

New Zealand soldier killed in Afghanistan

Tom Peters
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Lieutenant Tim O'Donnell, 28, was the first New Zealand soldier to die in the US-led Afghan war. He was killed in an ambush on August 3 in Bamiyan Province, north-west of the Afghan capital Kabul. His patrol of about 12 soldiers in three vehicles was hit by an improvised explosive device (IED), followed by rocket-propelled grenade and small arms fire. Two other New Zealand soldiers were seriously injured and an Afghan interpreter received minor injuries.

The attack in Bamiyan province, regarded as one of Afghanistan's safest, comes amid intensified fighting and bloodshed. US President Obama's "surge" of an extra 30,000 US soldiers has brought the total number of foreign troops to 150,000. A record 102 foreign troops were killed in June, followed by 89 in July. A recent UN report found a 31 percent spike in Afghan civilian casualties in the first half of this year, with 1,271 killed and 1,997 wounded.

O'Donnell's death is a tragedy for his family and friends, for which the entire New Zealand political establishment is responsible. Both the National Party government and Labour Party opposition have supported the war and New Zealand's involvement. O'Donnell was part of the NZ Defence Force's 140-strong Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), sent to Bamiyan in 2003 by the previous Helen Clark-led Labour government.

New Zealand also has about 80 elite Special Air Service (SAS) troops in Afghanistan. These highly trained commandos, which took part in the initial US-led invasion, have been redeployed four times under Labour and National governments. According to comments by Norway's defence chief last year, the New Zealand SAS was taking over from Norwegian troops who had been involved in arresting insurgent leaders allegedly responsible for suicide attacks in the Kabul region.

Following O'Donnell's death, Prime Minister John

Key made clear that there would be no early withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. "We owe it to the thousands of New Zealanders who have served in Bamiyan in the last seven or eight years to see the job done and to be in a position where we can hand back control," he declared.

The *Dominion Post*'s editorial on August 4 criticised "those who have seized on the death of Lieutenant O'Donnell to argue that it should be the catalyst for a withdrawal". The *New Zealand Herald* coldly stated that New Zealand must "expect such a cost as it meets its commitments" and warned that the government should not be deterred by "the likelihood of a higher death toll over the next year or so".

On August 4, all the parliamentary parties lined up with the National government to mark O'Donnell's death and in doing so to indicate their support for New Zealand's participation in the Afghan war. Facing widespread opposition to the war, the Labour Party, Greens and the Maori Party have all called for the SAS to be withdrawn from Afghanistan, but supported the continued presence of the PRT troops.

A nationwide poll conducted by Research New Zealand in May found that an overwhelming majority of respondents—77 percent—favoured some form of withdrawal of New Zealand troops from Afghanistan. Of those, 40 percent supported a complete pullout and another 37 percent favoured the withdrawal of SAS troops. Only 10 percent wanted all troops to remain and the rest were undecided.

Currently, New Zealand's PRT is scheduled to remain in Afghanistan until 2014, with a gradual reduction of troops starting in September 2011. The government has set March 2011 as a withdrawal date for the SAS troops.

The criminal role of New Zealand troops in Afghanistan was highlighted on August 15 in the *Sunday*

Star-Times, which revealed that SAS troops were assisting the Crisis Response Unit (CRU) in carrying out raids and arresting alleged insurgents. The article stated that SAS soldiers had been involved “in arrests more than two dozen times since it began working with the CRU last year”.

Those arrested were handed over to the notorious National Directorate of Security (NDS), which, according to Amnesty International, carries out the “systemic and routine torture of suspects”. A British high court recently upheld a ban on British forces transferring prisoners to the NDS after reports of beatings, electric shocks, starvation, amputations and burns, with at least one prisoner dying.

The Labour Party’s support for the withdrawal of SAS forces is completely cynical. It was a Labour government—supported by its coalition partner, the “left-wing” Alliance—that sent the SAS to Afghanistan in the first place. Responding to the allegations of torture, the Greens’ defence spokesman Keith Locke reiterated the party’s call for an SAS withdrawal, saying: “We don’t want New Zealand’s good name muddied by links [to] the torture of prisoners”.

Both parties continued to fully support the PRT’s presence. Responding to O’Donnell’s death, Locke declared the Greens were “proud of the good peace-keeping and reconstruction work that our Provincial Reconstruction Team has done in Bamiyan province and we mourn the loss of one of its members”. In reality, the PRT is just as much a part of the US-led war as the SAS operations. The PRT’s purpose is to try to bolster support for the occupation and the US puppet government in Kabul among a population that is overwhelmingly hostile to the presence of foreign troops.

The war in Afghanistan has nothing to do with “fighting terrorism” or bringing peace and democracy to the country. It is a neo-colonial war aimed at crushing the resistance among the Afghan people to the military occupation and the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai. The US is seeking to transform the country into a base of operations for pursuing its economic and strategic ambitions in the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

New Zealand is supporting the war to ensure US backing for its own commercial and strategic interests.

Wellington wants to safeguard trade talks with the US and, along with Australia, needs Washington’s backing to maintain a dominant role among the small island states of the South West Pacific, in the face of growing Chinese influence in the region.

The death of Tim O’Donnell coincided with the annual Pacific Islands Forum in Vanuatu, where the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, confirmed that tripartite free trade talks would be held between Australia, New Zealand and the US for the first time in decades. The talks were part of negotiations that began earlier this year, to extend an existing P4 trade agreement between New Zealand, Brunei, Chile and Singapore to include the US, Australia, Peru and Vietnam.

Campbell told reporters that the US would seek to “play a substantial role in the economic drama that is playing out in the Asia-Pacific region”. Referring to NZ and US soldiers “serving and dying together” in Afghanistan, Campbell said that there would be “a very deliberate effort on the part of the United States to work more closely with New Zealand as a recognition of the role that New Zealand is playing in global politics”.

It is precisely to retain this US backing that the entire political establishment in New Zealand is committed to keeping troops in Afghanistan, despite broad popular opposition and the further casualties that will inevitably occur.



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