Unfamiliar allies: Australian cross-cultural communication in Afghanistan and Iraq during the war on terror

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Abstract

During the war on terror, Australia became engaged as a military-alliance partner in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both wars, these commitments were relatively small-scale and Australians were primarily engaged as subordinate elements of larger coalition formations. Australian soldiers had to manage the obvious challenge of linguistic and cross-cultural communication with unfamiliar Afghan and Iraqi allies, but linguistic and cross-cultural communication problems were also significant in relations with Western coalition allies. Despite surface commonalities, Australians found that the troops they worked with from the United States and the Netherlands had noticeably different military cultures. In the Iraq war, the American commitment to a whole-of-nation struggle engaging large numbers of regular troops, reservists, National Guard, and civilians was significantly different to the low-level Australian deployments, and challenges emerged both from the management of American expectations, and from everyday Australian interactions in an ultra-patriotic American military culture. Conversely, Australians in Afghanistan worked with the Dutch, an unfamiliar western ally whose liberal social values and consensus/discussion-based military culture differed from Australian military expectations. This chapter will explore the social history of Australian military communication with allies in the war on terror focusing on cross-cultural communication and language.

Former Australian soldier Shane Bryant quickly found transition to war in Afghanistan as a contractor had its cross-cultural challenges. 'The other dog handlers and I were travelling on what the Americans call Space-A - space available transport. I was starting to learn a whole new language and Space-A, translated, meant low priority. Uniformed American personnel got top billing, arranged by rank, and coalition soldiers and airmen were next. At the bottom of the heap were the civilian contractors like me.'[1]

Australian military[2] language, like any other, has adopted lexical components over time as Australians have engaged in cross-cultural communication with a wide variety of military partners.[3] Adoption of various expressions can arise because of exposure over time, a practical desire to use commonly understood terms to simplify communication, or it can relate to a value placed on specialist language. Before the First World War, British military language and style were valued. The phrase *all Sir Garnet*, a shortening of 'it's all Sir Garnet' meaning everything is all right, was a tribute to a very competent, late-Victorian British General Sir Garnet Wolsey, but it is now almost unknown.[4] Some terms from Australia's long military association with British India have endured: every day sick Australian soldiers arrive at a military medical centre to see the medic or the doctor and are given a *chit* (Indian army slang for a small piece of paper) excusing them from duty or stating what medical restrictions they have. *Dhobi* is a term for washing, while a *puggaree* (decorative cloth band) still adorns the Australian Army slouch hat. Other terms still in use reflect Australian military deployments to Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Solomon Islands, and Bougainville. In his Afghanistan war memoir, Nathan Mullins notes the use of *makan* (Indonesian Malaysian term for eating), *vui tui* (small plastic leaflet book, from the Vietnamese for small photo album), and *em tasol* (South Pacific pidgin for that's all, everything is finished).[5] The survival of such terms is tribute to the enduring significance of cross-cultural communication in military environments.

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[1] Shane Bryant with Tony Park (2010), *War Dogs: An Australian and His Dog Go to War in Afghanistan* (Sydney: Macmillan), p. 51.
[2] I use the term military to refer to troops or soldiers, as in members of the Army, Navy, or Air Force.
[3] For a detailed exploration of a range of these terms, see Amanda Laugesen (2005), *Diggerspeak: the Language of Australians at War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press).
[4] Richard Fotheringham (2009), 'Speaking a New World: Language in Early Australian Plays', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, 111, pp. 1-20, here p. 5.
[5] Nathan Mullins (2011), *Keep Your Head Down: One Commando's Brutally Honest Account of Fighting in Afghanistan* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin), pp. 80-81.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provided opportunities for further linguistic and cross-cultural exchange. In both wars, Australian military commitments to an area collectively known as the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO)[6] were relatively small-scale and Australians were almost always deployed as subordinate elements of larger coalition formations where they were compelled by circumstances to interact with different military cultures.

The past decade has seen a growth in the examination of warfare from the perspectives of language and communication, notably in the work of Footitt and Kelly.[7] This chapter contributes to this scholarship on language, while also building on earlier scholarship addressing the way individual memoirs reveal the experience of war, such as the contributions of Woodward and Jenkings.[8] It examines accounts of Australians who participated in two recent conflicts to trace instances of cross-cultural communication. There is a rich vein of scholarship examining the memoirs of participants in recent conflicts,[9] but research on the Australian experience is still in its infancy. During the war on terror Australians served with Iraqis, Afghans, Italians, Canadians, and Singaporeans among others, but this chapter will explore the social history of Australian military communication with their US and Dutch allies. This research is based on selected personal accounts[10] that reveal how participants understood and experienced cross-cultural communication in war, and positions these accounts beside news reports, as well as the author's personal experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2006-07 and 2008-09.

The deployment to the MEAO meant Australians had to address two specific issues of communication, interpreting, and translation in war, one relating to the locations of the wars and the other to the allies they worked with. Firstly, a common feature in both deployments was that the local populations spoke languages (primarily Arabic or Pashtun) that most

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[6] The term MEAO encompassed Australian military activities in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in bases and on ships throughout the Arabian Gulf, but the focus of this chapter is on Iraq and Afghanistan.

[7] Hilary Footit and Michael Kelly (eds) (2012), *Languages and the Military: Alliances, Occupation and Peace Building* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan).

[8] Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkings (2012), '"This Place Isn't Worth the Left Boot of One of Our Boys": Geopolitics, Militarism and Memoirs of the Afghanistan War', *Political Geography*, 31:8, pp. 495-508.

