

# SASR celebrates 50 years of daring to win

By Lieutenant Colonel Anthony John

The curtain of mystique associated with the Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) was briefly lifted recently at their home base of Campbell Barracks in Perth, Western Australia (WA) on the occasion of the unit's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations.

The anniversary of the raising of the Australian Special Air Service or *the Regiment*, as it is simply and widely known, was celebrated in style with a veritable who's who of past and present members representing the entire history

of the unit. While many former members are Perth-based due to the unit's long and proud association with the WA capital, many guests heard the call from near and far to gather for the festivities culminating in an all ranks unit ball. Those who attended ranged from the Governor General His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffrey AC CVO MC in his capacity as Honorary Colonel and former Commanding Officer, to the most recently qualified Trooper. Regardless of rank or position, the SASR prides itself on its egalitarian attitude of all being part of the wider Regimental family.

Conspicuously absent were those members of the Regiment currently on active service on operations around the world. Their absence was a salutary reminder of the sacrifice and ongoing commitment that wearing the winged dagger demands. Despite the well known and less well known exploits of the Regiment of recent times, the unit had a relatively inauspicious start and has had its share of setbacks. One constant throughout its history, however, is that ordinary men have been called upon to perform extraordinary deeds in the spirit of the Regimental motto – *Who Dares Wins*.

Like many Australian Army units, the SASR draws its inspiration from its British counterpart, with which it still maintains close links. The roots of both units share a common heritage with David Stirling's World War II (WWII) unit of the same name. It should be noted that Stirling's co-founder was Australian Jock Lewes, the subject of Virginia Cowles' book – *The Phantom Major*. Although it shares the ubiquitous sandy beret, badge and motto, the Australian version has forged its own unique identity influenced by the tradition of the WWII Australian M and Z Special Forces and the courage displayed by the men of Operation Jaywick and the daring raid on Singapore Harbour.

The 1957 raising of the 1<sup>st</sup> SAS Company of the Royal Australian Regiment was a low key affair. Established in temporary lines at Campbell Barracks, occupied by the then 57<sup>th</sup> National Service Battalion, the home of the SAS Company appears to be chosen by default as a means of justifying the Army's continuing ownership of the adjoining Swanbourne Rifle Range. Arguably more by accident than design, the decision to base the SAS Company at Campbell Barracks with its prime



Former serving members of the Special Air Service Regiment (centre middle) Mr Chas Wilson (1<sup>st</sup> SAS) and his mates at the memorial service held as part of the commemoration at Campbell Barracks for the unit's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations.

Indian Ocean beach front was to pay dividends later when the unit developed its amphibious role and expanded to its present size. It is also a decision much appreciated by subsequent generations of SAS soldiers and their families who occupy the neighbouring married quarter precinct.

By 1964, the SAS Company had grown to two Squadrons in strength, which justified the award of the title the SAS Regiment. The unit's first operational commitment was in Borneo in 1965 alongside its British counterpart. This was rapidly followed in 1966 with the first of its multiple Squadron level tours to Vietnam in support of the Australian Task Force. It was here that the SASR earned its combat reputation. Inflicting a kill ratio of 500 confirmed enemy casualties to one SASR battle casualty speaks for itself. Additionally, Warrant Officer Ray Simpson, a founding member of the SAS Company, was awarded the Victoria Cross while serving with the Australian Army Task Team Vietnam. It was also in Vietnam that the SASR began its close and enduring relationship with United States Special Forces, which still exists today.

The 1970s saw the unit focus shift to the establishment of the troop-based insertion skills. Each Squadron had three troops who focussed on Water, Vehicle and Climbing (later Freefall) operations respectively. In a typical example of SASR over achievement, the first Climbing Troop Commander, then-Captain Pat Cullinan, with no previous climbing experience summited Mount Everest a decade later. Throughout the 1980s the unit developed an additional role – counter terrorism. Although the techniques are still shrouded in secrecy, the SASR applied sound military principles and its trademark skill and daring to the tactical problem of recovering hostages held by terrorists. By the end of the 1980s the unit was widely recognised as having a world class capability.

By 1990 the Regiment was back up to three Sabre Squadrons and with that had the ability to rotate Squadrons through an operational cycle of training, war roles and counter terrorism. The SASR believes in the adage *train as you fight*. The dangers of such high standards were highlighted on 12 June 1996. Fifteen members of the unit perished when two Blackhawk helicopters collided in mid air. There had been training accidents before but nothing on this scale. Like all those who went before them, the 15 names are inscribed on the unit memorial known as 'The Rock'.



Photos provided by Public Affairs

Special Air Service Regiment's (SASR) Honorary Colonel, the Governor General His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC, presents the newest members of SASR with their first sandy beret at Campbell Barracks for the unit's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations.

The current high operational tempo began for the SASR about a decade ago. The deployment to Kuwait in 1998 was followed by a diverse range of operations from East Timor to Afghanistan, Iraq, the Solomon Islands and back to East Timor. Concurrent with these major deployments, the SASR provided domestic security support to the Sydney 2000 Olympics, Commonwealth Games 2006, CHOGM and APEC 2007, as well as boarding operations against illegal immigrants on the MV Tampa and the North Korean freighter the MV Pong Su. With this wealth of operational commitments have come many individual and collective honours and awards making the SASR the most decorated unit in the Australian

Defence Force. Sadly, this has come at a price and several more names have also been inscribed on The Rock since 1996.

The SASR today is a battle hardened and professional unit of world class standard. During the anniversary celebrations, the current Special Operations Commander, Major General Mike Hindmarsh, acknowledged the legacy of those thousands of men who have proudly worn the winged dagger. For half a century they were the standard bearers and blazed a steep path for future SASR soldiers to follow. To them he said – "congratulations and well done". So happy 50<sup>th</sup> birthday to the Special Air Service Regiment – and here's to another 50 years of *Who Dares Wins*.