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From nurse to Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Afghanistan

Jonathan Ball

Bachelor of Nursing, 1995

Deputy Head of Mission, Australian Embassy, Afghanistan

Jonathan Ball's career is the epitome of extraordinary. He attends diplomatic meetings with the President of Afghanistan, has served as a soldier in the British and Australian armies in places such as East Timor and Northern Ireland, set up a professional ambulance service in Baghdad, and managed natural disaster response teams around the world.

After initially leaving the Army to pursue a nursing career, Jonathan was enticed back as an Infantry Officer which he served as for another 11 years, before moving on to AusAID and eventually the Australian Embassy in Afghanistan, where he is currently the Deputy Head of Mission.

Jonathan explains his remarkable career, which has taken him all over the world, shares the most challenging situations he has been involved in and why Syria is his favourite place in the world.



Please describe your position as the Deputy Head of Mission in Afghanistan.

As the Deputy Head of Mission (DHOM) I am responsible for providing support to the Ambassador and managing the Embassy on his behalf. As the DHOM I manage our political, development, corporate and security teams. Post security is one of my most crucial roles and involves working with our own security staff as well as the contracted security team that actually provides our physical security. I also engage with the Afghan Government, the international diplomatic community and local and international non-government organisations (NGOs). Due to the peculiarities of Kabul, I actually spend half of my time in-country as the acting Ambassador or Chargé d'Affaires. As the Chargé, I am responsible for all Australians in Afghanistan, representing Australia at high level events, and engaging with senior members of the Afghan and international community.

What is like living in Afghanistan, including any misconceptions?

The Afghan people are a wonderful collection of cultures. They are generous, polite and welcoming. Some people would have you think that they all pose a threat to Australia, which just isn't the case. The level of danger we face – as diplomats – is probably misunderstood. The threat is extremely high (including shootings, bombings, kidnapping and rocket attacks) but the security that is in place to keep us safe is second to none.

What does a typical day involve?

I get picked up from home in the morning by an armoured vehicle and body guards and driven to the Embassy. The day usually involves a series of meetings with Afghan Ministries or other embassies, coalition military forces, NGO's or even the President. Moves away from the Embassy, to attend meetings, are always done in armoured vehicles with normally between four and eight bodyguards, depending how far from the Embassy we are venturing. Following a meeting, I will then report back to officials in Canberra (if it is deemed important enough) by email or through the diplomatic cable system. Daily, I will look at all the meetings and moves the Embassy is scheduled to do the next day and approve or decline them depending on the latest security updates. At the end of the day I am driven back home, normally with just enough time to get ready for one of the four or five official dinner functions I attend every week.

Briefly explain your journey from studying a Bachelor of Nursing at UniSA to becoming the Deputy Head of Mission, including how you transitioned from an Infantry Officer to the Iraq Programme Manager (responsible for \$60M budget)?

While serving as a soldier I completed the Special Forces Patrol Medics course. I found the subject interesting so when I decided to leave the Army I thought a career in the medical field would be good. During the final year of my nursing degree I was offered a position in a newly formed unit in the Australian Army. As I had had some regrets about leaving the Army, I thought I would give it one last chance before starting a nursing career. The step back into the Army lasted another 11 years. Army service took me to places such as East Timor and Bougainville, and although I was posted as an Infantry Officer I used my nursing skills and qualification to provide medical assistance to local communities and work in military hospitals or clinics on an adhoc basis. In 2007 I was posted to Darwin and having achieved most things I wanted to in the Army, I decided to leave and stay in Canberra where I was then posted as a Senior Instructor at the Royal Military College Duntroon.

I successfully applied for a job with AusAID and asked for the vacant Iraq Programme Manager job, mainly due to the fact it was Iraq at the height of its troubles, and was as close to being in the military as I was going to get without wearing a uniform. The job required me to manage our development program to Iraq totalling over \$24 million a year. This included supporting multilateral organisations such as UNHCR as well as identifying, planning and funding projects as diverse as agriculture, health and law and order. That job resulted in me being posted to Baghdad for 18 months following two years on the desk in Canberra. One of my biggest achievements was setting up a professional ambulance service in Baghdad in conjunction with International Medical Corps, a medical based NGO.

Following my time in Baghdad, due to the combination of my military and health training, I specialised in disaster response. This specialisation resulted in me being seconded to Jakarta as an advisor to the Indonesian Disaster Management Agency for two years. It also meant being contracted by the United Nations as a disaster response specialist resulting in UN deployments to disasters in places such as Pakistan, Laos, Sri Lanka and Burma. On returning to Australia, as Director Humanitarian Operations, in 2012, I managed about a dozen overseas disaster responses including our response to Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Philippines in late 2013. This response included the deployment of a 50-bed surgical hospital (Australian Medical Assistance Team) from the National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre, based in Darwin. The combination of my nursing, diplomatic and military skills perfectly aligned to allow the hospital to be established in Tacloban and treat thousands of patients over the following month. This deployment was a highlight of my disaster/nursing career, as still being registered; I was able assistance in surgery, triage and outpatients as well as doing my actual Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) job as Mission Commander.