[9] Synne L. Dyvik (2016), '"Valhalla rising": Gender, Embodiment and Experience in Military Memoirs', *Security Dialogue*, 47:2, pp. 133-150; Lamberta Hendrika Esmeralda Kleinreesink (2017), *On Military Memoirs: A Quantitative Comparison of International Afghanistan War Autobiographies* (Boston, MA: Brill); Julien Pomarède (2018), 'Normalizing Violence through Front-line Stories: The Case of *American Sniper*', *Critical Military Studies,* 4:1, pp. 52-71.

[10] While uniformed members of the military dominate this study, defence civilians and former members of the military also form part of this group of Australians attempting to communicate with allies during war.

Australians were unfamiliar with. This lack of familiarity complicated Australian interaction with their allies in the Iraqi and Afghan security forces, the sometimes neutral civilian population, and also their insurgent enemies. Such unfamiliarity meant use of interpreters was essential and even with such mediation, linguistic interaction with local nationals could be obscured by differences. Cultural differences between Australians, Iraqis, and Afghans provided further communication challenges. Secondly, a common feature of both deployments was that the stated mission language was English, the majority language of the United States and a widely spoken second language of the Netherlands, and this might have been supposed as eliminating communication difficulties. But despite linguistic commonalities between Australia and the United States there were some challenges of communication, interpretation, and language and even greater differences emerged between Australians and the Dutch.

The experience of Australian communication with allies in the two theatres of war varied to a tremendous degree. For younger or junior-ranking Australians who might never have travelled overseas, never worked with people from another country, and who lacked exposure to different cultural practices, deployment with the US or Dutch military could provide a significant culture shock. For those meeting Americans for the first time, this culture shock might perhaps have been partially alleviated by the ubiquitous presence of American popular culture in the Australian mass media. But the fictive media version of the United States differed from the reality.[11] Other more experienced Australians had well-developed prior understanding of their future coalition partners. Before serving as a senior commander at the United States headquarters in Iraq in 2004-05, Major General Jim Molan had practical exposure to working with the Americans on joint military exercises, giving him a real understanding of American military culture.[12] Unlike the accounts of other soldiers, his memoir rarely dwells on matters of cross-cultural communication.

Trying to communicate with the locals in an unfamiliar world: Language mediators

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[11] Richard Gehrmann (2017), 'Enemies of the State(s): Cultural Memory, Cinema, and the Iraq War', in Jessica Gildersleeve and Richard Gehrmann (eds), *Memory and the Wars on Terror* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 69-89.

[12] Jim Molan (2008), *Running the War in Iraq* (Sydney: HarperCollins), pp. 23-24; 40.

While the focus of this chapter is on linguistic and cross-cultural communication with Australia's Western coalition allies, this needs to be considered in the context of the degree of isolation and social distance that could be felt by those engaged in linguistic and cross-cultural communication with Afghans and Iraqis. Tone and intensity could aid in communication but spoken words might be unintelligible, as infantryman James Prascevic discovered when he walked into potential danger from sniper fire in Baghdad—'I was yelled at by an Iraqi soldier and although it was in his language, I knew that he was telling me off.'[13] Operating in a linguistically and culturally unfamiliar environment, the Australian Defence Force worked to reduce problems by deploying military members who had native fluency through their own migrant heritage, by training troops without native language background in the challenging languages required for the Middle East deployments, and by employing contract interpreters. Unfortunately, despite a large and diverse immigration program, Australia did not have a vast supply of military-grade Iraqi, Arabic, and Afghan language speakers. The Australian military was unable to recruit many migrants with native fluency in these languages,[14] a factor in part explained by structural and language issues[15] and a natural reluctance of those who have migrated from war-torn countries to join the military or have their children join the military.

The Australian Defence Force School of Languages at Point Cook supported military deployments by conducting year-long courses, three-month courses, and month-long courses in a range of languages,[16] and some Australians were given specific language training in Arabic and in the Afghan languages Pashtun and Dari. Previous Australian deployments to Bougainville, East Timor, and the Solomon Islands required instruction in Indonesian/Tetum (Timorese) and variants of Pidgin English, and trainees could gain a degree of competence in these languages in a limited study time. Very basic communication could be achieved in a very short timeframe, as infantryman Paul de Gelder found out when his completion of a two-

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[13] James Prascevic (2014), *Returned Soldier: My Battles: Timor, Iraq, Afghanistan, Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Melbourne: Melbourne Books), p. 92.

[14] This is despite specific targeting of this group. See Anthony John (2013), 'From Institution to Occupation: Australian Army Culture in Transition', *Australian Army Journal* 10:3, pp. 187-202, here p. 191.

[15] Hugh Smith (1995), 'The Dynamics of Social Change and the Australian Defence Force', *Armed Forces & Society*, 21:4, pp. 531-51, here p. 12.

[16] See Issares Surachestpong (2016), 'A Needs Assessment of Intensive Language Teaching at the ADF School of Languages', PhD thesis, Victoria University.

week basic Tetum course and the fact that nobody else could speak Tetum resulted in him becoming his platoon's translator.[17]

The languages required for Iraq and Afghanistan were more difficult to learn, and in the case of Arabic training for the Iraq deployment, one of the complications was that there are extensive variants of Arabic throughout the Arab world. In both wars there was a reliance on contract interpreters although the Australian Defence Force was engaged in competition for international trained interpreters with the United States, the primary end user for interpreters. These (mostly male) interpreters ranged from native-born speakers who were American citizens to local nationals who were often university-educated young men taking considerable risks by operating unarmed in a war zone. These urban-centric tertiary-educated interpreters also had to deal with the challenge of living and working in what for them were harsh conditions in rural areas, and the significant risks of combat. Despite their unarmed status, there were instances of interpreters using weapons. For example, in January 2009 one interpreter working with Australians training the Afghan National Army (ANA) was caught in an ambush and responded to the crisis by using a weapon captured from insurgents to fire at the opposing Afghan insurgents, before using his language skills 'to motivate the ANA in the rear squad,'[18] forms of 'cross-cultural communication' which were highly appreciated by the Australian soldiers he was working with. But there are limits to what interpreters could do to bridge gaps. Given that Australians were in war zones where they experienced a high degree of social distance and isolation from the unfamiliar local people, it would be anticipated that Australians would gravitate towards United States or Dutch soldiers whose culture on the surface appeared to be so much more familiar.

