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Entertaining Australian troops at war in Afghanistan and Iraq

This article examines the Australian forces concert tours during the War on Terror in the Middle East area of operations. From 2001 members of the Australian Defence Force were deployed to the Middle East for service in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. Following the tradition established in earlier conflicts both by Australian and American performers, Australian artists entertained troops in a series of live concert performances. Despite the prevalence of alternatives such as easily accessible online forms of entertainment and DVDs, the practice of military concert tour entertainment has survived and appears to show little sign of redundancy. For the troops, the experience could provide a break from routine, stress, and boredom, as well as the opportunity to reconnect with the world they had left behind. However, these tours were far more significant for the civilian entertainers. Performing in the Middle East could be an exhilarating and in some cases a life changing event. Apart from being physically dangerous, participation could potentially harm or enhance an entertainer's reputation at home due to the highly politicised responses to the conflict. Most significantly, touring entertainers briefly experienced something unfamiliar to most people in contemporary developed societies—the experience of being in a war. Richard Gehrman is a Senior Lecturer in Humanities and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland. His research interests include war and memory, and he served as an Australian Army reservist in Iraq in 2006-07, and in southern Afghanistan in 2008-09.

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The success of the recent Vietnam War movie *The Sapphires* (Goalpost Pictures, Wayne Blair 2012) has revived popular awareness of entertaining troops in war zones, for some Australians building on the past

memories of Little Pattie (Patricia Amphlett) singing to Australian troops in Vietnam while hundreds of combatants were dying just a few kilometres away in the Battle of Long Tan.¹ For an older generation, the memories might be of international artists such as Vera Lynn or Bob Hope performing for the troops in earlier conflicts. While there have been previous studies of the experience of Australian entertainers in other wars,² the experience of Australian performers during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq remains an unexplored aspect of popular entertainment culture. During the United States-led War on Terror, the Australian Forces Advisory Committee on Entertainments (FACE) organised a regular series of concert tours for Australian troops stationed in the Middle East. Performers have recorded their individual memories of the concert experience, and during separate deployments to Iraq and then Afghanistan, the author observed performances and audience reactions, and interacted with performers as they transited to and from the war zones. After surveying concert tour entertainment during these wars, this article explores the impact of the concert experience.

There is a continuity of experience between the Australian entertainers who performed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the Australian, British, and American performers of the past; Australian entertainers are in fact part of an enduring tradition. Soldiers at war have long been accompanied by entertainers, but this was formalised in the large-scale conflicts of the 20th century. During World War 1 individual artists and touring concert parties entertained the troops with performers such as 'Anzac Ada' Reeve gaining popular followings and reframing their brand to identify with the target audience.³ Whether undertaken by troops themselves or by visiting performers, concert entertainments were integral components of the war experience for Australian soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front.⁴ World War 2 saw a more structured and centralised approach with units such as the 1st Australian Entertainment Unit performing a valued role in all theatres of war. The relatively high level of domestic support for these wars made it easy to recruit performers. Military concert tours were an international phenomenon, redeploying the large entertainment industries in Great Britain and the United States to support the war effort.⁵ World War 2 allowed British performers such as singer Vera Lyn to become identified as the forces' sweetheart and thus build an enduring reputation.⁶ Concert tours continued throughout wars in Korea, Vietnam and in other large conflicts.

After Vietnam, large-scale concert style performance activities might have seemed to have lost relevance in a world of easily accessible packaged music and film, and yet the military concert tour tradition continued. The position of the United States as a global power requires the maintenance of bases across the world, from South Korea to Germany, and in peacetime deployed troops are provided with concerts to relieve the boredom of garrison duty and to remind them of home. The 1990–91 Gulf War provided a re-validation of the practice of entertainers performing in war zones. In particular, Bob Hope attracted global attention in a war publicised by CNN. Through his concert tour activities during World War 2, and later in Korea and Vietnam, this iconic figure had become part

of the cultural history of troop entertainment. Hope's visit to Iraq provided symbolic links to the past and drew global attention to the tradition of entertainers supporting troops at war.

When the United States sent troops to fight in the Middle East after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, it was inevitable that entertainers would also go to war. The long-term deployment of large scale United States military forces was accompanied by a well-established Morale, Welfare and Recreation Program (MWR) which includes libraries, gymnasiums, and free movies for troops.⁷ Despite the wide availability of such alternatives in the large warehouse-sized air-conditioned MRW tents on major Middle East bases, and despite the increasing availability of DVDs and downloaded films on laptops, the live entertainment of the military concert maintained its own *raison d'être*.

The United States entertainers who undertook morale boosting visits to their deployed troops were prominent names, as varied as pop singer Jessica Simpson, rapper Tech N9ne, actors Robin Williams and Bruce Willis, political satirist Stephen Colbert, and the *Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders*.⁸ Social attitudes in the United States differentiated between support for political leadership and support for the troops and this made it easier for Colbert⁹ and other high-profile entertainers who opposed the Republicans and President George W. Bush to perform and thus show public support for U. S. troops.¹⁰

Drawing on both Australian and international traditions, the military concert has also been an integral feature of the Australian war experience in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. For the troops, concerts could provide a change of routine and a chance to alleviate stress and boredom as well as an opportunity to reconnect with the world of home. However, concert tours could be far more significant for the civilian entertainers. The act of travelling and performing in the Middle East could be an exhilarating and for some a life changing event. While the physical danger might be an obvious risk, the decision to tour or not could also have an impact on the brand identity of the entertainer in politically contentious wars. Most significantly, although they were not combatants fighting on the front line, touring entertainers were exposed to an unfamiliar, dangerous and often exciting world; something that would allow them to gain a brief understanding of an experience that was fortunately very unfamiliar to most Australians in the early twenty-first century—the experience of being in a war.

