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New evidence of more Australian special forces' war crimes in Afghanistan

Yesterday, in an attempt at damage control, the Australian government belatedly revealed the existence of a third closed-door inquiry into alleged war crimes by the Special Air Services (SAS) and other military special forces personnel in Afghanistan.

After a Fairfax Media investigation reported over the weekend a new series of killings by Australian commandos, the Defence Department announced that earlier this year, military chiefs commissioned David Irvine, a former director-general of security, to conduct an “independent assessment.”

This is the latest manoeuvre in years of official cover-up, seeking to cloak the barbaric character of the ongoing, 17-year US-led invasion and occupation of the impoverished country.

Far from being the conduct of a few “bad apples” or “rogue elements,” there is mounting evidence of endemic abuses of Afghani civilians, reflecting the nature of the war itself.

The Afghanistan war necessarily involves brutal killings of civilians, because most of the population are suspected of opposing the US and its allies. Such wars require the recruitment and training of soldiers to become “elite” hardened killers.

The crisis surrounding the SAS began last Friday, when the Fairfax journalists, Nick McKenzie and Chris Masters, reported some contents of a 2016 confidential inquiry, which concluded that special forces members committed war crimes in Afghanistan.

Yet another probe has been underway since May 2016, headed by New South Wales Supreme Court Justice Paul Brereton, who is a major-general in the Army Reserve, on behalf of the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force.

None of these inquiries, each conducted by a figure within, or close to, the military-intelligence apparatus, can be regarded as “independent.” Irvine led the secretive overseas spy agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) from 2003 to 2009, then ran the domestic surveillance force, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) from 2009 to 2014.

Among the latest cases reported by Fairfax Media, each backed by eye-witnesses, are the following:

* A SAS trooper on his first deployment to Afghanistan in 2009 was pressured by higher-ranking soldiers to execute an elderly, unarmed detainee as part of a “bleeding” ritual.

* On the same mission, a man with a prosthetic leg was killed by machine-gun fire. His plastic leg was souvenired and taken back to SAS headquarters in Perth to be used as a novelty beer-drinking vessel.

* In September 2012, an SAS commando killed handcuffed detainee Ali Jan by kicking him off the edge of a cliff near the village of Darwan.

These revelations came on top of the leaked inquiry report, written by Defence Department consultant Dr Samantha Cromptvoets. Her report pointed to the toxic culture, personal degradation and abusive behaviour inevitably produced among the special forces officers and troops sent repeatedly to both Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001.

Cromptvoets, an academic whose consulting firm has conducted several reviews for military agencies, reported that during interviews with her, special forces “insiders” confidentially disclosed “unsanctioned and illegal application of violence on operations” that extended to “disregard for human life and dignity.”

One “SOF [special operations forces] insider” told Cromptvoets: “I know there were over the last 15 years some horrendous things. Some just disgraceful things happened in Kabul ... very bad news, or just inappropriate behaviour, but it was pretty much kept under wraps.”

The consultant said the conduct went “well beyond blowing off steam.” She wrote: “Even more concerning were allusions to behaviour and practices involving abuse of drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, unsanctioned and illegal application of violence on operations ... and the perception of a complete lack of accountability at times,” from the military chain of command.

Crompvoets said “others felt there was a deep impediment to change because of the extent to which leaders with SOF backgrounds, highly placed through the SOF and beyond, were compromised by their own participation or complicity in problematic behaviours of the past.”

This indicates systemic cover-ups, implicating successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, and high-ranking military officers, some of whom today sit at the top of the armed forces and spy services.

Ex-SAS commanders are prominent throughout the political and military establishment.

Andrew Hastie, who chairs the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Security and Intelligence, is a former SAS officer. So is Duncan Lewis, the current ASIO director-general, whom the previous Labor government appointed as national security adviser in 2008.

Government Senator Jim Molan headed allied military operations in Iraq during 2004-05. A Labor Party MP and ex-minister, Mike Kelly, was a colonel and Director of Army Legal Services, which would have handled complaints against special forces members, before he became a Labor candidate in 2007.

Other ex-SAS commanders include Army chief, General Angus Campbell, who will become the Chief of the Armed Forces next month, and Deputy Chief of Army General Rick Burr.

Crompvoets’ report was commissioned to try to improve the performance of the special forces, and rescue their political reputation. She stated: “The current situation holds inherent risks, not only for sub-optimal delivery of capacity, but potentially for national security and/or strategic/political interests, given the sensitive nature of deployments.”

Nevertheless, the suppression of the report for more than two years confirms an ongoing pattern of cover-up. The journalists, McKenzie and Masters, said previous efforts to obtain the Crompvoets’ report under freedom of information laws had been blocked.

There is a long record of special forces crimes. Internal investigations, in recent conflicts alone, go back to the military intervention in East Timor in 1999.

The Australian Defence Force paid out \$120,000 in compensation for incorrectly killed and injured Afghan civilians during 2009–2011 alone, according to an Amsterdam International Law Clinic report. With payments of less than \$2,000 per murder, that indicates hundreds of casualties.

The following is a partial list of known cases:

* Last July, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published reports of leaked documents said to cover “at least 10” incidents between 2009 and 2013 in which military investigators [summarily cleared](#) soldiers of killing civilians or other war crimes.

One of the incidents occurred in 2013, when troops commanded by Hastie severed the hands of dead alleged Taliban fighters. This followed a training session where soldiers were told such methods could be used for identification purposes.

* In October 2016, special forces sergeant Kevin Frost told the ABC he helped cover up the shooting of a detainee and wanted those involved—including himself—to face trial.

* In May 2013, Stephen Smith, the defence minister in the last Labor government, rejected complaints by Afghan detainees that they were subjected to humiliating public searches of groin and buttocks areas, as well as poor food and cold cells.

* In May 2011, an Australian military court [dropped](#) manslaughter charges against two soldiers involved in the killing of five Afghan children during a raid in the southern province of Uruzgan in early 2009. The decision effectively gave Australian forces a green light to kill civilians.

* In October 2008, an inquiry whitewashed an operation that resulted in the mistaken killing of Rozi Khan, the pro-occupation governor of Chora district in Uruzgan province. A SAS [death squad](#) stormed the house of an alleged Taliban member to execute him in cold blood, but got the wrong man.

Such crimes are not isolated incidents. They flow from the thoroughly predatory motives of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were seized upon as the pretext to take over these countries to secure domination over one of the world’s most strategic and resource-rich regions.

The revelations of war crimes are a warning to workers and youth. The special forces operations are part of preparations for use at home. As well as deployments to overseas neo-colonial wars, the commandos train to suppress domestic unrest, in the name of combatting terrorism.