Working with Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan

Australian military engagement in the MEAO covered specific phases and locations. A small Australian force entered Afghanistan to drive out the Taliban in 2001, and following this, small numbers of Australian troops were located at Kabul's Kandahar airfield (KAF), and

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[17] Paul de Gelder (2011), *No Time for Fear* (Camberwell: Penguin), p. 93.

[18] Ben Gooley, Matt Lines, and Tom Larter (2012), 'OMLT – in contact', in Dave Allen (ed), *War in the Valleys: 7th Battalion Battle Group (MRTF-1), Afghanistan, October 2008 to June 2009* (Wilsonton: Ryter Publishing), p. 36.

eventually 1,500 were deployed in 2006 at Tarin Kowt in the southern province of Uruzgan. In 2003, a small number of Australians participated in the invasion of Iraq, and in the subsequent reconstruction phase a small number of Australians were posted to staff, logistics, and air traffic control positions in the capital city Baghdad, in the Green Zone of central Baghdad, and at Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). A security detachment (SECDET) was maintained to protect the Australian Embassy in Baghdad and further troops were sent to train the new Iraqi army. Between 2005 and 2009, Australia had a 500-strong task force in the southern provinces of Al Muthanna and Dhi Qar. With the exception of the Dutch-run Uruzgan province, Australians were principally located near Americans.

Australia and the United States are English-speaking, Anglo-dominated, multicultural nations sharing many common cultural links, both through historical experience and through more recent globalisation, so it might be presumed that wartime cross-cultural communication problems would be rare. As allies through the ANZUS treaty and other military pacts, Australians conducted routine military exercises with Americans, and personnel from both nations served in reciprocal exchanges. Australians have previously fought alongside Americans in the Second World War and in Vietnam, and have a history of cooperation. However, the American Iraq and Afghanistan war commitment to a whole-of-nation struggle engaging large numbers of regulars, reservists, National Guard, and civilians was significantly different to the small-scale Australian deployments. Indeed, when Jim Molan first arrived in Iraq in 2004, he noted that while the entire coalition of predominantly United States troops numbered 175,000, he was one of only 311 Australians in Iraq.[19] Challenges emerged both from the management of American expectations and from everyday Australian interactions in an ultra-patriotic American military culture. As a subordinate partner, Australians understood American military language and communication processes, frequently adopting lexical aspects of the American military, and despite some differences cross-cultural communication problems were generally overcome.

The United States was fighting a high-intensity war in which year-long repeat deployments were common. David Savage, an Afghanistan-based defence civilian working on aid projects (who was to subsequently be wheelchair-bound with significant brain and spinal injuries following a child suicide-bombing attack) recalled the experience of one of his security detachment, a twenty-three-year-old American. This soldier was on his fourth

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[19] Molan, *Running the War in Iraq*, p. 310.

deployment to the Middle East, having previously served on two tours to Iraq and one to Afghanistan, a not uncommon story that reflected the very high deployment rate that was just part of the American war experience.[20] While the number of Australians deploying on multiple occasions increased over time, unlike their American allies, few undertook repeated twelve-month tours of duty.

Australian troops arriving in the MEAO had to adjust their expectations of Americans. For many in the Australian military, the Australian heroic representation of the Vietnam War experience[21] had created a perception that Australians had a much greater warfighting ability than the Americans. Jim Molan recalled, 'Since I had joined the army, almost every story I had heard from my superiors and every account I had read concentrated on the deficiencies of our powerful friend. I believed that US soldiers were certainly brave but far from competent … We spoke of how the US lost the Vietnam War, not how "we" lost the Vietnam War.'[22] The experience of being on the sidelines in Iraq[23] and of performing a less significant role in Afghanistan than Commonwealth allies Canada or Britain meant this perception of Australian superiority required some modification.[24]

American culture, and uses of language

Troops arriving in the MEAO had already received briefings on Iraqi or Afghan culture during their pre-deployment training in Australia. On arrival in staging locations in the Arabian Gulf such as Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates Al Minhad base, they could also be given further briefs on cross-cultural adjustment—in this case on adjusting to Americans, as allies they would be working and living with.

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[20] Paul Field (2017), *Gimme Shelter: Stories of Courage, Endurance and Survival from the Frontline and Back Home* (Richmond: Echo), pp. 6-7.

[21] Graeme Dobell (2014), 'The Alliance Echoes and Portents of Australia's Longest War', *Australian Journal of International Affairs,* 68:4, pp. 386-96, here pp. 288-289.

[22] Molan, *Running the War in Iraq*, pp. 23-4. See also Gary McKay (1998), *Delta Four: Australian Riflemen in Vietnam* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin), pp. 215-223.

[23] Jim Hammett (2008), 'We Were Soldiers Once: The Decline of the Royal Australian Infantry Corps?', *Australian Army Journal*, 5:1, pp. 39-50.

[24] On occasions in Iraq, the British actually thought Australians were reluctant to become engaged in combat. John Blaxland (2014), *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press), pp. 241-242, pp. 246-247. For a comparison of the Canadian and Australian deployments see Kim Nossal (2009), 'Making Sense of Afghanistan: The Domestic Politics of International Stabilization Missions in Australia and Canada', *International Journal*, 64:3, pp. 825-42.

