

# Desert WARRIORS

**Linton Harris**   
TROOPER, 34, DARWIN, NT

**Australian troops in Iraq believe they are setting an example for the rest of the country, telling Ben McKelvey they want to stay until the job is done.**

**I**T'S FUNNY, the way your body works, but when a bomb goes off and you're that close, you don't actually hear it," Trooper Linton Harris, 34, tells *The Bulletin*. "Somehow, your brain shuts it out. The heat, the flame, the smell, the smoke you remember, but no bang."

On Australia Day, 2005, Harris was in the middle of a convoy of three Australian Light Armoured Vehicles travelling Route Irish, the infamous 12km shooting gallery between the heavily fortified Green Zone in central Baghdad and the city's international airport. As the LAVs passed a late-model BMW, its driver detonated explosives inside the car spraying shrapnel at the convoy. Manning the rear gun, Harris was exposed from the shoulders up.

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TROOPER LINTON HARRIS ON FINISHING THE JOB IN IRAQ

"It absolutely flogged me," says Harris, who's from Darwin. "I was smashed down into the gun-hole and I could feel the deepest heat. I got back up and saw my machine-gun had been bent and was stuffed. As it turns out, I had 13 shrapnel wounds." At the time, the Australian Army was introducing a new type of body armour, but the older, lighter and more comfortable vest was still acceptable kit. Harris chose the new armour and says it saved his life.

If anyone was to be forgiven for no longer wanting to be involved in the coalition Iraqi misadventure, it'd be new father Harris. Two years later, having recuperated and been reintegrated back into the army, he's back in Iraq.

It's soon apparent it's not just John Howard and George W. Bush who want "to stay the course" in Iraq but also those Australian diggers serving with the coalition forces. Their motives are complex but one thing they have in common is their professionalism – they want to finish the job they've started.

"I'm happy to come back," says Harris. "The political types took Iraq from one type of stability, albeit with a dictator, to an unstable environment and they absolutely owe them a stable country, however long it takes. Regardless of decisions made in the past, right or wrong, we can't walk away from this country now. I believe we'll get there."

The violence in the Sunni triangle around Baghdad – and even around their own base

– does not deter them. Lieutenant Colonel Tony Rawlins, commanding officer of the Australians' Overwatch Battle Group West (2) based in Dhi Qar, a Shia province in the country's south, sees his troops as providing a model for other areas of Iraq. "The strategy should be to reinforce success down in the south, rather than saying the job is done because what that does is to serve as a model," Rawlins says. "Almost like a test case that the rest of the country can look at and say, 'I want what they have down in the south'. You start from a secure base and then you have to expand out from there."

Rawlins warns against premature

withdrawal and advocates more specialist troops being sent to Iraq. "A level of security has been established, but now what we need are organisations that can plug into civic forms of government," says Rawlins. "Services in the fields of health, agricultural, electrical, sewage and local governance need to be re-established. One of the key suggestions that we've put up is that reservists who are experts in those fields could come over as part of the additional trainers already announced," says Rawlins, referring to the 70 additional members of the Australian Army Training Team soon to be sent to Dhi Qar.

"[A withdrawal would] be devastating for a province like Dhi Qar," says the head of national co-ordination for Provincial Reconstruction Teams, US General Eric Olson (Ret). "The US has decided that they won't operate in Dhi Qar anymore because it's gone under provincial Iraqi control. If it weren't for the Australian Army, I couldn't have a provincial reconstruction team here and we'd lose all influence and virtually all presence here."

**W**ELL, WHEN YOU played footy at school, did you play on the wog team or the skip team?" asks a soldier. "Wog, but I'm not an Arab, I'm a Kurd," says Bombardier Tarik Perwer (not his real name, as he still has family in Iraq and cannot be identified). "Same shit, they're Arabs, right?" says the soldier. "No, mate. Can you tell him?" says Perwer to me. I say that Kurds and Arabs are different ethnic groups. "I think you both might be Arabs," comes the reply.

I'm standing next to Perwer, waiting for a C-130 to fly us into Iraq. He and most of the other soldiers are heading back into the country after their two-week, mid-deployment leave, where they had the option of being flown home (most

JOHN CARROLL (ADF)





**Ashton Morant**  
CORPORAL, 25, BOURKE, NSW



**Jason Harley**  
MAJOR, ??, BOURKE, NSW

soldiers with family take this option) or travel to Rome or a destination of equivalent cost.

Perwer is unique in the group, not only because he's a reservist who's taken time out of his IT degree to go full-time to help train the new Iraqi Army, but because he also has shared experience with the locals in the area he's operating in. Perwer had to flee Iraq as a child and sheltered in Iran, escaping Saddam's malevolence, as many in Dhi Qar did after the Shia uprising of 1991.

"Personally my feelings were that what people had been going through, they need a

that I've seen how people live here and I've seen how people live in Australia and I see the potential for them in the future. I'm happy to help."

**C**AMP TERENDAK, Dhi Qar, is the temporary home for the 550 soldiers employed with the Overwatch Battle Group West (2) and the Australian Army Training Team. It's a place of blast walls, prefab buildings, razor wire and armoured infantry vehicles.

