

Belated report of Australian soldier's suicide after serving in Afghanistan

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An article in *Time* magazine on April 19 revealed that Geoffrey Gregg, a former Australian soldier who served in Afghanistan, committed suicide last September. He killed himself 16 months after being interviewed for a *Time* feature that described a disastrous Australian special forces patrol in May 2002 involving a firefight with one Afghan tribe and a massive US aerial bombardment of another.

The media attention surrounding Gregg's death has led to an official admission that at least one other Australian soldier who served in Afghanistan or Iraq has committed suicide. Veteran support groups say that as many as five may have taken their own lives due to the mental trauma caused by their military service.

Geoffrey Gregg was discharged from the army in May 2004, suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) provoked by his experiences in Afghanistan. According to his family, he did not receive adequate treatment. He was clearly deeply troubled by the incident in May 2002.

His six-man Special Air Services (SAS) patrol—codenamed Redback Kilo Three—was assigned to carry out surveillance on gun emplacements above mountain paths that US intelligence alleged were being used by Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters to cross back and forward between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gregg, who was an army signaller and not in the SAS at the time, was included in the patrol because it needed a radio operator.

The intelligence was completely wrong. The gun emplacements had been erected as part of a decades-long dispute between the two neighbouring villages—Bhalkhel and Sabari—over the control of timber on a nearby mountain. Neither tribe had any involvement with Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Utterly ignorant of the area, its history or the local people, the

SAS patrol established surveillance on a machine-gun post overlooking Bhalkhel. A series of questionable decisions led to the patrol being spotted by a villager, whom the Australian soldiers proceeded to gun down. Other villagers, believing they were under attack by their tribal rivals, returned fire and pursued the patrol as it sought to escape.

Sabari tribesmen, on the other side of valley, who believed they were under attack by their rivals, responded by shooting at the positions of the Bhalkhel villagers. Some of their rounds came close to SAS reinforcements driving toward the scene. An air strike was called in and an AC-130 gunship pounded Sabari positions with laser-guided bombs and withering machine gun fire, killing at least nine men and wounding others. In all, 11 Afghan men were killed unnecessarily, leaving nearly 50 Afghan children orphaned.

Details of the incident began to filter out of Afghanistan within days. Officially, however, the Australian government insisted that the SAS had come under fire in a “known Al Qaeda stronghold”, implying the deaths were justified. In fact, just 24 hours after the incident, US and Australian officials visited Sabari village to apologise. They promised compensation but none has ever been given.

The soldiers involved were plunged into bitter recriminations. According to *Time*, Gregg had stated in 2005 that he had been “pressured to write a report which reflected badly on the patrol commander”. He also claimed that he had been the target of accusations by other soldiers, who implied his lack of experience and training had been a factor in the debacle. “I was in that position and none of it was to do with me or was my fault,” he told the magazine.

According to his family, Gregg experienced

tremendous difficulties after returning from Afghanistan. His mother Christine told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7:30 Report": "He knew he was having the nightmares, these anxiety attacks. He had mentioned it to his next level ... and basically he was told 'you're just trying to get out, compo, money, you know, it's all bullshit.'"

Gregg was finally discharged on medical grounds in May 2004 and granted a temporary pension. He attempted to begin work as an apprentice carpenter, but suffered repeated bouts of depression. He apparently did not seek help from mental health services after leaving the army—a fact the Australian military has used to effectively absolve itself of any responsibility for his suicide.

The killing of innocent Afghans, however, clearly had a serious impact on Gregg's psychological state. His partner told ABC radio: "He kept asking me if he was a good person and if he had done good things in his life. He had nightmares. What bothered him most was the lack of support when he got back."

His family discovered after his death that the military superannuation [pension] fund had assessed him as a "suicide risk" and judged him to be unable to hold down a job. Despite such assessments, there does not appear to have been any attempt to assist Gregg, even after the May 2005 *Time* article describing his experiences in Afghanistan. His father emotionally told the "7:30 Report": "If someone needs help, give him help."

A total of 52 Australian soldiers have been discharged between 2001 and 2006 for mental illness. A former SAS trooper, identified only as "Adam", told ABC radio on April 30 that counselling services were difficult to access as recently as last year. "I told them I was having nightmares of the various conflicts that we'd been in and pretty much the military said 'well you know, suck it up and be a man about it,'" he explained.

"These young guys are coming back from overseas, and they're having to adapt to normality again and a lot of them just don't, from what they've seen. If a car backfires ... the anxiety of hearing anything exploding is like being back in Baghdad or even back in Afghanistan again. I just think there needs to be a lot more vigilance on the Defence and government's part to help these soldiers out."

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers internationally who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq are susceptible to similar intense feelings of guilt, shame and anger over what they have been ordered to do. Both conflicts are neo-colonial occupations in which the American military and their allies have used overwhelming force to crush the resistance of the Afghan and Iraqi people, in order to control strategic territory and energy resources. In the process, they have caused tens of thousands of civilian deaths—which have been routinely dismissed as "collateral damage", "mistakes" or "tragic accidents".

In 2004, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a major mental health survey of American servicemen who had returned from Afghanistan and Iraq. Not surprisingly, it found that "there was a strong reported relation between combat experiences, such as being shot at, handling dead bodies, knowing someone who was killed, or killing enemy combatants, and the prevalence of PTSD." Of the 1,700 personnel who had served in Iraq, 14 percent of soldiers and 28 percent of marines reported they had been responsible for the death of a "non-combatant".

At least 34,000 American Iraq war veterans had sought treatment for PTSD as of June 2006. It is highly likely that many others, like Geoffrey Gregg, are suffering from mental illnesses of one form or another, but receiving no treatment at all.



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