These briefs were designed to reduce tension between Australian and US troops, and to increase mutual understanding. Topics included the risk of causing offence by disparaging very distinct American values and religiosity. Shane Bryant worked as a contractor with the United States military in Afghanistan, and viewed Americans positively but observed cultural differences. He recalled: 'They were generally friendly and polite, and I had already picked up that many were overtly religious compared to Australian soldiers. It wasn't unusual to see guys saying grace before they ate.'[25] Australians were warned about American attitudes of hierarchy and respect, and their high degree of ultra-patriotic loyalty in comparison to Australia's more casual and iconoclastic culture. Another topic to be avoided was the low American pay and allowances in comparison to the high Australian service allowance, although infantryman James Prascevic noted that some 'did say that it would be great to be on the sort of money we were but for them it was all about representing their country. Whenever I asked the question, "why did you join up?" most of the time the answer was "9/11." They were so proud of their country and the fact that they could represent it overseas.'[26] Regardless of whether they voted Republican or Democrat, the US President was their commander-in-chief and was accorded significantly more respect than Australian Prime Ministers were, and public Australian speech with Americans had to be adjusted accordingly. The American propensity to wear unusually short haircuts, so-called 'high and tight' haircuts, and to spend hours in the gym weight lifting also distinguished them from Australians. A number of Australians were embedded in predominantly American coalition headquarters, and the requirements to understand American cultural norms posed a daily challenge for them, a cross-cultural challenge that was far less pressing for their fellow Australians based in the large all-Australian deployments in Al Muthanna and Dhi Qar in southern Iraq.

Respectful language and the use of profanity was a further cultural difference. While in private everyday speech military conversations between ordinary American soldiers could range from polite to explicitly coarse,[27] in public or official interactions the American military exhibited a high degree of political correctness in relation to appropriate language use and unacceptable behaviour. This was taken to what Australians could see as extreme lengths. All troops in the Middle East were lectured on the requirement to drink enough water, and a basic test individuals could perform on themselves was to check that they had

[25] Bryant, *War Dogs*, pp. 62-3.
[26] Prascevic, *Returned Soldier: My Battles*, p. 83.
[27] For examples of this see Evan Wright (2005), *Generation Kill* (London: Corgi), and Chris Kyle (2012), *American Sniper* (New York: Harper).

clear rather than dark yellow urine two times per day. The American public-advisory slogan was a circumspect 'be clear twice a day' while the very direct Australian version was 'piss clear twice a day.' Political correctness and circumspection was also reflected in the language that could be used in public gatherings. Award-winning stand-up comedian Tom Gleeson has described his experiences undertaking a concert tour to the Middle East in 2006,[28] where he performed his highly amusing musical parody of British artist James Blunt's song 'You're beautiful' to mixed Australian and American audiences. Having comprehensively trashed the character, life, and music of Blunt, Gleeson concluded this segment of his performance with the words 'James Blunt, rhymes with c[un]t.' Americans would visibly recoil in horror, complaints would be made, Gleeson's public relations minders would tell him not to do it—and of course he did it again in the next performance!

American military culture regulated aspects of the interaction between males and females. While both militaries had rules prohibiting inappropriate sexual contact or fraternisation, Australians were accustomed to a more relaxed level of everyday interaction between males and females, and found American restrictions unusual. When transiting through US staging bases in Middle Eastern countries for short periods, Australians were accommodated on stretchers in large hangar-sized temporary sleeping tents. As guests, Australians were obliged to adhere to American requirements that dictated males and females sleep in separate tents, despite the fact that the male sleeping tent might be crammed full to overflow and the female tent might only be occupied by half a dozen soldiers. In such circumstances, Australians in transit would have been comfortable sleeping in the same location regardless of gender. This is not to imply that United States rules of public behaviour protected Australian [29] and American women[30] from unwelcome sexual attention. There was a difference between the prescribed rules and the actual realities of everyday life, especially in an environment where women were a minority. Some female Americans experienced rapes by male soldiers. Signals officer Sarah Watson commented that the gender imbalance and her

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[28] Tom Gleeson (2008), *Playing Poker with the SAS: A Comedy Tour of Iraq and Afghanistan* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press).

[29] There have been significant changes in the Australian Defence Force since a highly publicised sex scandal in 2011. See Jessica Carniel (2017), 'Death and the Maiden: Memorialisation, Scandal, and the Gendered Mediation of Australian Soldiers', in Jessica Gildersleeve and Richard Gehrmann (eds), *Memory and the Wars on Terror* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 237-62, here pp. 251-55.

[30] See, for example, the memoir of Kayla Williams (2005), *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army* (London: W. W. Norton & Company).

obviously foreign status made her stand out: 'It did add an unwanted pressure. I got hit on quite a bit by the Americans in the mess. They were just blatant.'[31]

Cross-cultural differences also included ethnic diversity and public affirmation of such diversity. The vast US armed forces that deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan were far more ethnically diverse than the much smaller Australian military, with significant numbers of Americans from minority communities, including African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Asian-Americans. This diversity was reflected in public celebratory aspects of US military culture. For example, in Baghdad Australians eating at the DFAC (Dining Facility or mess hall) occasionally encountered posters, singers, musicians, and food celebrating the diversity of America for events such as National Hispanic American Month or Korean American Day. Such public displays of national multiculturalism surprised many Australians who had presumed the United States to be far more monocultural. There are no similar Australian celebrations, despite Australia's ethnic diversity.

