Australia's Lessons

Rhys Crawley

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, International and Intercultural Communication Commons, Military and Veterans Studies Commons, Military History Commons, Military, War, and Peace Commons, National Security Law Commons, Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, Policy Design, Analysis, and Evaluation Commons, Political History Commons, Public Administration Commons, Public Affairs Commons, Public History Commons, Public Policy Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.
ABSTRACT: This article analyzes Australia’s contribution to the Afghanistan War from 2001 to 2014. It recommends policymakers and practitioners consider applying a whole-of-government approach, embedding personnel in coalition headquarters, and limiting reliance on Special Forces soldiers in future interventions.

A survey of Australia’s broader contribution to the Afghanistan War highlights the complex considerations of a coalition partner in a “war of choice” fought in an area geographically distant from its immediate region of strategic interest. By examining the many facets of Operation Slipper, Australia’s military engagement in Afghanistan, three key lessons emerge that will help policymakers and practitioners avoid past mistakes and build on programs that serve Australia’s national interests.

When facing similar conflict scenarios, Australia should consider the following: the need to look beyond the provision of security and consider a whole-of-government (interagency) and development approach from the outset; the reputational and experiential benefits accrued by selectively embedding Australian personnel in coalition headquarters; and the inherent hazards that accompany an overreliance on Special Forces.

Australia’s War in Afghanistan: An Overview

The Australian public knows little of Australia’s contribution to the war in Afghanistan. Few would be aware that between 2001 and 2014, more than 25,000 Australians served in, or in support of, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which made the nation the ninth largest supporter of the effort.\(^1\) Moreover, Australia was the largest non-NATO contributor to ISAF.\(^2\) The war cost Australia AUD$8.3 billion.\(^3\) Tragically, 41 Australians were killed, and through January 2013, there had been

---


249 physically wounded.\(^4\) The full extent of psychological injuries is unknown. But the numbers are clearly higher still, and suicide among discharged veterans is a growing problem.\(^5\)

The decades following the Vietnam War are known within Australian defense circles as “the long years of peace.”\(^6\) In the absence of any major threat to Australia’s national security interests, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) kept busy with exercises and niche contributions to international peacekeeping missions.\(^7\) But in reality, exercises only provided so much training, and peacekeeping contributions involved only small numbers of ADF personnel.

By the early 1990s, as one commentator has written, an entire generation of “officers and soldiers had not seen any form of operational service.”\(^8\) The East Timor crisis of 1999—the largest deployment of ADF personnel since Vietnam—changed that. Since then, the ADF has been “involved in almost continuous military operations.”\(^9\) Afghanistan was but one of many.\(^10\)

Operation Slipper, the name given to the ADF’s contribution to operations in Afghanistan, is perhaps best understood if separated into four periods (see figure 1). The first, 2001–2, covered the initial response following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The second, 2005–6, saw Australia’s return to the war, this time with Special Forces in Uruzgan province. In the third, 2006–10, Australia was part of the Dutch-led Task Force Uruzgan, and in the fourth, 2010–14, Australia was part of the American-led, and later took leadership of, Combined Team Uruzgan.

From 2001 to 2006, Australia contributed forces as part of OEF. But the majority of Australia’s Afghanistan experience from 2006 to 2014 was under ISAF’s banner and centered on Uruzgan. Australia’s main contributions were by way of ground forces. But as figure 1 shows, numerous other elements, notably naval assets; rotary and fixed-wing aircraft; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; logistics; and a bevy of Australian officers embedded in coalition headquarters worked in support of Australian and coalition forces. These contributions were spread throughout Afghanistan and the greater Middle East.

