

Documentary exposes the fraud of New Zealand “peacekeeping” in Afghanistan

Sam Price, Tom Peters
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A recent documentary presented further evidence of the criminal character of the New Zealand Defence Force’s activities in Afghanistan. *The Valley* aired on TV3 on August 14 and is also available on Fairfax Media’s Stuff.co.nz website. It describes in detail a tactic called “bait and hook”, used by the elite Special Air Service (NZSAS) to terrorise civilians and provoke battles, as well as the offensive and intelligence-gathering operations of the regular army’s so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team (NZPRT).

Successive governments have fraudulently portrayed New Zealand’s military operations in Afghanistan as a “peacekeeping” effort and part of the fight against terrorism. In fact, the ongoing war is one of several predatory imperialist ventures, including the wars in Iraq, Syria and Libya, undertaken by the US to reverse its historic decline and gain control over resource-rich regions. Now the US is threatening North Korea and building up its forces against nuclear-armed Russia and China.

New Zealand’s ruling elite joined the Afghan war to strengthen its alliance with the US, which it relies on to support New Zealand’s neo-colonial interests in the Pacific region. The NZSAS was first sent to Afghanistan in 2001 by the Labour Party government of 1999-2008, supported by its “left” coalition partner, the Alliance, whose MPs voted to endorse the mission. The 140-strong NZPRT was deployed in 2003. Under Labour, the NZ military also joined the occupation of Iraq.

The National Party government withdrew the bulk of New Zealand’s forces from Afghanistan in 2013, although 10 military personnel remain in the country. About 140 New Zealand soldiers are currently in Iraq.

The NZSAS are highly trained killers, valued by the US. They received a citation from President Bush in

2004. The new documentary follows revelations in the book *Hit and Run*, published in March, that NZSAS troops led a raid on a village in 2010 in which six civilians were killed and 15 others wounded. The government and Defence Force sought to cover up and deny NZ involvement in the raid.

Two men from Uruzgan province interviewed in the *Valley* described a “bait and hook” operation in 2004. NZSAS troops entered their village and “kicked, slapped and punched” people in the bazaar, accusing them of collaborating with the Taliban. Later that night, the villagers heard gunfire nearby, where the SAS troops had set up camp.

The next day, SAS troops returned to the village with dead bodies of insurgents strapped to military vehicles. In front of terrified locals, the bodies were dumped on the ground. The soldiers then ransacked houses, tied several villagers’ hands behind their backs, shouted abuse and threatened to kill them. Sources within the military confirmed this version of events and “asked whether the firefight needed to happen at all.”

In 2007, corporal Willie Apiata was awarded a Victoria Cross medal for carrying a wounded soldier to safety during the 2004 Uruzgan firefight. The entire political establishment and the media glorified Apiata as one of New Zealand’s greatest heroes. He is regularly wheeled out at Anzac Day ceremonies to encourage young people to join the military.

The official Defence Force version of events was that Apiata’s team came under surprise attack—rather than the battle being deliberately provoked by the soldiers’ brutal actions. In an email to military staff, leaked to Fairfax Media on August 30, Defence Force chief Tim Keating said “we never mistreated bodies as the documentary claimed” but gave no further details.

The *Valley* also shed further light on the role of the

NZPRT in Bamiyan province. Officially a “peacekeeping” force, it in fact led offensive operations, including the botched Battle of Baghak in 2012, which resulted in the deaths of two New Zealanders and four Afghan Army soldiers.

The NZPRT was an integral part of the US occupation. Part of its work was to forcibly collect biometric data such as eye scans and fingerprints from Afghan civilians and slain combatants. The data was uploaded to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) database, which passed the information on to intelligence agencies such as the CIA.

Former National Party defence minister Wayne Mapp defended the intelligence gathering, about which the New Zealand public was never informed. Interviewed for the documentary, Mapp declared that “you don’t send soldiers overseas” only to do reconstruction, even though this is precisely what New Zealanders were told the PRT was doing.

Former Labour Party Prime Minister Helen Clark responded to *The Valley* by claiming she had “no recollection whatsoever of hearing of the alleged events before and after the firefight involving Willie Apiata and his colleagues.” She continued to insist that Apiata was a “hero” and his decoration was a “proud” moment for the SAS.

In an attempt to appeal to widespread anti-war sentiment ahead of the September 23 election, Clark told Fairfax Media that if Labour had won the 2008 election it was “unlikely” her government would have continued the NZPRT deployment.

This is manifestly false. On September 21, 2009, then-Labour leader Phil Goff told Fairfax media the PRT continued to make an “effective contribution” to Afghanistan.

Current Labour Party leader Jacinda Ardern declared during a televised election debate on August 31 that she supported the National Party government’s decision on August 25 to send three more troops to Afghanistan, following a request by the Trump administration.

Former Green Party MP Keith Locke was interviewed for the *Valley* and feigned opposition to the war, describing it as “a waste.” The Green Party, however, was a key supporter of the Clark government and backed New Zealand’s involvement in Afghanistan. Following the death of a New Zealand soldier in 2010, Locke told parliament that the Greens were “proud of

the good peace-keeping and reconstruction work that our Provincial Reconstruction Team has done in Bamiyan province and we mourn the loss of one of its members.”

The Greens are contesting the election in a formal alliance with the Labour Party. Both parties support the military alliance with the US, including the government’s announcement last year of \$20 billion to upgrade the military and strengthen New Zealand’s integration into the US military build-up against China.

Whichever parties win the election on Saturday, the next government will continue to deepen New Zealand’s involvement in US-led wars. Ardern told TVNZ on September 17 that she supports New Zealand’s membership in the Five Eyes intelligence network, in which the NZ intelligence agency, the GCSB, has played a major role in spying on China on behalf of the US. The Labour Party, like the National Party, has not ruled out joining a war against North Korea, which Trump has threatened with nuclear annihilation.

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