

It's the soldiers who make our special forces special

The forced exodus of the SAS's best fighters is a mistake that leaves Australia's defence weakened



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It was Trotsky who said: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” Just ask those Australians and their families touched by the past 20 years of war. Despite the nostalgia and open wounds left by Australia's longest war, now is the time for our defence force to be focused on the future and “re-org”. And, as we saw in the Afghan evacuation, our SAS has a critical role to play in preparing for the next threat.

Senator Jim Molan in a recent article stated: “Many ordinary Australians ... are awakening to the sombre reality that war is not just possible in our region, but likely.” It is easy to pass off such commentary about the threats in our region as alarmism. However, our defence force is in the business of training and preparing for war – including having our most experienced war fighters being fully prepared and available.

Here is the problem. Many of our best are leaving.

I discharged from the Australian Defence Force in 2019, after 30 years in the military and the Special Air Service Regiment. In my final years, I grew increasingly concerned about the over-reliance on technology and equipment, including indoor video games for shooting practice and virtual reality for combat simulation.

The benefits of technology noted, the risk is the erosion of not only martial skills and capability, but the resilience and toughness required of frontline soldiers. For example, Australia used to be counted among the best jungle war fighters on the planet. Our SAS won renown as “Phantoms of the Jungle”. Of late, I have been contacted by lone voices, some from our most esteemed training facilities, who have concerns about major gaps in jungle warfare skills. And our region is full of jungles.

While excessive sums of money are spent on aircraft that don't fly, submarines that don't swim, and technology that mentally overloads our troops, my sense is that we are less than optimal in terms of closing with a foe who will give us no quarter.

The corporate knowledge and skills we have built up fighting war for the past 20 or 30 years is walking or being marched out the door. At least this seems to be the case in the SAS Regiment.

Of course, there is no wishing away the investigation into war crimes in Afghanistan. The allegations are of the gravest nature and must be investigated. Ultimately, the regiment serves our country to uphold sacred values within a democratic system. Each member, beholden to the primary unit value of integrity, must be prepared to stand accountable as stewards and beneficiaries of its name and reputation. The SAS Regiment above all others must be the most accountable, given the trust and confidence afforded it by the Australian public. So above any individual, the regiment holds absolute primacy.

I am confident that all those involved – alleged wrongdoers, presumed whistleblowers – will receive their opportunity to represent themselves justly. An independent justice system is what many in the profession of arms have fought and died for.

Unfortunately, the public trial has commenced. However, I'm talking about a different cohort of soldiers; those who are not under criminal investigation.

In the swirling public commentary around the regiment, there are factions marking their ground, some unwittingly distributing misinformation. However, my concern is that Defence appears to be using the investigation as an opportunity to take a fire hose to the SAS Regiment. Some of our finest future leaders in SAS and in Special Operations Command have been wrung through external and internal leaks and subsequently “encouraged” to step aside. Others for no more than having a beer on operations.

By these standards, generations who have fought in World War I to Vietnam would have much to answer for. The risk is the loss of hundreds of years of warfighting experience for mistakes that pale into insignificance when compared to the years of service given. It has taken decades to find and build these intelligent, mentally tough, physically hard warriors and leaders.

Defence must recognise how they helped carry our defence force through the Afghan campaign.

Through more than a decade of exhausting, daily firefights across thousands of missions, against a remorseless enemy whose grotesque intent and potency were on full display at the gates of Kabul airport recently.

The investigation notwithstanding, we should be examining the experience and skills developed over the past 20 years, particularly when parts of our defence force retain little or no combat experience. Australian mothers and fathers want to know their sons and daughters who choose to serve their country have the chance to learn from those who want to give back.

Those being “encouraged” to leave rightly feel betrayed and are unlikely to come back to share the long and hard-earned lessons of frontline warfighting and command.

Defence might rethink this.

Our military leaders have been disappointing. Not one has stepped forward to defend the regiment and the broader SAS community’s honour. Indeed, Defence has been silent, leaving room for rumour and speculation.

We need strong leaders prepared to state their case, explain their actions and, most importantly, train and prepare our soldiers for future wars. A good start would be to prioritise spending on our humans over hardware.

By letting some of our warriors go, defence leaders risk letting down our next generation of war fighters: the infantry, commandos, field engineers, artillery, and armoured soldiers, among other frontline troops.

Who will pass on the hard-earned lessons of combat? For what will our comrades have fallen if not to learn and pass on those lessons? It is remiss to let those soldiers who are not under criminal investigation be shamed out of the military, taking decades of valuable experience and knowledge with them.

With the next conflict around the corner, the SAS Regiment and its warriors may soon be needed more than ever.

Harry Moffitt is a former SAS team commander, now a psychologist and the author of *Eleven Bats*.

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JIM MOLAN SENATOR AND EX-SOLDIER