---

\(^6\) Horner, “Emerging Strategic Environment,” 34.
\(^8\) Tom Frame, “Lessons and Learning,” in Frame and Palazzo, On Ops, 3.
Figure 1. Operation Slipper

11 Dr. Steven Bullard, Australian War Memorial
Australia’s 25th prime minister, John Howard, was in Washington, DC, on 9/11, having met President George W. Bush for the first time the day before.\textsuperscript{12} The impact of the terrorist attacks on Howard was profound. Almost immediately, from a bunker in the basement of the Australian embassy on Massachusetts Avenue, he announced Australia “will stand by [the United States], we will help them, and we will support actions they take to properly retaliate in relation to these acts of bastardry against their citizens and against what they stand for.”\textsuperscript{13}

Howard knew that in all likelihood Australia would be going to war in support of her great and powerful friend. His government soon invoked the mutual defense clauses of the ANZUS Treaty (1951) between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States as a practical show of its “steadfast commitment to work with the United States in combating international terrorism.”\textsuperscript{14} Australia’s strategic objectives in contributing to the war on terror were twofold—help defeat al-Qaeda and make a down payment on the US-Australia alliance.\textsuperscript{15}

Before long, Australia had committed military personnel to support the war in Afghanistan. These came from each of the ADF’s three services—the Royal Australian Navy, Australian Army, and the Royal Australian Air Force. But the main role, and certainly the one that provided the most visible and significant contribution, was Australia’s Special Forces Task Force.\textsuperscript{16} Between October 2001 and December 2002, three rotations of predominantly Special Air Service Regiment troops—each numbering some 200 personnel—worked alongside their US counterparts in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

The task force was involved in some firefights, notably Operation Anaconda. The main strength of the task force to OEF, however, was its ability to undertake self-sustaining, long-range reconnaissance patrols, some lasting for weeks, while liaising with and observing local Afghans. The intelligence they gathered informed coalition plans and guided coalition air support onto targets.\textsuperscript{17} The government never intended for a long-term Special Forces commitment and brought the troops home in late 2002. Until 2005, Australia maintained a small footprint in Afghanistan—usually one, sometimes two, officers.\textsuperscript{18} Significantly, and no less controversially, during this period Australia joined the United States, Britain, and Poland in the invasion of Iraq.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{13} Howard, \textit{Lazarus Rising}, 382.
\textsuperscript{16} Horner, “Emerging Strategic Environment,” 43.
\textsuperscript{17} Middleton, \textit{Unwinnable}, 58–66.
\textsuperscript{18} Nicole Brangwin and Ann Rann, \textit{Australia’s Military Involvement in Afghanistan since 2001: A Chronology} (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 2010).
\textsuperscript{19} Albert Palazzo, \textit{The Australian Army and the War in Iraq, 2002–2010} (Canberra: Directorate of Army Research and Analysis).
After a break, the ADF returned to Afghanistan in late August 2005. As before, the Howard government chose to send Special Forces in the form of a Special Forces Task Group (SFTG) consisting of elements from the Special Air Service Regiment and commandos from the 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (Commando). Working within a US Special Forces construct, their operations focused on Uruzgan and Daykundi provinces in central southern Afghanistan.

The strategic rationale for Australia’s involvement was similar to that offered in 2001—Howard favored an in-and-out approach, that is, the SFTG would return to Australia after 12 months. Throughout those 12 months, three rotations of approximately 200 personnel were engaged in a myriad of tasks—long-range, vehicle-mounted reconnaissance; security patrols; direct action assaults; clearance operations; and civic action programs. It was a busy time operationally and intellectually as the SFTG attempted to both understand and close with the enemy—known at the time as the “anti-coalition militia.”

On schedule, although not without debate about whether it was the right move, the SFTG returned home in September 2006. That 12 months represented the highest intensity of combat and prolonged battlefield stress faced by the ADF since Vietnam. In the eyes of senior ADF leaders, it set the conditions for Task Force Uruzgan to begin its work in Uruzgan province as part of the ISAF Stage 3 expansion into Regional Command South.

In addition to the SFTG, in early 2006, Australia also committed two of the army’s CH-47D Chinook helicopters to the coalition pool in Kandahar. Initially these were largely confined to logistic support. But as time progressed, the helicopters were configured and approved for combat missions. Significantly, both Chinooks were involved in a joint Canadian-Australian direct action assault in July 2006, which saw the Chinooks insert and extract the Canadians under extremely heavy fire. Australia maintained its Chinook deployments on and off for the remainder of the war.

