing nations had broader national agenda, the primary objective of removing the terrorist group al-Qaeda and denying it Afghanistan as a safe haven was clear in the minds of the US-led coalition forces.

Then a major, I led the first SAS Squadron, under an Australian Special Operations Task Force Headquarters.<sup>1</sup> We entered Afghanistan in early December 2001, through Forward Operating Base Rhino, a former drug-smuggling hub located in the desert south of Kandahar. Following the fall of Kandahar in late December, during which Australian forces supported the combined US special operations forces and Northern Alliance efforts, the Task Force's base of operations moved to Kandahar airfield. Although the base was home, much of the squadron's time was spent outside it on long-range and long-duration patrols and shorter direct-action tasks. In March 2002, the Task Force temporarily relocated to Bagram Airfield to support Operation ANACONDA in attacking Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in eastern Afghanistan. My squadron was rotated out and replaced by a second squadron in March–April 2002, at which time Bagram Airfield became the permanent base for the Task Force headquarters. The final squadron rotation occurred in September 2002, and Australian special forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan in December 2002.

This chapter reflects on the first year of the commitment of Australian special forces to combat operations in Afghanistan, from the invasion in 2001 through to withdrawal at the end of 2002. It is intentionally focused at a level higher than specific tactical actions, most of which remain classified. Instead, its focus is on Australia's national strategy, the missions and the broad lessons. It will also briefly reflect on Australia's exit strategy.

These reflections are deliberately limited to those of the tactical troops and commanders of 2001–02; it captures the rough, blunt perspectives of then junior troops rather than the analytical and polished evaluations of now senior soldiers and officers. This account and any inaccuracies are my own; however, in preparation I interviewed many of the SAS commanders of the 2001–02 deployments and others who were senior officers at the strategic level in Australia at the time.

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter numbers the SAS squadrons by the order in which they were deployed to Afghanistan, not by their formal subunit titles; i.e. 'the first squadron deployed' rather than '1 SAS Squadron'.

## **National strategy—ANZUS, entry and the Australian reputation**

At the time of the September 11 attacks, I and elements of the squadron were on a separate deployment and did not learn of the attacks until some days afterwards. We were swiftly recalled to Australia and, in November 2001, the squadron was sent to the Middle East.

Prime Minister John Howard's swift decision to stand alongside the United States and commit troops to combat operations in Afghanistan demonstrated the level of Australian national intent. Although the Special Forces Task Force was issued a mission to defeat al-Qaeda and deny Afghanistan as a terrorist safe haven, we had no real relationship with Middle Eastern nations. Furthermore, each of our traditional coalition partners was focused on their own national agenda, and the United States was focused on its own plan rather than on forming and supporting a broader coalition. This left us with the problem of securing a base in the Middle East, entry to Afghanistan, US command and control 'sponsorship' (i.e. the US host formation to which Australians could attach) and logistics support necessary to achieve the national will. There were no favours—nothing was offered and nothing was simple.

The Task Force faced some active resistance from other coalition partners who were positioning themselves within their own national agenda, and there were some follow-up discussions between the Australian Prime Minister and US President to finally secure support. The Task Force Commanding Officer, supported by the deployed national commander, Brigadier Ken Gillespie, had to work hard to secure a base in the Middle East. He had to work hard for US command and control sponsorship. This eventually came in the form of a US Marine commander by the name of Brigadier General James Mattis, who would go on to become the US Secretary of Defense under President Trump, and then Gillespie had to work harder to actually get the force into Afghanistan. There was a lot of work to be done before the real work began.

Once the Task Force was deployed to Afghanistan, all ranks of the squadron felt keenly a responsibility to reinforce Australia's military reputation on this world stage. The soldiers understood that the Task Force was representing not only the Australian military but also the Australian nation, including its commitment to the global rules-based order and the

US alliance. At the tactical level, the soldiers knew that actions in this war zone would shape the coalition's judgement of the professionalism of Australian soldiers.

