

20

Final reflections

John Blaxland

Niche Wars sets out to help provide some meaning to an otherwise hard to explain, let alone understand, series of choices made by successive Australian governments from 2001 to 2014. A string of decisions was made that saw Australian forces deploy carefully calibrated contributions to various places across the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also in neighbouring countries. The book's authors have made contributions spanning Australia's commitment of troops to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in the United States through the decision to support the US invasion of Iraq and then dealing with the consequences of that decision both in Iraq and back in Afghanistan.

Building on contributions made at the 'War in the Sandpit' conference on Australia's involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the book outlines a wide range of observations and potential lessons for Australia as it considers the utility of force and the pitfalls of short-term thinking in the pursuit of its national interests.

The book helps us to understand the choices made as well as the incomplete and, at times, incorrect information at hand that led to certain fateful decisions. While not addressing the Brereton Report of November 2020¹ in any detail as it was released on the eve of publication, this book helps to explain some of the context of the gravely flawed decisions that

1 Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force, *Afghanistan Inquiry Report* ('the Brereton Report'), afghanistandinquiry.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/IGADF-Afghanistan-Inquiry-Public-Release-Version.pdf (retrieved 24 November 2020).

led to the atrocities reported upon by Brereton—ones that have brought shame on the ADF, the Australian Army and the special forces. It also is intended to help consider the implications arising from the recent past for contingencies that might arise in future. The benefit lies in the broad range of views, including those of politicians, senior commanders, government advisers, international counterparts, diplomatic and aid agency representatives, operational-level decision-makers, contingent commanders, and men and women of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Niche Wars serves an important purpose: one that reflects on the mission of the Strategic & Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at The Australian National University, to understand Australian military operations, Australian Defence policy and security affairs of the Asia Pacific, or Indo-Pacific, writ large. This is all within the context of the field of strategic studies that was defined, in Australia's case, by SDSC's founder, Professor Tom Millar and his successors as head of SDSC, Robert O'Neill, Desmond Ball, Paul Dibb, Hugh White, Brendan Taylor, myself and now Brendan Sargeant.

SDSC teaches three degree programs: a Bachelor of International Security Studies and a Master of Strategic Studies at the Acton campus, and the Military and Defence Studies Program, as part of the master's degree taught by SDSC, at the Australian Command and Staff College in the Canberra suburb of Weston. As noted in the introduction, a range of autobiographical and biographical accounts of certain aspects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have already been written. Yet there remained a need for a book that would be useful for courses taught on these degree programs about Australia's experience—one written from the point of view of the practitioners, the crafters and implementers of Australian defence policy.

The inspiration for this book came from a discussion between myself and Colonel Marcus Fielding—the President of Military History and Heritage Victoria (MHHV)—himself the author of *Red Zone Baghdad*, a book written as a reflection on his experiences on deployment to Iraq in 2008 and 2009. As Fielding observed in the foreword to this book, we became fast friends working together in the lead-up to and conduct of the deployment of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) sent in response to the crisis in East Timor following the vote over autonomy that led to East Timor's independence. Our first collaborative work after I joined academia was the 2014 conference held to mark the fifteenth

anniversary of the intervention in East Timor. That resulted in *East Timor Intervention: A Retrospective on INTERFET*, published by Melbourne University Press in 2015.

I note that the collaboration between MHHV and SDSC goes back to the conference arranged by MHHV and SDSC that led to *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War*, edited by Peter Dean and published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. Building on this experience, the ‘War in the Sandpit’ conference drew inspiration from this model and has delivered the array of speakers and authors now assembled in this book.

The key questions addressed in the chapters of this book are worth revisiting at this juncture: what happened? How well did Australians understand the nature of the fight in which they were becoming involved? Were there other viable approaches to the options taken along the way? Did Australia’s contribution add value to the coalitions? And what lessons can be learned for the future? The aim of the conference and this book has been to distil some key observations and lessons for the Australian Defence Force and Australia more widely, as it ponders its future circumstances. So how well did we do in answering these questions?

