

Another Australian soldier killed in Afghanistan

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Lance Corporal Jason Marks, 27, was killed on Sunday during the preparations for an Australian assault on a stronghold of anti-occupation Taliban insurgents in the southern Afghanistan province of Uruzgan. He is the fourth Australian military fatality in the Afghan war since last October and the fifth since the conflict began in November, 2001.

Marks leaves behind a grieving family and two children—a four-year-old son and a baby daughter. His wife, Cassandra, has not directly spoken with the media. A press release issued in her name stated: “All Jason ever wanted to do was join the Army.... Becoming a commando was a dream of Jason’s, he was proud of who he was and what he did.... Our family is devastated at the tragic loss.” His uncle, who was tracked down by journalists seeking comments, said: “He was a great young bloke and it’s a shame that he was over there. I’m too upset to say more.”

The young soldier was born in the mining town of Broken Hill and grew up in the northern Queensland tourist town of Yeppoon. He enlisted in the army in 1999, at the age of just 18. After serving for a number of years as a medic, he transferred in 2005 to the army’s commando battalion, 4RAR (Royal Australian Regiment). A company from the battalion has been stationed in Afghanistan since mid-2007, working with elite Special Air Service troops to hunt down and kill Afghans in Uruzgan province who are resisting the US-led occupation of their country.

Marks lost his life as a result of the latest search-and-destroy mission. His company reportedly only arrived in Afghanistan several weeks ago, presumably to replace a unit that had completed its tour of duty. They were deployed on the weekend to assault an alleged Taliban camp about 25 kilometres south-east of the city of Tarin Kowt, where the Australian and Dutch troops occupying Uruzgan have established their main base. According to

military accounts, Taliban fighters ambushed the commandos as they were moving into position for their attack. They were barraged with small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades. Marks suffered multiple gunshot wounds and died in the field. Four other soldiers in his platoon were wounded. Air strikes by Dutch helicopter gunships and F-16 fighters had to be called in to drive back the Afghans and extricate the Australian troops.

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd responded to the death of Lance Corporal Marks by combining condolences to his family with the cold prediction that more Australian troops will be killed this year in Afghanistan. For the soldiers his government has put in harms way, Rudd said that the rest of the year would be “difficult, dangerous and bloody and the Australian nation needs to prepare itself for further losses”. In response to journalists’ questions, he twice stressed that the death toll would rise. “Let’s accept that reality and prepare ourselves for it,” he declared.

The Rudd Labor government has made the deployment of over 1,000 Australian troops to the Afghanistan war a cornerstone of its foreign policy since its election last November. Rudd has utilised it to reassure the Bush administration that Labor is just as committed to supporting the neo-colonial US agenda behind the so-called “war on terror” as his conservative predecessor. While the prime minister restated on Monday that there were “no such plans” to send more troops, there remains the possibility that the 500-strong Australian combat unit being withdrawn from southern Iraq in the next several months will be re-deployed to Afghanistan before the year is out.

Rudd, with the backing of the media establishment, justifies the war with the claim that Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, was invaded for legitimate and just reasons. He repeated on Monday that the only motive for the war was

the Taliban's "succour and support" for Al Qaeda and the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. More than six years later, Australian troops in Uruzgan province are purportedly fighting a "good war" against demonic terrorists and Taliban fanatics who want to re-impose hell on earth on the long-suffering Afghan people.

The reality is that the invasion of Afghanistan was an integral aspect of broader US plans to dominate the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. The September 11 attacks were the pretext for US efforts to subjugate the country and transform it into a US client state. Over the past years, the US military has constructed a massive base at Bagram airport, which allows American air power to deploy within minutes to Iran, Russia and China—three geo-political rivals and potential targets. Changing the terrible conditions confronting the Afghan people is not even a consideration in Washington. Nothing is being done to alter the oppression, abject poverty and malnutrition that afflict the vast majority.

As for the Australian government, its motivation for participating in the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq is utterly mercenary. Within both the Liberal and Labor parties, the media, and the ruling elite in general, support for US militarism in Central Asia and the Middle East is viewed as the necessary down-payment for the continuation and strengthening of the US alliance. Canberra needs Washington's backing to assert itself as the regional strongman in the South Pacific, against efforts by China and other powers to develop their economic and political influence in the region.

The Labor government is not only continuing Australian participation in the current US wars. It is also supporting the campaign of threats and provocations being waged by the Bush administration against the Iranian regime that may well escalate into another conflict. An Australian frigate is deployed off the Iranian coast alongside US warships and would immediately be involved in any hostilities that break out.

In the wake of Jason Marks's death, the media has once again stepped forward to block any examination of the real geo-political reasons behind the war in Afghanistan. The propaganda of the "good war" has been repeated ad nauseam. The *Adelaide Advertiser*, for example, editorialised that Marks's death "reinforces to all Australians the individual sacrifices which have to be made to preserve democracy and freedom and suppress world terrorism". The ABC's "Lateline" program, which presents itself as the cutting edge of current affairs

journalism, crudely labelled the Afghan guerillas who fought Australian troops on the weekend as "terrorists". That Afghans are conducting a legitimate war of resistance against a foreign occupation—as they did against earlier British and Soviet attempts to occupy the country—is never countenanced.

Rudd has not faced a single question over the Australian deployment. Instead, *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist and international editor Peter Hartcher gushed that his response to the young soldier's death was evidence that the Labor prime minister was beginning "to emerge as a credible wartime leader". Hartcher, a liberal commentator who has, in the past, criticised the Iraq war, had nothing but praise for Rudd's declaration that more Australian soldiers will be killed. It proved, he declared, that Rudd would not "go wobbly" under the "pressure of casualties".

The lives of more Australian soldiers are likely to be squandered by the Rudd government sooner rather than later. Jason Marks was killed the same day that six Taliban partisans successfully infiltrated through tight security in the Afghan capital, Kabul, and opened fire on a military parade being presided over by US-backed President Hamid Karzai. (See: "Anti-Karzai attack in Kabul shakes US puppet government")

The near assassination of Karzai is the sharpest indication of the hostility and growing resistance to the 70,000 US and NATO troops occupying Afghanistan. The number of attacks on US and NATO forces has increased by 40 percent compared with the first three months of last year in the southern provinces and by more than 70 percent in the area surrounding Kabul. After a harsh winter, followed by severe flooding, the spring weather is allowing thousands of Afghan fighters to move from their bases in the mountains along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to conduct guerilla operations. Uruzgan province, and the Australian forces based there, will be a prime target.



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