The Australian war tour experience

The Australian Defence Force has sponsored tours by entertainers to troops deployed overseas through the structure of the Forces Advisory Council on Entertainment (FACE). Established in 1966 for the Vietnam War and revived after the 1999 Australian intervention in East Timor, FACE arranges for comedians, actors, singers, celebrities and other entertainers to visit Australian troops on operations. While the focus of this article is on entertainers in Afghanistan and Iraq,¹¹ troop entertainment has included visits to peacekeeping operations in East Timor, the Solomon Islands and in Egypt's Sinai desert. The

highly successful December 1999 Tour of Duty concert in East Timor was compered by comedians Greg Pickhaver and John Doyle (a.k.a. Roy Slaven and H.G. Nelson), and featured well known entertainers Kylie Minogue, Doc Neeson, John Farnham, Gina Jefferies, James Blundell, and *The Living End*.¹² There was record domestic approval of the Australian intervention to support East Timorese independence, making it easy for such high-profile entertainers to tour, and the success of this tour played a role in re-legitimising Australian military concert tours.

Tours to politically uncontentious and safe deployments such as East Timor or the Solomon Islands could be more open than those in dangerous war zones. The first combined Federal Police-Australian Defence Force concert in the Solomon Islands in July 2005 included the well-known indigenous band *Yothu Yindi*, comedian Chris Franklin, model and actress Annalise Braakensiek, the Federal Police Band, and the Royal Australian Navy Rock Band and was reportedly attended by 20,000 people.¹³ For security reasons the involvement of so many local community members was not a feature of performances in the Middle East war zones.

The arrangement and structure of a typical forces entertainment tour to the Middle East was carefully managed and followed a well-established pathway. Troops could request particular artists, and FACE would contact both these and a range of other entertainers. Those who agreed to tour undertook familiarisation training and briefings before flying on the weekly shuttle service from Australia to the Middle East on a civilian A330 aircraft. Travel from the international terminal of civilian airports such as Sydney in the company of soldiers in civilian attire provided a gradual transition to the war zone, an embarkation experience far removed from troop ship images of earlier conflicts. After arrival at an Australian staging base in the Middle East the entertainers undertook further familiarisation training, described by comedian and radio host Dan Ilic as “essentially 12 hours of PowerPoint presentations extolling the virtues of drinking water, washing your hands, how to apply a tourniquet, and warning us against drinking too much water,” together with a practical lecture on improvised explosive devices and for some, an optional familiarisation experience with weapons.¹⁴ A preliminary performance at this base would occur before they donned flak jackets and helmets to board less comfortable Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) military aircraft.

The tours could take them to Australian base locations in Afghanistan ranging from the small Australian national headquarters in Kabul, to the logistics base at Kandahar airfield and the large group of Australian troops at Tarin Kowt in Uruzgan Province, north of Kandahar. During the Australian deployment to Iraq, FACE tours also included visits to the Australian headquarters and security detachments in Baghdad, and visits to the larger force concentrations of the Al Muthanna Task Group (in Camp Smitty) in 2005-06 and later to the Overwatch Battle Group at Tallil in southern Iraq (2006-08). While most entertainers were of course accustomed to the schedule of being on the road in civilian touring environments, the experience of a forces entertainment tour could be a

demanding one with unfamiliar military discipline, varied quality food at a range of military bases, and often excessive waiting time in transit due to the higher priority of the ever-changing shifts in military operational tasking. The obligation to wear heavy body armour while in transit increased the physical demands on the entertainers, as did the experience of travelling in the rudimentary unpadded pole-and-strap style temporary seating in the hold of a noisy C130 Hercules aircraft.¹⁵

A typical forces entertainment tour comprised often disparate entertainers brought together for the purpose of the tour. There was always a military band from one of the armed services, often a comedian or entertainment identity, as well as musicians and singers who could perform as individuals or as a group. The 2006 FACE tour provides a good example of a standard tour group. The performers included songwriter and country music singer Allan Caswell (writer of the theme song for the long running Australian TV series *Prisoner*), stand-up comedian Tom Gleeson,¹⁶ indigenous contemporary didgeridoo player Adrian Ross, and the all-female country band *The McClymonts* who had won several prestigious County-and-Western awards. They reflected youth and experience, with ages ranging from 19 (Mollie McClymont) to the veteran 55 year old Caswell, and were accompanied by the uniformed Australian Defence Force personnel of the RAAF band who performed on stage and also acted as 'roadies.' As with some other tours this tour included an indigenous performer, which provided special meaning for serving Indigenous Australians.¹⁷ Although the performers might not have worked together before, experiencing the vicissitudes of touring in an unfamiliar and challenging environment could create unifying bonds.¹⁸

The selection of performers was a challenging task as it needed to match particular criteria both in terms of audience appeal and also in terms of Australian social mores. The demography of a standard Australian military deployment was predominantly male, with a larger percentage of 18 to 30-year-olds in combat-focused locations such as Tarin Kowt. However, because of the military rank structure, the audience demographic could also include many older men and women in their 40s and 50s. Therefore, it could be difficult to arrange tours that would match all music tastes.

While there are few limits to what might be acceptable in public concert entertainment in Australia, for a FACE tour the entertainment could not be excessively sexual in nature or too crude.¹⁹ There was also a requirement to match the official standards of social behaviour expected of the Australian Defence Force as an institution, and also an obligation to meet national community standards of behaviour for anyone associated with this publicly funded body.²⁰ Entertainers were supposed to tailor their material in the light of these considerations. (In his 2006 skits about James Blunt, comedian Tom Gleeson repeatedly used the C word to the embarrassment of American soldiers in the audience, and the disquiet of his Australian managers).