Early on, my boss, the SAS Commanding Officer, made a tactical decision that had strategic impact: the decision to deploy with our own ground transport in the form of the SAS's modified Land Rover Perenties. Australia's was one of the few coalition special forces that brought its own vehicles. This provided autonomy and flexibility, and the ability to conduct a wider range of missions, thereby allowing a modest-sized squadron to make a disproportionately large contribution to the US-led effort. For a period in the midst of winter of 2001–02, Australia was one of the few nations conducting long-duration special reconnaissance patrols, reporting on the presence of al-Qaeda and the broader mood and perceptions of the Afghan people across the east and south of the country. Each individual Australian patrol was tracked at the US Central Command (CENTCOM) Headquarters in the mainland United States, and its reporting was being briefed at the highest levels of the US military and administration. The information provided was highly regarded, and the Australian patrol flags on the map at CENTCOM Headquarters were a powerful demonstration of Australian commitment. However, it was Operation ANACONDA that showcased Australian professionalism and influenced the course of the commitment of Australian special forces for the remainder of 2002.

Operation ANACONDA's objective was to destroy a large al-Qaeda–Taliban force located in the Shahi Kot valley, in Ghazni Province in central eastern Afghanistan. Unlike earlier Afghan-led operations in the Tora Bora region of Nangarhar Province, north of Khost, Operation ANACONDA was to be a coalition-led combat operation that would commit more than 6,000 conventional and special operations forces. During the course of this operation, Australian patrols directed air power on to al-Qaeda targets all day and night for more than a week, killing significant numbers of enemy fighters, destroying enemy equipment and on more than one occasion protecting the lives of coalition soldiers fighting in the valley. The action resulted in the awarding of a Distinguished Service Cross to an SAS sergeant patrol commander and a US Silver Star, the US military's third-highest personal decoration for valour in combat, to a United States Air Force member attached to one of the SAS patrols.

About the time of Operation ANACONDA, the Australian Government was considering that there would only be a single squadron commitment with no rotations. The Task Force performance on Operation ANACONDA persuaded senior US commanders that the Australian force was one worth lobbying for. The Australian Government agreed to remain committed and deployed a second squadron to Afghanistan to take over from the first.

Not surprisingly, the squadron rotations were the subject of deliberate government consideration and decision. No rotation was assured and, in both cases, the decision to continue the deployment was not made until four to six weeks before departure. This process was apparent to the deployed force, with the tempo of operations reducing around the times of Australian Government consideration.

As the deployment progressed into mid-2002, it became clear that most al-Qaeda forces had departed Afghanistan. At this point, the national intent seemed less clear. There was still work to be done to ensure that pockets of al-Qaeda were dealt with, but the focus of the deployed forces shifted a little, which is probably best understood through the missions assigned to each SAS squadron.

## Missions

The first SAS Squadron's mission was clear and without restriction—it was essentially to deny Afghanistan as a firm base for al-Qaeda's global terrorism campaign in order to reinforce Australian national interests. The ruling Taliban regime was of interest and clearly important in terms of Afghanistan as a safe haven for al-Qaeda; however, the focus was very much on hunting al-Qaeda forces. The mission was simple, clear, executable and aligned from the tactical to the national level.

There might have been some surprise at the wide range of the mission at the time of Australia's deployment. The US and UK special forces had made early gains before we departed Australia, and indeed the tactical situation did evolve from September to early December 2001. The Australian Government probably could have reduced the breadth of the Task Force mission but chose not to, which sent a strong message of Australian national commitment.