When the Australian government announced its intention to deploy the SFTG, it also told the public it was looking at the possibilities of contributing to an ISAF-led provincial reconstruction team. After some delay, it settled on partnering with the Dutch as part of the Dutch-led

---

22 Howard, “Press Conference.”
25 Houston, “SOCAUST Media Briefing.”
26 Bernd Horn, No Ordinary Men: Special Operations Forces Missions in Afghanistan (Toronto: Dundurn, 2016), chap. 5.
27 Brangwin and Rann, Australia’s Military Involvement.
28 Howard, “Press Conference.”
task force in Uruzgan. As noted earlier, this saw a shift in Australia’s commitment from OEF to ISAF.

The deployment of a 400-strong reconstruction task force (RTF) also marked a shift in Howard’s preferred strategic concept of deploying Special Forces for a short, defined mission and then withdrawing them before they got involved in peacekeeping, stabilization, and nation building.29 Howard’s actions revealed he realized Afghanistan would not be a quick fight.30 Indeed, the RTF was the first of what would amount to 13 conventional Australian task forces to Uruzgan.31

Between August 2006 and October 2008, Australia sent four RTF rotations to Uruzgan.32 The RTFs were engineer heavy, with a significant force-protection element, and were increasingly employing combined arms theory and practice. Over the course of more than two years, the RTF, in the words of its first commanding officer, “worked to rebuild the physical infrastructure of Uruzgan province, to build an indigenous capacity to undertake engineering activities there.”33 The latter was achieved through a trade training school which focused on providing carpentry skills to Afghan youth.34

On top of its own work, the RTF was ultimately in Uruzgan “to support the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team.”35 It was, in essence, an effort to win “hearts and minds” and thus turn people away from the insurgency.36 From the start, the RTF concept of operations was to take a “top down, bottom up” approach by rebuilding government infrastructure as well as doing small-scale missions requested by villages.37 The projects, which included the construction of schools, bridges, health facilities, and patrol bases, grew in size and scope. In 2008, the RTF briefly left Uruzgan to work on higher coalition construction priorities in Zabul province.38

During May 2007, a Special Operations Task Group of 300 soldiers returned to Uruzgan. Australia had wanted it to operate as part of OEF. The Netherlands insisted otherwise. Australia relented; the 17 task group rotations through the end of the war were therefore part of ISAF’s effort and reported to ISAF special operations forces headquarters rather than Task Force Uruzgan (ISAF special operations forces were commanded on a rotational basis by British and Australian officers).39 The troops in

30 White, “Why Australia.”
32 Brangwin and Rann, Australia’s Military Involvement.
34 Ryan, “Other Side,” 134.
37 Ryan, “Other Side,” 130 (italics in original).
38 Bullard, “Australia in Afghanistan,” 18; and Stuart Yeaman, Afghan Sun: Defence, Diplomacy, Development and the Taliban (Brisbane: Boolarong, 2015).
39 Middleton, Unwinnable, 185.
the task group, most of whom did multiple tours, “carried the burden of taking the fight to the Taliban . . . by targeting key leaders, insurgent compounds, weapons caches, bomb-making facilities, and drug-related criminal elements.”

By 2008, Australia had a new government. At his first meeting of the National Security Committee of Cabinet, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd asked the ADF’s senior leaders for an explanation of Australia’s strategy in Afghanistan. At first he “was met with blank looks.” Eventually, it emerged that since 2001, Australia’s strategy, as Rudd understood the situation from conversations with the Chief of the Defence Force, “had largely been a matter of honouring our alliance obligations and going where the Americans thought we could make the best contribution, given the type and size of our military resources.” Rudd said Australia had to find a better reason to be in Afghanistan than just keeping the United States happy. His government then commenced a strategic review but held off implementing its findings until the Obama administration made its intentions clear.

The combination of Rudd’s desire to do something different and the coalition’s adoption of a counterinsurgency strategy caused a slight shift in Australia’s focus. In October 2008, a mentoring and reconstruction task force replaced the RTF. Over two rotations, the task force continued with its reconstruction tasks.

