



RSL TASMANIA
SERVICE TO MARK THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF
AUSTRALIAN SERVICE IN AFGHANISTAN
ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
HOBART CENOTAPH, SUNDAY 11 OCTOBER 2026

Good morning, everyone. It is an honour to join you all here at the Cenotaph as we mark the 25th anniversary of Australian service in Afghanistan.

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge all veterans and their families and supporters here today, as well as those who are currently serving in our Australian Defence Force, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have served in defence of Country.

Australia first committed its sons and daughters to the war in Afghanistan in October 2001. It was in the raw aftermath of the attacks of September the 11th in America, that Australia's Defence Force established what was called Operation Slipper, and our Special Air Service troops joined the campaign against those who had sheltered the perpetrators of that atrocity.¹

What began as an act of solidarity with a wounded ally, became, in time, this nation's longest war, one that would span 20 years and ultimately touch the lives of some 40,000 Australians who served, in Afghanistan itself and in the wider operations that supported it, across those two decades.²

¹ <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84816> accessed 21 Aug 26

² <https://www.dva.gov.au/news/latest-stories/operation-slipper-and-australias-involvement-in-the-war-in-afghanistan> accessed 21 Aug 26

We remember today not as an abstraction, but individuals. We remember members of the Defence Force including Sergeant Andrew Russell of the SAS, the first Australian to fall, killed in February 2002 when his vehicle struck a landmine in the deserts of the south.³

We remember Trooper David Pearce, Sergeant Matthew Locke, Lance Corporal Jason Marks, and every name that follows theirs on the nation's Roll of Honour. Forty-seven Australians in total, drawn from our Army, our Navy, and our Air Force, who did not come home are recorded on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial.⁴ This is somewhere Rob and I visited just a few weeks ago and that is currently undergoing major redevelopments that are very impressive and extremely moving. I would urge you to visit next time you are in Canberra.

We remember, too, that there were 263 directly wounded during the campaign and that many more carry wounds the eye cannot see but that can have a similarly devastating impact. We think of the families who waited by telephones, who stood at airport barriers, who now stand at gravesides and cenotaphs around Australia on days like today. Their grief is not history to be filed away. It is present, and it is ours to honour.

The story of Australia's service in Afghanistan is not a simple one, and I do not intend to make it simple today. Our forces served initially as part of a coalition response to terrorism and later took responsibility for security and reconstruction in Uruzgan Province, partnering with Afghan soldiers, training local forces and absorbing years of grinding, dangerous work far from the attention of the evening news.⁵

³ <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/104/finishing-the-job> accessed 21 Aug 26

⁴ https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/war_casualties accessed 21 Aug 26

⁵ <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/104/finishing-the-job> accessed 21 Aug 26

Operation Slipper concluded at the end of 2014, but Australia's commitment did not end there. Operation Highroad continued the work of training and advising until 2021, and in that year's final, chaotic weeks, Australian personnel returned once more. This time the focus was the airfield at Kabul to help evacuate citizens, visa holders, and Afghan colleagues in the desperate final days before the country fell back into the hands of the Taliban.⁶ Who can forget those images of the chaos on the evening news.

For many veterans, those images of August 2021 continue to reopen questions that have never fully closed: what had two decades of sacrifice achieved, and what would become of the Afghans who had trusted us?

These are fair questions, and this nation owes its veterans an honest reckoning with them, not a hollow tribute that asks nothing of us in return. The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which examined the toll this war and others took on those who served, made clear that commemoration is not enough on its own.

We must match our words today with the ongoing work of care that will include mental health support, transition services, and a genuine national commitment to those who bear the invisible costs of war. To honour our veterans only in ceremony, and then to forget them in policy, would be its own kind of betrayal.

Yet, alongside the grief and the hard questions, there is something else that deserves to be said plainly on a day such as this. The character our servicemen and women showed was extraordinary. Their courage under fire in the valleys of Uruzgan, their patience in years of slow, unglamorous mentoring work, their loyalty to the mates beside them and to the Afghan partners who fought alongside them were not small things.

⁶ <https://www.dva.gov.au/news/latest-stories/operation-slipper-and-australias-involvement-in-the-war-in-afghanistan> accessed 21 Aug 26

Four Australians were awarded the Victoria Cross for their extreme gallantry during the war in Afghanistan. Trooper Mark Donaldson in 2009, Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith in 2011, Corporal Daniel Kechran in 2021 and, posthumously in 2014, Tasmanian Corporal Cameron Baird for his valour at Ghawchak. They embodied a spirit that ran through the whole of this deployment and demonstrated a willingness to place duty to others above concern for self.⁷

That spirit does not belong only to the decorated few. It belonged to every soldier who walked a patrol route despite knowing what might lie beneath it, and to every sailor and aviator who supported them from ship and sky.

So today, twenty-five years on, we hold two truths together, as commemoration so often asks us to do. We honour a war that was long, costly, and whose final outcome brought sorrow as much as resolution.

And we honour the men and women who served in it with skill, with courage, and with decency, and the families who served alongside them in every way but name.

To the veterans here today, this nation sees you and it is grateful.

To the families of the forty-seven who did not return, their names are carved in stone at the Australian War Memorial, but they live, more truly, in the way that family, colleagues and friends still hold them dear.

To every Australian who wore this nation's uniform in Afghanistan, in whatever capacity, for however long, and for those who continue to do so, thank you.

Lest we forget.

⁷ <https://www.army.gov.au/community/members-veterans/vale/corporal-cameron-baird-vc-mg> accessed 21 Aug 26