The Fall of Kabul

By Gray Connolly

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban this past August brought Australia's longest war to its end. Anyone who served in, or served in support of, the Afghan theatre of war, cannot pretend to be, in any way, shocked by this result. For my part, I most certainly was not.

In the past 20 years, almost 40,000 Australians served in the Afghanistan war, alongside an Allied coalition from almost 50 countries. Tragically, at least 41 Australians died in the war. Our many hundreds of physically wounded and those suffering traumatic brain injuries will live with Afghanistan for the rest of their lives, as will those thousands for whom the war in Afghanistan (and/or Iraq) is a recurring nightmare, and the cause of persistent insomnia – and sporadic survivors' guilt.

For a very brief moment in August, the fall of Kabul – and the sheer chaos of an evacuation that was never properly planned and supported – forced Australians to ponder their longest war. That moment of reflection proved to be just as illusory as the gains our war was, supposedly, always making in Afghanistan.

Contrary to myth, the Afghanistan War, like the Iraq War, was never very popular with Australians, or, indeed, even very well understood. The messy reality of '*war as it is*' left those Australians who did serve throughout the Middle East – and, much worse, left our families here at home – to live in a parallel universe. No sustained public case was ever made by the Australian Government for our wars, leaving our families to bear the heaviest and most lonely burdens.

Watching Kabul fall in August to the Taliban, my thoughts were, initially, of the utterly shambolic Allied conduct of the war's final phase. I was, in particular, mystified by the foolish decision to abandon the massive and secure Bagram airfield complex, which allowed Allied forces to have strategic depth and to dominate Afghanistan's very regionalised conflicts, in favour of, insanely, Kabul's cramped and very vulnerable airport. Abandoning Bagram violated all the most cardinal rules of military prudence.

Gray Connolly outside NATO Headquarters, Kabul, October 2006

The resulting disaster was, simply, inevitable.

However, as the waste of two decades of war ended in the Taliban capturing Kabul's presidential palace, all I found myself thinking about, watching the last Allied transports depart Kabul, were those whom I had served with – and, most especially, my late and beloved parents, who had so loyally supported me throughout my long absences from home while serving in the Royal Australian Navy.

With the war now over, attention has been drawn to successive Australian Governments, (of all parties) mishandling of War, as well as the neglect of Veterans and military families. Hopefully, after all these years, something will now be done. As with various Governments' support for the war when it was being fought, one cannot help thinking this attention will be sporadic and will result in only cosmetic changes. My own hope is the voluminous and confusing repatriation and Veterans entitlements legislation, enacted for past wars, will be repealed and replaced with laws for the Veterans population we do have.

As for we in the Veteran community, it is time to, as best we can, put our wars behind us, or, at least, make even our most difficult experiences the foundation for something noble. In the magnificent film, *Testament of Youth*, based on the Great War memoirs of British nurse, Vera Brittain, whose fiancée, brother, and university friends, were all killed in that war, a friend says to Vera, collapsing under the weight of her war grief, 'All of us are surrounded by ghosts – and now we need to learn how to live with them'. Indeed, we all do. Lest We Forget. **BN**

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