Australians on a US base would usually have their meals in an American-run DFAC. They would be offered a varied array of typically American food where high-fat and high-sugar options appear to dominate, but there was enough choice to ensure that the food was still acceptable to Australian tastes. However, even just going to eat was a daily experience of linguistic and cross-cultural engagement. Troops entering the DFAC had to produce their ID card and often submit to being greeted by the armed soldiers on guard with the distinctively American 'Hooah' call, a call Americans would reply to with the same word as an antiphonal response. Australians would usually only respond with that term if they were deliberately making fun of the DFAC guards, or they could alternatively respond with a purposefully clichéd 'g'day mate,' which over time could lead to the DFAC guard being subtly 'retrained' to use this greeting for Australians.

Borrowing of United States military language

As well as cross-cultural adjustment, more formal acculturation of Australians towards the American language of war came with the wholesale adoption of a range of US military terminology by Australians serving in the Middle East. This occurred both because of the

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[31] Paul Field (2017), *Gimme Shelter*, p. 228.

functional or practical requirements to match the dominant military partner and use a common pattern of spoken and written military behaviour, but also because use of such language was a marker of veteran expertise and legitimacy. By using American Middle East military terms, individual Australians demonstrated status and experience of having served in *the sandpit* or *the sandbox*, rather than a benign and therefore lower-status peacekeeping mission such as East Timor or the Solomon islands.

Functional or practical terms were official acronyms and expressions that simplified communication. The author's recollection of terms included *TIC* ('tick,' troops in contact), *TOC* ('tock,' tactical operations centre), *DFAC* ('Deefack,' mess hall), *MSR* (main supply route), *CSH* ('Cash,' combat surgical hospital), IED (improvised explosive device), 5 and 25s (search pattern) for IEDs, and *YPOC* ('Whypock,' yellow palm oil container possibly re-used and filled with explosives for an IED). Different people were referred to as *LN* or local national (a citizen of Iraq or Afghanistan), *TCN* (third country national and usually a contractor from the Global South), and *terp* (interpreter). The name for the enemy in each country varied over time. The acronym *AIF* (anti-Iraqi forces) was problematic for military Australians accustomed to associating these letters with the venerated Australian Imperial Force of the First World War, so it was a welcome change when the term *INS* (insurgents) became standard.

T walls were the thick concrete blast walls commonly used to protect troops in Iraq from rocket attack or small-arms fire, whereas in Afghanistan *HESCO gabions* (wire mesh containers filled with gravel) were common. A prisoner was a *PUC* ('puck,' person under control). Nouns could of course also have their verb form, as the following exchange would indicate: 'Did they bring a PUC in with them?' – 'yes—actually they pucked two guys in the last raid.' In United States headquarters, operations staff officers were referred to as battle captains and battle majors. This was a practice followed by Australians in the national headquarters or who were embedded in coalition headquarters, despite the fact that there was a clear disjuncture between actual fighting in a battle with a weapon, and the role of a staff officer performing an equally significant, but far less heroic, task of fighting the war with Powerpoint.

Of course, unofficial United States military slang terms were also adopted. *Battle rattle* referred to complete military equipment, including body armour, and a *pogue* was a derogatory term used by infantry to refer to everyone else. *FOB* ('fob') was an official term

that stood for Forward Operating Base which was a large secure military base occupied by Fobbits, those whose jobs did not take them into areas of risk *outside the wire*, which meant the only risk they faced was *IDF* (indirect fire), usually from rocket or mortars. The *Green Zone* in Baghdad was the slightly safer area around the embassies and national headquarters in central Baghdad, which one would reach by travelling along Route Irish from Camp Victory, the main US base located at Baghdad International airport (BIAP) on the edge of the city. Confusingly, in Afghanistan, the Green Zone was not safe but was the potentially very dangerous cultivated and inhabited area located along a river valley. While many Australians knew a few Arabic (*shukran* thank you) or Pashtun (*tashakor* thank you) phrases, the greatest source of loan words was the most dominant power in the MEAO, the United States military.

Working with the Dutch in Afghanistan

Although some Australians were based in Kandahar and Kabul, the majority of Australians in Afghanistan worked with the Dutch at Camp Holland in the southern Uruzgan province under the auspices of NATO, as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Despite being fellow members of the Western alliance, the Dutch were a relatively unfamiliar ally with no recent history of shared military cooperation with Australia. While a small number of Australians had fought with the Dutch against the Japanese, Second World War military cooperation with the Dutch was minimal and the post-war Australian military occupation of Indonesia did not improve Australian-Dutch relations. For soldiers serving together in the twenty-first century, the lack of past military cooperation exacerbated existing cultural differences.

The Netherlands was a more open and progressive social culture than Australia and this was reflected in aspects of their military communication and practice. During the years of military cooperation in Uruzgan province between 2006-10, it became apparent that Dutch liberal social values and consensus, and the Dutch discussion-based military culture, differed from that of Australia. Even Dutch food was different, as was their propensity to wear spandex tights while exercising. Despite military cooperation in war and the high levels of English spoken by Dutch soldiers who were far more linguistically talented than their Australian counterparts, a degree of distance remained between the Dutch and Australian

military, and Dutch military terminology did not become part of the Australian military lexicon.

