

A digger's tour of duty

Modern-day diggers such as Colonel Andrew Condon are the heirs to the ANZAC tradition. By **Emma Page**.



“We got 5200 Australians out of Lebanon. It was one of the most rewarding things I’ve ever done. The relief on their faces...”

Each year on April 25 we are asked to remember the legacy of Aussie soldiers, men and women who sacrificed their lives to safeguard our political and cultural freedoms, our Australian way of life. While our mainstream cultural myth depicts diggers from the First and Second World Wars as

heroes pure and simple, we know this lofty image of ANZACs is at odds with the personal experiences of soldiers who were disillusioned with their triumphant homecoming and experienced great difficulty integrating back into society. We have learned to celebrate other voices in Australian military history such as indigenous and migrant diggers who fought alongside their Anglo brothers, and those who fought in more marginalised conflicts such as Vietnam, Rwanda and East Timor.

Chief Executive Officer of Sydney Legacy, Colonel Andrew Condon CSC, is one of a new generation of ANZACs. Condon undertook 26 years of military service in the Australian Defence Force, including operational deployment in both Iraq and East Timor, before retiring late last year.

Growing up on a rice farm in Griffith, NSW, Condon says he was exposed to military influences from a young age. He used to listen to his father tell stories about his grandfather's experiences on the Western Front in the First World War.

“I lived on an original soldier settlement farm – my grandfather was allocated a block of land when he came back from the First World War, and they built a road out to that land called Condon Road. My grandfather served on the Western Front in some of the battles that are getting a little bit more airplay nowadays – Possieres and the Somme and so forth.”

Inspired by the prospect of studying engineering and working outdoors, Condon joined the Australian Defence Force in 1982. He applied for a scholarship to go to Duntroon (Australian Defence Force Academy) and was successful. Four years later Condon graduated with a Bachelor of Engineering from the University of NSW and was simultaneously commissioned as an officer.

He spent the next two and a half decades working his way up to the rank of colonel in the Australian Defence Force, completing a Master of Science degree (Operational Research) at Cranfield, UK along the way.

Condon's first operational deployment came in 2004, when he was embedded into a US Army Corps

coalition headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq. Condon spent six months there co-ordinating the coalition's logistical operations during the reconstruction phase of the war. The base was home to about 1200 personnel, mostly Americans, about 20 Australians and a handful of personnel from other nations.

“I arrived in 2004 so the initial invasion and fighting was finished and they were entering the reconstruction phase. As each new nation joined the coalition, my specific role was to help them move in and ensure all their logistic requirements plugged into the US system,” Condon says.

For the most part, his job involved ordinary office duties – briefings, meetings, video-links, presentations, planning, and negotiations. When Condon wasn't on site in Baghdad, he'd travel out to local provinces in a Black Hawk helicopter or a C130 Hercules Aircraft to inspect areas where new troops were expected to arrive.

“Ninety-nine per cent of the time I was doing a job and then occasionally it would be interrupted by mortar or rocket fire – one moment everyone has stopped because there are mortars or rockets landing close by and then as soon as they stop, everyone stands back up again and gets back to their desk and continues on. You don't have time to waste thinking about it too much, you've got a meeting to go to or a presentation to do and so people adapted to that pretty quickly.”

Condon says he found himself playing a diplomatic role. “A natural advantage Australians have is we don't tend to have too many pretensions, we seem to be able to talk to anybody, and we can laugh at ourselves. I often found myself between the US and the other nations as the mediator because I was accepted by both sides as being neutral but in a position where both sides were trusting my professional judgment.”

Such quintessential Aussie values make Condon a part of the digger tradition. This is something author Denny Neave writes about in his new book *Aussie Soldier* (\$35, Big Sky Publishing). The text features 200 personal memoirs from Australian soldiers who fought in battles from the Boer War to Iraq, including an excerpt from Condon. Neave believes the role of the soldier has diversified over time but the intangible spirit of the Aussie digger remains the same.

“Militaries all around the world have some things in common and one of those is that respect for professionalism,” Condon says. “I found that the Australian military in general is highly regarded because Australia has a professional army and we have a very professional training and education system,” Condon says.

After Iraq, Condon was appointed Commander of the Australian Defence Force Joint Task Force, which was responsible for evacuating Australian nationals from Lebanon during the 34-day war between Hezbollah and Israel in July 2006. In the 2007 Queen's Birthday Honours List, Condon was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross for this operation. “We got 5300 Australians out and my understanding for all those who wanted to get out got out. It was probably one of the most fulfilling and rewarding things I've ever done. Just the relief on their faces when they saw a familiar uniform or heard a familiar accent – they were very grateful.”

These days the father of three has settled into a new life working for Sydney Legacy. He offers support and care for the widows, widowers and junior legatees of deceased servicepeople.

“I've had a pretty good run. It was a tremendous 26 years in terms of the education, the training, the travel and the various places I've been to, but my kids are at an important stage of their growing up and I want to be more a part of that. This role with Legacy allows me to provide that balance while working for such a good cause.”