While throughout 2002 the mission remained focused on al-Qaeda and denying Afghanistan as their base, by the second squadron rotation the Taliban started to feature more prominently in tasking. Following Operation ANACONDA, it was increasingly clear that the bulk of the remaining al-Qaeda forces had departed Afghanistan and moved largely into Pakistan. As a result, the second and third SAS Squadrons' tasking shifted from directly targeting al-Qaeda forces to a more traditional reconnaissance role, focusing on remaining pockets of al-Qaeda forces, their support networks and their movement routes along the various 'rat lines' between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Australian forces were now also tasked with stemming the flow of Taliban figures along the same movement routes. A particular focus became protecting Kabul from attack to facilitate the conduct of the strategically important national Loya Jirga to select a future President and Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

The mission assigned to the first Task Group deployed to Afghanistan provided the freedom to exploit fleeting opportunities. The Task Group commander had the flexibility to move his forces wherever necessary within Afghanistan to achieve the national intent and the tactical direction of his coalition commander, Brigadier General Mattis. As I said earlier, the first assigned mission was simple, clear, executable and aligned from the tactical to the national level. It remains the finest example of mission command I have experienced,<sup>3</sup> and was one of the many useful tactical lessons of this deployment.

## Lessons

From its first rotation, the first squadron documented more than 200 lessons and recommendations. They ranged from a lack of modern anti-tank capability to 5.56mm weapons being outranged, a lack of a mature joint tactical air control capability, the advantage of a varied fleet of helicopters and of course experiences in cold weather warfare. The following strategic, operational and tactical lessons are worthy of note.

---

2 Pashto for 'grand council', a Loya Jirga is a mass national gathering that brings together representatives from the various ethnic, religious and tribal communities in Afghanistan. See [www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-loya-jirga-explainer/25174483.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-loya-jirga-explainer/25174483.html) (retrieved 31 March 2020).

3 Mission command involves the trusted delegation of authority to undertake a mission within the parameters of a commander's guidance.

## **Strategic lessons**

The first lesson concerns the issue of the reasons for intervention in a nation's external affairs versus its internal affairs and the associated national strategic decisions, preparation and level of national commitment in time, resources and casualties.

The 2001 invasion was about intervention in Afghanistan's external affairs; that is, al-Qaeda and the safe haven it had in Afghanistan from which it was planning and carrying out global terrorist operations. While Taliban regime change was a predictable (and potentially US-planned) consequence, it was not the primary aim, certainly not of Australian forces, and might not have happened had the Taliban eventually given up al-Qaeda forces early during the invasion, as the United States had requested. To succeed in this mission, the Task Force needed only a fairly basic understanding of Afghanistan: its strategic relationships and influencers, its history, its people, its first and second level of tribal affiliations and its geographic environment.

Contrast this with intervention in Afghanistan's internal affairs, which might include installing and maintaining a pro-Western government, imposing Western-style values, systems and processes, nation-building, protecting human rights and reversing the oppression of women and minority groups in a complex tribal environment where subtribes and their associated dynamics extend eight, nine, even 10 levels. This involves a far deeper and greater level of planning, cultural understanding and immersion, risk, inter-agency commitment in time and resources, and a deeper assessment of Australia's national interest. I do not believe that any one nation demonstrated an appreciation of this until much later in the occupation and, as a result, I do not believe that any contributing nation, including Australia, prepared well with a strategy for the level of commitment necessary for intervention in Afghanistan's internal affairs.



**Australian personnel on guard in an Australian light armoured vehicle as a US Army Blackhawk helicopter takes off in Baghdad, 2006.**

Source: Courtesy of the Department of Defence.

Second, and a lesson that is topical given current geostrategic circumstances, the Australian military needs to work at understanding the alliance with the United States and not take it for granted. Despite the many activities and interactions with the United States at many levels, the initial problems we had with securing basing, sponsorship and entry to Afghanistan taught us that we were not as 'tight' with the Americans as we thought. Despite shared history over many of the world's major conflicts in the last century, it was apparent at the tactical level that at that time the United States really did not know us, understand us or necessarily trust us.

