

Australian war crimes report: A damning indictment of the barbarity in Afghanistan

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
1 December 2020

Despite six volumes of redactions—blacking out the specific and gruesome details—the official report released last week on the atrocities committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan is a devastating indictment of all the governments and ruling establishments, from Washington to London and Canberra, involved in this criminal war conducted by US imperialism.

Everyone responsible for the military's crimes in Afghanistan, and the war of aggression itself—including successive Liberal-National Coalition and Labor prime ministers, governments and the military high command, should be placed on trial for crimes against humanity, just as the Nazi leaders were after World War II.

By seeking to whitewash the war crimes as much as possible, and blame low-ranking troopers—not their commanders and governments—the report must also serve as a warning. More than four years in the making, behind closed doors, this report is a part of a calculated operation to cosmetically “clean up” the now severely tarnished reputation of the Special Forces and the military as a whole for even worse and greater wars, as well as repression of dissent at home.

Even by the heavily-censored account published by the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force, there is “credible evidence” that Special Forces units murdered at least 39 prisoners of war or innocent civilians in cold blood and committed many other abuses, including “cruel” treatment (i.e. torture), the use of illegal weapons and the desecration of victims’ bodies. Statements from Afghan families and organisations declare there were many more killed.

So systemic were the killings that Special Forces recruits were “blooded” by being ordered to assassinate captured detainees. This level of depravity, confirmed by the report’s author, Paul Brereton, a judge and Army Reserve Major General, cannot be explained as the actions of isolated individuals at the lowest ranks of the armed forces. It points to the brutalisation of the military itself in preparation for criminal new wars.

According to the report, victims included two teenagers whose throats were slit. In this “incident,” the report states, “members from the ‘SASR’ were driving along a road and saw two 14-year-old boys whom they decided might be Taliban sympathisers. They stopped, searched the boys and slit their throats. The rest of the Troop then had to ‘clean up the mess’, which involved bagging the bodies and throwing them into a nearby river.”

Without any detail, another redacted incident is described as “possibly the most disgraceful episode in Australia’s military history.” That underscores the depth of criminality of this war. As the report outlines, there is a long record of Australian war crimes—such as massacres and village burning—from the Second Anglo Boer War of

1899-1901 to the horrors of the Vietnam War that ended in US defeat in 1975.

Brereton’s report provides scant information about 39 other incidents of alleged breaches of law, which he declared “unsubstantiated” or “discontinued.” They include reports of waterboarding and soldiers holding a knife to a man’s testicles. Many more abuses remain covered up, shielded by a continuing “code of silence” that Brereton concedes created “enormous challenges in eliciting truthful disclosures.”

It is obviously implausible to claim, as the report does, that the Special Forces atrocities were simply the work of a “small number of patrol commanders, and their protégées” or a “warrior culture” that remained totally unknown above the level of corporals and sergeants. By the report’s own admission, this “culture” began domestically, in military training and indoctrination, not in Afghanistan. “It was in their parent units and sub-units that the cultures and attitudes that enabled misconduct were bred,” the report states.

Special Forces troopers were deployed to Afghanistan as many as 16 times, despite the resulting mental health and addiction problems, precisely because their task, as trained killers, was to terrorise the population. Their conduct flowed inevitably from the nature of the war itself—a ruthless operation to terrorise the population and crush all resistance to the imposition of US control over the country. It is no coincidence that US presidents, including Barack Obama, have singled out the Special Forces for praise.

Special Forces units were sent back, time after time, also because Coalition and Labor governments alike feared that if regular troops were dispatched they would suffer casualties that would fuel anti-war sentiment, as emerged especially after the televised atrocities of the Vietnam War and the more openly illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, which triggered huge anti-war protests across Australia and internationally.

Far from the “good war” for “freedom” and to eradicate terrorism, as claimed by the Bush and Howard governments—backed by the Labor Party and the Greens—the Afghanistan invasion of 2001 and subsequent military occupation was, and remains, a filthy neo-colonial war. It was launched to secure hegemony over a resource-rich and geo-strategically located country in the heart of the Eurasian landmass, bordering China and former Soviet republics.

As in the Vietnam War, governments in Canberra and Washington, as well as the complicit corporate media, relied upon the fabricated “kill counts” reported by the Special Forces and issued by the military chiefs as proof of the supposed “success” of what is now a near 20 year-long war in Afghanistan.

