



**General Angus J Campbell AO DSC
Chief of the Defence Force**

**Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Senate Estimates (Budget) hearing**

**Parliament House
Tuesday, 1 June 2021**

Opening Statement

Chair, Committee members,

Over the last 20 years, some 39,000 men and women of the Australian Defence Force have served in Afghanistan, alongside diplomats, police officers, aid workers and civil officials, and of course both Afghan and Coalition military partners from more than 50 countries.

Through Operations SLIPPER and HIGHROAD, Australia has steadfastly contributed to the NATO-led mission – currently involving 36 of its allies and partners – to thwart terrorism and bring security and stability to Afghanistan.

It has been our nation's longest war.

Tragically, 41 Australians died – making the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty.

More have returned home with lasting physical injuries and mental wounds. For them, Australia's longest war continues.

Throughout the last two decades, the families and loved ones of our servicemen and women have served in their own way – being pillars of support, devotion, encouragement and strength. Afghanistan has been their war too.

In April this year, the Australian Government announced, in coordination with the US and NATO, that Australia will complete its military drawdown in Afghanistan.

This is a step anticipated through the US-Taliban negotiations of recent years.

It's a decision consistent with policy outlined in the *Defence Strategic Update 2020*, and Australia's prioritised military focus on our own Indo-Pacific region.

A region where our interests are now being challenged more directly.

Our military contribution in Afghanistan peaked in 2012, with more than 1,550 personnel in country.

The coalition drawdown is progressing smoothly. Remaining military personnel will depart Afghanistan by September this year.

The story of Australia's longest war is already being written.

This chapter in our nation's military history will be painted in different hues.

It will be coloured, in part, by the findings of the Afghanistan Inquiry report; and by the work of the Office of the Special Investigator, as it addresses the alleged unlawful conduct described in that report – doing so in accordance with Australian law and always upholding the presumption of innocence – while the ADF acknowledges, accounts for and learns from the experience.

But it is my hope that this important work will be understood from the perspective of a larger canvas;

- that the historical record also accurately documents all of the activities and achievements of the ADF and partner agencies in Afghanistan over the last 20 years,
- that Australians appreciate the incredible effort of many, and
- that our national memory never forgets what our men and women have accomplished through their service and sacrifice.

Australia went into Afghanistan in 2001, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The ADF contributed to a multi-national effort to deny terrorist organisations a safe haven in Afghanistan.

They helped degrade extremist organisations like Al-Qaeda; inhibiting their ability to plan, execute or encourage terrorist attacks on our soil or that of our partners.

Our people did so in numerous acts of valour and bravery.

Like those of Corporal **Daniel Keighran VC** – who, in August 2010, deliberately and repeatedly exposed himself to Taliban fire, drawing it away from his patrol.

The ADF helped to improve the security of millions of Afghans through the Coalition's efforts to:

- Develop the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, and
- Train and advise many thousands of Afghan Officers and Soldiers.

Australia contributed more than US \$680 million dollars to the Afghan National Army Trust Fund and \$1.51 billion dollars in development and humanitarian assistance, which contributed to outcomes such as:

- School enrolments increase ten-fold since 2002 – with girls a growing proportion of students.
- Access to basic health care rise from 9 to 57 per cent.
- Maternal mortality rate reduce from 1,100 to 396 deaths per 100,000 births.
- Women's representation in politics increase from zero to 27 per cent.

- Afghans' access to electricity increase from about 220,000 to 1.5 million connections.

None of these societal outcomes would have been possible without the accompanying security and stability provided by the Coalition and Afghan military effort.

Like the contribution of Warrant Officer **Samantha Lund** – who, between 2011 and 2012, met with Afghan women in local communities to discuss topics like education, income and hygiene.

Samantha's conversations helped coalition forces to understand local issues, provide community assistance, and establish rapport with, and support from, Afghans.

Or the efforts of Lieutenant Colonel **Clare O'Neill** – who, as part of Reconstruction Task Forces between 2006 and 2008, helped build crossings and rebuild destroyed bridges, ensuring supplies could be transported between population centres.

In so doing, Clare and her combat team also repelled a Taliban ambush of rocket propelled grenades and machine gun fire.

During 20 years of wretched war, Australians and Afghans worked together and suffered together for a better Afghanistan and a safer world.

Australia remains committed to supporting Afghanistan even as we draw our focus to the challenges within our region.

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the ADF continues to provide support to the Australian people and their security.

Since the end of the devastating bushfires of the summer of 2019/20, over 17,000 ADF members have deployed around Australia; supporting States and Territories in response to COVID 19, flood relief in NSW, cyclone relief and fires in WA, and Search & Rescue operations.

While this has very much been a joint effort, the larger burden has understandably fallen to our soldiers, from every corner of the country and category of service. I am particularly appreciative of the employers who have so patriotically and patiently enabled Reserve personnel to carry a significant portion of the load; they have performed magnificently.

Within our region, the ADF has supported the Australian Antarctic Division, as well as numerous exercises and deployments throughout South East Asia. Our sailors have spent months at sea contributing to Australia's security and that of our near region, without complaint or the usual respite of port visits.

Our men and women are supporting operational missions in pandemic ravaged countries throughout the Middle East and Africa, even as they contribute to the vaccine distribution in PNG and Timor Leste.

Our aviators continue to patrol our maritime approaches and deliver personnel and aid globally, despite the constraints imposed by COVID.

It is noteworthy that the 700 aviators of Air Mobility Group, who fly, support or maintain our cargo aircraft on their missions across Australia and around the world, have spent a cumulative 55 years in government supervised quarantine or self-isolation.

Chair, Committee members – as the Chief of the Defence Force, I express my utmost gratitude to all Australians who have served and continue to serve – for their efforts, for their sacrifice, and for their achievements.

Thank you.

[ENDS]