

BACK in the darkest days of the Great War, the word fairdinkum was used to describe the young Anzacs that signed up to fight after the truth of the carnage became widely known back in Australia.

The simple Australianism may seem acronistic, but I believe it is the perfect word to describe the current generation of young Diggers fighting in the backward valleys of Uruzgan's mountains.

While they may be equipped with the very latest in gucci gear and vehicles and with the latest in technological aids, our young soldiers, sailors and airmen are fighting the toughest campaign we have experienced for two generations.

The 8/9RAR led Mentoring Task Force 4, like the nine hard fighting Task Forces before them, have done Australia proud in what I believe is the most complex and unforgiving tactical environment imaginable.

While they may be the youngest of our battalion groups, MTF4 have excelled since hitting the ground in February. Not only have they mentored their various Afghan partners professionally but they have advanced towards and met the enemy and emerged victorious in a number of vicious battles and evaded or discovered and destroyed dozens and dozens of IED booby traps.

Without any sense of embellishment I can say that the Diggers of MTF4 and the Australians who fought in Afghanistan before them have earned the title Anzac. Seriously fairdinkum Anzacs.

During my embed I was fortunate enough to witness the young Diggers of MTF4 conduct Op Hamkiri Gogai Jangee II (Pashto for Return of the Wolf) in conjunction with elements of 1 Kandak 4th Brigade in the Helmand River Green Zone in the Charcheneh area of the insurgent controlled Shahid-e Hassas District.

Apart from the attentions of SOTG and the resident US Special Forces ODA at PB Tinsley at Lwar Oshay on the Helmand, Charcheneh had resolutely resisted G/RoA influence. Beyond a particular grid reference every ISAF/ANSF incursion goes kinetic.

Watching the 8/9RAR Diggers as they supported the main ANA thrust into Charcheneh was a real privilege. While the battalion may be the newest to be raised in the Royal Australian Regiment, its tactical proficiency was truly five star.

The quality of the battalion's training, equipment and leadership was evident in the confidence and aggression of the troops who pushed their ANA partners forward into one of the most hostile areas in Afghanistan.

During the Op Gogai Jangee incursion, MTF4's infiltration route was heavily mined, with almost every choke point along the Charcheneh Valley road laced with IEDs. In places the road simply disappeared into craters left by IEDs, the roadside cliffside littered with the debris of ANA vehicles destroyed by earlier attempts to enter the area.

I'm not free to tell you all I know due to the 72 page non disclosure statement I signed before my embed. But I can tell you that our troops have been involved in the heaviest fighting since Korea with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of battles fought and won in the remote areas of Uruzgan.

The Government has, in its wisdom, decided that the Australian public should not know how intense the combat has been. Without violating the spirit of the legal agreement I made with the ADF prior to embedding, I can tell you that our Diggers have been knee deep in the action and have killed hundreds if not thousands of militants, drug dealers, religious fundamentalists and some just plain dumb Afghan farm boys who have stood in the way of our troop's mission objectives.

Sadly, the intensity and ferocity of the fighting is not known to the public, who are just plain confused about why we are

fighting this war and ignorant of the outstanding courage and devotion to duty of our modern Anzacs in the Hindu Kush.

As a long term observer of ADF operations in Afghanistan I find the public ignorance of the fighting spirit, professionalism and devotion to the mission of our Diggers a major tragedy.

Part of the problem was the genesis of the current campaign as a Special Operations Command operation with all the



Pic: John Hunter Farrell



Pic: SGT Tim Eck Davis



Pic: John Hunter Farrell

aversion to publicity that organisation has.

OpSec was a driving force. Public information was seen as a distraction not a core requirement. While the SF have scored 10 out of 10 tactically, they have a lot to learn about the political aspects of warfare.

The Australian people were actively discouraged from taking any interest in or having any knowledge of this war. They were told to piss off. Now they are pissed off. And that is a big problem for the war fighters in the Hindu Kush.

Trying to justify the loss of a young man's life or limb in an information vacuum is a lost proposition. It is why so many Aussies have turned against the war. Without information they simply do not understand why we are fighting so far away.

Because the only information emanating from Afghanistan is either casualties or Afghan focused, the Australian public has become isolated from the outstanding bravery and tactical genius of our troops who have been fighting and winning battles that may never be known about by our people.

The public also does not dig the traction that has been achieved. While the price in blood and treasure has been high, the results of Australian and Coalition operations have also been dramatic. The derelict skeleton of the provincial capital encountered by the initial AustSF of SOTG 1 back in 2005 is now a living, even thriving commercial centre.

Traffic jams and an expanding commercial centre have replaced the starving dogs and severed heads on stakes that greeted that first Australian contingent seven long years ago.