In terms of what happened, this book did not set out to offer a comprehensive review of every force contribution over the duration. That is for the official historians to grapple with. Instead, selected contributions are made by those who were directly involved in decision-making or in the conduct of operations. Most of the contributors spoke directly at the conference, although we invited some to contribute afterwards. Part 1, on the selection on policy and strategy, covered the contributions from Robert Hill, Ric Smith and Chris Barrie. Part 2, concerning the experience on operations in and around Iraq and Afghanistan, concerned the contributions from Dan McDaniel, Chris Westwood, Anthony Rawlins, Peter Jones and Jim Molan. Part 3, on joint forces, enablers and partners, is covered by the chapters from Michael Crane, Mick Lehmann, Elizabeth Boulton, Alan Ryan, Col Speedie and Steve Mullins, David Savage and Karen Middleton. The fourth and final part covers the lessons and legacies, with chapters from William Maley, Dan Marston, Peter Leahy, Craig Stockings and John Blaxland. In fact, virtually every chapter has lessons identified.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile recapping the key lessons identified in the preceding chapters. The main points identified for parts 1 to 3 of the book are as outlined in the introduction, but the key lessons from Part 4 are worth covering in additional detail here.

Maley listed seven lessons for military deployments. First, military deployments always need to be linked to a political strategy. Second, it is not possible to stabilise a disrupted state such as Afghanistan on a province-by-province basis. Third, aid can act as a fuel for conflict rather than function as a flame retardant. Fourth, stability can prove remarkably tenuous. Fifth, in the long run, reliance on 'strongmen' tends to be at the expense of sustainable institutional development. Sixth, time is the ultimate security commodity, and it is often in short supply in undertakings of this kind. Seventh, treating assistance as a means to some other end runs the risk of devaluing the people affected.

Looking at the US and British experience in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2001 to 2004, Dan Marston observed the following lessons were identified, if not learned. First, there was a lack of clear and realistic strategic debates for use of force by both countries. Second, there were breakdowns in civilian–military relations in both countries. Third, there were breakdowns in trust between the two key allies, especially in Iraq. Fourth, there was a tactical-level reform on the battlefield by both the United States and United Kingdom; however, winning tactically on the battlefield does not equate to strategic victory. Fifth, there were problems created by ignoring the 'mosaic of the battlefield' and attempting to apply simplistic narratives and solutions to complex scenarios.

Peter Leahy draws a list of nine lessons and legacies from Australia's experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. First, the ADF should be ready for the most likely conflict. Second, have a strategy. Third, you cannot go to war quickly without introducing risk. Fourth, you cannot make a flexible and versatile force out of nothing. Fifth, equipping the force is difficult, expensive and time-consuming. Sixth, doctrine is important. Seventh, when designing the force, a clear mission is essential. Eighth, 'whole of government' should mean whole of government; and ninth, a combined arms approach is essential. In compiling his nine points, Leahy acknowledges the significance of the work of Dr Albert Palazzo,

who wrote the redacted report on the Australian Army's experience in the Iraq War, made public through the revelations of Fairfax journalist David Wroe.²

He also suggests that there are no clear legacies from these conflicts, but there are three candidates. First, he calls for a parliamentary convention to debate and approve the commitment of ADF elements to conflict. Second, he argues that such commitments should not be based solely or even primarily on protecting the Australian–US alliance but on clearly articulated Australian national interests. Third, he calls for an obligation to look after the wounded and a dedication to making them the best reintegrated generation of soldiers in the nation's history. To Leahy, and many others, the obligation to learn from the effort and sacrifice of those soldiers involved in Afghanistan and Iraq is a sacred one that must be honoured.

In terms of how well understood was the nature of the fight in which we were becoming involved, this book indicates that Australia had a lot to learn. At each critical juncture, decisions were made that, even without the benefit of hindsight, could have been made slightly if not significantly differently. No one knows the future, and the decisions made at any point in time cannot easily be judged fairly looking back. But some observations can be made about the importance of thinking through the longer-term ramifications of decisions, thinking through the strategy; that is, the ways, the means and, importantly, the ends of a plan; to make sure it is as carefully considered as any decision can be, informed by the past and the present.