Outside the Aussie compound, you're in Tallil Airbase, a hub of thousands of American

soldiers fulfilling supply missions to the north and also home to one of Iraq's two Burger King outlets. A few times a day, up to 50 armoured Mack truck convoys with a handful of humvees head up Route Tampa to the Sunni Triangle to sustain the Baghdad-Anbar-Diyala war.

"That's why we don't get attacked that often," says Corporal Ashton Morant, 25, pointing as a convoy drives past. "Why would you attack us, when you can have a massive juicy convoy with just a few gun cars?"

This is Morant's second deployment to Iraq. He joined the army after a well-respected cousin, who was then in the Army, suggested he enlist after getting into a bit of trouble back

**Tony Rawlins**   
LT COL, ??, ??

home. "In fact, a lot of trouble back home," adds Morant.

He had been blown into a ditch a fortnight before by a 122mm rocket (similar to the Hizbollah's Katyusha rockets which struck Israel last year and were possibly supplied by Iran) out the front of Terandak's gate. "The rocket attack the other day, that's part of the job," Morant says. "Doesn't make me not want to be here. Makes you want to be here more and secure the area.

"See, people in the Australian Army are here because they want to be in the army and they're professional soldiers and the best thing for a professional soldier is deployment. You get to do your job properly rather than just rehearsing in Australia all the time," Morant says.

This is in contrast with some of the American forces. With few exceptions, Australian soldiers are full-time and on a fixed, six-month rotation into Iraq, but many American national guardsmen and reservists I met at Tallil were coming into their 17th and 18th month. They signed up as weekend warriors, many to pay for college, and now are on almost perpetual deployment. I heard of at least two suicides on the base.

**"T**HEY SAY they need a clinic for medicine, for 20 miles they have to walk if they are sick," says Mahmoud, a coalition interpreter relating the wish list of the villagers to Major Jason Harley, the Australian CIMIC officer (CIMIC is the civilian-military co-operation and liaison branch of the Army). "And they want a football pitch."

"Football, football, football," the gathering crowd start to chatter in English, having recognised the word. "Geez," an infantryman standing next to me laughs underneath his breath. "The whole country's a football field, isn't it?"

Across the province, Aussie forces are laying relatively low. It's Ashura, a holy day of mourning for the death of Ali Husayn, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson and the most critical figure in Shia Islam. For the Shia, it's a time to remember sacrifice and injustice and many of the radical Shiite Madhi Army militiamen are out on the street.

We've travelled to a village on the Euphrates with a reverse-osmosis water purification plant, care of the CIMIC program. "I personally think southern Iraq can be a success story," Harley says. "Nation-building is a

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big, strategic operation and civilians do it a lot better than we do, but there can't be any reconstruction if there's no security. We're here to facilitate that, but at the end of the day we'll need to transition out and the civilians can come in for full reconstruction."

Harley says he thinks the end of the day will only be six to 12 months, but a premature, politically motivated withdrawal could rupture that transition.

"I've got a fiancée and she spent six months in Iraq, we spent a week home and then I deployed for Iraq for six months," says Corporal Tim Glover. "She's going to East Timor in a week so when I get home she'll be away. It's a strain but we're working while we're young so we can rest while we're older."

Like Morant, Glover, 26, from Canberra, is a professional soldier. In fact, it's all he's done since he was 17 and disappointedly missed out on the initial INTERFET deployment to East Timor. He says being a soldier in Australia is like being in a footy team that trains, but never plays; he wants to hone his skills and even have a crack at joining the SAS.

"Also, anyone who tells you the money isn't a factor too is lying," he adds. Australian soldiers generally earn more than \$60,000



**Tim Glover**  
CORPORAL, 26, CANBERRA, ACT

Today is day one for the new recruits, who will be part of the plan to train 30,000 new troops to replace killed or deserted soldiers.

Money is a major factor for the Iraqis, too, with the job paying \$US500 (\$644) a month – a very good wage in a country whose unemployment runs at about 50%. Under the auspices of Australian-trained Iraqi trainers, they'll get a five-week course, including one week of counter-insurgency training, then these Dhi Qar locals will be sent north to battle the Sunni insurgency.

"It's a dangerous job, yes," says Glover, "but every man and woman here is prepared for that; that's part of joining the army."

Harris' sentiments are the same and he adds: "Baghdad is a beautiful city, well, could be a beautiful city. I'd like to be able to take my son there one day." That day may be so far away in the future that his son may be taking him, but in the meantime, Harris and the Australian contingent in Iraq will settle for a peaceful and prosperous Dhi Qar. ● Ben McKelvey travelled to Iraq with the ADF

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CORPORAL ASHTON MORANT ON A BRUSH WITH DEATH

change and I think it's been a good change for the Iraqi people," Perwer says. "It's something we run away from because it's war, but I think this has been a good thing for the people. Well, here anyway."

Dhi Qar, the province in which the Australian Battle Group has overwatch duties, is one of the safest places in Iraq, simply because it's an all-Shiite province and is virtually free from sectarian strife. Many Australian officers hope that as the province is reconstructed, it can be an example for other provinces and set off a domino effect.

Perwer joined the Army reserve in search of adventure long before this war. "What I feel is