The demographics of the Australian Defence Force include a small but increasingly significant percentage of women,²¹ and a large percentage of soldiers in relationships, which shapes the audience at a 21st century wartime concert. The popular Vietnam War concert image of raunchy entertainers dancing on stage before thousands of male soldiers “half-crazed with drink and desire”²² would be deemed inappropriate today in any official defence-sponsored event. While Vietnam War entertainer Jill Kennedy recalled her experiences of being a female entertainer on stage in front of unruly male troops as being “terrifying – absolutely terrifying,”²³ such experiences would not be replicated in Afghanistan and Iraq where soldiers’ alcohol consumption was severely restricted²⁴ and where public social behaviour was highly regulated.

Politics and war

The widespread popular support for the 1999 Australian intervention in East Timor had attracted concert tour participation from major Australian performers but the politically complex Iraq War made such universal support by the entertainment community less certain. The Iraq War was regarded by some Australians as morally ambiguous, and the Australian government’s representation of the war created further uncertainty.²⁵ While the Australian deployment after 2005 was legally approved under the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1546, 1637 and 1723,²⁶ this message was not clearly communicated to the Australian public. Then Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s rhetoric of alliance solidarity with George W. Bush might have appealed to his domestic constituency and his international allies. On the domestic front however many thought it also suggested unthinking support for the United States and the much condemned earlier 2003 invasion, rather than a United Nations-sanctioned reconstruction support mission, undertaken at the request of the democratically elected Iraqi government.

The decision to tour could impact on an entertainer’s professional reputation. Whereas in the United States entertaining troops in the war zone indicated support for the troops but not necessarily for the war, the Australian situation was less clear. Whilst there was much sympathy for the United States after the terrorist attacks on New York of September 11, 2001, many Australians had concerns about the United States taking unilateral military action. There was some Australian support for the war in Afghanistan but support for the war in Iraq was lower. Despite having performed for troops in East Timor, in 2006 singer Tim Freedman (*The Whitlams*) refused an offer to go to Iraq on the grounds that even though he understood the difficulties facing the soldiers, he didn’t agree with the war. His comments were echoed by veteran entertainer Col Joye who had performed in Vietnam. Joye stated that the war in Iraq was irrelevant, and that he would not go there to perform.²⁷

Tom Gleeson had marched against the 2003 Iraq invasion but despite this was still interested in touring.

To be honest, I just want to go over and ‘have a look.’ I really don’t think the course of the war is going to be changed by a tall, thin, red-headed comedian doing a few jokes for the troops. Later when I tell my parents, family and friends about going over I find nothing but unanimous support. *It will be an adventure! You’ll get to travel and see the world.* These words of encouragement were a bit too World War 1 for my liking.²⁸

His words reflect a desire to observe the experience of war, something felt by many entertainers. In 2011 Christian Lo Russo of pop punk band *Amy Meredith* was undisturbed by politics and conveyed a similar message in different words: “I just enjoy the idea of different experiences in terms of different crowds and different energies.”²⁹

The politically contested nature of the Australian commitment to Iraq, and to a lesser degree the Australian commitment to Afghanistan, created a challenge for the concert organisers who at times had difficulty recruiting high-quality performers. The arduous nature of the schedule, loss of remuneration, and the risk to life also detracted from the appeal of a forces entertainment tour. Some who had gone were described as “unknowns and B-grade celebrities,”³⁰ a further disincentive in an image-conscious industry where there was little kudos in being associated with failure and a reluctance to share a billing with perceived low-grade entertainers. In describing a 2006 tour, Tom Gleeson referred to his fellow companions *The McClymonts*, Allan Caswell, and Adrian Ross as “not exactly your A list,” but clarified the point with the reflection that “the ‘A List’ doesn’t turn up to entertain the troops in an unpopular war that has long fallen off the front pages of the national newspapers.”³¹ In 2006 high profile performers found it easier to tour Iraq if they had a more conservative support base, and heavily tattooed hard rock singer Angry Anderson (a future National Party candidate) made several tours to the war zones. Country singers such as *The Wolverines* and *The McClymonts* would face little backlash from their fans.³²

This recruiting challenge for tour organisers was not helped when the decision not to tour by high-profile performers *The Whitlams* became public. Their decision was criticised—and thus in effect unintentionally politicised—by then Defence Minister Brendan Nelson. *The Whitlams’* decision not to perform in Iraq may have been prompted by personal ideological conviction, but such a stance also reflected the indie band’s political and cultural position as a brand of music, and the cultural position of many of their fans.³³ In contrast, when well-known Hollywood actor Bruce Willis visited U. S. troops in Iraq in 2003 and entertained them with his previously little-known band,³⁴ Willis’s familiar on-screen conservative ‘action man’ character made for easy identification between him and the military, and his association with the war was consistent with his hyper-masculine brand appeal.³⁵

The newly elected Labor government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd kept its election promise to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq after 2008, which helped depoliticise FACE tours and made visits by Australian entertainers to Afghanistan less contentious. A more diverse range of performers began to

tour, with popular youth radio entertainers Hamish Blake and Andy Lee making four live broadcasts of their radio show from the Australian base at Tarin Kowt in 2008.³⁶ Former members of the classic left-wing band *Redgum*, John Schumann and Hugh McDonald performed in Afghanistan as *Vagabond Crew* after the deployment to Iraq had ended. This was consistent with Schumann's political stance as an Australian Democrat and as an anti-war songwriter who had opposed the war in Iraq, but who had also stated his support for the troops.³⁷ While Schumann's iconic Vietnam War song "I was only 19" has been widely received as an anti-war statement, he achieved success performing the song for troops in Afghanistan in 2011³⁸ in what comedian Dan Ilic described as "one of the most moving shows I've ever being in the audience for."³⁹

