



# Australian veterans' health: Iraq war

The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 for reasons that remain controversial.

The US government claimed that Iraq was concealing weapons of mass destruction, as well as harbouring links to terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, and that the dictator, Saddam Hussein, was a menace not only to his own people but internationally.

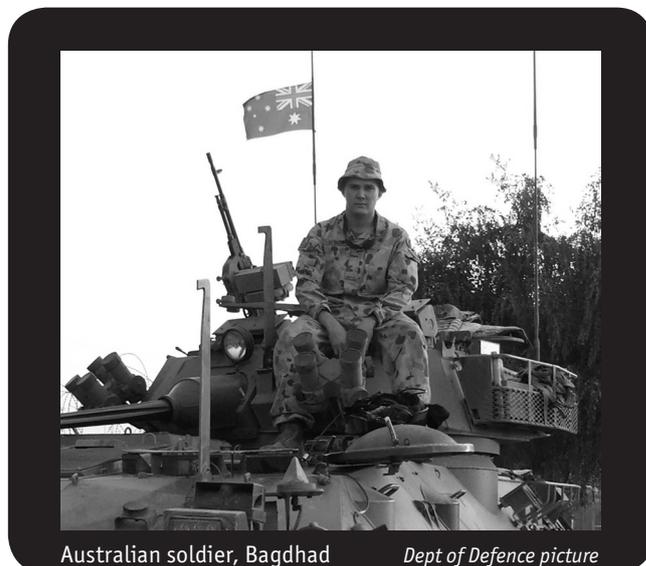
Despite United Nations weapons inspectors failing to find evidence of the alleged weapons, previous presumptions that the Iraqi government opposed Al-Qaeda rather than supported it, and Iraq's missiles and other equipment being known to be seriously outdated and limited in effectiveness, the US launched a non-United Nations sanctioned attack.

At the request of the United States, Australia sent 20,000 service personnel to Iraq between 2003 and 2009. These were withdrawn in 2009.

They participated in a range of combat and combat support roles at first, and later took on projects concerned with security and the training of Iraqi forces.

## Injuries and deaths in Iraq

Australian military suffered no deaths in battle in Iraq. Two died in indirect incidents: one from what is believed to be an accidental shot to his head in barracks, and one SAS soldier during a training drill in Kuwait prior to going to Iraq. Twenty-seven Australians were wounded in the course of their duties, including two in a suicide car bomb attack in 2005.



Australian soldier, Baghdad

Dept of Defence picture

## The long-term health consequences

In September 2011 the Department of Veteran Affairs figures indicated that 945 Australian war veterans live with an ongoing medical condition as a result of service during the Iraq war, with 2,010 medical conditions identified. The most common are various forms of hearing damage including tinnitus and sensory-neural hearing loss. (Mental health effects are discussed on the next page.)

**Editor's note:** Impacts on the health of the people of Iraq and their land have been far greater, but are not covered in this fact sheet.

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## Impact on mental health

Australians in Iraq faced a number of psychological stressors, including the constant threat of suicide bombings, road-side bombings and rocket or mortar attacks. The most pervasive ongoing mental health consequence is post traumatic stress disorder, and 243 Iraq war veterans had been diagnosed with this illness by the Department of Veteran Affairs by 2011. This number is predicted to rise as Iraq war veterans age.

The Australian Centre for Post-Traumatic Mental Health estimates that one in ten of the Australian Iraq veterans has mental health problems of some kind. Fifty-eight have been found to suffer from alcohol dependence or alcohol abuse problems.

### Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD results from intense negative experiences, including threatened and actual physical harm, major loss of personal freedom or infringement of personal principles. Long-term symptoms include avoidance of reminders of the event, and distressing unwanted recollections – vivid flashbacks or nightmares. Sufferers remain emotionally on edge, unable to enjoy normal social interaction. Their symptoms include sleeplessness, anxiety, irritability, depression and mood swings, as well as social withdrawal and alcoholism.

## Evidence

The drawing of final conclusions on the health effects of this war is limited by the fact that some diseases, including many cancers, take many years to develop.

## Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry

In 2012 the Campaign for an Iraq War Inquiry, was established to press for an independent inquiry into the decisions that led to Australia invading Iraq, and a review of the war powers of the government, to draw out what lessons can be learned for the future. MAPW supports this campaign.

- Details at [www.iraqinquiry.org.au](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.au)



ADF Air Traffic Control compound security, Baghdad 2012

### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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