One of the striking features of the experience of Australia's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as outlined in these pages, is how each of the decision points along the way seems to have been reached and acted on, mindful of one underlying long-term concern—namely, maintenance and support of the US alliance. Yet this was undertaken principally with short-term priorities and concerns in mind. It was these short-term factors that drove the tangible contributions the government decided to offer at each juncture.

2 Palazzo, *The Australian Army and the War in Iraq 2002–2010*.

The rotation of naval forces in the Gulf, for instance, was contingent on US priorities and the contribution calibrated to what Australia could sustain without a significant increase in the size of the fleet. Essentially, Australia maintained a peacetime naval force structure, despite the rhetoric of an existential global so-called War on Terror. Similarly, the RAAF tailored contributions to fit in with routine training and operational priorities. Over time, of course, the cumulative effects of such decisions meant that Australia's contributions were hard to explain in other than quite woolly terms.

Moving to land forces, the Australian Government envisaged the contribution of the special forces in October 2001 as a one-off and short-term contribution. Subsequent land force contributions to the war in Iraq also were carefully contained to exclude post-conflict, or so-called Phase 4, operations to aid in the reconstruction of post-invasion Iraq. Then again, the return of special and conventional land forces to Afghanistan was with relatively short-term priorities in mind. As one quite senior officer cynically confided in 2006 when Australia was redeploying land forces to Afghanistan, the mission was accomplished: Australia had managed to get the Dutch into Uruzgan Province and Australia into NATO. This betrayed a remarkably superficial understanding of what it means to commit Australian young men and women into probable combat. It also reflects the ongoing lack of planning beyond the horizon, with the longer term ramifications in mind.

Little did planners seem to realise that a rotation of land forces, centred on an engineer regiment, the First Reconstruction Task Force (RTF1), would make ensuing demands on Australian forces that successive Australian governments simply were not prepared to meet. Indeed, the deployment of RTF1 came at a time when a crisis in East Timor stretched the ADF, and particularly its land forces, to the edge. As I pointed out in *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard*, the unprecedented operational tempo saw five of the six Regular Army commanding officers of the infantry battalions in the Royal Australian Regiment deployed on operations concurrently.³ This was not sustainable without either capping Australia's involvement to carefully calibrated niche contributions or significantly expanding the force.

3 Blaxland, *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard*, p. 317.

A similar point again can be made about Australia's contribution to Iraq from 2005 onwards. As the authors of several chapters have pointed out, Australia's contribution to the Al Muthanna Task Group (AMTG) and the subsequent Overwatch Battle Group (West) (OBG(W)) was particularly constrained, to the point where British and US allies questioned the reliability, if not fidelity, of their Australian partners. Arguably, it might have been better to stay away than to make such a token force contribution in southern Iraq.

This pointed to the enduring peacetime mindset that saw no great urgency in expanding the land force in anything remotely akin to the expansion of forces during the Second World War (with its equivalent in terms of land forces of 14 divisions), let alone the period of Confrontation and the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War parallel is particularly instructive, for it is here that the Australian Army, with its nine infantry battalions and associated arms and services that made up the brigade-sized 1st Australian Task Force, managed to maintain a rotation of forces through Phuoc Tuy Province in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1972. Eager to avoid the heightened domestic political controversy associated with the expanded force enabled by conscription in the 1960s, the Australian Government did not seriously consider a significant force expansion that might have enabled a more robust and holistic force contribution. That was understandable on one level, although arguably an expansion of the force could have been achieved without conscription simply by better and more targeted advertising and improved conditions of service. Instead, repeated rotations placed an unreasonable strain, particularly on the special forces, to the point where their practices led to controversy and even disrepute.

