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What Does The Australian Military Have To Hide?

By John Martinkus

Compared to the other Western nations fighting in Afghanistan, Australia is notoriously secretive about its military operations, writes foreign correspondent John Martinkus

In the five reporting trips I have made to Afghanistan for SBS TV since 2005, my relationship with the Australian military reached a laughably low moment in a Stanley-and-Livingstone-type encounter I had with two Australian soldiers in the office of the then Governor of Uruzgan, Abdul Munib, in May 2006.

I was setting up for an interview with the Governor, having made the perilous trip from Kandahar to Tarin Kowt by road. This meant that to avoid being identified as a foreigner by the many Taliban in the area I was dressed in the local attire and sported the customary beard. At this moment, two Australian officers and an American, all bearing weapons and wearing body armour, were ushered into the office. The Governor, who must have known that the visitors were expected, then mischievously introduced me to the military men as an Australian reporter from SBS. The look on the faces of the Australians was one of utter shock and panic.

As I stood up, introduced myself and extended my hand, they turned on their heels and walked quickly out of the room leaving their embarrassed US colleague to stammer, "you must understand, we have very strict rules with the press". But my experiences in Afghanistan the previous year, and in Iraq the year before suggested that those rules only applied to the Australian media's contact with its own military, not the normally verbose Americans.

What followed was even more ridiculous. As I was leaving the building to accompany the Governor on a quick tour of the local hospital, the Australians were still outside and I tried to talk to them both on and off camera. When I approached them they ran away from me. All I got was a few shaky shots of two heavily armed soldiers in full flight and myself pursuing them in a style reminiscent of *A Current Affair*: "excuse me sir, excuse me, can I just ask one question?"

The fact that I, a commissioned reporter for a publicly funded, internationally renowned current affairs program, *Dateline*, could not get the officers in charge of establishing what would become Australia's most dangerous and significant military deployment since Vietnam to say one word to camera showed how absurdly secretive the ADF had become in its relations with the Australian media.

I had been sent to Afghanistan in April and May 2006 with the brief to get as much information as possible and film a story about the area where the Australians were to be based in Tarin Kowt. Advance personnel, I knew, were already there as well as SAS members. I didn't bother approaching the SAS knowing that any request for an interview would be refused, but I did try

repeatedly to go through ADF Public Affairs to assist me with a military flight and possibly an interview with the non-SAS officers already there. They ignored all of my requests.

The fact I had no cooperation from the Australians led me to request an embed with the Canadians who had taken over control of Kandahar province in February 2006. My logic was simple: if I could not go to Tarin Kowt I would simply do a report on the situation faced by the Canadians in neighbouring Kandahar. The Canadians approved my request within a few days and I joined the sizeable Canadian press corps at their base in town. The Canadians, with a 2500-personnel deployment, had a permanent presence of reporters and technical support staff from CBC Television and CBC Radio News, CTV News, Global Television, *The National Post*, the Canadian Press wire service, *The Globe and Mail*, and *The Toronto Star*, who had a journalist embedded with troops at a forward operating base north of Kandahar, as well as a few freelancers covering other outlets.

The contrast with the Australians could not have been more stark and the Canadian officer in charge of the embed expressed dismay that I wasn't allowed to go and cover the Australians. That same officer later told me that after I turned up in Tarin Kowt the Australian military called him demanding to know why he had allowed me to leave the embed to go there. He had replied that I could do whatever I wanted to and if I was anybody's responsibility I should be theirs.

As I settled down in the Canadian camp my local fixer called to tell me that a police-escorted convoy would be going from Kandahar to Tarin Kowt early the following morning, providing a reasonably safe means of getting there. Before dawn the following day the fixer picked me up from the Canadians' base. We joined the convoy and headed out of town. The convoy consisted of about 40 fuel trucks from Pakistan, and the escort my fixer had talked about was two ute-loads of police with heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. They positioned themselves at the front of the convoy and we tried to stay close. On a road well known for ambushes, kidnappings and executions of anyone the Taliban believed to be supporting the Afghan government, this didn't feel like a very secure way to travel!

We arrived in Tarin Kowt safely but quickly realised just how small an area was then controlled by the government. Doctors at the hospital, the police chief and the governor all related how they could not travel more than two kilometres from the centre of town without fear of attack from the Taliban. Each of them lived in and worked out of guarded compounds. Was that what the ADF were trying to hide from the public?

In fact, the ADF were much more sensitive about the operations the Australian SAS were conducting at the time and the civilian casualty figures that resulted. This was an issue that came up repeatedly in my discussions with locals. Unfortunately much of the information they provided about these incidents was unverifiable due to the problem of my being unable to visit the districts where these operations were taking place. They were firmly under Taliban control and even the local police did not go there. I was, however, left in no doubt that in the course of SAS operations substantial numbers of Afghan civilians were being killed and injured.

Unable to spend the night at the nearby military base I was forced to accept the hospitality of the Governor, a former Taliban Minister who was still on a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees wanted list for crimes committed under the Taliban regime. He had only been appointed a few months before. His predecessor, Jan Mohammad Khan, Governor of Uruzgan from January 2002 to March 2006, had been sacked for corruption and abuse of power and was now making life difficult for his successor. When he was dismissed he had taken all the government weapons and vehicles, distributed them to his people and told them to fight the government.