Based on an infantry battalion rather than engineer regiment, however, the task force shifted its—-and therefore Australia’s—main effort from reconstruction to mentoring an Afghan National Army (ANA) kandak (battalion). It did this through an operational mentoring and liaison team. The second rotation grew in size and responsibilities—thus allowing it to mentor more ANA units and to provide combat power in support of the 2009 elections. As such, the overall numbers of ADF personnel in country increased to more than 1,500 (see figure 2).

Australia’s efforts and focus underwent another shift in February 2010. Five rotations of the newly named mentoring task force (MTF) focused solely on advising and developing the capacity of 4th Brigade, ANA. Drawing on the experiences of the mentoring and reconstruction task force, the MTF maintained an aggressive patrolling program, living and working from patrol bases that now dotted Uruzgan’s landscape. The added emphasis on mentoring saw Australian forces, along with their Afghan partner units, push into parts of Uruzgan province that hitherto had been the responsibility of Dutch and French operational mentoring and liaison teams. This was especially the case from August

41 Kevin Rudd, The PM Years (Sydney: Macmillan, 2018), 12.
42 Rudd, PM Years, 13.
43 Rudd, PM Years.
44 Rudd, PM Years, 139.
46 Connolly, Counterinsurgency, 8; and Horner, “Emerging Strategic Environment,” 47.
1, 2010, when the Dutch handed responsibility for Uruzgan to the United States.

The United States commanded the newly named Combined Team Uruzgan until Australia assumed that responsibility in late 2012.\(^\text{47}\) From the perspective of one of its commanding officers, the MTF “sought simply to get the Afghan Army to weaken the insurgents such that the people would be left with no alternative but to collaborate with the agencies of the Afghan Government.”\(^\text{48}\) It did this by maintaining a persistent presence in insurgent-controlled or insurgent-contested areas, thus reducing insurgent freedom of movement, and by extension, aiming to convince the population that Afghan government dominance was inevitable.\(^\text{49}\) Of course, such efforts were designed to fulfill the security pillar of ISAF’s campaign plan; governance and development were mostly left to others.

Like the coalition more broadly, throughout this period the Australian government was firmly focused on getting out of Afghanistan. Its exit strategy was predicated on two factors: transitioning responsibility of local security to Afghan forces and sticking to the coalition timetable of 2014. An end date rather than end state would determine when Australia’s job was done. In this regard, though, Australia was cautious to set an end date before other coalition partners had shown their hand.

In line with its aims and appetite for risk, Australia gradually shifted its focus from mentoring to advising. This was especially the case when green-on-blue attacks increased the threat to ADF personnel.


\(^{49}\) Commanding Officer, “Commanding Officer’s Observations.”

\(^{50}\) Data collected by the Australian War Memorial.
living and working with their ANA counterparts. Australia also assumed responsibility for the local provincial reconstruction team, thus improving the whole-of-government presence on the ground and allowing for a greater focus on capacity building.\textsuperscript{51} In December 2013, the last Australians left Uruzgan. About 400 personnel remained in training and support roles in Kandahar and Kabul.\textsuperscript{52} Today, around 300 Australians are still training, advising, and assisting in Afghanistan as part of the Resolute Support Mission.\textsuperscript{53}

In assessing Australia’s contribution in Afghanistan, the first point to keep in mind is unlike the commitment of a brigade-size task force and ownership of a province in Vietnam, Australia deployed small elements as part of a larger coalition force. The fact the ADF was a small cog in a larger coalition machine is an important piece of context when examining Australia’s war in Afghanistan.

