

And then there's their battle back home

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Two wars are being fought by Australians in Afghanistan. In one, our soldiers teach carpentry, train Afghans, and build bridges. In the other, to paraphrase George Orwell, rough men visit violence on those who would seek to do us harm.

Four of those rough men have died in the past two months, all while we slept safely. Judging by the public response to these deaths, most Australians don't know what those men were doing - or why they were doing it - on our behalf.

Our soldiers understand Afghanistan is an unpopular war in Australia. While 86 per cent of Australians, according to a recent Lowy Institute poll, feel the US alliance was important for Australia's security, and 73 per cent of them believe in combating international terrorism, a majority (54 per cent) don't support future Australian military involvement in Afghanistan. No polls are conducted, though, to gauge how much the Australian public understands about what our soldiers are doing there.

Our soldiers suspect much of what they do is either misunderstood or ignored at home. Many are starting to ask why there isn't more public debate on Australia's Afghan strategy. Our soldiers expect to be well trained, well equipped, and well led when they deploy - they also want their actions to be well understood back home.

Australians have a curious relationship with the military. Many own military histories of Kokoda or Tobruk. Every schoolchild studies Gallipoli. Most families have a relative who served in World War II. But understanding of military past dwarfs understanding of military present.

There are several good reasons for this. Defence service is not a common career path, bases are often in remote places, and in our democracy, seeing a soldier with a rifle is entirely uncommon. For most, the military can be put in a box only to be opened on Anzac Day or when military tragedy commands our attention.

Parliament has done little to provide robust information about what our soldiers are doing in Afghanistan. Few politicians have direct experience of combat. Fewer have much official military information to work with. Kevin Rudd as prime minister committed to delivering an annual national security statement to the Parliament in 2008. No second statement has ever materialised. When the government uses the ADF to mount an argument it physically can't do more in Afghanistan, few commentators have the expertise to dispute the claim.

Soldiers don't want people to understand tactical details but they appreciate understanding of the complexity and the professional skill required. The savage terrain in which our forces operate is inconceivable to many back home. Special forces operations are extraordinarily complex and arduous. The difference between a mission's success and failure can be as arbitrary as an errant gust of wind.

An amateur appreciation of military matters can be dangerous. The WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has assured journalists none of the classified military documents on Afghanistan he leaked will endanger coalition soldiers. He couldn't be more wrong.

In them are details that will help the Taliban piece together how our soldiers operate and what restrictions they face. Leaked intelligence summaries will help the Taliban track down and kill human intelligence sources. The flow of information helping to keep our troops safe will lessen in the coming months. Leaked sensitivities will foster friction among allies and distract from the plight of Afghanistan's citizens.

The Taliban don't report the civilian casualties they cause. They don't conduct public polling on their campaigns of violence. They have a higher pain threshold than the democratic militaries they fight. Their strategy hinges on forcing countries such as Australia to gauge military commitment by military casualties. The very qualities that make Australia a vigorous democracy are fundamental weaknesses in the war in Afghanistan.

There should be robust public and parliamentary debate on the benefits and costs of staying in Afghanistan, and Defence should make more of an effort to increase public understanding of the military. The best way we can pay tribute to those who are serving in Afghanistan is by understanding what they are doing and why.