By this September, the war had directly claimed the lives of at least

175,000 Afghans, leaving many more maimed and displacing millions in the impoverished country of 32 million people. The war has featured indiscriminate US bombings, drone assassinations, death squad night raids and the operations by the US Army's 5th Stryker Brigade, which systematically murdered civilians and mutilated their bodies.

Extraordinary moves are being stepped up internationally to bury these crimes. In September, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced new sanctions, personally targeting the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court for proposing an investigation into war crimes committed by US military forces and intelligence agents in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the "war on terror."

Given the nature of the war, it is no accident that nearly every government in the US-led coalition—those of the US, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark—has faced war crimes allegations. Few, if any, prosecutions have resulted from the official inquiries in these countries and "it is predictable that Australian prosecutions could encounter similar obstacles."

In fact, the only Australian prosecution is against ex-military lawyer David McBride, who faces a closed-door trial for allegedly leaking documents to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 2017, exposing a litany of war crimes. The Australian Federal Police also raided the ABC headquarters, and two ABC journalists, Dan Oakes and Sam Clarke, were threatened with prosecution

WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who was responsible for the greatest exposure of US and allied war crimes in Afghanistan—the 2010 release of 75,000 documents from US "army war logs"—remains incarcerated in a COVID-infected British prison facing extradition to be imprisoned for life, or executed, in the US on trumped-up espionage charges.

As Brereton acknowledges, his report was prepared in close collaboration with the US and its allies. He travelled to their capitals for consultations. The purpose of the resulting whitewash is not just to ensure that war crimes investigations, and any eventual prosecutions, protect all the military generals and governments from being held to account.

Above all, it is to prepare the military for fighting in the US-led wars being prepared against China and other perceived threats to Washington's declining economic and geo-strategic power. In any such war, the Special Forces will be a key element of any Australian military contribution. In Brereton's words, "Australia needs a more surgical and refined Special Forces."

For years these war crimes were covered up at the highest levels, including by military lawyers and intelligence officials. Evidence from devastated Afghan families and even official complaints by the US puppet Afghan government were brushed aside, or attempted to be bought off by paltry "blood money" compensation payments. That continued until the sheer volume of leaks by courageous whistleblowers eventually led to Brereton's inquiry being convened in 2016.

In the meantime, some key figures involved, such as ex-Special Forces officer Andrew Hastie (Liberal Party) and former military legal colonel Mike Kelly (Labor Party), were elevated into parliament. The current and previous Governor-Generals of Australia have been recruited from former heads of the military. Moreover, there have been endless government and media efforts to promote the myth of heroic and honourable armed forces—from annual Anzac Day commemorations to commercial TV glorifications of the Special Air Services (SAS).

Neither a Biden administration in the US nor a Labor government in Australia would be any less militaristic. In fact, most of the reported abuses in Afghanistan occurred during the Obama administration's "surge," which doubled the number of US soldiers from 30,000 to 60,000, backed to the hilt by the Greens-backed government of Julia Gillard.

In August 2019, as Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government ramped up its commitment to the US confrontation with China, it announced a \$3 billion funding boost to the Special Forces over the next two decades. This is part of a massive expansion of military spending, with \$575 billion allocated over a decade.

The military revamp is also a preparation to deal with political and social discontent at home, amid staggering economic inequality and preparations for war. The atrocities in Afghanistan are a warning of the methods that will be used internally. In 2018, laws were passed, supported by the Labor Party, to give governments and military generals expanded powers to call out troops to suppress "domestic violence." Further such powers are currently being legislated, following the unprecedented military deployments during the bushfire crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, which were designed to accustom public opinion to the presence of troops on the streets.

There is only one way to end the violence and barbarism of Australia's military, and halt the danger of an even more catastrophic war. It is bound up with the struggle to put an end to the capitalist profit system, which bears full responsibility for imperialist war and its crimes.

Our party's record is clear. On October 9, 2001, two days after Washington launched its Afghanistan invasion, accompanied by a barrage of war propaganda from the corporate media, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a statement titled "Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan." It explained that this was "an imperialist war" in which Washington aimed to "exert hegemonic control" over not only Afghanistan, but over the broader region of Central Asia, "home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world."

The anti-war program of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was elaborated in the 2016 statement "Socialism and the fight against war," amid the escalating US war drive against China and Russia. It explained that to prevent a new world war a genuine anti-war movement had to be built. That had to be founded on the politically independent struggle of the working class, unified across national boundaries in an international struggle for the abolition of the capitalist nation-state system and the creation of a world socialist federation.

We urge our readers to take up that life-and-death fight by joining the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the ICFI.



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