

New Zealand military covered up killing of Afghan children

Tom Peters

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On October 15 the magazine *North and South* published allegations that the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) covered up the killing of two Afghan children by a member of the elite Special Air Service (SAS) unit.

The 10-page article by journalist Nicky Hager was based on accounts by unnamed members and ex-members of the SAS and NZDF. It reported that in 2004 an SAS medic joined a raid on an Afghan village, led by US forces. During the fighting, the medic shot dead two Afghans defending the village. He later discovered they were just boys, aged 12 and 13.

The article is the latest revelation of potential war crimes committed by New Zealand troops in Afghanistan. The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Helen Clark sent the SAS to join the US-led invasion in 2001. For 17 years NZ forces have been deployed in the impoverished country, under Labour and National Party-led governments alike.

Troops were also sent to the Iraq war in 2003 as part of the bipartisan agenda to strengthen New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism. The Labour Party-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern recently extended NZ's deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and sent troops to support the US military encirclement of North Korea.

Hager and journalist Jon Stephenson co-authored a book last year, *Hit and Run*, which described in detail how a New Zealand-led raid on a defenceless Afghan village in 2010 led to six civilian deaths and injured 15 people. The NZDF denied the allegations and the government has established an inquiry into what took place. Most of the hearings, however, will be held in secret.

The *North and South* article explains that the SAS medic violated the Geneva Conventions, which strictly

ban medical personnel from shooting anyone, except in self-defence. A former SAS member told Hager the corporal was severely “damaged” by taking part in the raid. “He was thinking, ‘Shit, I’ve killed kids’” and was “angry at [the SAS commanders] for sending him into it and, when it turned to custard, for turning on him.”

According to the source, the NZDF initially considered court-martialling the corporal, a claim the NZDF denies. Instead, the article explains, details of the raid were kept secret and the medic was given New Zealand's second-highest medal, the Gallantry Decoration. In a July 2007 ceremony, Prime Minister Clark presented the award, saying it was “for displaying outstanding courage and leadership, and accepting extraordinary risks... testimony to the dedication, skill and professionalism of the NZSAS.”

The ex-SAS member came forward to Hager after seeing then-Chief of Defence Force Tim Keating deny any responsibility for the civilian deaths documented in *Hit and Run*. The source said in his opinion Keating was lying. He said: “The SAS is at the extreme end of thinking they’re above the law, that they don’t have to be held accountable to others. We can say we never committed war crimes, but we have.”

The article also detailed the violent, abusive, alcohol-soaked culture within the NZDF, which is at odds with the picture painted by its well-funded public relations department. In preparation for greater wars, the NZDF is engaged in a recruitment drive, with posters and online advertisements telling young people they can follow their “passion” in the armed forces.

Hager pointed to several allegations of sexual assault and rape that were ignored or downplayed by the NZDF. Hayley Young, a navy marine engineer, said she was raped in 2009 while posted on a British

warship, but her navy friends told her speaking out would be “career suicide.” When she left the navy in 2012, she sent a letter to the captain of fleet personnel and training detailing what she had endured.

Young was given no support. She was horrified to discover, 18 months later, that the navy was “using her face, without asking her, on thousands of brochures and posters promoting NZ Navy careers to young women.” Young told *North and South* her case was “the very tip of an iceberg.”

Sources also told Hager that homophobic bullying was common, despite the NZDF being named the 2018 Supreme Winner in the Diversity Awards, “based on information NZDF had provided about itself.”

In 2010, 20-year-old Ethan Hall fell from a building in Palmerston North after being bullied at Linton Military Camp. Three soldiers who believed Hall was gay had held him down and tortured him by scorching his leg with a gas burner. One of Hall’s former colleagues told Hager he was driven to suicide. A coroner ruled Hall’s death an accident based on a commanding officer’s statement that the bullying had been an isolated incident.

Other sources outlined the lack of support for soldiers returning from combat overseas. One former SAS trainer said: “NZDF doesn’t care about the people who work for them... When they come home, anger management and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] are treated as their personal problems.” Another source said: “Three to six months after a deployment, you start to see people with alcohol problems, domestic violence, drugs, financial problems, affairs, suicide, anxiety and depression.”

The military has remained virtually silent on the *North and South* article. A brief report by Newstalk ZB said “in an initial response to specific points, the Defence Force says the claims are either incorrect, or that it has taken appropriate action.” It did not elaborate.

The Labour Party-led coalition government has said nothing, including the Green Party and New Zealand First, underscoring the cross-party agreement with the government’s militarist agenda. Defence Minister Ron Mark, from the right-wing nationalist NZ First, is a former soldier who completed the SAS selection course in 1982.

The corporate media, after a handful of reports, has

buried the story. Pro-Labour Party commentator Chris Trotter, writing on the *Daily Blog*, called for a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the alleged “breaches of the Geneva Convention, dishonesty and cover-ups, sexual assault and torture.” He blamed these heinous crimes, not on militarism or imperialism, but on “a culture of toxic masculinity.” He called for a “purge” to ensure that the armed forces are led by “brave, upright and honourable personnel.”

In fact, the atrocities and brutality exposed by Hager and Stephenson are the direct and foreseeable product of the much bigger crimes perpetrated by New Zealand’s ruling elite. Genuine accountability requires the prosecution not just of leading military personnel, but the leaders of successive Labour and National-led governments who authorised participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have killed more than a million people.



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