The fact that this relationship was not automatic was a surprise but clear to those deployed. It did not seem as clear to the Defence organisation in Australia, which appeared critical of the Task Force's early inability to gain the tactical traction necessary to meet the national intent. There seemed to be in Australia an assumption that trust automatically came with Australia's decision to commit ground forces, which was not the experience of those deployed. The military outcomes of Australia's alliance with the United States require constant work at many levels and ongoing and realistic assessment.

## **Operational lessons**

Beyond the strategic-level lessons observed during this phase, three lessons stand out at the operational level. First, the Australian military overseas exchange program reaps dividends and must be continued. In 1998, I spent a year posted to the United States serving with different units of the US special operations fraternity. Fast forward to Afghanistan in 2001. Following our occupation of Kandahar airfield, we had identified some areas of interest in the Helmand region but were being denied the safe passage through Kandahar city necessary to travel to the Helmand area. The US Special Forces unit that, with Hamid Karzai and his Northern Alliance soldiers, had secured Kandahar city had either not received our formal requests or ignored them. My commanding officer and I travelled into Kandahar city to try to negotiate passage with the US Special Forces commander. Upon arriving at the makeshift US Special Forces Headquarters, I met a senior US warrant officer with whom I had worked closely while on exchange in the United States and who was now a senior member of this US Special Forces group. After recounting old times, he organised an immediate meeting with the US Special Forces commanding

officer who, as it happens, I had met at a social function while on the same US exchange. The US commander promptly offered us passage through Kandahar city whenever we required it.

Admiral Bill McRaven, a former commander of US Special Operations Command, was fond of what he termed the Special Operations Force truth that 'you can't surge trust'. Notwithstanding my earlier comments regarding our broader military relationship and alliance with the United States, the one-on-one trust that is built through the exchange program has paid off at the tactical level time and again. It is important to note that the Australian Special Operations Commander in 2001, Major General Duncan Lewis, had attended the US Army War College. Additionally, one of the Australian deployed commanding officers in 2002 had attended the US Marine Corps Command and Staff College.

The second lesson concerns Australian national command. It would not be an Afghanistan discussion without mentioning command and control and, most particularly, what the term 'national command' actually means and how Australia applies it. Australia established a national commander and headquarters from 2001; the first national command headquarters was lean and comprised a commander, a handful of staff officers, some logistics personnel and a signals detachment.

Before deploying the first squadron, the then Chief of Defence Force, Admiral Chris Barrie, made it clear to my commanding officer that the 'national command' function had two purposes: first, a backstop and support should he face tasking that was outside the national interest, and second for Australia to exert influence at senior levels in the coalition. The national command function was not designed to command or control the commanding officer; rather its mandate was to allow him the freedom to make rapid decisions within Australia's strategic intent and, in so doing, exploit fleeting opportunities without reference to higher mission command.

Throughout 2002, and probably specifically after Operation ANACONDA, there was anxiety at senior levels within Defence that the Special Operations Task Force would draw itself further into whatever fight presented, regardless of national intent, and wedge the Australian Government into remaining committed to Afghanistan. This suspicion led to pressure on the national commander and his staff to be more involved in managing priorities and directing the Task Force and its actions.

Over the years, Australia's national command headquarters grew and on occasions seemed to assume a greater level of almost operational command of Australian task groups, parallel to and sometimes in competition with the coalition operational command and control arrangements. The Australian national command headquarters often provided outstanding support for deployed task groups; however, its status and responsibilities were inconsistent and seemed to depend on the intent of the appointed national commander rather than on the need or indeed direction from Canberra. The national command function started with a clear role and mandate that grew hazier. Certainly, each time I deployed I felt the need to test what it thought it was doing against what I had been briefed before departing Australia.<sup>4</sup>

The point is that the ADF needs to better define and implement the mandate, tasks and responsibilities of a national commander. Further, it needs to be clear on its national command and operational command and control models to ensure the most efficient employment of finite staff resources. One alternative model used by other nations was to add national command responsibilities as a function of its most senior deployed headquarters or staff, which in our case would have rested with the Task Force commander.