For some high-profile entertainers, performing in military concert tours enhanced their brand image. Publicity for lead singer of *The Angels*, Doc Neeson has emphasised his participation in the 1999 Tour of Duty concert for peacekeepers in East Timor, crediting him with a key role in initiating the tour. In 2007 his reformed band, *Doc Neeson's Angels* (DNA) toured in Iraq and Afghanistan, a fact that was also highlighted in his public profile.⁴⁰ Such tours helped promote him and his band as a continuing force in the Australian rock industry. Arguably, identification with soldiers and the connotations of hard work, sacrifice and gritty reality resonated with his image and with the image of *The Angels*. This was also consistent with his former soldier persona. In the late 1960s Neeson had been conscripted for military service and his military past gave him insights into the world of a later generation of soldiers, and an obvious degree of empathy. While in Baghdad, Neeson was presented with two medals which had retrospectively been authorised for national servicemen, the National Service Medal and Australian Defence Medal,⁴¹ further consolidating his brand image. Perhaps the best-known song of *The Angels*, "Am I ever going to see your face again?" resonates as a pub rock classic and this has been frequently performed by other military tour bands.⁴²

Tour challenges and transitions

It is as tough a tour as you will do as a performer. My throat's gone, my diet's gone out the window, I'm smoking 60 cigarettes a day, I've had three hours sleep – all the things that should and can impact on a performance and inspire lethargy. If a promoter tried to dump this type of tour on me in Australia we'd last about two days. But here – so what? I'm on a stage for people who have been here for six months. Give it your all.⁴³
(Fred Lang, 2008)

Being offered a chance to perform for troops in Afghanistan could evoke different responses, and such responses can be revealing. Anne Davis, the mother of Australian entertainer Brielle Davis reacted to her daughter's forthcoming tour of Afghanistan in the following manner:

We think it's an unbelievable opportunity for her to be going to Iraq and Afghanistan. It's something that I don't think there are very many people

that would ever have that opportunity (sic). We realise there's a huge element of danger but she's going to get another experience in life that other people can only dream about.⁴⁴

Reflecting a range of emotions that might include lack of knowledge about the war, as well as the natural concern of a mother for the safety of her daughter, the quote above reveals how the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were far removed from the experience of most Australians who were untouched by this (and indeed any) conflict.

Unique challenges facing civilian entertainers in the war zone included the need to adhere to strict military rules, the requirement to maintain operational security, and the culture shock of being in a military environment. For some younger entertainers like Christian Lo Russo of *Amy Meredith* the adaptation to the very language of the military provided a cross-cultural challenge:

“Fuck, all of a sudden you're thrown into this like, this ah structure where they're like, alright oh six hundred hours! and where you're like what does this mean first of all (sic).”⁴⁵

Transitioning between civilian and military environments could require cultural shifts for entertainers. The requirements to maintain operational security could be confusing, and entertainer Tom Gleeson saw the incongruity of trusting a comedian with military secrets.⁴⁶ During his performances in the Middle East, he made comedy from the fact that he could not reveal the names of one of the countries he had flown to, to the amusement of many in his military audience who also chafed under what seemed to them unnecessarily strict operational security requirements. In his book he referred to such places as Secret Country No. 1, or Secret Country No. 2, purportedly avoiding a breach of security but clearly using comedy to subvert this. Gleeson managed to draw even more humour from this in his book when describing the bomb damage done by United States attacks on the reinforced ‘impenetrable’ aircraft hangars used by the Iraqi air force after they invaded Secret Country No. 1 in the 1990-91 Gulf War, a description that makes it clear to the reader where his secret location was.⁴⁷

Threats and dangers

It's an eerie feeling being there and knowing there is war happening close by but you've just got to keep your mind on the job.⁴⁸ (Blake Ralph, 2009)

Participation in a forces entertainment tour would present a very real threat of danger for tour members. It is always problematic to compare the degree of danger between one war and another, and comparisons become irrelevant for anyone actually killed or injured—the projectile that strikes a human body makes such broad questions meaningless to the individual concerned. However, the structure of the battle space in Iraq and Afghanistan was vastly different from some earlier conflicts and had created its own particular stresses and dangers.⁴⁹ The clearly demarcated frontlines of World

War 1 meant those fighting in the trenches could be given regular respite in safety behind the front line, where they could also be entertained. Although the World War 2 battle space was more fluid, similar distinctions between the same principles of frontline danger and the relative safety of rear-echelon areas applied. In contrast, during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan troops were stationed in bases that could vary in size from Baghdad's Camp Victory (effectively a mini city that incorporated Baghdad's international airport) to small patrol bases not much bigger than a football field. All these bases were surrounded by countryside, towns, and villages which could be a source of threat, depending upon local circumstances. Troops patrolling outside the wire were obviously at greatest risk, but even those in the safety of their bases were also often under attack, particularly indirect attacks by rockets fired from 8 kilometres away. Such attacks might often be ineffective, but even non-combatant soldiers in this environment faced challenges and risks, and such risks also confronted the visiting Australian entertainers.

