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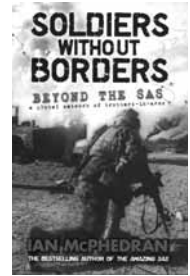
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## **BOOK REVIEW**

# ***Soldiers without borders: beyond the SAS a global network of brothers-in-arms***

by Ian McPhedran

HarperCollins Publishers: Sydney, 2008, 375 pp., ISBN 9780732285555,  
RRP \$35.00 (paperback)



There comes a time in most military careers when 'regimental soldiering' is clearly coming to an end and a decision has to be made about what to do next – learn to 'fly a military desk' or seek carve out a new career in the civilian world. *Soldiers without borders* tells the stories of some 40 former members of Australia's elite Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment, who, when they reached this mid-career decision-point, chose the civilian option.

Ian McPhedran, a Sydney-based journalist and author, is currently national defence writer for News Limited. During his career, he has covered conflicts in Burma, Somalia, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. His earlier book on the SAS, *The amazing SAS: the inside story of Australia's special forces*, was published by HarperCollins in 2007. He received a United Nations Association Peace Media Award in 1993; and a Walkley Award in 1999 for his news report on the Navy's problems with its Collins-class submarines.

During his career, McPhedran has developed good contacts among current and former members of the Special Air Service Regiment. For this book, he has drawn extensively on those contacts and has interviewed some 40 former officers and non-commissioned officers of the regiment, or, in a few instances, personnel who have trained with and fought with the regiment as Navy clearance divers or as Army or Air Force pilots, including a few New Zealand ex-special forces personnel. From these interviews, which were mainly conducted in the first half of 2008, McPhedran has compiled a biography of each person.

The book, then, is a series of short biographies, each one constituting a chapter. Typically, the biography commences by outlining the soldier's SAS career and, where relevant, his associated family life. It then explains what led the soldier to evaluate his career; how he came to his decision about his future; and what subsequently transpired. In some cases, comments from wives/partners and work colleagues are included. Finally, it sums up his feelings about his life and career at the time the interview was undertaken.

There are a few unifying themes that run through the book, such as the global network of brothers-in-arms that links the former members of the SAS, not only with one-another, but also with their British and American special forces counterparts; and the unique nature of special forces selection and training which produce uniform, reliable personal qualities which are highly sought after in the civilian world, irrespective of the

military skills which also come with that 'product', skills which also are highly valued in many jobs.

The unifying themes notwithstanding, each of the individuals interviewed has a unique story and this diversity holds the reader's interest from beginning to end. Several come to their mid-career review because they have done every job open to them in the regiment and their next promotion will see them posted to a non-regimental training or staff environment, never to return to the regiment. Others, after twenty or so years of regimental service, find their bodies can no longer sustain the immense physical demands that have been placed on them. Others have been seriously injured in training accidents and a return to regimental service is no longer feasible. Some go on to work in the international private security industry which has mushroomed during the war in Iraq; some train the special forces of foreign armies; some enter business – either starting their own or joining a large corporation; some undertake humanitarian work; some become politicians; and a couple even become Christian ministers.

Most do well in their post-service careers, but a few remain bitterly disillusioned with their former careers and subsequent treatment by the country they once proudly served. Another has found that, after two years out, civil life is not nearly as satisfying as his former service life was and he has returned to the regiment while he is still young and fit enough to do so, dropping one rank (from sergeant to corporal) in the process.

Along the way, the book provides insights into the way SAS soldiers are selected and trained, and reveals fascinating details about recent SAS deployments – East Timor, the Solomon Islands, the 2000 Olympic Games, the Tampa affair, Afghanistan and Iraq.

This book is easy to read and is timely, given the Defence Force's current recruiting and retention challenges, particularly the retention of highly-trained specialists. The book remarks on some of these dilemmas in passing, but unfortunately draws no generic lessons from the cases examined. Nevertheless, anyone who has an interest in service-people and their careers would enjoy *Soldiers without borders*, particularly anyone either contemplating a career in the Defence Force or already at an early stage in such a career. It would alert them to career stages and how others have managed them, even though the author has stopped short of any analysis of how best to approach and address such challenges.

**David Leece**