

Eighth Australian soldier dies in Afghanistan amid calls to boost troop numbers

James Cogan
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The eighth Australian soldier lost his life in Afghanistan on January 3. Thirty-year-old Private Gregory Michael Sher, from a Melbourne-based Army Reserve company of the 1st Commando Regiment, was killed by 107mm rockets fired into an Afghan army base in the southern province of Uruzgan. He had reportedly been in the country for several months.

According to reports, Sher was part of the 300-strong Australian special forces detachment that is operating in Uruzgan and mainly comprised of units from the Special Air Service (SAS) and the army's regular commando battalion, 4RAR. Its primary mission is to locate and capture or assassinate insurgent leaders and bomb-makers. Some 800 other Australian troops are in Afghanistan performing engineering, logistical or support roles.

The previous conservative Australian government authorised the deployment of the special forces into frontline combat in Uruzgan in mid-2007. The Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, which took office in November 2007, has continued and expanded their deployment. As a result, casualties have spiked sharply. Only one soldier was killed between October 2001 and October 2007. In the past 15 months, seven more have lost their lives and more than 50 have been wounded.

While the number is still small, Afghanistan is now the most costly conflict for the Australian military since its operations in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971, when 500 died and some 3,100 were wounded.

Sher's death has prompted another round of

speculation in the Australian media as to whether the incoming Obama administration will request that Rudd deploys even larger numbers of combat troops to the Afghan war—with the prospect of greater casualties.

Under Obama, Afghanistan will be central to the US strategy of asserting its influence in Central Asia at the expense of its main rivals in the region—Russia and China. Establishing supply lines to Afghanistan, independent of the increasingly unstable route across Pakistan or a contentious path through Russia, is being exploited to bolster the pro-US client state in Georgia, strengthen ties with Azerbaijan and oil-rich Kazakhstan, and develop relations with Uzbekistan and gas-rich Turkmenistan which both border Afghanistan. (See: "US 'surge' in Afghanistan threatens wider war")

Theoretically, a complex "East-West corridor" for both military supplies and oil and gas pipelines could be developed, stretching from Europe to northern Afghanistan. As Indian diplomat M.K. Bhadrakumar noted in the *Asia Times* on December 20: "The project, if it materialises, will be a geopolitical coup—the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. At one stroke, the US will be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan."

The US military is already preparing for a dramatic escalation in the Afghan war and stepped-up incursions into Pakistan to target insurgent safe-havens. It has announced that its troop numbers in the country will double from 30,000 to 60,000. Pressure on Australia to boost its commitment as well is considered virtually inevitable.

The January 6 editorial of the Melbourne Age commented: "With most Australian troops having left Iraq... Washington would be well aware Canberra has capacity to increase forces in Afghanistan. The military protection that Australia derives from the US alliance also carries expectations of reciprocity, so Mr Rudd will find it hard simply to deny any request from Mr Obama for more help in Afghanistan."

Sections of the Australian establishment support sending additional forces as they consider the protracted Afghan war an opportunity to finally dispense with the "Vietnam Syndrome"—the reluctance of governments to deploy troops into combat out of fears this could ignite domestic political opposition. The Army's infantry battalions and armoured squadrons, for example, have not gone into battle for 37 years.

Two Army officers wrote papers last year denouncing the policy of not sending the infantry battalions into frontline roles. The Murdoch press widely publicised their criticisms and supported the officers with a column in the *Australian* calling for Rudd to "let the infantry do its job" in Afghanistan.

Last month, the campaign was stepped-up by retired Major General Jim Molan, who for a time commanded the Australian task force in Iraq and was prevented from undertaking offensive operations by the then Howard government. While giving full support to the Bush administration's occupation of Iraq, Howard was acutely conscious that Australian casualties would have galvanised political opposition. In late 2002 and early 2003, some of the largest demonstrations internationally against the impending invasion took place in Australia.

Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Molan complained that Howard's deployments to both Afghanistan and Iraq had "lacked military logic", as they did not allow troops to engage in combat. The Rudd government, he declared, had to consider the "option to deploy a joint combat group of up to 2,000 capable personnel *permitted to fight* and give itself the option of increasing its commitment up to 6,000 by

about 2011" (emphasis added).

Again the *Australian* signalled its support. In an editorial on December 27, it declared: "There is one request the Rudd government must be ready to answer as soon as President-elect Barack Obama takes office next month—a call for more Australian combat troops to join the allied effort in Afghanistan...."

"Major General Molan argues that Australia has got used to deploying the ADF [Australian Defence Forces] in international peacemaking and peacekeeping operations, and that we need a culture where the armed forces are equipped and expected to fight long wars."

The remedy, it declared, "could be to add one of the six regular infantry battalions, plus support troops, to supplement, or rest, the hard-working SAS" in Afghanistan.

The *Australian* speaks for powerful sections of the political establishment who want the population to become accustomed to troops dying in overseas interventions. In a period of economic and political upheaval, they expect Australian governments to be prepared to deploy military force to defend their economic and strategic interests, especially in the Asia-Pacific region—regardless of the human cost. A stepped-up involvement in Afghanistan is viewed as both a training ground to blood the Australian Army and a down-payment for future US assistance.

The Rudd government has not ruled out a major escalation. When questioned over Molan's column, Minister for Defence Joel Fitzgibbon emphasised only that, thus far, Canberra had "received no approach from the US... to increase our troop commitment".



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