Even the act of arriving at a tour location involved risk, particularly in Iraq. Entertainers were travelling on military aircraft that could be subjected to ground based attack during take-off and landing. After his return to Australia Tom Gleeson was questioned about instances when he was scared, and on reflection felt one of the few occasions was when he realised the aircraft taking him into Baghdad might be attacked by surface-to-air fire, and as a matter of standard procedure would have to take evasive action while landing.⁵⁰ There could also be dangers of attack by improvised explosive devices or direct fire when travelling on land. Those entertainers who traversed Route Irish into the Green Zone (International Zone) in central Baghdad knew they were travelling along what journalists called "the most dangerous road in the world," and comedian Fred Lang and *Wolverines* singer John Clinton realised the dangers when their access to the earphones of their armoured vehicle crew allowed them to listen in on the crew's pre-emptive battle procedures.⁵¹ While a less significant hazard, entertainers also faced the possibility of suicide bomb attacks.

More constant risk came from indirect fire as they performed on military bases that were frequently under daily enemy rocket attack. Such sporadic rocket attacks might be poorly aimed but they had killed and injured coalition troops (including Australians), and while no Australian concert entertainers suffered this fate, this remained an enduring risk. Blake Ralph recalled that the entertainers on his 2009 tour to Afghanistan had to take cover in protected bomb proof shelters as a result of a threatened rocket attack on Tarin Kowt⁵² (fortunately the alarm sounded after their performance had ended). Dan Ilic had his 2011 tour comedy routine at Kandahar interrupted by rocket attack and was obliged to throw himself on the ground, as did the audience.⁵³ Such attacks were routine for the troops but not the entertainers, and the words of fellow performer in the same concert, guitarist Cameron Laing: "I'm not going to lie, I sh*t myself,"⁵⁴ summed up the feelings of many entertainers. For some entertainers, the risks precluded participation in a tour. As *Augie March* singer Glenn Richards pointed out, "I understand Australian troops are there for peacekeeping, but you'd be mad to risk lives by going to Iraq."⁵⁵

The meanings of tours

Those entertainers who did go were greatly appreciated by their Australian audiences,⁵⁶ who were predominantly members of the armed forces deployed for between 6 to 8 months. During the deployment they were on duty seven days a week, often working shifts of 12 to 16 hours. While popular representation of war emphasised the very real dangers of rocket attacks, improvised explosive devices during an enemy ambush, or an attack from within by disaffected Afghan soldiers, these events might have been a constant concern for some soldiers but were not a daily occurrence in all locations. But all soldiers on deployment faced long working hours with little off-duty entertainment on offer apart from a gym workout or DVDs and laptop films, and such a drawn-out routine existence could be both boring as well as terrifying. The arrival of an entertainment tour, just like a visit by politicians or dignitaries, signalled a break from the normal routine. FACE tours included a disparate range of entertainers, and while not all the individual performers on a given tour might appeal to all in the audience, this was an environment with rare opportunities for mass public entertainment. Laugesen points out that entertainment can alleviate soldiers' boredom and also allows them to preserve psychological resilience.⁵⁷ A high value can therefore be placed on the concerts for their amelioration of the conditions of routine, and concerts could provide the chance to listen to and participate in music and humour, as well as the opportunity to talk to usually out-of-reach performers one-on-one after the concert.

The act of entertaining in a war zone also had particular significance for the entertainers themselves. Entertainers repeatedly spoke about their sense of duty to the troops, and the ways that taking part in the tour helped them understand the experience soldiers were going through. Indigenous singer Blake Ralph thought his experience allowed him to connect the television coverage of Afghanistan to the reality, and also felt a sense of patriotic commitment: "When you go over there to do a gig you're representing your country, and performing for men and women who are doing such a great job for your country."⁵⁸ For singer Jenny Morris, touring gave her "a better understanding of the Australian military" and an understanding of the focus of those in command and their sensitivity to Afghans in a challenging environment.⁵⁹

Many performers found that participation in a war tour was a significant event that connected them to the military. For classically trained musician and singer Ami Williamson, performing on the 2008 tour was a life changing event that helped her relate to the experiences of her father and her in-laws who had also performed in military concerts.⁶⁰ Performers often found the improvised blast wall and sandbag concert settings and the physical closeness to their small but very different weapon-carrying audience were highly stimulating: "it's by far the best gigs I have ever done," commented Blake Ralph.⁶¹ In Western societies with volunteer armed forces, many lack contact with those in the military, and often gain their impressions of armed forces from the fictions of sometimes inaccurate film and media. (Wade Osborne of *Amy Meredith* stated he expected Afghanistan in 2011 to resemble a scene from the TV series *M.A.S.H.*)⁶² The

experience of flying in military aircraft, of wearing a helmet and body armour, being subjected to a degree of military discipline, and being part of the military world for two or three weeks while also undertaking a normal performing role was an adventure in itself. As Ami Williamson said, "It's a bit unreal. It's bizarre. A performer, you know, generally doesn't have to carry the heaviest of flak jackets, the helmet, the gas mask, put it all down and then get in a frock."⁶³ For Brooke, Samantha and Mollie McClymont (*The McClymonts*) their own experiences on their earlier entertainment tours of Afghanistan and Iraq were responsible for their 2013 decision to lend their track "Where You Are" to the Legacy defence families support charity to aid in fundraising.⁶⁴

Deployment to a war zone as an entertainer could bring out a sense of vicarious euphoria through closeness to danger and the wartime experience. *Hungry Beast* TV presenter and comedian Dan Ilic (whose younger brother had deployed to Afghanistan as a soldier) put it frankly: "But who needs endless video entertainment channels when you're dressed in body armour and about to fly into a war zone? This shit was cool."⁶⁵ Even more frank was the comment from Christian Lo Russo who urged other entertainers to "come over and fucking play to the troops – it'll blow your fucking mind."⁶⁶

