

BOOK REVIEW:

The dust of Uruzgan

by Fred Smith

Allen & Unwin; 2016; 416 pp.; ISBN 9781760292218 (paperback); RRP \$32.99

Fred Smith, a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade officer, served for two years over two tours as a diplomat in southern Afghanistan, working alongside Dutch, United States, and mostly Australian soldiers in Uruzgan Province between 2009 and 2014. His job was to engage with local leaders and try to comprehend the complex web of tribal and patronage networks that made things tick; and then to bridge the cultural gap and try to get all the stakeholders to work together – classic diplomacy ... but in a war zone.

The book is part memoir, part history, and part reflections from working on the multinational base in Tarin Kowt and from a forward operating base in the Chora Valley. Smith came to see the province through Afghan eyes, as well as those of the soldiers he worked with. The book offers a sympathetic explanation of coalition efforts and recounts the setbacks and successes of a contingent of Australian soldiers, diplomats and aid workers struggling to make a difference in a place where truth and clarity were often buried, and where many young Australians were killed and wounded.

One of Smith's 'diplomatic tools' was a guitar and his

ability to write songs. His guitar regularly served as a bridge, not only to the soldiers, but also to the people and tribal leaders of that war-torn region. In the course of his tours, Smith wrote a powerful collection of songs about the realities of life for soldiers and civilians in this difficult war. He recorded these in the acclaimed album 'Dust of Uruzgan'.

Based on the military nature of the cover image and the claim of the book being "the first 'comprehensive on-the-ground account' of Australia's mission in Afghanistan" some buyers might mistake this book for a more militaristic account. Neither is the book a full or holistic historical account of Australia's contribution to the war in Afghanistan – that will come with the recently commissioned official history series. *The Dust of Uruzgan* is a well-written, interesting and thoughtful contribution to the narrative record of Australia's longest war. But, perhaps most significantly, it is a book about the Australian experience in Afghanistan that isn't written by a reporter, an ex-special forces soldier or a retired general; and that in itself makes it worth reading.

Marcus Fielding