The Vietnam parallel is also instructive in terms of thinking through what matters most to Australia. Beyond seeking to be seen as supportive of the US alliance, Australia's Defence White Paper of 2016 lists three strategic priorities: a secure and resilient Australia, with secure northern approaches and proximate sea lines of communication; a secure nearer region, encompassing maritime South-East Asia and South Pacific; and a stable Indo-Pacific region and a rules-based global order.⁴ Yet, ironically, Australia's carefully calibrated and constrained force contribution to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq reveals a certain dissonance here. The

4 Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Canberra, p. 33.

contrast with Australia's contribution to the East Timor intervention in 1999 is noteworthy. For that operation, Australia was prepared to be the lead nation, accept hundreds of casualties, if needs be, and assume the leadership role to ensure that the 22-nation coalition was successful in its mission. By 2020, Australian defence policy belatedly placed greater emphasis on security priorities closer to home in the Indo-Pacific region.⁵

In contrast, the approach taken in Afghanistan and Iraq stands in marked contrast. Despite having a significant stake in Uruzgan, Australia was deeply reluctant to offer to lead the provincial efforts on behalf of the coalition. Similarly, Australia was reluctant to stay for Phase 4, stabilisation operations, after the initial apparent victory in Iraq in 2003, or to expand the remit of its forces in southern Iraq when it did reluctantly redeploy there after repeated appeals from US and British allies from 2005 onwards.

In addition, there was little consideration of how to make a more profound and long-lasting contribution in a province like Uruzgan. This was in part because there was little if any appetite for taking responsibility for the province and driving the agenda there, with the long term in mind. In part this was driven by the lack of a coherent and sustained strategy for effective governance that dealt with the profound levels of corruption in Afghanistan. Absent this kind of strategic vision from the United States and other coalition partners, let alone signs of competent and effective governance emanating from the capital Kabul, there was little appetite for Australia to allow itself to be overexposed by its military contributions there. It bears repeating the point made by one senior officer commenting in mid-2006, the 'mission's accomplished' already. Australia had managed to 'get the Dutch into Uruzgan and us into NATO'.⁶ But this cynical calculus simply was not enough to justify the blood and treasure spent in the dust of Uruzgan. Critics might say that this is unfair as many good people tried very hard, over successive rotations, to make a real difference in Uruzgan. That is true. The point, though, is not to lay blame at the feet of the practitioners who did their best in difficult circumstances. Instead, it is to question the lack of thought-through strategy for what the ADF would do there and what effect it would have on those who served there, let alone what long-term effects their actions would generate in country. For this, the senior-most military leadership and their political masters

5 Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, Canberra, 2020.

6 Personal recollection of author.

must share responsibility: the military for not offering more frank, fearless and far-sighted advice, and politicians for not thinking beyond the prism of their own domestic political cycles.

As Craig Stockings has pointed out, the Official History of Australia's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan is in train, but we might have to wait a while longer before those volumes are published. This work does not seek to cover this gap, but it does include an assembly of some important voices; some with unique vantage points as actual eyewitnesses, and others who have deep scholarly expertise and capacity to make judgements. This volume is not a formal history, so no attempt has been made to present the material chronologically. What this means is that the reader has been able to take a more eclectic route to understanding Australia's niche wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After all, such thematic treatments are just as valid, and can be just as educative as formal histories.

There is merit for Defence to have external agencies undertake conferences of this type as part of the organisational learning process or as lead-in activity to the production of official histories. Indeed, many of the Official History authors attended the conference and expressed an appreciation of the information presented and the discussions that followed.

For Australia, the contributions made to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were deliberately constrained ones. Lessons were learned, experience was gained, capabilities were enhanced and alliance ties were burnished, but the experience was deliberately confined to the theatre of operations. Deployed forces put their heart and soul into their work. Yet there was a genuine reluctance in Canberra to embrace wholeheartedly the demands of the operational areas where Australian troops deployed. As a result, the mission often seemed opaque, the command authority constrained and the story allowed to be told through the media tightly managed. This too-clever-by-half strategy set the scene for some of the most shameful conduct of Australia's military history whereby unlawful killings came to be accepted in certain quarters as part of the norm. Looking back, in the hearts of veterans, there is a palpable sense of disappointment, even shame. Perhaps, as it considers future contingencies, where more than niche contributions might be required, Australia can learn from this experience—that it should commit troops when it has formulated clear-eyed strategic goals that we all can live with.

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