

# Australian troops accused of Abu Ghraib, My Lai-style war crimes in Afghanistan

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An article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week, citing a confidential military investigation, has indicated that the scale of war crimes perpetrated by Australian Special Forces units in Afghanistan is far greater than previously acknowledged.

The study, commissioned by then army chief Angus Houston in 2016, was part of a protracted campaign of damage control and cover-up that continues to this day. It is motivated by fears within the political establishment and the military command that revelations of illegal killings, torture and other violations of international law could create a political crisis, inflame anti-war sentiment and obstruct Australian imperialism's predatory operations throughout the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.

The 2016 review was conducted by Dr Samantha Crompvoets, an academic who works as a consultant for the defence force. The article indicates high-level complicity. It notes that her findings, based on interviews with soldiers, have been among "the most tightly held documents in Canberra."

The details in the article are relatively scanty. What is there, however, undercuts official claims that the war crimes between 2011 and 2015 were carried out by a few "bad apples" and "rogue elements," and that the military command was unaware of the atrocities.

Instead, the revelations further demonstrate that extra-judicial murders and other abuses were widespread practices, taking on the character of unofficial policy. This was in line with the character of the Afghan war—a neo-colonial occupation aimed at the subjugation of an entire population.

One excerpt from the report cited an account of troops going to Afghan villages, where they "would take the men and boys to these guest houses and interrogate them, meaning tie them up and torture

them." After the soldiers left, "the men and boys would be found dead, shot in the head, sometimes blindfolded and throats slit. These are corroborated accounts." The phrasing strongly indicates multiple incidents along the same lines.

Another account stated that two "14-year-old boys suspected of being Taliban sympathisers had their throats slit ... the bodies were bagged and thrown into a nearby river."

Sections of the report noted a "large number of illegal killings often gloated about," widespread "bloodlust" and a "pressure to conform" to the "culture" of violent attacks on Afghan civilians.

Other testimony recounted multiple instances in which people were shot solely because they ran away from troops. Those who fled were described as "squirters" and were frequently shot from behind with the catch-all justification that they were "running for a weapons cache."

A chilling citation from the report said "comparisons were made to My Lai and Abu Ghraib."

The My Lai massacre, perpetrated by US troops in 1968, involved the murder of as many as 504 Vietnamese civilians, most of whom were killed at close range by American soldiers, who also perpetrated the gang rape of women and girls. Abu Ghraib was a US military prison in Iraq, where hundreds of detainees were tortured in the years following the illegal American invasion of 2003.

Because the report's contents were never meant to be made public, there can be no suggestion that the historical comparisons are exaggerations aimed at drawing media attention.

Previous media revelations have documented multiple instances in which Special Forces troops murdered detainees, including by shooting unarmed

civilians at point-blank range and kicking them off mountains.

In the latest previous exposure, an article published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) earlier this month, noted that many Special Forces regiments were involved in a supposed “war on drugs.” This targeted alleged poppy cultivators and traffickers who had fallen foul of the occupying forces and the Afghan government, under conditions in which opium production soared during the US occupation. In one incident, soldiers had no room for a prisoner on their helicopter, so they shot him dead.

The ABC story cited US soldiers who said the Australians had a reputation for war crimes and illegal acts, including among their American and British “coalition partners.”

The 2016 report further exposes the fraudulent claims that military commanders and successive governments were blindsided by the killings.

One section of the report bluntly stated, about soldiers and their commanders: “If they didn’t do it, they saw it. And if they didn’t see it, they knew about it. If they knew about it, they probably were involved in covering it up...” It is unclear from the newspaper article whether this was a soldier’s testimony or Crompvoets’ assessment.

Other excerpts noted that the army’s rules of engagement were interpreted in such a way that any atrocity could be justified. Intimidation of potential whistle blowers was widespread. One soldier stated: “It’s like your typical whistle blower, we all know what happens to them. I became a chameleon. I knew what I needed to do to survive.”

Cover-ups were the norm. An Afghan interpreter working with the units “kept reporting that Australian SF [Special Forces] were executing farmers, but no one ever followed anything up.” Allegations of illegal acts “were apparently muted by SF leadership in Afghanistan.”

Crompvoets was told of “concerns about the ... diaspora of SOF [special operations forces] alumni who are powerful, have a great deal to lose, and will no doubt fight to protect their personal reputation as well as the SF brand should they be implicated in any of the above. I was told repeatedly everyone knows who the culprits are.”

Pointing to the motives of the protracted damage

control operation, the 2016 report stated:

As stories trickle out, and inevitably they will, the legacy of SOF will perhaps no longer be the fine capability held in such high regard politically and internationally.” This would “stain the organisation for a long time to come.”

The report concluded that a high-level cover-up was likely. “Is it a Pandora’s box too complex and with too much organisational risk to prise open? I don’t know the answers. My hunch, though, is that reputational risk does not stop at SOF and is far greater than even army.”

The reference to “far greater than even army” is a clear reference to governments. Significantly, heinous war crimes occurred around 2012. This was in the immediate aftermath of a “surge” in Afghanistan, overseen by the US administration of President Barack Obama, and supported by the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Afghanistan was flooded with thousands more soldiers, who were instructed to “root out” insurgents, under conditions of mass opposition to the occupation. This program was inevitably going to involve war crimes and attempts to terrorise the Afghan population.

The details of the 2016 report have been published in the lead up to the scheduled completion of an official inquiry into the allegations by Paul Brereton, a judge and army reserve Major General. The Australian government has said the long-delayed Brereton report, like its 2016 predecessor, will not be made public. Instead, selected “excerpts” may be released, as the cover up continues.



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