The tour to the Middle East could become part of their brand identity for other performers. Country rock band *The Wolverines* included details of their April 2008 tour of Afghanistan and Iraq on their website, with an extensive entry recounting their activities. This chronicled the vicissitudes of travel which included the loss of a passport and baggage, contact with a range of multinational soldiers, uncomfortable rides in military aircraft, and extremes of heat and cold. They described the experience as one in which they "got back more than money could ever buy," citing highlights that included the insights into the war and soldiers' lives, an appreciation of the soldiers' professionalism and "the reward of putting a smile on the faces of our troops." They also made reference to gaining an appreciation of different cultures and of the privilege of visiting the ruins of the ancient city of Ur, the 4,000-year-old cradle of civilisation.⁶⁷ Their distinctive long hair, extensive beards and burly physique might have accentuated their differences from the younger soldiers photographed with them but *The Wolverines* clearly appreciated the opportunity to participate in a series of very different cultures.

Conclusion

Deployment to a war zone is dangerous both for soldiers who fight and for civilians who don't fight but who also face significant risks. The arduous conditions and danger confronting Australian entertainers who toured in the Vietnam War was ultimately to be recognised by the retrospective Vietnam Logistic Support Medal (1993), which by 2010 was extended to include both those entertainers who performed in official tours as well as those who had gone to Vietnam in a private capacity.⁶⁸ An Australian Operational Service Medal has been gazetted for defence civilians who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, and it

seems appropriate that entertainers should be eligible for some form of recognition.

The military concert tours entertaining Australian troops in the Middle East represent connectivity between the current era and past concert tours in Vietnam, and those of World Wars 1 and 2. While Australia has no equivalent to Vera Lynn or Bob Hope, those who did entertain soldiers at war achieved a certain position in the eyes of the audience. Wartime concert entertainers ranged from witty and polished comedians, conservative country singers, iconic figures from the rock and roll past, and attractive younger emerging artists of both sexes. Despite the easy availability of alternative entertainment on laptop and DVD, concert tours were well attended as they represented life back in Australia. The soldiers in the audience (and their families at home) clearly appreciated the risks taken by civilian entertainers who were under no obligation to tour but chose to do so. For the audience, the tours provided links to home, an opportunity to talk after a concert to well-known entertainers, and a reaffirmation that those back in Australia cared for them—as well as the chance to chant the popular and vulgar refrain to *that song* by *The Angels*.

For the entertainers themselves, the tour might mean a chance to demonstrate support for soldiers doing their jobs, an opportunity to show support for the cause of a war, or perhaps the possibility of promoting an emerging brand or reviving a fading career. For some, the tours could also provide an opportunity to undertake dramatic new experiences. There was also the chance to gain an understanding of the culture of war and the culture of soldiers, cultures that are inaccessible to most Australians. To vicariously explore that little-known experience of war in two or three weeks was a unique privilege, and one that their soldier audiences did not begrudge them.

¹ Bruce Johnson, "An Interview with Patricia Thompson (Little Pattie)," *Popular Music and Society* 27:1 (2004): 71-72.

² See for example Amanda Laugesen, *'Boredom Is the Enemy': The Intellectual and Imaginative Worlds of Australian Soldiers in the Great War and Beyond* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011); Ann-Mare Jordens, "Not *Apocalypse Now*: Government-Sponsored Australian Entertainers in Vietnam 1965-71," *Labour History* 58 (1990): 65-75, and Siobhan McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts: Australian Women and the Vietnam War* (Melbourne: Lothian, 2005).

³ Martina Lipton, "Tactical Agency in War Work: 'Anzac Ada' Reeve, 'the Soldier's Friend'," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 3:1 (2012): 7-23.

⁴ Amanda Laugesen, "More than a Luxury: Australian Soldiers as Entertainers and Audiences in the First World War," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 6:3 (2013): 226-238.

⁵ ENSA, or the Entertainments National Service Association (later Combined Services Entertainment) took on the role of organising troop entertainment in Great Britain and the United Services Organizations (USO) did the same in the United States.

⁶ Born in 1917, Vera Lynn was one of the most popular British singers of the Second World War with her most well-known songs being 'We'll meet again' and 'The white cliffs of Dover.' She performed in the United Kingdom, the Middle East and on the India-Burma campaign. At the age

of 92 she made it to number one on the British album list. See Stuart Maconie, *The People's Songs: The Story of Modern Britain in 50 Records* (London: Random House, 2013), 9-11.

⁷ *Army Regulation 215-1, Morale Welfare and Recreation* (Washington: United States Army, 2010), accessed 10 January 2014, http://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/pdf/r215_1.pdf, 66.

⁸ They were avid supporters of deployed United States troops. "Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders Celebrate 75th USO Tour with Middle East Trip," 21 December 2012, accessed 20 December 2013, <http://www.uso.org/dallas-cowboys-cheerleaders-75-uso-tours/>.

⁹ Campbell Robertson, "In Iraq, Colbert does his Shtick for the Troops," *New York Times*, 7 June 2009, accessed 20 December 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/08/arts/television/08colb.html? r=0>. Colbert toured Iraq in 2009, staging four separate comedy performances in a business suit especially tailored in American military camouflage. His usual comedic character was a critical parody of a domineering right-wing Fox News style presenter, and performing in this costume was another iteration of this character, amended for the war environment. One show in Baghdad's Al Faw Palace included a cameo video link appearance by President Barack Obama who ordered Colbert's interview subject, American commander General Ray Odierno, to shave Colbert's hair live for the entertainment of the watching troops and viewers at home. Colbert also parodied George Bush's premature declaration of 2004 that the war had ended with his own declaration of the war's end, an example of nuanced American political satire that could demonstrate support for soldiers at war and also ridicule of the former Republican President.

