

Afghan mine kills SAS soldier

Date: 18/02/2002

By Michelle Grattan, Chief Political Correspondent

Australian forces in Afghanistan are mourning their first death, after a Special Air Services soldier was killed when his army Land Rover hit an anti-tank mine. The soldier, whose name has not been released because of family wishes, was one of five in the vehicle at the head of a convoy. He was treated by a US military parachute surgical team and evacuated to Kandahar but died soon after arriving there on Saturday.

Australian soldiers were recently warned to be especially alert to the high risk of mines, after an SAS soldier lost two toes after standing on a landmine.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Opposition Leader, Simon Crean, offered their sympathies to the dead soldier's family. It is understood he was married, and last night it was reported he had only recently become a father.

"This young man has died in the service of his country and in the fight against terrorism which is so critical to all of us and to our futures," Mr Howard said.

"It indicates how dangerous is the mission on which our servicemen are embarked. It is a sad and awful reminder of the great risks that the men and women of the ADF undertake."

Mr Crean said the tragedy "reminds us all of the enormous debt that we owe the men and women who serve in our armed forces. Our prayers go out to other Australians on active duty." The army chief, Lieutenant-General Peter Cosgrove, told reporters that at about 4.30pm in Afghanistan on Saturday, the soldier's vehicle struck the landmine in southern Afghanistan and he was seriously wounded.

He received medical attention from Australian colleagues who were nearby, before the surgical team, which included a surgeon and three medics, parachuted into the area about an hour later.

A US Military Combat Search and Rescue team took him by helicopter to a US military medical facility in Kandahar.

General Cosgrove said Australian soldiers in Afghanistan had been "working extraordinarily hard removing the instruments of terror and war. Arms caches, military equipment left behind in abundance - these are obviously focal points where mines are emplaced by evil people."

General Cosgrove said a military funeral would be held for the soldier if his family wished.

SAS trooper's body flown home

Date: 20/02/2002

By Craig Nelson in Kandahar and Craig Skehan in Canberra

The body of SAS Trooper Andrew Russell has been flown back to Australia in a US Air Force C130 Hercules aircraft after a ceremony in southern Afghanistan.

As bagpipes played, colleagues mourned his weekend death. But the international news organisation CNN complained that it had been banned from filming the ceremony.

The 33-year-old trooper from Perth was killed on Saturday when the patrol vehicle in which he and four others were traveling hit a landmine.

The following evening Australian soldiers lined up on either side of the rear ramp of the aircraft used to transport his body back to Australia. "The body was carried by Australian soldiers dressed in desert camouflage up the ramp," reported CNN correspondent Martin Savidge, who was present. "The only light came from the interior light in the plane. It was very dark." Savidge said it was a pity that he couldn't film the ceremony. "Australia has made the biggest sacrifice possible. Australians deserve to see it."

An Australian Defence spokeswoman said Savidge's account was being checked by Australian personnel, but it was not usual practice to allow filming which could identify Special Forces personnel.

A full memorial service is scheduled to be held at the Kandahar base today.

Trooper Russell's wife, Kylie, said yesterday in a statement that he was a loving man with a wicked sense of humour. "Andrew lived his life to the full and passionately loved his job," she said. "He lived and experienced more in this short time than he had than most other people would in a lifetime." Mrs Russell, who gave birth to a daughter, Leisa, on February 5, has asked for details of funeral arrangements to be kept private.

Australian Defence spokesman Brigadier Gary Bornholt yesterday disputed claims that it took too long for Trooper Russell to be treated. "About 20 to 25 minutes after the incident we had helicopters in the air, which is pretty quick," he said.

A US aircraft then overtook the helicopters and parachuted three specialist medical personnel to Trooper Russell's aid.