There was no Australian concentration of force in Afghanistan—no Australian fast jets or artillery supported ADF elements on the ground in Uruzgan. For this and more, Australia relied on coalition partners. Instead, the ADF filled niche roles that reflected Australia’s appetite for risk and its wider strategic priorities.\textsuperscript{54} As one commentator has written, Australia’s participation was “carefully calibrated,” with successive Australian governments balancing their aversion to casualties with the reality that Afghanistan is not in Australia’s strategic area of interest.\textsuperscript{55}

Next, most of Australia’s operational experience in Afghanistan was at the platoon level or lower. The fact the ADF, and especially the Australian Army, “had lost foundational war fighting skills at anything above sub unit level,” was not lost on some in the ADF senior leadership.\textsuperscript{56} Since at least 2004, elements of the ADF have recognized the importance of and attempted to alleviate the potential of being unprepared for the future by changing the structure of the army to create all-arms brigades and to improve the force-generation cycle to ensure the army can sustain long-term operations.\textsuperscript{57}

Despite all of this, the high operating tempo in places such as Afghanistan, has led to the ADF becoming “a far more sharp-edged force” than the one that existed when the East Timor crisis hit in 1999.\textsuperscript{58} Whether or not Australia’s presence and contribution made a difference or was worth the costs is open to debate. The answers vary depending on who is asked and at what level of war the question is directed.

\textsuperscript{51} Church, \textit{Australia at War}, 14.
\textsuperscript{55} Blaxland, “Army and Government Objectives,” 283.
\textsuperscript{58} Blaxland, “Army and Government Objectives,” 290.
Admittedly, it is difficult to balance the achievements of the past with news of Taliban gains and continued fighting in 2019.59

**Lessons**

“It is only through rapid adaptation that a military organisation can keep pace with an adversary who is also evolving. Plainly, both combatants seek an advantage over the other,” wrote Albert Palazzo.60 “To defer lesson learning,” he continued, “risks losing the contest for ideas.”61 At the tactical level, the ADF had various mechanisms to identify and to disseminate lessons from Afghanistan, sometimes before the next rotation deployed.62

The primary aim of these short-term lesson loops was to prepare soldiers and subunits for what they might face on operations: adaptation in tactics, techniques, and procedures, as well as equipment.63 There is a chance the niche nature of Australia’s contribution means the ADF did not learn the right lessons or its lessons were incomplete.64 There is also the reality that the wrong lessons might be drawn from a war that did not feature enemy air power, artillery, counterintelligence capabilities, high-end equipment, or cyberwarfare.

Nonetheless, the processes for identifying lessons at the tactical level were not matched at the operational, strategic, administrative, or institutional levels. No formal reviews, for instance, were conducted on these aspects until after Australian forces had left Uruzgan.65 Senior practitioners and military institutions should revisit, and not repeat, this approach lest they lose the contest of ideas or forget those lessons encountered and insights from the “longest war.”66 The above survey, as well as work undertaken to date for the *Official History of Australian Operations in Afghanistan*, identifies three key lessons that deserve further consideration before Australia next finds itself as a junior partner in a coalition counterinsurgency effort.

**Lesson One: Consider a Whole-of-Government Approach from the Start**

The truism that military action alone would not bring stability or security to Afghanistan was not lost on those planning Australia’s contribution.67 When it came to deploying civilians, however, the

---

61 Palazzo, “Postscript.”
63 Palazzo, “Postscript,” 303.
Howard government decided it was too dangerous, preferring instead to leave nation-building work to other entities, such as the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, or the Dutch. This should not downplay the significance of Australia’s aid donations, which totaled over AUD$1.2 billion. But Australia’s war in Afghanistan was dominated by the military, which carried the burden both in funds and risks. Australian diplomats, development experts, and civilian police were not seen in any meaningful numbers until after the Dutch departed Uruzgan in 2010.

The lessons to be learned from Australia’s experience, as well as those of the coalition in general, are numerous. First, if Canberra really wants to make a difference on the ground, it needs a greater interagency commitment as soon as the security situation permits. Moreover, it needs to be willing to take outright responsibility for more than the security pillar of a counterinsurgency campaign. It should ensure better multiagency cooperation and the integration of the whole-of-government efforts with those of coalition partners, and it needs to resource the commitment appropriately. By the time these realities were implemented in Afghanistan, Australia was already working toward its exit strategy of transitioning responsibility to Afghan authorities.

