

BOOK REVIEW

DEATH OF A SOLDIER: A MOTHER'S STORY

BY MARGARET EVISON

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There is a range to this book that is alone distinguishing. Margaret Evison, the mother, delivers the intimate close up of the devastating loss of her son. Evison the clinical psychologist also manages to stand back and offer a more professional perspective on the struggle with grief and reconciliation. As well, a gifted writer intervenes to make sense of a story as remote and imposing as the Hindu Kush.

The question of why Australia's longest war in Afghanistan is our worst reported war is one for the age. To attempt a comprehensive answer will turn this review into something else. Suffice it to say, an army of barriers to media coverage has left too great a portion of the narrative in the hands of government.

Margaret Evison considers most of the battle for understanding was lost when the Afghanistan mission morphed from a counter terrorism operation to a

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counter insurgency. Neither comprehending nor believing the rationale for continuing to risk the lives of our own, the broader population tuned out.

Born in Australia, Evison lives in the United Kingdom. Her son Mark balanced keenness for the cello and rugby, loyalty to his home country and affection for Australia, although the Aussie in him did surface awkwardly at times after he joined the British Army. Lieutenant Mark Evison, while well regarded, was counselled by superiors to ‘guard against familiarity’ with the men.¹

In 2009, the 26 years old Welsh Guardsman was deployed to Afghanistan for the first time. Sent to a small forward operating base in the hostile Helmand province, Evison was less than a month in the country when a Taliban bullet struck his right shoulder while he was on patrol at Haji-Alem.

Although the public did not so well know it at the time, the British Army was poorly equipped for the mission. At the top of a long list of inadequacies were undermanning, not enough helicopters to assure casualty evacuation and inefficient radio communications.

Lieutenant Evison’s wound, initially categorised in the less serious Level C range, proved fatal. Loss of blood failed the young heart in the 80-minute interval between the injury and arrival at the military hospital.

Helmet camera vision, later accessed by Margaret Evison, records her son’s last words, ‘I’m going down, I’m going down’.² At least as harrowing is the chapter that follows, focusing on the coroner’s inquest, 15 months on from the Haji-Alem battle.³

As Margaret Evison puts it: ‘This bald inquisitorial legal process was trying to address a battle situation of great heroism, compassion and individual responsibility, and it felt very pale in comparison.’⁴

Given an admitted absence of objectivity, she makes a measured case that witnesses were intimidated by their Ministry of Defence (‘MOD’) masters and the MOD failed to supply information to address the key question — why the casualty evacuation response was slow.

¹ Margaret Evison, *Death of a Soldier: A Mother’s Story* (Biteback, 2012) 71.

² *Ibid* 132.

³ *Ibid* 163–97.

⁴ *Ibid* 172–3.

Far from achieving promised closure the grieving mother saw only contradiction in the official verdict that her son's injury was 'unsurvivable', when so much evidence pointed to a reasonable conclusion that Mark's death was preventable.⁵

The case has resonance in Australia where inquiries into operational losses are conducted by the Australian Defence Force. Reports are often so grievously redacted that they become pointless. The principal excuse for lack of transparency — the maintenance of operational security — did not wash with at least one Australian parent.

Private Robert Poate was one of three Australian soldiers killed by an Afghan ally in August 2012. His father, Hugh, was allowed to sight rather than obtain an unredacted copy of the inquiry officer's report. Hugh Poate, citing deficiencies in the report, has called for a further coronial inquiry. In October 2013 he told the ABC: 'I could see no rationale in there for the extent of the redactions'.⁶

In *Death of a Soldier*, Margaret Evison invokes Wilfred Owen's famous poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. Experience has brought her to the same conclusion; the proposition that it is sweet and right to die for one's country is indeed 'the old lie'.⁷

Having reported on the Afghanistan conflict for most of a decade I have seen many good reasons to be there, and heard many a strong argument for military intervention in small wars that threaten a broader peace.

But if governments can't openly investigate the prospect of systemic failure nor persuade the likes of Margaret Evison and Robert Poate of the worth of the mission, they will hardly persuade the rest of us. Although, as many a veteran wonders, how much do we want to know?

Evison has revealed that in early discussions with her publisher it was suggested she tone down the reality because the public might find it too confronting. Imagine that — asking a mother to make the story of the death of her son a little less sad.

Please read this book.

⁵ Ibid 196.

⁶ Michael Brissenden, 'Father of Soldier Killed in Afghan Insider Attack Critical of ADF Investigation', ABC News (online), 3 October 2013, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-02/father-of-soldier-killed-in-afghanistan-critical-of-adf-report/4994746>>.

⁷ Evison, above n 1, 217–8.

