AND then there was one. Three years after a US-led force invaded Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime and hunt down the leadership of the al-Qaeda terrorist network, Australia's official military presence in the war-ravaged nation has dwindled to a single soldier.

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Yet Major Craig Lauder - the combat engineer who heads the Mine Action Centre at the Bagram air base north of Kabul - insists he isn't lonely.

"When I first came here, I thought I would be," he told The Age. "But it's not something that has entered my mind."

With an estimated 10 million landmines and unexploded ordinances planted in Afghanistan during 25 years of successive wars, Major Lauder and his five-person team have a massive task.

As part of the Taskforce Coyote engineering group, they are responsible for clearing mines on the massive compound occupied by foreign troops at Bagram, Kandahar and other military bases throughout Afghanistan. They also run briefings and training for foreign military personnel heading out to mined regions, and share information with 8000 civilian de-mining experts.

"The best thing is the fact that we're making a real difference here," Major Lauder said. "These people have been ravaged by war, and they are grateful that we are helping to provide security once more."

But the situation is far from stable, despite a fall in rocket attacks and makeshift explosive devices in the past few months.

The fragile security situation and strict controls on foreign troops conspire to limit trips off base to meet locals or find entertainment. With little to do in his free time besides watch DVDs bought at the weekly market held on the base, the 32-year-old major from Maitland, NSW, spends most of his waking hours in the office or out inspecting the work of his team. But he doesn't begrudge the lack of distraction. "Being in the military was always something I wanted to do . . . and that comes with the job," he said. Major Lauder is not the only Australian working here to rebuild the shattered nation. Dozens of Australian aid workers, volunteers and consultants are working with civilian agencies and government departments. They include two Australian troops on military exchange programs with the United States.

Captain Cameron Thorley, from Mirboo North in Gippsland, was sent almost 12 months ago from his Hawaii-based infantry division to oversee construction projects from the Combined Forces Command compound in central Kabul. "It's been a great experience," he said. "If I had spent all my time in Hawaii, I would never have seen how the US works in a place like this. And I really appreciate how Australians operate - the flexibility, the professionalism, the quality of our training."

Navy Commander Mark Todd, a Sydneysider deployed as an international adviser at US Central Command in Florida has been developing a long-term strategy to help the Afghan Government cope with the drug trade. "President Karzai has shown a lot of leadership on this, and slowly we're starting to make progress," he said.

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