**Lesson Two: Maintain a Selective Embed Program**

A defining feature of Australia’s war was the visibility and effectiveness of its embedded officers in coalition headquarters across OEF and ISAF. Anecdotally, it was not unusual to have an Australian in ISAF headquarters briefing another Australian in Regional Command South, both speaking with the weight of their respective coalition commanding generals. American General Stanley McChrystal had Australians spread throughout his headquarters. A two-star general was his senior military adviser to the Afghan defense minister. A one-star general coordinated the ISAF security response for the 2009 Afghan elections. And another one-star general was a senior intelligence officer.

Being a non-NATO member, Australia was able to bypass the flags-to-task ratios and take a strategic approach to select where it placed its well-trained, highly proficient officers. Consequently, the ADF’s leadership focused on getting people into positions that increased Australia’s exposure to high-level decision-making and theater operations and then keeping an Australian in those jobs so long as it suited national interests. This program also benefited those individuals, exposing them to significant coalition machinations, personalities, and pressures.

These few well-placed people often were more visible than the hundreds of troops in Uruzgan. Several coalition generals have spoken in surprise about Australia’s successes in this regard and have commented

---

68 Church, *Australia at War*.


they wished they would replicate that access. Notably, they have also invariably praised those officers. It was a deliberate policy, enabled because of Australia’s historic links with the Five Eyes intelligence partnership countries that dominated Regional Command South and ISAF Headquarters, as well as the performance of those individuals.

This selective embed program delivered huge benefits to Australia. Aside from exposing a generation of senior officers to coalition warfare at the operational and strategic levels, it allowed Australia to have a say in shaping the war at the tactical level without having to deploy too many people, expend large sums of money, or put people unnecessarily in harm’s way. It delivered strategic bang for the buck, allowing the ADF to meet the government’s objective of supporting the United States without undue risk. The lesson, therefore, is Australia, leaning on the reputation it has gained in Afghanistan, as well as its access to Five Eyes intelligence material, should continue to maintain a highly targeted program of embedded officers.

Australia must be careful, however, not to develop a reputation for contributing embeds at the expense of boots on the ground. In Iraq, for example, the ADF was criticized for having a highly capable battle group with restrictive rules of engagement. Such an approach did not win Australia any favors among its coalition counterparts. The Iraq example shows that a successful embed program has to be paired with adequately sized forces engaged in operations, with few caveats. It mostly achieved this in Afghanistan. Tied to lesson one, Australia should aim to expand its embed program outside military channels, to include more civilians, and to use the exposure and the experience gained to engender a greater whole-of-government approach on the ground.

Lesson Three: Be Careful of Overreliance on Special Forces

As noted earlier, Special Forces were the force of choice for Howard. He saw in them less risk, less cost, and greater flexibility. Undoubtedly their smaller footprint, perceived lower casualty rates, high operations security, and familiarity with coalition Special Forces, appeals to risk-averse governments, especially those embarking in wars of choice, as opposed to wars of necessity.

It is no surprise then that Howard used them to spearhead his commitments to Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Afghanistan again in 2005. Recent media reports of cultural issues within the Special Operations Command and an ongoing inquiry by the Inspector-General of the ADF into alleged war crimes committed by Special Forces soldiers in Afghanistan, however, suggest successive governments may have overused, and even misused, Australia’s Special Forces.

---

71 Interviews conducted by the author.
By 2004, it was apparent to the Chief of Army Lieutenant General Peter Leahy that “too much of the burden” during recent operations was falling on a small portion of the ADF, in particular the Special Forces.\(^{75}\) Their operating tempo was high, their wider responsibilities (which included domestic counterterrorism) equally taxing, and their numbers finite. Yet in 2005, they were again sent to Afghanistan. As discussed above, with the exception of a brief period during 2006 and 2007 when the ADF’s senior leadership had been convinced they needed a rest, the Special Forces were constantly deployed in Uruzgan for the remainder of the war. Twenty Special Forces deployments between 2005 and 2014 largely fell to the Special Air Service Regiment and what became 2nd Commando Regiment. The bulk of two deployments were undertaken by the Army Reserve-heavy 1st Commando Regiment.