Following my time working in disasters, which coincided with the DFAT and AusAID merger, I shifted to the policy (rather than development) side of DFAT and when the opportunity came to apply for the position of Deputy Ambassador to Afghanistan, I took it.

What is the most challenging natural disaster you have been involved with?

Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines due to the scale of destruction and the number of deaths, as well as the ongoing need to make life and death decisions regarding the treatment of individuals based on what limited resources were available. In addition, the complexities involved in establishing and managing a large field hospital in a location with no power or water combined with lots of players all trying to secure the same resources, including space, made the deployment very challenging.

Have you witnessed any situations that have made you impressed with humanity?

Probably the Philippines. I landed in Tacloban about 36 hours after the typhoon struck and for the next month every few minutes a plane would land carrying relief supplies from all over the world. It really highlighted to me that if humanity wants to mobilise to help each other we can and we can do it quickly.

During each natural disaster, I am often in awe of people who had absolutely nothing giving away their relief items to those whom they believe, needed them more. Or even just watching our own soldiers going hungry to make sure local children had at least something to eat.

Where is your favourite place you have been to and why?

Syria, because of the history and the people. Work took me to Syria on a variety of occasions and I loved it so much I took my wife there on our honeymoon in 2010. Unfortunately, Syria turned into turmoil about six months later. If we opened an embassy in Damascus I would be the first to volunteer.

What is the most challenging place you have been to and why?

I really can't identify the most challenging as everywhere is different. Disasters are challenging because of the death and destruction that surrounds you, whereas places like Iraq and Afghanistan are challenging because of the threats you face and the lifestyles you live in order to mitigate those threats. As a soldier, Northern Ireland was a challenge because of the hatred displayed by some while you were doing your job. Whereas some of my diplomatic roles have been challenging due to the people you sometimes have to deal with and be polite to, despite being fundamentally against everything they stand for.

Do you have any advice for recent graduates?

Only you can determine what your future holds and don't expect your employer to make decisions based on what's best for you. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself and try something new, life is more fulfilling that way.

What is the best piece of advice you have received?

Prioritise looking after the people who work for you over pleasing those senior to you and that includes prioritising family over work.

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Today you have the power to do something remarkable

Every student who comes to UniSA has a unique journey ahead of them. As each student strives toward their hopes and ambitions for the future, many have personal hurdles to overcome. Students like Michelle, who was urged to study a Bachelor of Social Work by her amputee doctor, as he knew she could make a positive difference in people's lives. Michelle believes her disability and living through a traumatic childhood will help her to influence others to also be the best they can be. Following graduation, she hopes to inspire Aboriginal children in Adelaide's northern areas to reach their potential.

Hear Michelle's story, including how receiving a scholarship gave her the encouragement she needed to embark on a brighter future.

Hear Michelle's story:



Michelle describes the obstacles she faced earlier in life and her hopes for the future in an open letter.

"Eight years ago I was diagnosed with cancer. Thankfully I survived, but then not long afterwards I was involved in a serious car accident and as a result I lost my right arm. I'm sure you can understand why I found myself in a dark place. But, when I climbed out of it I realised that all I wanted to do was to help others.

"I felt that I was going to struggle academically and that my disability would mean I took longer to complete assignments, so this scholarship meant I could dedicate more time to studying. Not only this, but I saw it as a sign that a generous person believed in me and I was determined not to let them down.

"It feels silly admitting this to you now, but I was so convinced that I would fail that for two years I never even looked at my grades. All of my life I'd believed that I was worthless so can you imagine how I felt when one day after class my lecturer asked me to review my assignment with them? They handed me back my marked essay with the words 'High Distinction' jumping off the page! The next day the lecturer announced to the class that they had just awarded their first High Distinction for the year and I was beaming; I had never felt so proud."

You can read Michelle's full letter [here](#).

See people's messages of support for Michelle on the [University of South Australia Alumni Facebook page](#).

When you give to UniSA's Scholarship Fund, every single dollar goes directly to changing the life of a student.

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From life on Mars to an undercover insight into North Korea

Hawke Centre 2017 program

Among the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre's 2017 line-up is *Life on Mars*, a conversation with two astronauts exploring the concept of humans living on the Red Planet. Carmel Johnston served as the Crew Commander of the [Hawaii Space Exploration Analog and Simulation \(HI-SEAS\)](#) Simulated Mars Mission and spent a record eight months in isolation living in a solar-powered dome simulator atop Mauna Loa on Hawaii. Her co-presenter is Josh Richards, physicist, explosives engineer, soldier, and comedian, who is one of 100 astronaut candidates short-listed to leave Earth forever to colonise Mars in 2027 as part of the [Mars One Project](#). Radio presenter and media personality Angela Cattens is facilitator for this March event and places are limited, so book now for [Life on Mars](#).



Hawke Centre Executive Director, Jacinta Thompson, previews an exciting program of events planned for 2017.