¹⁰ Garofalo has discussed the post-September 11 support for Bush by music industry figures who would previously have been assumed to be oppositional. See Reebee Garofalo, "Pop Goes to War, 2001-2004: US Popular Music after 9/11," in *Music in the Post-9/11 World*, eds. Jonathan Ritter and J. Martin Daughtry (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.

¹¹ The examples in the following discussion are derived from my observations made in Iraq in 2006-07 and in Afghanistan in 2008-09.

¹² "John Farnham Info; Tour of Duty," accessed 15 January 2014, http://www.johnfarnham.info/gigs/tour_of_duty.htm.

¹³ "From Little Patti to the Screaming Jets a Tradition Continues," *Platypus*, Edition 97, December 2007, 30, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.afp.gov.au/~media/afp/pdf/3/30-31-from-little-pattie-to-the-screaming-jets.ashx>.

¹⁴ Dan Ilic, "My Kandahar Comedy Show that Literally Bombed," *The Punch*, 3 November 2011, accessed 15 January 2014, <http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/My-kandahar-comedy-show-that-literally-bombed/>.

¹⁵ Those entertainers who travelled in the later phase of the Afghanistan War were sometimes fortunate enough to fly in the far more comfortable new Globemaster aircraft.

¹⁶ Gleeson subsequently wrote a book about his experiences. See Tom Gleeson, *Playing Poker with the SAS: A Comedy Tour of Iraq and Afghanistan* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).

¹⁷ The writer observed two separate forces entertainment tours in the Middle East and on each occasion indigenous Australian performers (Adrian Ross, Blake Ralph) took part. During Adrian Ross's 2006 tour, the warm personal interaction between Ross and Indigenous Australian soldiers after one performance was particularly noticeable, while in 2009 Blake Ralph thought it was "pretty cool" to be joined on stage by an Indigenous sailor when singing *Treaty*. See Darren Coyne, "Blake Plays for Troops," *Koorie Mail*, 8 April 2009, 13.

¹⁸ Gleeson, *Playing Poker*, 22-23.

¹⁹ The comedians on tour often stepped over this mark.

²⁰ Those whose images of the military come from film or from accounts of military culture in the national service era of the 1950s and 1960s might not be aware that like many other Australian social institutions, the contemporary Australian Defence Force has publically adopted socially progressive values. For example, the first decades of the 21st century has seen dramatic changes in the Australian Defence Force in terms of equality and in support for gay and transgender personnel. See for example Dominic Lopez, "Brothers and Sisters in Arms: Experiences of Gay Soldiers in the Australian Army," *Australian Army Journal* 10:3 (2013): 213-225, and Steve Cannane, "Lieutenant Colonel Cate McGregor," ABC Radio 18 September 2013, accessed 15 January 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/09/18/3851509.htm?site=brisbane>.

²¹ There are over 10,000 women in the Australian Defence Force, and the ratio of females in each service is Navy 18%, Army 12% and Air Force 17%, *Defence Jobs*, accessed 5 January 2014, <http://www.defencejobs.gov.au/recruitmentCentre/supportAndDownloads/FAQs/WomenInDefence/#HowmanywomenarethereintheADFandwhatistheratio>.

²² McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts*, 88.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ During the Iraq and Afghanistan deployments, troops were typically banned from consuming alcohol. On special occasions such as Anzac Day, Australia Day and Christmas, soldiers who were not on duty were permitted to sign for and purchase up to three units of alcohol, which had to be consumed with food in a stated location under supervision.

²⁵ For example, the same Iraq Campaign Medal was awarded to soldiers who took part in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and to the soldiers who took part in the United Nations-sanctioned mission post 2005.

²⁶ See for example *United Nations Security Council*, "Security Council Extends Mandate of Multinational Force in Iraq until 31 December 2007," 29 November 2006, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sc8879.doc.htm>.

²⁷ Peter Holmes, "Why should we risk our lives?" *The Telegraph*, 24 September 2006, accessed 15 December 2013 <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/why-should-we-risk-our-lives/story-e6freuzi-111112257919>. Gleeson quipped that Joy had not been asked to tour and that he wouldn't be asked as the government wanted troop morale to rise not fall. Gleeson, *Playing Poker*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ Christian Lo Russo, *Amy Meredith – The Afghanistan Chronicles Part One*, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBT1W3j1ZDY>.

³⁰ Holmes, "Why should we risk our lives?"

³¹ Gleeson, *Playing Poker*, 22.

³² Boulton has argued that in the American context country music was framed to support the War on Terror. Andrew Boulton, "The Popular Geopolitical Wor(l)ds of Post-9/11 Country Music," *Popular Music and Society* 31:3 (2008): 373-387. This position is also supported by Garofalo, "Pop Goes to War," 9-13. Despite differences between Australian and American country music it appears that some country performers such as *The Wolverines* and *The McClymonts* found it easy to associate with the popular cultural values of the military.

³³ There is a cultural divide in United States entertainment culture between a Hollywood that might represent anti-war views and Nashville (country music) that might represent conservative and patriotic views. See Boulton, "The Popular Geopolitical Wor(l)d," 375. Similar tensions seem apparent in Australia, although this is a topic requiring further research.

