

Australian soldiers drank alcohol from prosthetic leg of dead Afghan

Oscar Grenfell
4 December 2020

An image published by the *Guardian* on Tuesday, showing an Australian special forces soldier drinking beer from the prosthetic leg of a dead Afghan, is the latest evidence of the neo-colonial barbarism of the 19-year occupation and pillage of the oppressed Central Asian nation.

According to the *Guardian*, the photo was taken in the “Fat Lady’s Arms,” an unofficial bar set up by Australian special forces at their base in Tarin Kowt, the capital of Uruzgan province. In another picture, the device is strapped to a soldier’s backpack, and in a third, two soldiers pose with it.

The paper claims to have obtained other images, including one showing soldiers dancing with the leg.

The prosthetic was reportedly taken from a “suspected Taliban fighter” after he had been killed during an April, 2009 Special Air Service Regiment assault in Uruzgan. The evident disability of the man, and the practice of the special forces in deeming broad sections of the civilian population, especially those they have killed, to be “enemy combatants” means these assertions cannot be taken at face value.

In any event, the photographs are proof that in addition to murdering civilians and prisoners, special forces soldiers engaged in the war crime of pillage, defined under international law as taking property from the legitimate owner for private or personal use, without consent.

The response of the political and media establishment to the horrific images has been decidedly muted. Liberal-National Prime Minister Scott Morrison and opposition Labor leader Anthony Albanese have said nothing and nor has any other senior politician.

In comments to the *Guardian*, Luke Gosling, a little-known Labor MP and former Australian army officer, presented the photographs as scarcely more than an embarrassment. The images were “concerning” and indicated a “problematic culture.” “It’s not the conduct we want our Australian defence force to be getting up to overseas in our name,” Gosling said.

The indifferent response is all the more striking given that on Tuesday, when the *Guardian* article was published,

virtually every prominent political figure in the country was denouncing another image related to the Afghan conflict as “disgusting,” “repugnant,” “sickening,” etc.

The deluge of confected outrage, which continues, was over a tweet by Zhao Lijian, a mid-ranking Chinese official, condemning Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. Zhao was referencing the military-initiated Brereton investigation, which last month revealed “credible information” that Australian special forces murdered at least 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners between 2009 and 2013.

Zhao’s tweet was accompanied by an image, created by a visual artist, showing an Australian soldier with a knife to the neck of an Afghan child. The graphic was clearly based on incidents noted in the Brereton report, including one in which special forces soldiers allegedly slashed the throats of two 14-year-old boys.

Labor and the Greens joined with Morrison in declaring the image to be unacceptable and offensive, after the government demanded that Twitter censor the post and that China apologise. The cartoonish graphic was bizarrely denounced as “doctored” and “fake” by journalists at virtually every major publication.

The same reporters and editors, who were condemning Zhao’s tweet in unhinged terms as an “ISIS-like post” and even an “act of grey zone warfare,” have not bothered to comment on the photos of the prosthetic leg. It has not been mentioned in a single article by the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Nine Media’s *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers or in Murdoch’s national flagship, the *Australian*.

The virtual blackout is a calculated political decision. The gruesome images too clearly expose the blather about China demeaning and maligning “our brave soldiers,” so they are simply being buried.

In addition, the circumstances surrounding the prosthetic leg undermine the implausible narrative contained in the Brereton report. It insists that the war crimes were the result of a “rogue element” operating without the knowledge of any level of the military hierarchy above patrol command.

Labor and Liberal-National governments, which initiated and oversaw Australia's involvement in the war, supposedly knew nothing.

According to soldiers who spoke to the *Guardian* anonymously, the leg became something of a sick and deranged mascot. They would take it wherever they were transferred, and it was eventually mounted on the wall of the "Fat Lady's Arms." Senior officers visited the bar, and would have seen the leg, the soldiers claimed.

The photographs also cut across various apologies for the war crimes, including claims that soldiers "lashed out" because of stress and fatigue from repeat deployments. Instead, they point to the systematic dehumanisation of the Afghan population, flowing from the neo-colonial character of the occupation itself.

Comparisons with the crimes of the Nazis acquire a very direct character. The mounted leg reportedly had a header in German, "das Boot." Next to it, in pride of place, was an iron cross, the military decoration of the Third Reich. Given the brutal killings and other atrocities committed by the special forces, and the fact that their targets would have been defined as "inferior people" by the Nazis, this was hardly ironic barracks humour.

The existence of fascist networks within the army, and particularly the special forces, has long been rumoured.

In 2018, the ABC published an image of special forces riding around Uruzgan in a vehicle flying the Nazi flag. Army command confirmed the 2007 "incident," but presented it as a minor issue. Earlier this year, the ABC released a 2012 image of two special forces soldiers holding a Confederate flag with the words "Southern Pride" emblazoned on it.

Because of the veil of official secrecy, maintained by the Brereton report, it is not publicly known at this stage whether the soldiers who evinced Nazi proclivities were the same ones murdering Afghan civilians. The implications of soldiers involved in a neo-colonial occupation identifying themselves with the fascists, however, are clear.

Over the past days, the media has featured comments by defenders of the special forces soldiers that have an extreme right-wing character.

Radio shock jock Alan Jones, notorious for his role in instigating the 2005 Cronulla race riot directed against Muslims, wrote an opinion piece for the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* demanding that Prime Minister Morrison apologise to the special forces for lending credence to the findings of the Brereton report.

When the report was released, Morrison lamely described its contents as "disturbing and distressing," and said it contained "hard truths." Even these mealy-mouthed statements were too much for Jones, who asked, "When will

you apologise for your language and that of your Generals that condemned all our men in Afghanistan, the best of the best, to the charge of criminal behaviour..."

"Thousands of innocent, courageous and heroic Australians whom we sent to Afghanistan to put their lives on the line in our name" had been "betrayed" by the government and military officialdom, Jones wrote.

His comments were immediately echoed by Andrew Hastie, a Liberal MP and chair of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security. Hastie, a former special forces commander who served in Afghanistan in 2012, declared that the Brereton report had aired "unproven rumours," which "undermined public confidence in the process and allowed the People's Republic of China to malign our troops."

Meanwhile, the official cover-up of the war crimes continues. Despite military experts and former soldiers insisting that the crimes could not have occurred without high-level knowledge, the government and defence are sticking to the story that no one above patrol command knew anything.

Morrison is refusing to implement some of the tepid recommendations of the Brereton report. The government has no plans to compensate Afghan victims, and is moving to block the revocation of meritorious service awards to soldiers from the squadrons involved.

Two weeks since the Brereton report was released, no one has been charged, despite voluminous evidence of the illegal killings, at least one of which was caught on film. The soldier photographed drinking from the prosthetic leg remains in the army.

Twenty-five others have been recommended to the Australian Federal Police for potential prosecution. Ten more have been dismissed from the special forces.

At least two dozen heavily-trained fighters, credibly accused of murder, torture and other war crimes, are walking the streets of Australia's towns and cities, amid right-wing declarations that they have been "betrayed" and "stabbed in the back," and government statements that prosecutions, if they ever eventuate, could take a decade. One does not need to be a political genius to see the dangers.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact