

Twenty-third Australian soldier killed in Afghanistan

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On February 20, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) chief, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, announced the death in Afghanistan of the twenty-third Australian soldier killed there since operations began in support of the US-led invasion and occupation in 2001.

Houston said Sapper Jamie Larcombe, a 21-year-old member of the 1st Combat Engineer Regiment, and an unnamed Afghan interpreter died when they came under heavy machine-gun fire during a military operation in the Charniston Valley in the southern Uruzgan province.

Larcombe's death followed the loss of another soldier from the same regiment, 22-year-old Corporal Richard Atkinson, who was killed on February 2. Both young men were on their first tour of duty in Afghanistan. Another four Australian soldiers have been wounded in Afghanistan so far this year, with 168 defence force personnel wounded in action since 2002.

The federal Labor government greeted the news with the usual platitudes, along with expressions of its unwavering commitment to an indefinite Australian involvement in the deeply unpopular war and warnings that Australians should be prepared to accept more casualties.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said Larcombe's death had occurred as part of an expanding counter-insurgency operation in the area. Although she was "immeasurably sad," she was "certainly very determined to see the mission through". It was "in the nation's interest," she declared, "to remain in Afghanistan".

Defence Minister Stephen Smith predicted further deaths in the ongoing commitment to Washington's longest war. "Every time there's a tragic death of an Australian soldier in Afghanistan... [it] causes the Australian community to ponder why we are making

this effort," he conceded. "My response is ... we are working in what we very strongly believe is Australia's national interest, our national security interest ... to seek to stare down international terrorism. As we pursue our national interest ... we have to steel ourselves for further fatalities and further casualties."

These ominous statements came less than two weeks after Smith attacked reports by Fairfax group newspapers—the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*—claiming that the Defence Department had drawn up secret plans to reduce the number of Australian troops, starting this year.

The newspapers alleged that these plans were produced as part of federal budget calculations in the wake of the Queensland floods, Cyclone Yasi and other recent natural disasters in Australia.

Smith rejected these claims, making clear that Labor's commitment of 1,550 troops in Afghanistan was open-ended. Referring to the alleged goal of handing security in Uruzgan to Afghan forces, he stated: "We believe we are on track for our mentoring and training mission to be successful over the next two to four years, but we certainly don't see any drawdown over the next immediate period, 12 months to two years."

For the Gillard government the question of any early withdrawal of troops is a politically sensitive question and bound up with the anti-democratic backroom coup that removed her predecessor Kevin Rudd as prime minister in June 2010.

US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks late last year showed that the Washington military and diplomatic establishment was dissatisfied with Rudd throughout 2008 and 2009. Cables referred to Rudd's pessimism about the Afghanistan war and his reluctance to provide additional troops for the US

military surge planned for 2010. Of particular concern for the US military and President Barack Obama's administration was the Rudd government's refusal to replace the retiring Dutch contingent as the leading force in Uruzgan.

A December 2009 cable from the US embassy in Canberra commented: "Rudd, who is loathe to increase troop levels, had hoped to offer increased civilian effort to the US as a substitute." In the same month, the US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, told ADF chief Houston that the "Rudd government's refusal to allow Australian troops to take the fight to the Taliban was impairing the US war effort ... doing permanent damage ... to the US perception of Australia's military commitment".

Washington brought pressure to bear on Rudd to agree to increase the combat role of Australian troops by allowing Special Forces to operate outside Uruzgan. In 2010 this meant the involvement of Australian commandos with Canadian and US forces in major operations against the Taliban around Kandahar.

This was not enough, however, for Washington. The leaked US embassy cables revealed that the Obama White House was also dissatisfied with Rudd's diplomatic manoeuvres in Asia, which took place without consultation with Washington. Essentially, while fully committed to Washington, Rudd was seeking to perform a balancing act with China, Australia's largest export market. Since at least 2008 the US embassy had identified Gillard as a more suitable prime minister.

The US embassy was deeply involved in the plots within the Labor Party to remove Rudd. Right-wing party power brokers, including government minister Mark Arbib, were secretly providing the embassy with details of the inner-party conflicts that erupted after Rudd attempted to impose a new tax on mining companies and the Murdoch-controlled media launched a campaign against him.

On the morning of June 23, the day the coup plotters moved against Rudd, Defence Minister John Faulkner announced that Canberra would withdraw troops within two to four years. But as soon as Rudd was deposed, Gillard announced a commitment to the US war in Afghanistan that would last "through this decade at least". On July 7, Faulkner resigned as defence minister.

The entire ruling elite in Canberra fully understands that this commitment has nothing to do with fighting terrorism but is supporting Washington's efforts to secure hegemony over the geo-politically and economically strategic region of Central and South Asia. In return, Canberra receives US military and diplomatic backing, not least for its own predatory ambitions in the South Pacific, including in East Timor and Solomon Islands. The ongoing sacrifice of Australian soldiers' lives in Afghanistan is part of the price for this support.



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