

UK Special Forces personnel give eyewitness accounts of officially sanctioned assassinations and war crimes in Afghanistan

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The BBC's documentary programme *Panorama* aired *Special Forces: I Saw War Crimes*, is available for the next 11 months on BBC iPlayer.

A team of reporters has been investigating unlawful killings by UK forces in Afghanistan for several years and produced an important episode, *SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime?* in July 2022, which forced the government into calling an inquiry the following October.

The latest programme is based on conversations with more than 30 sources who served with or alongside UK Special Forces in Afghanistan during the US-led occupation. Their words are spoken by actors to prevent identification and retaliation.

Their testimony describes the murder of unarmed Afghans in their sleep; the execution of handcuffed detainees, including children; psychotic killing raids; personal kill tallies; and the systematic cover-up of all incriminating evidence, including the deletion of files and the closing down of investigations.

Crimes took place over more than a decade, far longer than the three-year-period (2010 – 2013) being examined by the ongoing Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan, which opened in London in October 2023.

Referring to the largely concurrent US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003, witnesses told the programme that the Special Air Service (SAS) "had already developed a method of covering up unlawful killings in Iraq" by planting weapons (known as "drop weapons") on the bodies of their victims to make them look like armed fighters.

This method became routine in Afghanistan. One veteran told *Panorama*, "They'd search someone, handcuff them, then shoot them" [before removing the handcuffs] and "planting a pistol" on the body.

One source who had served with the SAS added, "You'd see a lot more folding stock AKs [AK-47 rifles]. Because of the way they're designed to fold they were easier to carry in day sacks, easier to bring on to the targets and plant by the

body to make it look like the person was holding a rifle when they were shot."

Another source who had served with the SAS said bluntly, "Everyone knew what was going on... so there was implicit approval for what was happening."

According to sources, more junior members of assault teams were told by more senior SAS operators to kill male detainees.

Children were not exempt, he recalled, "They handcuffed a young boy and shot him. He was clearly a child, not even close to fighting age."

The Special Boat Service (SBS) is also implicated for the first time in executions of unarmed and injured Afghans, with *Panorama* speaking to at least 10 sources who served with or alongside the regiment.

One of these explained that wounded fighters were routinely killed, describing one operation when an Afghan had been left shot but still breathing: "The medic was standing over him, treating his injury... Then one of our blokes came up to him... and there was a bang. He'd been shot in the head at point-blank range... I can't recall us taking a single injured insurgent back to base for treatment. They were shot... there and then... these are not mercy killings, its murder."

A veteran who served with the SBS said some troops had a "mob mentality" and described their behaviour on operations as "barbaric," expressing "serious psychopathic traits."

A former Intelligence Officer who had been attached to the SBS described the doctoring of operation accounts, saying, "You could see from the photographs taken on site that the accounts being given by the SBS guys to justify certain killings just didn't add up. They say they've been caught in a firefight, but in the photos, you'd see these were multiple clean headshots."

Panorama was also able to speak to former members of Afghan Special Forces (ASF) who served alongside the SBS

around 2020. One told of an operation where his British mentors shot a boy of 13 or 14. He was told his squad should “destroy all the evidence of what happened that night.”

Narrator Richard Bilton explains of “the same squadron that kept a kill tally in Iraq. In Afghanistan, that squadron killed an average of 2.7 people on every operation. Hundreds were killed.”

A former Intelligence Officer who had been attached to the SAS corroborated this: “It was all about the stats. When the numbers were read out at the morning meeting at NATO headquarters, they wanted the SAS task force to have high numbers. It was seen as a metric of success.”

Witnesses tell of one member of an SAS squadron who personally killed dozens of Afghans on a single tour. A veteran with the SAS said, “It seemed like he was trying to get a kill on every operation... He was notorious in the squadron. He genuinely seemed... like a psychopath.”

In one incident sources say was notorious inside the SAS, the soldier slit the throat of an injured Afghan after telling an officer not to shoot the man again, “because he wanted to go and finish the wounded guy off with his knife.”

Another witnesses, who said that among the SAS were “lots of psychotic murderers,” described how, “On some operations, the troop would go into guesthouse-type buildings and kill everyone there... They’d go in and shoot everyone sleeping there, on entry.”

Panorama also examined the methods used to cover up these crimes. According to the testimony, officers would help to falsify post-operational reports. One of the veterans explained, “We understood how to write up serious incident reviews... If it looked like a shooting could represent a breach of the rules of conflict, you’d get a phone call from the legal adviser or one of the staff officers in HQ. They’d pick you up on it and help you to clarify the language. ‘Do you remember someone making a sudden move?’ ‘Oh yeah, I do now.’ That sort of thing. It was built into the way we operated.”

Intelligence Officers watching the operations on live drone feeds, and so witnessing war crimes in real time, were requested to “dig up” data on victims to retrospectively link them with the Taliban.

The programme pointed to Operation Northmoor, an investigation launched by the Royal Military Police in 2014 into allegations of over 600 offences by UK forces in Afghanistan, including the killing of children. The investigation was terminated in 2019 without any prosecutions, despite the proven permanent deletion of evidence by the Special Forces.

Panorama revealed for the first time that then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron was repeatedly warned during his term in office that UK Special Forces

were killing civilians in Afghanistan.

Bilton narrates, “Senior people were told about the killings, but they weren’t stopped. We found evidence of a widespread cover-up lasting years. The cover-up started with Special Forces on the ground. It was continued by some of Britain’s most senior officers, and it was maintained by politicians and the Ministry of Defence.”

A spokesperson for Cameron was compelled to reply to *Panorama*, saying, “any suggestion that Lord Cameron colluded in covering up allegations of serious criminal wrongdoing is total nonsense.”

Bruce Houlder KC, a former director of service prosecutions, told the programme he hoped the public inquiry would examine the extent of Lord Cameron’s knowledge of alleged civilian casualties following operations by UK Special Forces.

The following are indicted with full complicity; General Sir Gwyn Jenkins, head of UK Special Forces in Afghanistan for a year from 2011 and former Director Special Forces; General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, the former head of the British Army; and Lieutenant General Jonathon Page, another former Director Special Forces.

The final segment of the *Panorama* programme looks at the veto by UK Special Forces of over 2,000 asylum claims by former members of the Afghan Special Forces (ASF), who could potentially have been called to give evidence of war crimes in the ongoing London inquiry. A former ASF member concluded, “They don’t want us in the UK because of what we have witnessed.”

The programme revealed that the individual overseeing this mass rejection of asylum applications was Gwyn Jenkins. *Special Forces: I Saw War Crimes* was aired Monday May 12. On May 15, the Labour government’s Ministry of Defence promoted Jenkins to First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, the head of the British Royal Navy.



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