

Australian war crimes report points to history of military atrocities and coverups

Mike Head**25 November 2020**

In all the corporate media coverage of last week's official military report revealing barbaric war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan, the illegal murders and other abuses have been depicted as tarnishing the otherwise glorious record of the Australian military.

An opinion piece by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's political editor Andrew Probyn was typical. "The digger mythology that's long sustained Australia's self-image has been shaken by a murderous few with maximum firepower and discretion but minimum oversight," he wrote on November 19.

"Consequently, a nation that has cherished and so proudly celebrated its soldier heritage must now confront the fact that some of its military elite may be cold-blooded killers."

Such statements reveal how much is at stake for the ruling establishment and its media outlets in seeking to sustain the mythology of heroic and honourable military forces, cultivated so assiduously in annual Anzac Day and other war commemorations.

This is all the more so because the Liberal-National government, following in the footsteps of the previous Labor government, is spending \$570 billion this decade expanding and retooling the military, including the Special Forces, and stepping up its commitment to Washington's preparations for war against China. Greater powers also have been legislated, with more to come, to use the military to suppress domestic unrest, another role for which the Special Forces are being prepared.

Yet the official war crimes report itself shows the fraud of the manufactured mythology. It has an entire 59-page chapter—not reported in the mass media—on the history of atrocities committed by the Australian armed forces, starting from the Boer War at the dawn of the 20th century to entrench the British Empire in southern Africa. The account climaxes with the Vietnam War, fought in support of US imperialism's ultimately defeated bid to establish unchallenged control over Southeast Asia.

In between, even according to the report's limited outline, Australian forces carried out illegal killings, acts of torture and massacres in China during imperialist intervention to crush the Boxer Rebellion of 1900–01, a further massacre in Palestine in

1918 and the murder of prisoners of war in both world wars.

Entitled "War Crimes in Australian History," the chapter is confined to six conflicts from the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 to the First Gulf War of 1990–91. It documents numerous "reports, allegations, or evidence suggestive of war crimes by Australians, or suggestive of Australian unwillingness or inability to report or investigate allegations."

Not included are the Korean War (1959–53), the Malayan Emergency (1948–60) and the Confrontation with Indonesia (1963–66), partly because "the key trend line is sufficiently well illustrated" by the other six conflicts. There is no mention of the 1999 intervention in East Timor, the 2003 invasion of Iraq or more recent operations.

One of the chapter's chief focuses is on how war crimes have been defined historically. This is in order to advise the military high command and the present government on how to prevent any perceived failure to "comprehensively deal" with the Afghanistan evidence having a "corrosive" impact on the armed forces.

In this way, the chapter forms part of the overall mission of the report. That is, to depict war crimes as aberrations and exonerate the senior military commanders and the governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, that deployed the Special Forces to join the US-led invasion and to suppress popular resistance to the occupation of Afghanistan.

The chapter begins by claiming that "Australia has a proud record of adherence to and support for the Law of War/Law of Armed Conflict." Nonetheless, it admits that the historical record shows Australian involvement in "the killing of detainees, prisoners, persons *hors de combat* (out of combat), and persons otherwise under the control of Australian forces" and using "throwdowns"—the planting of weapons or other items on bodies to justify killings, especially during the Vietnam War.

The report concedes a history of cover-up and whitewash. While Australia has supposedly been firm, but fair, in investigating and prosecuting the war crimes of enemies, "we have generally been less proactive in dealing with reports or allegations of war crimes by Australian personnel."

More than 10,000 Australians fought in the Second Boer War, often playing a spearhead role in the British "scorched

“earth” strategy. This was a “formally sanctioned policy” involving “destroying or seizing Boer civilian property and crops, confiscation of Boer horses, cattle, and wagons, and evicting Boer civilians from their homes and farms.”

In one well-known case, that of “Breaker Morant,” three Australian lieutenants were later court-martialled for killing prisoners, despite arguing that they were following an order to take no prisoners.