As night fell everybody in the Governor's compound carried a weapon, and boys as young as 15 manned the walls. Gunfire continued to sound in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Explosions could be heard all night. It was rumoured that the Taliban and the followers of Jan Mohammad had retaken the town, and as a result nobody ventured out. Beyond the confines of the town, explosions and gunfire could be heard coming from the direction of the main base where, from what local

people told me, the foreign troops, including the Australians, never ventured out. It truly was a town under siege every night.

Why were the ADF so reluctant back then to allow reporters into Camp Holland, their base at Tarin Kowt? Was it that they were instructed to downplay the seriousness of the situation in Tarin Kowt so there would be less public opposition to the deployment? Was it their fear of being accused of indifference to civilian casualties in their ongoing operations? Or was it just the culture of secrecy, the fear of being quoted in the press that I had encountered with the Australian troops in Iraq in 2004?

I really don't know the answer to that question. When I made my report for *Dateline* in Australia a few weeks later, I concluded that this Afghanistan deployment would be the one where the ADF — which had had such luck in avoiding casualties in Iraq — would be likely to suffer a number of casualties. I was criticised for that prediction as somehow supporting the other side or wishing harm upon the troops. Far from it. The lack of government control around Tarin Kowt had scared me and I had realised how big a job was ahead for the Australians and how exposed they were.

So you can imagine my surprise when, returning to Kabul in January 2007 to organise an embed with the British forces, I was discouraged from covering them by the NATO press officer — who, incidentally, was Australian — in favour of doing an embed with the Australians in Tarin Kowt. For whatever reason, whether it was pressure on the ADF to open up, a desire for more favourable publicity from Afghanistan to justify higher troop levels, or maybe just a desire to get the ADF back on Australian television, Australian policy had done a complete turnaround. The ADF were now doing their utmost to ensure that I went down to Tarin Kowt and filmed Australian, not British, operations.

Embedding with the Australians was very different from my experiences with the US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the US forces in Baghdad in 2004, and even in 2005 in Afghanistan's remote Kunar province, I received my press pass from headquarters, made some enquiries and was given the contact of the public affairs officer at the base where I wanted to go. I then arranged a time when he or she would meet me at the gate to the compound, and so my embed would begin. Often with the US forces I was asked what I wanted to film: a patrol, a raid, or whatever they were doing. I was then assigned to a sergeant, or at most a lieutenant, who took me out with his squad. The US troops almost always answered the questions I asked them on camera and explained what they were doing and why. I was often ignored by the officer assigned to look after me. This worked for both parties. He had more important matters to take care of, and I just wanted to film what was happening around me.

When I embedded with the Australians I was escorted by no less than a Major who was with me 24 hours a day for the whole week. We slept in the same room, generally ate our meals together, and he came out on patrol with me. In one sense this made the trip a lot smoother. We had good luck catching flights from Kabul to Kandahar and on to Tarin Kowt and back. We slept in beds, not on the floor in transit tents which is usually what happens to journalists with the US forces. But the flip side of this privileged access to transport and other facilities was that because the Major was always present I couldn't help feeling that the comments I was getting to camera, particularly from the enlisted men, were the ones that they perceived the Major would like them to make. With the Australian troops, unlike their US counterparts, there was a strong sense that they could be reprimanded for what they said on camera.

On the other hand I found the average Australian soldier a lot better informed about the society and political situation in Afghanistan than his or her US counterpart. I was also impressed by the way they handled the local population. One particular incident that stuck in my mind was the disarming of a man found with a pistol. He had a Police ID card from the district of Chora, which had been falling in and out of Taliban control since my last visit. This was done in a professional manner with none of the unnecessary aggression I have seen many American troops use in similar circumstances. The man was given the benefit of the doubt and allowed on his way.

Back at Kandahar airfield I was also given very good access to the Australian Army's Chinook Helicopters and their crews, and I filmed a second story detailing their work. As for filming any of the Commandos or Special Forces troops who are the ones carrying out aggressive operations, as the Major put it, "not a snowflake's chance in hell". The fact is, though, that throughout the entire Australian involvement in Afghanistan, the majority of the fighting has been done by SAS troops and Commandos. We in the press are never allowed to even know about these operations let alone cover them until long after they have taken place or if they have resulted in Australian casualties.

Major actions have been and continue to take place without any information at all being released to the press and the Australian public until well after the event, if at all. The only information we get is filtered through second-hand accounts given to "friendly" journalists such as News Limited's Ian McPhedran. Nothing approaching real, factual and balanced reporting of these ongoing and significant operations is possible given the current constraints on press access to these units.

In many ways the blame for the current culture of secrecy in the Australian military could be laid at the feet of the Howard government who, particularly in Iraq, were able to enjoy the prestige and benefits accruing from the US alliance without suffering any of the downsides of having to explain away Australian casualties. Australian troops there were under much higher degrees of operational restrictions intended to avoid casualties and press access was severely limited. Even if Australian troops were under fire in Iraq, the political leadership did not want the Australian public to see it. This is the attitude that seems to have taken hold within the ADF and dictated their approach to military-media relations in Afghanistan.

If the ADF's commanders want the efforts of their personnel in Afghanistan to be recognised they should behave with the same openness as many of the US commanders. If they are ashamed of their forces' efforts then they should continue with the draconian restrictions they have placed on Australian journalists in the past. The ADF's determination to control the media will only result in deepening scepticism among Australian journalists about the reasons for their eagerness to massage the coverage of the conflict in Afghanistan.

This is an edited extract from What Are We Doing In Afghanistan? The Military And The Media At War*, edited by Kevin Foster (Australian Scholarly Publishing).*