Small numbers of Australian Special Forces deployed to Afghanistan in 2001-02 and again in 2005, but large-scale regular army deployments only began in 2006. The primary Australian commitment in Afghanistan was the contingent serving as part of Task Force Uruzgan from 2006,[32] which marked perhaps the first long-term[33] Australian deployment in which Australians served under non-English-speaking operational command. While service under American command had seen the adoption of American military terminology, Australian troops in Afghanistan only adopted Dutch terminology on rare occasions. The Task Force was Dutch-led, but over time comprised elements from a variety of countries including Australia, France, Norway, Singapore, Slovakia, Britain, the United States, and also Afghanistan. Visiting journalist Chris Masters observed that in the Dutch-run mess, 'Each national force tends to keep to their respective tables; neither openly warring nor enthusiastically bonding, the Task Force Uruzgan allies assume a posture of armed neutrality.'[34]

Dutch culture, and uses of language

The Dutch were proud of their relaxed military culture, which even included casual parade behaviour on 'formal' parades, and their casual military style was apparent in their physical appearance and dress. The rituals of standing to attention and at ease were far more easy-going than those of the Australian military. A comparative study of military culture has revealed the Dutch military have been perceived as being independent, sociable, flexible and informal, loose and impertinent, but also as comradely and competent.[35] Like some of their other European counterparts that Australians shared a military base with (Italians in southern

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[32] This was to become the American-led Combined Team Uruzgan following Dutch withdrawal and transfer of command in 2010.

[33] Australians had served briefly under Dutch command in Java in 1942. See Andrew Faulkner (2008), *Arthur Blackburn, VC: An Australian Hero, His Men, and Their Two World Wars* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press), pp. 340-47; and Tom Gilling (2018), *The Lost Battalions* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin).

[34] Chris Masters (2012), *Uncommon Soldier* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin), p. 119.

[35] René Moelker, Joseph Soeters, and Ulrich vom Hagen (2007), 'Sympathy, the Cement of Interoperability: Findings on Ten Years of German-Netherlands Military Cooperation', *Armed Forces and Society* 33:4, pp. 496-517, here p. 513.

Iraq, French and Slovakians in Afghanistan), the Dutch had a more relaxed attitude to haircuts and shaving. In military circles, there was a significant degree of prestige in the beards Special Forces soldiers grew, but European beards were often more fashionable and tailored. In the words of Australian Major Rachel Brennan: 'You'd see them around the gym or eating in the mess hall. They'd have long hair. Some of them had mohawks. They'd get around in their lycra get-up. Just different. We thought they were a bit more loose than how we ran things. They'd come around in normal vehicles and not armoured vehicles. They had a different approach to things.'[36]

Dutch national characteristics of consensus and discussion were also part of Dutch military culture. This became readily apparent to Australians (such as the author of this chapter) who regularly worked with the Dutch. Getting to know the Dutch well on a daily basis over eight months provided a different perspective on their unique approach to military issues, their genuine commitment, and their very quirky sense of humour. But events that Australians expected to be formal military meetings could be marked by a high level of open discussion, informal critique, and ambivalent responses, which to some Australians appeared to be unprofessional, leading to cross-cultural misunderstanding and stress.[37] This is somewhat paradoxical because it has been argued that the Australian military prides itself on a culture of egalitarianism and informality, values that developed in response to the rank-conscious pomp and hierarchy of the British military,[38] and the open discussion and informal criticism implicit in Special Forces culture is universally admired. However, military Australians posted to mainstream conventional units prefer formality and more rigid styles of behaviour, and were uncomfortable with an ally whose soldiers could talk and discuss military issues so openly—and even join trade unions.

It has been argued that this perception that the Dutch are tolerant and non-martial is incorrect, and Zaalberg has claimed that 'the cliché of the Dutch as a traditionally peace-loving, non-militaristic and culturally sensitive people' was in fact at odds with actual Dutch military practice in Afghanistan which could be highly kinetic.[39] This reality was also noticed by some Australians. According to Lieutenant Colonel Jason Blain, 'A lot dis the Dutch as

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[36] Jimmy Thompson and Sandy MacGregor (2015), *Tunnel Rats vs the Taliban* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin), p. 138.

[37] See Dave Allen (ed), *War in the Valleys*, here p. 14.

[38] James Brown (2013), 'Fifty Shades of Grey: Officer Culture in the Australian Army', *Australian Army Journal*, 10:3, pp. 244-54, here pp. 248-49.

[39] Thijs Brocades Zaalberg (2013), 'The Use and Abuse of the "Dutch Approach" to Counter-Insurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36:6, pp. 867-97, here p. 891.

soft and weak. I tell you my experience is they focused on getting out there and achieving results. An interesting lot who don't want to be seen so much as professional soldiers.'[40]

The Australian Defence Force's strict no-fraternisation policy restricting sexual contact between fellow soldiers seemed bizarre to Dutch soldiers. Conversely, Australian soldiers presumed high levels of fraternisation took place among the Dutch. But this was just one of many cross-cultural differences. The Dutch had unisex showers, something which for many Australians seemed to confirm all their deepest suspicions of European behaviour, and the image of Dutch males in the gym was problematic. The practice of wearing lycra or spandex tights without the modesty shorts that were mandatory for Australian soldiers was so offensive to Australian soldiers that a Facebook page emerged to conduct discussion of the 'problem.'

Norms of political correctness was another area where cross-cultural challenges emerged. In this sphere Dutch practices seemed to be the opposite of American practices. While Americans were more likely to be highly religious and were overtly so in public displays, the Dutch were overtly secular and as well as a military chaplain they had a non-religious equivalent. The Dutch were quite happy to joke and make reference to sexual issues in a far more open manner than their Australian counterparts. Australians were also genuinely shocked by the Dutch Christmas tradition of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet (St Nicholas and Black Peter), during which some Dutch soldiers dressed as Christmas elves in blackface makeup.