Less known is that Australian troops were sent to China to help British and allied forces suppress the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 to 1901. In Beijing, Australian officers and sailors were directly involved in “the execution of sentences, including by firing squad, and later by decapitation (carried out by a Chinese executioner).” They also participated in “the sack of Peking,” which “was marked by wanton violence and looting, which lasted for several weeks.” There were “many contemporaneous reports” of looting, rape and murder and the burning of civilian villages.

Another such colonial massacre occurred in the 1918 “Surafend Incident” in Palestine, involving about 200 Australian, New Zealand and Scottish troops. Following the death of a New Zealand soldier, they burned a village and a neighbouring Bedouin encampment. Estimates of the local people killed range from 20 to 137.

As a result of the ensuing official cover-up, “no comprehensive disciplinary proceedings followed and no soldier was ultimately held responsible for any killing or destruction perpetrated during the incident, although ‘blood money’ was paid.”

In both world wars, there were many reports of Australian forces killing prisoners of war, including captured German soldiers in New Guinea in 1914, and later on the European Western Front, and the summary executions of Japanese POWs during World War II, some by bayoneting.

Vietnam, another neo-colonial war, saw even worse crimes by Australian and other forces in the massive US intervention. By many accounts, including the memoirs of soldiers, Australian units were “guilty of acts of barbarity.” According to one study, the report states, “there were Australians whose morality was so eroded that they murdered villagers, raped women, tortured and killed wounded enemy soldiers and mutilated corpses.”

Other reports described “throwdowns” and the degrading treatment of victims’ bodies, including by dragging them behind armoured personnel carriers, and a “massacre” at Binh Ba in June 1969.

Although the report does not say so, such practices flow inevitably from the nature of the wars themselves—brutal imperialist interventions driven by quests for geo-strategic dominance, with local populations regarded as the enemy.

The report’s conclusion on the Vietnam War is instructive. It admits to a “persistent and not insubstantial body of unresolved allegations regarding the commission of war crimes.” The

result was “the long-term and corrosive persistence of primarily oral reports and allegations,” lasting for decades.

This encapsulates the report’s primary concern: that war crimes evidence be seen to be adequately investigated to avoid undermining public confidence in the military and contributing to the growth of widespread anti-war sentiment.

So shocking, and often televised, were the war crimes committed by the US and its partners in Vietnam that they helped fuel a massive anti-war movement. That opposition and the eventual defeat of the US in 1975 gave rise to what President Ronald Reagan called the “Vietnam Syndrome”—a deep public hostility to such military interventions. That underlying revulsion re-emerged in the huge global protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which produced new war crime horrors.

In fact, fear of the public antagonism was a major factor driving the reliance of successive Australian governments on repeated redeployments by the Special Forces. Apart from the Special Forces being valued in ruling circles for their specialised killing capacities, there was concern that committing larger contingents of regular troops would result in casualties that could inflame public opinion.

A similar anxiety is wracking the ruling elites in all the US allies. Another chapter in the report, also not mentioned in the corporate media, documents how most of the other governments involved in the Afghanistan War—those of the US, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark—also “had to deal with allegations of war crimes.”

Few, if any, prosecutions have resulted from the official inquiries in these countries, “even where the evidence is apparently strong and clear,” due to political “pitfalls” and “it is predictable that Australian prosecutions could encounter similar obstacles.”

Thus, the report’s related preoccupation is with studying, and recommending, how to ensure that war crimes investigations protect the military and governments from being held to account.

One of the central conclusions of the report is that “Australia requires a more surgical and refined national Special Forces capability.” That is, the reputation of the Special Forces must be cleaned up so that its commandos, highly-trained to kill, can be deployed, both at home and overseas, for what the report elsewhere calls “irregular and unconventional operations.”

Far from lessening the danger of military savagery, the report is part of a process intended to “refine” and sharpen the Special Forces for frontline duty in further US-led wars or against internal political discontent.



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