

Accidental hero

Iraq. Kosovo. Afghanistan. Northern Ireland. Love. Babies.
Meet the Aussie lad who left Bond University looking for adventure and wound up a lieutenant-colonel in the British Army

words: **dwayne grant**

In many ways Andrew McDougall was no different from the vast majority of Aussies who head to London in their early 20s. He had spent several years at university. He wasn't quite ready to commit to a career. He was looking for adventure. His was a path countless others had already walked.

What makes McDougall unique is what he did next.

Rather than earn a crust pouring pints for thirsty Brits, he spent a year studying at one of the world's most prestigious military academies. Instead of experiencing Europe through the drunken haze of a Contiki tour, he did so as a troop commander. While some travellers' war stories revolve around running with bulls in Spain, his war stories are the real deal.

"I had very little sleep during the first two weeks of the (Iraq) war because we were constantly planning attacks," he recalled in a

2004 Bond University alumni newsletter. "It was also disconcerting as there was no frontline and battles were being fought behind us, in front of us and all around us."

At 21 Andrew McDougall was a bright-eyed Bond University law graduate who wanted to broaden his horizons. At 35 he is Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McDougall of the British Army – devoted husband, loving father and a veteran of conflicts in Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan.

This is one backpacker who clearly took the road less travelled.

When asked to reflect on the place he considers home, McDougall throws out a nice line: "Home is where my family is, wherever that may be." New Delhi it is then, for that is where the four women in his life – wife Georgie and daughters Tilly, 7, Clemmy, 4, and Jemima, 2 – have lived for a year. In something of a rare treat, so has he.

Instead of fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, McDougall has been based in India working in a diplomatic role with the British Foreign Office. India is a country of contrasts. It can be charming one minute and infuriating the next. It is a place of squalor and luxury, of colour and noise. It is also light years from where McDougall finds himself on this magic day.

He is sitting on the balcony of an amazing top-floor penthouse in Main Beach, the abode of his cosmetic surgeon father Ian. The brilliant blue of the Pacific Ocean sparkles to the east. The sun-drenched

hinterland beckons to the west. Some 25 storeys below lays the ordered city he called home as a university student.

His girls are inside the plush apartment enjoying the final throes of a two-month holiday. They have swum at Byron Bay, skied the slopes of Thredbo. In a few days the entire clan will be on their way back to New Delhi, back to the city they have embraced with vigour.

Before then though McDougall is telling *paradise* what it's like to fight a war while your pregnant wife watches it unfold on television back in England.

"I didn't speak to her for a month because all the mobiles were down," he says. "She was just watching Sky News and seeing these bombs rain down. That was hard, just thinking 'I hope she's not thinking I'm going to die'."

Before Iraq, before Georgie, before that first flight to London, there was Bond University. McDougall studied there from 1992-95, a sports-loving law student who decided to tag a year of international relations on to the end of his degree. And that's how he came to meet Dr Peter Young.

"You know how you have that one teacher in your life that you really get on with?" says McDougall. "Well, he was mine. He was an ex-British Army officer and when I told him I was going to go to England (after university), he said I should go to Sandhurst and do a short service commission for three years. He wanted me to broaden my

experiences, broaden my horizons.

"I'd always been interested in history and international relations so it was a natural fit – go to England, see a bit of the world. I just wanted to get out of Australia. I didn't expect to go to war. I just wanted to do something challenging and different."

The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is the stuff of legend. Universally known simply as Sandhurst, its stated aim is to be 'the national centre of excellence for leadership'. It has been active since 1802 and is where all British Army officers are trained. Alumni include Winston Churchill and, more recently, Princes William and Harry. Its motto says it all – 'Serve to Lead'.

"It's teaching you to lead men, to lead by example," says McDougall. "You have to be fitter. You have to be more capable. They want you to be able to command guys who are 40 when you're a 22 year-old.



“It teaches you about yourself, your juniors, your superiors, your peer group. It will take you to the limit of your endurance as a 21 year-old so you know how far you can go and what puts you under pressure, what stresses you out, what you do well and badly.” A grin-come-grimace spreads over his face. “That 12 months at Sandhurst is the hardest thing.”

McDougall arrived in England with nothing but ambition. No guarantees. No connections. As a foreigner, he first had to spend a year in the ranks as a soldier. Then came the stringent testing procedures to gain acceptance to Sandhurst, an institution he compares with England’s elite universities for the esteem in which it is held. It is not uncommon for non-Brits to train at the academy but he was one of the first Australians to accept the challenge.

“The Brits are happy that we want to join their army. It’s competitive but as long as you’re competent and earn their respect you’re fine.”

McDougall survived Sandhurst. Twelve months after entering its fabled grounds, he was commissioned and immediately deployed to Northern Ireland as a troop commander.