Dutch culinary culture also seemed foreign to many Australians. On Wednesdays, the Dutch-run mess hall in Camp Holland served Indonesian-style curry dishes, an element of Dutch cultural traditions based on the Dutch colonial experience in the East Indies,[41] but *Blauwe hap* or *Rijsttafel* never entered Australian military terminology. Another Dutch military tradition was to have a seafood brunch on Sunday mornings, which gave many Australians what may have been their first exposure to Dutch *rollmops* or raw pickled herring fillets rolled into a cylindrical shape around a filling. This was not a culinary trend that was

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[40] Chris Masters (2012), *Uncommon Soldier* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin), p. 269. For an understanding of Dutch approaches, see Martijn Kitzen (2012), 'Close Encounters of the Tribal Kind: The Implementation of Co-option as a Tool for De-escalation of Conflict – The Case of the Netherlands in Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35:5, pp. 713-34.
[41] Matthijs Kuipers (2017), '"Makanlah Nasi!(Eat Rice!)": Colonial Cuisine and Popular Imperialism in The Netherlands During the Twentieth Century', *Global Food History*, 3:1, pp. 4-23.

greatly admired by the non-Dutch military personnel at Camp Holland,[42] and there were protests about Dutch catering. The complaints about Dutch food eventually reached the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, who admitted to a government committee that while the Dutch food was 'generally nutritious,' 'the issue is that it's not Aussie food, it's European food.'[43]

Crisis situations could exacerbate cross-cultural difficulties on both sides. After taking part in a helicopter extraction of two wounded Dutch soldiers from the battlefield, combat medic Terry Ledgard had his life-saving treatment of one Dutch soldier challenged by a Dutch trauma nurse when he accompanied his casualty into the Dutch run hospital in Tarin Kowt. He described her angry responses to his treatment of the casualty leaving him feeling 'disoriented in a Bermuda Triangle vortex of unfamiliar Dutch culture, hostility and situational pressure.'[44]

Borrowing from other languages in Afghanistan

A very small number of Netherlands military terms became part of the Australian military vocabulary, reflecting the broader limitations to cross-cultural understanding. The very practical *NATO 9 liner* was used as it was the standard casualty-report form. Other generic military terms were acquired because of the particular nature of the training task in southern Afghanistan. An example is the term *omelette*, from Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), referring to a small group of Australian or other ISAF soldiers used to mentor and train the Afghan National Army soldiers.

Geographically significant Afghan terms such as the *dasht* (desert area) and *quala* (compound) slipped into regular military usage, as did *shura* (the Arabic term for meeting, used in both Iraq and Afghanistan). Another term that made the transition from the Iraq war to Afghanistan was *jundi*, the Arabic term for soldier that in Afghanistan was applied to any

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[42] Seth Robson (2010), 'At Tirin Kot, U.S., Dutch and Australians Serve Together, Observe Cultural Quirks', *Stars and Stripes*, August 20 2010, https://www.stripes.com/news/at-tirin-kot-u-s-dutch-and-australians-serve-together-observe-cultural-quirks-1.115410

[43] Rob Taylor (2009), 'Australia's Troops Aghast at Dutch Food', Reuters 4 June 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-food/australias-troops-aghast-at-dutch-food-idUSTRE5523ZE20090603

[44] Terry Ledgard (2016), *Bad Medicine: A No Holds Barred Account of Life as an Australian SAS Medic During The War in Afghanistan* (Melbourne: Viking Penguin), pp. 122-23.

male in Afghanistan.[45] Infantryman Kyle Wilson, like many Australian soldiers, used Afghan words in the battlefield and these words find their place in soldiers' memoirs of events leading up to an imminent battle: 'I had a bad feeling he was a bad cunt and we followed him. I yelled out '*Waderaja*' (stop) but he ignored me.'[46] However, Afghan languages rarely permeated Australian military consciousness, and did not become part of standard Australian military slang. Unlike Australian soldiers based in France from 1915 to 1918, most Australians were deployed to Afghanistan for fixed periods of up to eight months rather than several years, and did not spend rest and relaxation time in the company of a supportive local population. During their deployment to Afghanistan, they lived apart from the civilian population in secure military camps and patrol bases when not on patrol, and thus had limited opportunity to interact in everyday manner with the local civilian population. Troops mentoring the Afghan National Army who were posted to promote patrol bases alongside Afghan soldiers had greater contact with soldiers and of necessity learnt more Afghan terms, but this contact became more constrained as 'green on blue' killings (killing of a coalition soldier by a rogue Afghan soldier) increased in the later years of the Australian deployment.

Analysis of the Australian experience of communication in Iraq and Afghanistan

American expressions dominated both wars, which is unsurprising given the vast number of deployed US troops, the influence the United States has on global culture, and their superpower status. There are various possible reasons why Dutch military terminology did not become part of the Australian military lexicon. The very fact that the United States were the coalition leaders during the war on terror since 2001 gave the United States primacy, and would have made it difficult to any other linguistic military culture to have displaced that of the United States. A further explanation could be that the linguistic differences between Dutch and English meant that Dutch usage of terms was not readily apparent to many Australians, limiting the likelihood of the adoption of non-English terms. It should also be emphasised that the Dutch are a talented and educated multilingual people, and large numbers of Dutch military personnel spoke English, further limiting the transmission of Dutch military

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[45] Nathan Mullins (2011), *Keep Your Head Down: One Commando's Brutally Honest Account of Fighting in Afghanistan* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin), p. 81.
[46] Field, *Gimme Shelter*, p. 117.

language to the Australian lexicon. English was after all the mission language and a global language—and Australians did not need or bother to learn Dutch, so had fewer reasons to pick up Dutch vocabulary.

