

## The Australian Peacekeeper Narrative.

*“Peacekeeping is not a job for soldiers. But only a soldier can do it”  
“Life only demands from you the strength you possess. Only one feat is possible - not to have  
run away.”*

**Dag Hammarskjöld**, The Second Secretary General to the United Nations,  
Killed whilst serving the United Nations on 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1961, Zambia.

**Peacekeeping.** The name itself doesn't appear to be an activity or function that doesn't require a military or police presence. The name is not suggestive of any struggles or service in a war-ravaged country, where Peacekeepers themselves become targets. The name Peacekeeping appears to the unlearned to be a very low-keyed activity that embraces a pacified approach. Images of soldiers holding children's hands and being placed into a highly pacified posture provides a false façade toward the accurate unique nature of service of Peacekeepers. Peacekeepers are deployed for the future of the children of the host nation, and the narrative should not be confused with a Humanitarian role.

Indeed, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), places Peacekeeping in their blogs under the section of 'Women, Peace and Security' (WPS). So why is the service of Peacekeepers played down to that of a socially acceptable presence of deterrence, rather than a robust Combat capable Force ready to deal with violence and protect people?

Peacekeepers are the quintessential guardians of Peace. They are not civilian support staff. They are not bureaucrats. They are not Humanitarian Aid Workers. They are not baby-sitters. They are not politicians or diplomats. They are the protectors of the Peacekeeping Force (PKF). They are the Blue Berets who are military and para-military (Police) personnel of the PKF, working collaboratively in difficult and trying circumstances. They uphold the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), they are responsible for the security of humanity that they are on the ground, up close and personal, to ensure that the Peace is maintained and kept.

Peacekeepers have and will be caught in the Crossfire. They will be attacked and faced with violence and death. They will have to defend themselves, depending on their Mandate. They will have to exercise the Rule of Law and the Law of Armed Conflict. They operate in confusing, malevolent and hostile environments. They hold a purpose, the purpose of Peace. On numerous occasions since 1947 to the present day and into the future, it has cost them their lives. For some, it has cost them their wellbeing, but they served believing that they were helping people, in desperate need of a helping hand to build their future.

Australia has committed over 80,000 ADF and Police personnel to Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) around the world, since the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1947. Four Australian ADF Peacekeepers became the world's first to deploy into the field on a Peace Monitoring Operation in the then Dutch East Indies. This is a significant milestone in Australian Modern Military History. Australian Police followed suit by deploying to Cyprus on 26 May 1964 and remaining there for 53 years, withdrawing on 16 June 2017. The Australian commitment has been to over 63 PKO since 1947 up to the present day, non-stop in continuum.

For many decades Australian Peacekeeper Veterans have had difficulty in being adequately recognised. This difficulty culminates in the lack of awareness of PKO Service within the Australian General Public. Commemorations of Australian Peacekeepers normally occurs on 29 May [1948](UN International Day of UN Peacekeepers); and 14 September [1947] (Australian Peacekeeper Day), albeit in a relatively small scale in comparison to others.

The Australian Peacekeeping Memorial was dedicated on 14 September 2017, culminating the commemoration of 70 years of ADF and Police service, which has claimed 43 ADF and Police lives. The moral toll on Peacekeeper Veterans has also been 1 in 3 returned veterans suffering from chronic mental illness (Creamer et al., 2014). The Phoenix Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) forecasts that 1 in 4 returning Australian UN Peacekeeper will suffer an acute mental illness (Forbes et al., 2016). There is an unknown number of wounded. PKO Service, whilst it may be viewed by some as benign, can erupt into violence and chaos without warning. PKO Service is significantly difficult to conduct, frustrating for troops and commanders, under arduous and malevolent conditions, with admirable restraint. Considerable tactical and logical decision-making is made by the lowest denominator to the highest Commander within the PKF.

The representation of Australian PK Service does not reflect the magnitude of Troop contribution to some of the most dangerous places on the planet at the time of deployment. Dr Brendan Nelson in a presentation on 1 November 2018 lamented: “...our representation of Peacekeeping Service is quite frankly embarrassing...” It is obvious that more needs to be done, not only with the presentation and educating the public of Australian PKO Service, along with tangible recognition in Veteran Entitlements and Medals; but also, with what our Peacekeepers have endured, experienced and the profound positive and negative effect it has had on a number of Veterans’ lives.

Australian Peacekeepers take pride in being among the world’s best Peacekeepers. It is a reputation that has drawn International accolades on a number of difficult PKO. Unfortunately, Peacekeeper Veterans have gone largely mis-understood and under-recognised by Commanders, Veterans and the wider Community. George Gittoes, who worked alongside Australian Peacekeepers said: “It is very unjust for veterans of ‘shooting’ conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan to have their service regarded as any more dangerous or important than those of our Peacekeepers”. George accompanied Australian Peacekeeper Soldiers during the Kibeho Massacre in Rwanda in April 1995. He also worked alongside them in a range of operations including Cambodia, Somalia, The Middle East and Western Sahara. He recorded the service of Australian Peacekeepers through film, sketch and paint.

PKO differ from each other in terms the Security Mandate to a particular PKO. The majority of PKO since 1989 to the present day has seen Australians armed, but with restrictive Rules of Engagement. Such differing environments presents challenges that have been overcome by the flexibility of our Troops. They are popular with the local people, popular with their fellow International Peacekeepers and are highly regarded by the International Community.

George Gittoes sums up his experiences with ADF Peacekeepers: “I have been fortunate enough to witness the extraordinary courage, compassion and professionalism of Australian Peacekeepers and Peacemakers over many years and in different operations...”

Australian Peacekeepers need to be more widely recognised for the unique and noble service that they have rendered, with many suffering as a result of this service.

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*With input from and thanks to Peacekeeper Veterans and George Gittoes, AM.*