It is not uncommon to hear of these soldiers doing more than half a dozen tours.\(^{76}\) The implications of multiple deployments to a high-stress, high-threat environment, with the attendant constant exposure to the horrors of war, for those soldiers and their families is another theme that appears to be under investigation at the moment. Only time will tell.

Like concerns about overuse, the view that Special Forces were misused in Afghanistan is not new. Indeed, a 2008 article in the *Australian Army Journal* complained that rather than reserving Special Forces for missions of strategic importance, the ADF was using them in conventional infantry missions with tactical outcomes.\(^{77}\) The result was deep frustration within the wider Australian Army, especially among the ranks of the infantry, that the infantry was seen as “a distant second choice for combat operations behind the Special Operations Forces.”\(^{78}\)

This frustration could also be felt among Dutch and Australian commanders who, despite owning the area of operations and being accountable for the success of the mission inside it, were rarely consulted and often unaware of what the Special Forces were doing. Such a lack of cooperation is worrisome when one considers the Special Operations Task Group’s main purpose was to create and to maintain conditions that allowed Task Force Uruzgan, and its Australian component, to perform its functions. Lastly, there is also the fact of stress and pressure on the units of Special Operations Command. It is evident some of the overuse discussed above could have been avoided if more of these combat missions had been given to the broader army.

It would be foolish to think the Special Forces will not be one of the first options governments consider whenever war is on the table. It would also be incorrect to conclude there was no place for Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan. Many tasks they performed were appropriate, such as long-range reconnaissance, clandestine operations,

---


\(^{76}\) Masters, *No Front Line*.

\(^{77}\) Hamnett, “We Were Soldiers,” 41.

\(^{78}\) Hamnett, “We Were Soldiers,” 40.
and intelligence-led precision targeting against significant insurgent leaders. There is also the reality that in the world of special operations forces, elite units tend to want to work solely alongside other elite units. Despite these factors, the lessons for the government and their ADF advisers should be to pause and consider long-term ramifications for elite units and the wider Australian Defence Force before committing Special Forces to war. It should also ask whether Special Forces are the right choice for the task required.

**Conclusion**

A short article like this cannot do justice to the complicated and nuanced story of Australia’s contribution to the Afghanistan War. It can, however, provide readers with a contextualized account of that commitment and present insights into coalition partner considerations in a war of choice. It has also not attempted to identify or discuss all of the many lessons stemming from that experience. Indeed, the *Official History of Australian Operations in Afghanistan*, currently being written with access to classified records, will have nearly one million words to canvass such issues across political, strategic, operational, tactical, institutional, and interagency divides.

That historical project, however, is still many years from completion. Awaiting its detailed analysis before attempting to identify lessons, adapt, and implement change, accordingly risks, as Albert Palazzo wrote, deferring institutional learning and losing the contest for ideas. Yet this is precisely what has happened within the Australian Defence Force above the tactical level. This reality provides the first lesson for Australia: it must actively implement formal mechanisms to capture the lessons of Afghanistan and adapt at all levels and across all arms of government. It cannot afford to have those lessons confined solely to the realm of informal corporate knowledge, where it risks evaporating as senior public servants and military officers retire.

By focusing on three key lessons arising from Australia’s war in Afghanistan, this article has provided a starting point for Australian policymakers and practitioners. Afghanistan highlighted the importance of development and governance to any counterinsurgency effort. Consideration, therefore, should be given to implementing a whole-of-government strategy—paired with an interagency effort on the ground—early in any future Australian commitment.

So, too, should policymakers and military practitioners realize the benefits that accrue from a highly selective embed program. Such a strategy should be maintained in times of peace and war. It must, however, be balanced against the needs and wants of coalition partners,

---


Australian national interests, and the propensity to deploy embeds at the expense of—rather than in addition to—ground forces.

Finally, careful thought should be given to the government’s default position that Special Forces are the force of choice for such missions. The constant rotation of ADF Special Forces units through Afghanistan invariably strained a finite, strategic asset. Greater consideration should therefore be given to the institutional and individual impact of deploying Special Forces when another force element might suffice. This is as true for preserving the capabilities of the Special Operations Command as it is for developing those of the wider Australian Defence Force.