“Meeting your soldiers for the first time is the worst day of your life and the best day,” he says. “You’re thinking ‘what are they going to think of me?’ and to top it off I was Australian.

“A bonus was that I had gone through basic training with some of the soldiers that were in my troop, my platoon. Very few Sandhurst officers have experienced that but being a foreigner meant I had. My men knew that I was aware of what they went through as soldiers. It was a bond.”

His tone changes as the reality of his job descends on the conversation. “But you don’t want to be too close to your soldiers. Not because you don’t want to be friends but because you need to make tough decisions. You don’t want to be thinking ‘I don’t want to do that because you’re my mate’.”

McDougall remained in Northern Ireland until the 1998 ceasefire. The following year his regiment was sent to Kosovo to expel the Serb forces. Another year on and it was Norway for Arctic warfare training with the Royal Marines. Scattered in between were stints in Canada, Germany and South Africa.

By 2000 McDougall was ready to leave the army. He had achieved what he set out to do – found an adventure, tested himself, tried something new. It was time to move on with his life. Then two things happened. He fell



Above, Gold Coast boy Andrew McDougall laps up a hometown holiday with wife Georgie and their three girls. Below, in dress uniform in India and on tour in Afghanistan



in love with a girl called Georgie and went to war with a man called Saddam.

Young officers were allowed to invite five guests to the Catterick Army Ball of 2000. One of them brought along his girlfriend and four of her single friends. Andrew McDougall owes that man a sincere debt of gratitude.

Georgie was more than an English flame. She was also a reason for the Aussie to remain not only in the UK but also the British Army. The pair married in July 2002 and by the end of that year were expecting their first child. Life should have been wonderful. Instead the cloud that hung over Iraq also hung over them.

“You don’t care (about being sent to war) when you’re single but family changes that,” says McDougall.

The father-to-be flew to Kuwait in January 2003 to prepare for the looming battle. His pregnant wife didn’t know when she would see him again.

“It wasn’t like he was going on a six-month tour this time,” says Georgie. “It was a war and I just didn’t know when he would be back. They were also talking about



biological and chemical weapons so that was really scary. I watched Sky News constantly and you’d see the words ‘Three Dead British Soldiers’ come up on the bottom of the screen. You’d just think ‘eek’.”

Of criticism of the Iraq invasion, McDougall says: “I don’t think anyone’s pro-war, even soldiers. You don’t do it to fire guns . . . you do it to save lives and not just your own. You want to save other people’s lives.

“Saddam (Hussein) was a bastard. Regardless of the political reasons for the invasion, no one liked what he did to his own people. Even 18-year-old soldiers from the valleys of Wales who weren’t clued up on politics knew these guys were getting treated badly. We don’t want to kill people. We want to save them. There is a moral compass.”

While British troops remain in Iraq to this day, the initial war effort came to an end in May 2003. In the ultimate hospital dash McDougall jumped aboard the first Hercules aircraft out of Iraq and high-tailed it back to England. When he arrived at the airbase, his wife was waiting. It was her due date.

Tilly was born a couple of days

later. Clemmie and Jemima have followed in recent years. McDougall has been at all of their births, although subsequent tours mean he has been absent for extended periods of their lives. There was a second tour of Iraq in 2004 (“the war had completely changed, it had turned into a vicious insurgency”) and a foray into Afghanistan (“a lot of good is happening there but soldiers dying make headlines, not schools being rebuilt”).

A desire to spend more time with his family inspired his current diplomatic role. He is based in New Delhi for the foreseeable future and has no immediate plans to leave the army. “What would I do if I left the army?” he says. “Maybe management consultancy. Whatever pays the bills and I can stay home.”

New Delhi is indeed a long way from a war zone but McDougall also knows that in his career he can soon find himself back in one. “If I’m put back with the soldiers and they send us wherever, you just have to put on a smile and off you go.”

lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McDougall knew the question would come. Why is a boy from the Gold Coast serving in the upper reaches of the British Army instead of Australia’s?

“I didn’t know it would turn out like this,” he smiles. “I had no idea whether I’d come back or stay. I was just young and thought I’d do whatever.”

He adds that when he headed overseas in the mid-1990s the British military was a far more active force than its Australian counterpart. “I didn’t particularly want to fight wars but I thought ‘great, I’ll get an opportunity’.” He reinforces the notion that being educated at Sandhurst is more than just a military honour. “It’s like having an Oxford degree.”

McDougall then turns to the past to sum up the unique place he finds himself a decade and a half after walking out of Bond University. With a keen interest in history, it goes to figure he hasn’t forgotten where his heritage lays.

“I don’t really think of Britain as a foreign country,” he says. “Not like China is a foreign country. It’s the Commonwealth and my grandparents fought in the (Second World) War. Every Aussie who fought in the first and second world wars fought for Britain.

“I’m not the first Australian to fight in the British Army.”