"Registrations are open for a number of events, including our first [Art Talk for 2017](#). Hear ASO Managing Director Vincent Ciccarello speak with Adelaide Festival Co-Artistic Directors Rachel Healy and Neil Armfield AO about the ecology of the arts – exploring how orchestras and festivals underpin each other's creative work."

Presenters include 2016 Australian of the Year, David Morrison AO ([registrations now open](#) for the 2017 ARA Oration in June), and The Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG in-conversation with Geoffrey Robertson QC (yes, of *Hypothetical* fame!), plus many more.

"During 2017 we continue our partnership with Palliative Care SA. The first in this series will examine how the needs of [Culturally and Linguistically Diverse](#) populations are being addressed in the hospital setting. In April we will be looking at Advance Care Planning, in relation to people with Dementia."

"Our Kerry Packer Civic Gallery program kicks off 2017 with: [SANAA: A Better World Through Creativity](#) showcasing street artists from Kenya, who have a worldwide reputation for pushing boundaries and whose works convey powerful messages of peace, democracy, cultural diversity and hope. One of the artists will paint a mural of the late Nelson Mandela, who served as the Hawke Centre's International Patron (2001-2013), in the Kerry Packer Civic Gallery on 14 to 16 February."

"We are also proud to present the international exhibition *Let Me Be Myself - The Life Story of Anne Frank*."

Jacinta says that there are many more events to be added to the 2017 Hawke Centre calendar, which will also explore issues such as incarceration, the Chibok girls kidnapped by terrorist group Boko Haram, and an undercover insight into North Korea.

For more information go to [Hawke Centre Events](#).

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On the cusp of new adventures as a mature student

Dr Alan Reddrop, Adjunct Research Fellow at UniSA

After spending nearly 60 years working in industry, university, consulting and government, Dr Alan Reddrop completed a PhD at UniSA in 2013.

Previously a family business adviser for the state government, Alan observed – at times - reluctance among family business people to seek external advice on business challenges. When he retired from his extensive career, he decided to help ‘do something about’ the problems he encountered by engaging in research.

Tell us about your decision to embark on your PhD later in life.

While working with family businesses I became emotionally aware of the phenomenon of those I called the ‘impervious patriarchs’; in particular the frustration and suffering they could visit on more junior family members, notably would-be successors. It was with the notion that something more could be done about this that I decided to engage in research – through undertaking a doctorate. Thus I had a mission, a wish to change a bit of the world. The scope of my studies, nevertheless, broadened to cover the nature and effectiveness of advice to family businesses.

Please describe your experience undertaking a PhD as a mature aged student.

The School of Management was led by inspired people, John Benson and Howard Harris. I established rapport with my supervisor-to-be at our first encounter. He recognised I had a mission and he was to impart the stratagems and necessary politics to enable me to discharge it. That wise man was Gido Mapunda, a continuing friend.

Mission or not, Gido soon taught me that a thesis was not a manifesto or a polemic. It was permissible to use the words ‘I’ and ‘recommend’ as long as they were fourteen pages apart. This proved to be no disadvantage. In academia I learnt there is no such thing as an untenable argument. Any idea that the human mind could conceive can be advanced and supported by countless peer-reviewed articles in A* journals: you just have to spend long enough in front of UniSA’s superb ‘Search the Library Catalogue’.

Undertaking a degree by research in the School of Management was hugely enjoyable. It was part of Benson’s genius to encourage the formation of a Postgraduate Students’ Association. Members met for seminars, for social events, for weekend retreats and above all for mutual support. We were a very diverse group, in nationality as in age. But it was plausible to talk about teamwork and mean it. It was truly collegial.

I got my degree in the allotted time. But then what? I was granted an adjunct research fellowship. This enabled me to cling on in the institution I had come to love, to remain in contact with friendly colleagues, to give greater exposure to what I had learned through my thesis, to write this academic article, to address that conference, to contribute to seminars. Also, initially, I was asked to run a professional development program to help colleagues extend their external engagement – with industry and government (too rarely pursued).

My fellowship has just been renewed, so that, at 82, I feel on the cusp of new adventures.

Please tell us a little about your background.

I spent nearly 60 years as a hired hand – in industry, university, consulting, governments (four) and quangos: a chequered, stimulating and satisfying career. My final paid work was with the government of South Australia where I advised family businesses (without the skill to run one my job was to advise others how to run theirs). I resigned at 73 to spare my employer from having to dislodge me in my 90s.

Why did you choose to make a bequest to the University?

Having this life-enhancing experience, my decision to make a [bequest](#) to the School was an easy one. This has, incidentally, given me membership of the Chancellor’s Club which recognises the support of all those who make a bequest as well as major donors.

What advice would you give to anyone else thinking of furthering their university education at a later stage in life?

Would I recommend re-entering academia at maturity? What might be the alternative – shifting into Shakespeare’s Sixth Age of slipper’d pantaloons? So, yes, I would recommend it. But in universities subjectivity abounds; they are chalk and cheese. So choose! Not any-old university, not any supervisor willing to take you on. For me, in UniSA, I have found my academic home – and more, a place where my learning enthusiasms were and are encouraged and where friendships can be sustained.



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