

# Serving in Afghanistan

By David McLure

It is difficult to say anything interesting about the war in Afghanistan without the risk of giving offence or inviting ridicule. Part of the reason for this is that almost everyone who served there will have had uniquely different experiences and perspectives. I have not heard many tentative views about Afghanistan, especially from commentators who did not go there. I mention these things only to emphasise that I am not attempting to speak for any of the 39,000+ Australian soldiers who served in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, other than myself.

I deployed to Afghanistan as part of the Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) in 2008. By that time, NATO forces were consolidating their control of the southern provinces while the country thawed from a long and bitterly cold winter. In Uruzgan, where the Australian Defence Force mainly operated, Army engineers sought to make the Taliban irrelevant by building infrastructure and providing trade training to locals. Meanwhile, the SOTG aggressively patrolled the province to destroy and disrupt the insurgency. For a while that strategy looked to be working.

Time went on and the mission drifted. Perhaps the United States, Australia and their partners fell for the sunk cost fallacy. A kinder view is that successive governments here and abroad remained committed to finishing what they started. But herein lies a paradox. There is every reason to think that if NATO had left Afghanistan in, say, 2009, the Taliban would have regained control just as quickly as it did in 2021. So was it worth hanging on for another 12 years? If the ending was inevitable, what was the point of going there in the first place? Is anything worth the countless lives lost in the conflict, including the lives of 41 young Australians?

It is too much to expect of anyone who served in Afghanistan to concede that the whole endeavour was futile. The risks taken, the blood spilt and the friends lost leave no room for that thought. Regardless, I do not believe it was futile. Only a true nihilist would view the September 11 attacks and



David McLure, Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan, May 2008

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the Bali bombings as no more than batches of meaningless deaths. To have done nothing would have lowered the value of human life just as much as the attacks did themselves.

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give Afghanistan an opportunity to develop its own peace and security. Our success cannot be measured in how the Afghan people chose to use it. **BN**

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