³⁴ "Willis Does his Bit for the Troops," *The Guardian*, 27 September 2003, accessed 20 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/27/iraq>.

³⁵ There is a strong association between the military brand and masculinity. See Heather Smith and Richard Gehrman, "Branding the Muscled Male Body as Military Costume," *Fashion and War in Popular Culture*, ed. Denise Rall (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), 57-71.

³⁶ Australian Defence Force, Global Operations, Afghanistan, "Hamish and Andy broadcast live from Afghanistan," 18 April 2008, accessed 15 January 2014, <http://www.defence.gov.au/opex/global/opslipper/images/gallery/2008/0418/index.htm>.

³⁷ Lisa Dib, "John Schumann – Redgum: Music Interview," *Watch Out For*, 2 January 2010, accessed 10 December 2013, <http://watchoutfor.com.au/john-schumann-redgum-interview/>.

³⁸ "Tour of Duty a Tough Gig," *Sunday Mail (SA)*, 9 June 2012, accessed 15 December 2013, <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/tour-of-duty-a-tough-gig/story-e6frea6u-1226389865914>.

³⁹ Dan Ilic, "Operation Your Mum: On the Ground in Tarin Kowt," *The Punch*, 4 November 2011, accessed 15 January 2014, <http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/operation-your-mum-on-the-ground-in-tarin-kowt/>.

⁴⁰ "Australian entertainment network, Australian recording artists: Doc Neeson," accessed 15 December 2013, http://www.australiannetworkentertainment.com/doc_neeson.htm.

- ⁴¹ *Department of Defence Website*, "Rock Star Awarded Military Honours," 30 October 2007, accessed 15 January 2014, <http://www.defence.gov.au/media/download/2007/Oct/20071030c/index.htm>.
- ⁴² For more than 30 years, it has been a popular entertainment tradition that when the song's chorus line 'Am I ever gonna see your face again?' is sung, this will be followed by an antiphonal audience response chant - 'No way, get f----d, f---k off.' This popular song has been described by the ABC as the unofficial anthem of the Australian Defence Force. See *ABC Library Sales*, "Australian Story – Show of Force (Afghanistan)," accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.abccommercial.com/librarysales/program/australian-story-show-force-afghanistan>.
- ⁴³ "Show of Force Part 2 – Transcript," *Australian Story*, 19 May 2008, accessed 15 January 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2007/s2249960.htm>.
- ⁴⁴ "Show of Force Part 1 – Transcript," *Australian Story*, 12 May 2008, accessed 12 August 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2007/s2243524.htm>.
- ⁴⁵ Lo Russo, *Amy Meredith – Afghanistan Chronicles*. Australian military timings follow the 24-hour clock method used in Europe, with 6 AM in the morning equating to 0600 hours or oh six hundred hours.
- ⁴⁶ Gleeson, *Playing Poker*, 18.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ⁴⁸ Sarah Martin, "Blake Ralph Tours Afghanistan," *ABC Indigenous*, 19 May 2009, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/stories/s2575154.htm>.
- ⁴⁹ Damien Hadfield, "The Evolution of Combat Stress: new challenges for a new generation of Anzacs," in *Anzac Legacies: Australians and the Aftermath of War*, eds. Martin Crotty and Marina Larsen (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2010), 233-246.
- ⁵⁰ Gleeson, *Playing Poker*, 53-54.
- ⁵¹ "Show of Force Part 2 – Transcript."
- ⁵² Martin, "Blake Ralph Tours Afghanistan."
- ⁵³ Ilic, "My Kandahar Comedy Show."
- ⁵⁴ Presumably not to be taken literally. Thomas Bleach, "Tom's Music Reviews: Amy Meredith Interview," *North Lakes Messenger*, 21 January 2011, 30.
- ⁵⁵ Holmes, "Why Should we Risk Our Lives?"
- ⁵⁶ Audiences also included Afghan interpreters and multinational force members from countries such as the United States, the Netherlands, Singapore, France and Norway.
- ⁵⁷ Laugesen, *Boredom is the Enemy*, 6.
- ⁵⁸ Martin, "Blake Ralph Tours Afghanistan."
- ⁵⁹ *Jenny Morris Online*, "The FACE Tour: Images," 8 October 2009, accessed 18 December 2013, <http://www.jennymorris.com/?p=353>.
- ⁶⁰ "Show of Force Part 2 – Transcript."
- ⁶¹ Martin, "Blake Ralph Tours Afghanistan."
- ⁶² Wade Osborne, *Amy Meredith – The Afghanistan Chronicles Part One*, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBT1W3j1ZDY>.
- ⁶³ "Show of Force Part 2 – Transcript."
- ⁶⁴ *Legacy* is an Australian charity established by veterans in 1923 to help the children, spouses and families of members of the military who have suffered or died as a result of their service. "Legacy Release a Sweet Song as Australian Troops Return Home," *news.com.au*, 21 December 2013, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/music/legacy-releases-sweet-song-as-australian-troops-return-home/story-fnk854fn-1226787882504>.
- ⁶⁵ Ilic, "My Kandahar Comedy Show."
- ⁶⁶ Lo Russo, *Amy Meredith – Afghanistan Chronicles*.
- ⁶⁷ "The Wolverines Middle East Tour de Force: April 2008 Entertaining Aussie Troops," *The Wolverines*, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://www.wolverines.com.au/sail.htm>.
- ⁶⁸ *Enquiry into Recognition of Unattached Australian Performers in the Vietnam Conflict*, Australian Government, March 2010, 6-7, accessed 10 January 2014, <http://defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Tribunal-Report-recognition-of-unattached-entertainers-in-Vietnam.pdf>.