The third lesson concerns Army and ADF policy on a war footing. Despite the then ongoing operations in Timor Leste, Australia had not been engaged in many of the policy challenges that we faced since the Vietnam War. Rules of engagement for war, a lack of detention policy and a lack of detainee interrogation policy were a few of the operational issues that I had to work through. However, the most troubling issue was that of managing wounded soldiers back in Australia with what seemed primarily peacetime personnel policies. Quite different from today's practice, back in 2002 wounded soldiers had to comply with medical and fitness policies that did not seem to appreciate the impact of their war service.

In one case a soldier had lost a portion of his foot and significant leg function to an anti-personnel mine but was penalised for not being able to complete portions of the Army basic fitness assessment. While he ultimately and probably correctly discharged on medical grounds, upon return from that first tour it felt as if ADF policies were too slow to adapt

---

4 I served under its national command three times in eight years.

to the commitment of its people to war. Defence needs to ensure that its policies remain combat focused and do not lazily drift into those policy settings best for managing an ADF at peace.

## **Tactical lessons**

Beyond the operational level, there are three tactical lessons that stand out from that first year of service in Afghanistan.

First, this was the first real dawning of the necessity of a new suite of enablers to which we were exposed, such as long endurance, armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles. There was a growing awareness that Australian special forces needed to lift its modernisation game but without becoming over-reliant on technology. We had observed this over-reliance in the lead-up to Operation ANACONDA. Our Special Forces Task Force had independently discovered the significant al-Qaeda presence within the Shahi Kot valley a few months before Operation ANACONDA and was reporting from manned observation posts. The US command, however, ordered the Australian patrols to leave the area for fear of compromise, and instead manned and unmanned reconnaissance flights were flown to establish enemy dispositions. These flights failed to identify all of the enemy strong points that did much of the damage to coalition forces during the first hours and days of Operation ANACONDA. It was our view that the coalition was too reliant on technology for its reconnaissance and that reporting from manned SAS observation posts, combined with the overhead imagery, would have provided planners with a more complete picture of enemy dispositions. We believed that Australia needed to embrace new technology and ways of operating but that the soldier remained the critical piece. The answer was better enabled soldiers, not soldiers enabling technology.

Second, our tactical self-sufficiency was a key factor in our early success and overall reputation. While other coalition Special Operations Forces elements were competing for limited US vehicles and helicopters, the squadron's fleet of Long Range Patrol Vehicles, communications suite and fairly rough but workable logistics chain provided an agility that was attractive to the Americans, who needed to service the demands of a growing number of less robust coalition partners. The Australian force was light, agile, self-sufficient and therefore attractive to our US allies.

Third, the deployment validated the SAS maintaining a broad suite of equipment and capabilities. There had been much discussion in the 1990s about the SAS's focus, and at one stage the organisation debated disbanding the vehicle-mounted capability and disposing of the fleet of Long Range Patrol Vehicles. The first rotation validated the breadth of unit capabilities. The SAS squadron's ability to conduct a wide array of missions, from pinpoint direct-action attacks to reconnaissance across thousands of kilometres; the diverse skill sets, ability to plan and execute missions rapidly and such tactical skills as sniping and cold weather warfare were but some examples. The Special Forces Task Force delivered a high level of versatility, agility and adaptability that was attractive to the coalition command.

## **Exit strategy – mission accomplished or Iraq looming?**

Beyond these strategic, operational and tactical lessons, I cannot comment on whether there was a formal exit strategy as its existence was never clear to me at the tactical level. Only those in the senior political and military machine at the time would be able to verify the existence of a formal exit strategy and whether such a strategy was used to guide key decisions throughout 2002. What I do know is that while the national intent and mission was clear, the strategy for exit was less so.