Another reason might relate to Australian perceptions of their own status as fighters and of their perceptions of the status of the Dutch as fighters. Australians perhaps liked to see themselves as being closer to the more warlike Americans and far removed from the ostensibly less warlike and consensus-driven casual Dutch, whose much-praised counter insurgency policy of civil-military cooperation[47] appeared to some Australians to be a soft approach. A series of dismissive Australian comments on the much more significant Netherlands military presence in Uruzgan adds weight to this possible explanation. American perceptions that their NATO allies were not doing enough to support the fighting effort led to the American joke that the acronym ISAF (word on the sleeve of Dutch troops) stood for 'I saw Americans fighting.' It is ironic, in a situation where Australia actually had a disproportionately smaller military involvement in Afghanistan than the United States, that this American joke was adapted by Uruzgan-based Australians into 'I saw Australians fighting.' Mullins recalls the snide explanation that 'Dutch' stood for the phrase 'don't understand the concept here,'[48] and Masters observed that Australian soldiers had another apparent explanation of the international country abbreviation for the Netherlands (NLD), this being that it stood for 'no one likes Dutch.'[49] There have been Australian claims that the Dutch did not provide enough support for Australians.[50] Counter to this and despite Australian presumptions of their own warlike nature, it should be noted that there had also been instances of Dutch claims that Australians refused to support them in battle, because of more restrictive Australian rules of engagement.[51] This issue of who was the most warlike is not the focus of this chapter, but the key point might lie not so much with the reality of Dutch-Australian military cooperation, but in the Australian perceptions of this cooperation.

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[47] Zaalberg, 'The Use and Abuse of the "Dutch Approach" to Counter-Insurgency'.
[48] Nathan Mullins (2011), *Keep Your Head Down*, p. 90.
[49] Masters, *Uncommon Soldier*, p. 119.
[50] Ian McPhedran (2010), 'Dutch Left Australian Soldiers for Dead in Afghanistan', *Perth Now* 22 October 2010. https://www.perthnow.com.au/news/dutch-left-australian-soldiers-for-dead-in-afghanistan-ng-662402792fd7f286c5bd6042990ac985
[51] Tom Hyland (2008), 'Diggers "Let down" Dutch Allies in Deadly Battle with Taliban', *The Age*, 20 January 2008, https://www.theage.com.au/world/diggers-let-down-dutch-allies-in-deadly-battle-with-taliban-20080120-ge6mj6.html

The perception of Australian military superiority would have also puzzled the Americans when the Dutch left in 2010. Despite having more troops in Uruzgan than other nations, the Australians insisted on being under American command (Combined Team Uruzgan) until 2012, to avoid the political cost of provincial leadership. This chapter does not explore what allies thought of Australians in Iraq and Afghanistan, but a Lowy Institute publication titled 'inconsequential confused and timid' is telling.[52] In his evaluation of alliance relations in the Iraq war Jim Molan noted that 'The British called us "the new French" and the US saw us as just another ally that needed to be carried. The Americans are far more polite than the British.' Such comments bear out the assessment that Australian participation in the wars was small-scale and focused on alliance building rather than military victory.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Australian military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan are of interest in terms of the study of Australian military culture. Australians faced the challenge of engaging in cross-cultural communication and linguistic exchange with English-speaking and non-English-speaking allies, and significant differences existed in different cases. This chapter has explored the social history of Australian military communication with allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, and shows that the tradition of borrowing language during war continues, but it also suggests that the global power of English, plus the status of the United States as a major ally that Australians interact with on a regular basis, has meant that the United States has been the dominant linguistic source for Australian borrowing of foreign military terminology in the current era. It also demonstrates that despite apparent cultural similarities, cross-cultural differences meant that communication between allies could be problematic. Based on the Canadian experience, Brian Selmeski has pointed out that cross-cultural competence in war needs to go further than better briefings, additional language training, knowledge of the enemy, and knowledge of international relations.[53] Understanding

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[52] Jim Molan (2017), 'Australia in Iraq 2002-2010: Inconsequential, Confused and Timid', *The Interpreter*, 10 March 2017, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-iraq-2002-2010-inconsequential-confused-and-timid

[53] Brian Selmeski (2007), *Military Cross-cultural Competence: Core Concepts and Individual Development*. (Centre for Security, Armed Forces & Society, Royal Military College of Canada).

the ways in which ordinary members of the military understand cross-cultural communication with allies will do much to advance understanding and shape future experiences. Past research shows cultural diversity in multinational force operations can be the source of both weakness and strength,[54] and the likelihood of future service in coalition operations makes examination of past practice significant.

Australians in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan adopted a range of terms from their allies. The adoption of such insider terms occurs for a variety of reasons. It can be based on an admiration of another military culture, or can reflect the impact a dominant military culture has had on a subordinate military culture, with the duration of time cultures have been in contact with each other also being a factor. A further consideration is that soldiers want to adopt what become 'military chic' expressions in order to take on the representation of real soldiers, presenting themselves as experienced and well-travelled warriors. Using terms and language acquired in the war zone denotes experience and can provide the user with insider status, becoming the mark of the veteran.

Australians served in the war on terror after the Australian government's decision to commit to these conflicts as a military-alliance partner in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both wars, Australian commitments were relatively small-scale and Australians did not seek an autonomous role but remained engaged as subordinate elements of larger coalition formations. The Australian military had to manage the obvious challenge of linguistic and cross-cultural communication with unfamiliar Afghan and Iraqi allies, but linguistic and cross-cultural communication problems were also significant in relations with ostensibly more familiar coalition allies.

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[54] Efrat Elron, Boas Shamir, and Ben-Ari (1999), 'Why Don't They Fight Each Other? Cultural Diversity and Operational Unity in Multinational Forces', *Armed Forces & Society*, 26:1, pp. 73-97.