Australia's most decorated Afghan veteran accused of covering up war crimes

Oscar Grenfell
13 April 2021

A joint investigation by Nine Media's "60 Minutes" program and its *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers this week accused Ben Roberts-Smith, Australia's most decorated Afghan War veteran, of trying to bury evidence of war crimes.

Roberts-Smith has responded by describing the reports as "baseless." The former soldier is currently engaged in a defamation action against Nine Media over separate stories last year alleging that he participated in war crimes, including by kicking an Afghan villager off a cliff in 2012 before the civilian was shot to death by another special forces operative.

The latest accusations against Roberts-Smith centre on claims that he obstructed the Brereton Inquiry, commissioned by the military and the Liberal-National Coalition government in 2016. It conducted a secretive investigation into alleged violations of international law by Australian special forces soldiers in Afghanistan. This concluded with the release of a heavily-redacted report last November that referred to "credible evidence" of war crimes, including at least 39 murders, between 2009 and 2013, but provided no details to identify the participants.

The Nine Media investigation claims that Robert-Smith conducted a multi-pronged campaign to block the investigation's progress. It alleges that he:

• Buried a lunch box containing USBs in his backyard. On one of them was reportedly the photo of a dead Afghan killed by Roberts-Smith's patrol during a raid in the village of Tizak in 2012. Commemorative special forces coins had been placed over the dead man's eyes before he was photographed. Legal experts have stated that this may constitute evidence of war crimes, such as disrespecting corpses on the battlefield. Nine Media said the photo was not obtained by the Brereton investigation and was only discovered when state agencies secretly retrieved the lunch box from Roberts-Smith's backyard sometime last year.

• Had images on one of the USBs that apparently show multiple soldiers drinking alcohol out of the prosthetic leg of an Afghan who was allegedly unlawfully killed by Roberts-Smith in 2009. Other photos reportedly show a dress-up party at a special forces base in Afghanistan. Roberts-Smith is visible in an image that appears to show one of his colleagues in a Ku Klux Klan outfit burning a small cross.

• Sent anonymous letters and emails to soldiers seeking to intimidate them so they would not testify truthfully before the Brereton Inquiry.

• Purchased at least five burner phones between 2018 and 2019, as the investigation was underway.

• Was captured on an audio recording stating that he would "do everything I can" to "destroy" those who had published allegations against him.

The media coverage of the revelations has largely focused on the extraordinary character of Roberts-Smith's alleged behaviour. Virtually no attempt has been made to place the accusations against him in a broader context. Nobody in the official media has asked the obvious question: How is it that Australia's most decorated soldier of recent decades, who was universally lionised by the political and media establishment, now stands accused of such conduct?

Roberts-Smith came to national prominence in 2011 when he was awarded the Victoria Cross, Australia's highest military honour, for his conduct during a 2010 raid on Tizak, the same village where the photo of the dead Afghan with coins over his eyes would be reportedly taken two years later.

© World Socialist Web Site

A hagiographic account of the 2010 raid published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that Roberts-Smith's patrol had been dispatched to Tizak to "capture or kill" an alleged Taliban commander. They quickly came under fire from Afghan resistance fighters.

The article cited the official commendation, which hailed Roberts-Smith for "storm[ing[the enemy position, killing the two remaining machine gunners." According to the *Herald*, "Roberts-Smith went on to attack other positions and he and another patrol member killed more insurgents as his troop, no longer pinned down, cleared the village of Taliban."

For this conduct, Roberts-Smith was told by then Prime Minister Julia Gillard: "You went to Afghanistan a soldier, you came back a hero."

In 2010–2011, when the raid occurred, as well as most of the war crimes listed in the Brereton report, Gillard's Labor government presided over a dramatic increase in Australia's involvement in "kill and capture" operations, as part of a "surge" order by the Obama administration. Basing themselves on "kill lists" drawn up by American intelligence, Australian special forces were dispatched to Afghan villages with instructions to wipe out alleged Taliban leaders, amid mounting popular opposition to the US-led military occupation.

The military command was evidently aware that these operations involved mass killings. In April 2013, then Chief of the Defence Force General David Hurley issued a secret directive to soldiers, warning that they could be "exposed to criminal and disciplinary liability, including potentially the war crime of murder" if they could not prove that those they killed were participating in hostilities. The directive is inexplicable if senior command had no knowledge of the war crimes at the time, as the Brereton report asserted.

Nine Media has drawn attention to the fact that Roberts-Smith's legal actions are being financially supported by Kerry Stokes, the billionaire chairman of Seven West Media. It has alleged that Stokes lent some $1.87 million in company funds to Roberts-Smith, who is a senior executive at Seven West. The dogged backing of Roberts-Smith by Stokes, who is also the chairman of the Australian War Memorial, reflects the determination of sections of the ruling elite to support the special forces soldiers, regardless of any accusations against them.

But the focus on Stokes ignores the broader point. Roberts-Smith was elevated into a senior position at Seven West after he had been glorified by the entire political and media establishment as an "Australian hero." Roberts-Smith was front and centre at successive events commemorating Anzac Day, Australia's militarist national holiday, and was heavily-promoted during the massive government-funded "celebration" of the centenary of World War I.

As recently as 2016, Roberts-Smith was head of the Australia Day National Council, which bestowed that year's top civilian award on former army chief David Morrison. This was the same year that the Brereton Inquiry began. By that point, allegations of war crimes by special forces soldiers in Afghanistan were well known.

In its feature on the latest accusations against Roberts-Smith, "60 Minutes" said nothing about the likely knowledge of the military command about the war crimes. Instead it provided former military officials with an opportunity to express their shock at the alleged conduct. This included Chris Barrie, who as then Chief of the Defence Force, presided over Australia's involvement in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

The failure of the Nine Media investigation to raise any broader questions dovetails with the official attempts to pin the war crimes on a handful of special forces soldiers and squadron commanders and to amnesty the senior military commanders and governments that have overseen the war. Above all, it serves to obscure the fact that the atrocities flowed from a neo-colonial offensive that inevitably involved attempts to terrorise a hostile population into submission.

Like the earlier elevation of Roberts-Smith, the current attempts to limit the fallout from the Brereton Inquiry are aimed at ensuring that the military is able to play an aggressive role in the new wars that are being prepared, including in the US-led plans for a catastrophic conflict with China.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site