Some thought that there might be only one deployment of troops and that withdrawal would follow. Indeed, when the first commanding officer was rotated, it was widely communicated that his replacement was there to pack up and return the Task Force to Australia at the conclusion of Operation ANACONDA.

Around each rotation decision there were high-level teleconferences between Australia and the United States during which the United States pressured Australia to remain. Following Operation ANACONDA, Australia decided that it was so engaged in the fight and relied upon by the coalition that its forces should remain. So, in my view, the Australian Government decided to continue to commit ground forces not just for the sake of the US alliance but also because militarily Australia was delivering tactical effects upon which the coalition relied.

At the tactical level, the fairly blunt and unsophisticated view was that a one-year commitment would suitably demonstrate national will. A year also suited the SAS as it could be broken up into three four-month rotations, which would effectively manage the high intensity of the deployment and expose most soldiers to this combat environment. I doubt that anyone assessed at that point that the Australian special forces community would have more than enough exposure over the next 15 years.

Iraq was looming towards the end of 2002, and many at the tactical level felt that the evident geographic shift of US assets and the shift of US staff focus started to distract from the job in Afghanistan. The mission that underpinned the invasion of Afghanistan was, in my view, achieved by the end of 2002, so the force withdrawal in December of that year was prudent from an Australian national perspective. While I say this, one wonders what would have happened had it not been for the planning for the invasion of Iraq. I suspect that it was potential future operations that ultimately determined the timing of the withdrawal of Australian special forces from Afghanistan.

In terms of the decision to commence another operation in Iraq, my personal view in 2002–03 was that quite aside from the justification for invading Iraq, opening a second front in the Middle East at that time seemed militarily unwise. I viewed such a rapid pivot to Iraq as a military and strategic mistake, simply because it would stretch resources too thin, and that if the job in Afghanistan was to shift from countering terrorism to nation-building, then it was nowhere near done to the extent necessary for assets and staff to be reassigned to another invasion and major conflict.

Even in April 2002, my view was that the Taliban would return and behave in much the same way as the mujahideen of the 1980s. I did not share the view that even a massive military coalition had the resources to win, then hold Afghanistan and concurrently win in Iraq. My expectation was that in 2003, significant counter-attacks would be launched from countries bordering Afghanistan. In the end I was wrong, and the coalition faced only a limited insurgency in 2003. The Taliban could have made it more difficult in that first year of operations in Iraq; however, that was to come.

## Conclusion

This first year and, indeed, the first rotation were wild times when boundaries were set only by where the enemy were. I had the view that rather than making history, our squadron was dropped in the middle of it. One day while on patrol I met a former Afghan mujahideen fighter from the Soviet era who handed me a photo of Ronald Reagan. On the back was written the name 'Mike' and a phone number. The Afghan told me that he had been 'working with Mike some time ago' but that his radio batteries had gone dead and he needed new batteries so they could get back in contact. 'Mike' was clearly of the US Central Intelligence Agency and had likely dumped this Afghan contact back in the 1980s when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. I suspect that 'Mike's' CIA colleagues were probably as keen to speak to the Afghan contact now as he was to take their money. It struck me then that the game was back on and that, in an Afghan sense of time, the break between the Soviets and our invading force was merely a half time.

The missions and freedoms assigned to us in that 2001–02 period were an example of what right looks like, and Australia managed it well. Our task of removing a terrorist force and the conditions that allowed it to grow was clear, was aligned from the national through to tactical levels, and represented the essence of mission command. Its ultimate test was that it allowed deployed forces the necessary freedoms to best achieve Australia's national objectives, which the Task Force did. Although we did not find Bin Laden, the invasion was a success, the strategy and mission were clear and our exit roughly aligned with achieving that mission; denying al-Qaeda safe haven in Afghanistan.

This text is taken from *Niche Wars: Australia in Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001–2014*, edited by John Blaxland, Marcus Fielding and Thea Gellerfy, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/NW.2020.04](https://doi.org/10.22459/NW.2020.04)