Don't get me wrong, TK is still a dangerous place and its future is far from assured. But, serious progress has been made despite the naysayers back in Australia.

The security situation has also improved dramatically. Gone are the days when inbound flights corkscrewed tactically into the airstrip in the dead of night. These days the inbound Hercs and C-17s get to deliver their passengers into the base in a relatively civilised manner. Their long and low flightpath testament to the massive improvement in the overall security within Tarin Kowt. The situation is still as they say 'fragile' as the crew of USAF C-130H found out a few weeks back when their hydraulics were shot out by ground fire on final approach to TK.

Probably the best indicator in the success of the Australian, US and Afghan forces operating in the area is the dramatic improvement in the civilians' living conditions.

Almost every Quala has a roof, with thriving gardens



Pic John Hunter Farrell

and freshly planted fruit trees - indicating that the security situation has improved to the point where the local people are prepared to invest in their future. Farmers don't plant when their crops will just be burned or stolen. Tarin Kowt and the myriad villages in rural Uruzgan are now a garden in the desert.

All sorts of business abound. There is even a car wash in Tarin Kowt. Prior to the entry of ISAF, Uruzgan's citizens were barely able to find enough calories to survive. Now they are worrying about vehicle cleanliness.

The cynics amongst the intelligencia and the press could rightly say that with all the military might that Australia and our US and Dutch partners have put into place in Uruzgan it is not a surprise that the capital is now relatively secure.

But a better measure of Australia's success is the massive expansion of the ISAF 'ink blot'. Australian and US Forces and the Afghan National Security Forces they are mentoring are now operating relatively freely throughout Uruzgan.

Areas which have been under Taliban control since 1996 are now being seriously contested by Coalition forces.

Australian bases and the manoeuvre units they shelter now dot the province from the Charcheneh and Khod Valleys in Shahid-e-Hassas in the far north west, to Deh Rawod in the central west south along the Helmand River to Kajaki Dam and across the border into the worst parts of Helmand.

In the east, Australian mentored Afghan Toloys are pushing towards Zabol Province through the greater Mirabad Valley and are operating east of Chenartu and Chukajoy areas on the verge of Khas Uruzgan.



Pic John Hunter Farrell



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In the north Australians and their ANA partners are contesting the Taliban strongholds in the Kush Khadir and Kamisan Valleys on the Daykundi border.

In the south they have left Uruzgan all together and occupy the Sorkh Bed region in Kandahar's out of control Langar Valley.

While the benchmarks of operational success are many, Uruzgan and its approaches remain extremely dangerous and unpredictable. All of these tactical gains remain fragile.

The ancient warrior spirit of the Pashtun population and the region's ever changing tribal loyalties remain in flux. Small things can instantly become big things. Crazy men with guns and IEDs still haunt the hills and are ready to kill, torture, rob and rape in the pursuit of their idea of God's will.

The Taliban are hurting. Too many of their commanders are dead or detained. Their best fighters have long since entered Paradise. They have been reduced to using children as young as ten as suicide bombers. They are being beaten, but they are not defeated yet.

The final chapter in this war will not however be written by Australian or Coalition forces. With the date set for a progressive withdrawal of combat forces, the outcome on the battlefield will be settled by Afghans.

This I believe is how it should be. At the end of the day it is an Afghan war and they are exactly the right hands and feet to find those IEDs and face the insurgents' bullets and fragmentation.

While the outcome of the final battle remains unknown, Australia can rest assured that the training, mentoring and old fashioned combat leadership displayed by our soldiers in

Afghanistan has had a seriously beneficial impact on the ANA's 4th Brigade 205th Corps.

Australians no longer lead operations as they did in the past. Current tactical manoeuvre operations are now conceived, planned and executed by Afghan National Security Forces.

From a distance they look a little shambolic, but during Op Gogai Jangee II, the ANA 1st and 8th Commando Kandaks pushed deep into hostile country and discovered and destroyed many caches and IEDs before withdrawing to Tinsley.

While the ANA is not and may never be up to standards of excellence demanded by the Australian Defence Force, its capability and professionalism have improved dramatically since its inception as an armed band of anti-Taliban civilians in the wake of the US and Coalition intervention in late 2001.

The ANA still suffers from many problems. From lack of spares to keep their vehicles running to officers that refuse their men leave while taking it themselves, the problems are many.

But, on the upside the ANA is not afraid of a fight and have demonstrated that they will aggressively enter battle when properly led and trained.

I suspect that we will see an Afghan solution to the war. One that may not adhere to our Western definitions of victory or defeat. But as long as Afghanistan never again becomes a refuge for the likes of Al Qaida which threaten us in our own homes I think we can live with the outcome.

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