

War Itself Is a Crime, Let Alone What Australia's SAS Did in Afghanistan

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Major-General Paul Brereton presented his report into allegations of Australian war crimes in Afghanistan as necessary for a more effective ADF. But if we're horrified when the Army breaks the rules of war, we should also be outraged when it follows them, writes Nick Riemer.

A fortnight after its release, and now fuelled by [China's intervention](#) into the controversy, the Brereton report continues to prompt intense discussion of its 'shocking' revelations of Australian war crimes in Afghanistan.

The shock has, no doubt, been less among those who actually understand what war means.

From the moment Australia sent troops to one of the poorest countries in the world – one that had never attacked us, and supposedly to '[deny opportunities for terrorists](#)' – it was obvious that innocent people would be killed in droves. And that's what happened: more than 7,000 Afghans were [killed by Australian troops](#) during Operation Slipper, by no means all of them combatants.



Australian Army soldiers from Special Operations Task Group disembark from a US Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter after operations in northern Kandahar, Afghanistan, in October 2010. (IMAGE: CPL Chris Moore, ADF)

The fighting robbed countless others of their loved ones, their livelihood, and any possibility of a normal life. Thousands would have no choice but to become refugees – for those trying to get here, they would become targets of the brutal Australian war against asylum.

For all its impressive ability to cause misery far beyond these shores, the ADF is just a minor player in the 'great game' of 21st century warfare. But in its capacity for throat-slitting, kicking people off cliffs, or gunning them down while they're clutching their prayer beads in a field, Brereton has given it its AAA+ rating.

As a senior ADF officer himself, Major-General Paul Brereton downplays the fact that the conditions that spawned those sadistic outrages are systemic. It's hardly surprising that such regular war crimes reflect something about the army in which they occurred.

The depravity of ADF personnel now on the public record is hard for any normally

constituted person to fathom. What do we hear in [that chilling Four Corners video](#) as an Australian soldier executes a young Afghan cowering in the field? No attempt to prevent a cold-blooded slaying, not a single outcry of horror, just the casual indifference of the soldier's colleague to whether another human is slaughtered or not. The only moment with a sense of urgency is when he calls off his dog, more concerned about the animal than the life that's just been terminated before his eyes.

Between 2009 and 2013 alone, Brereton's report records 39 cases of murder and two of what he calls 'cruel treatment'. How much other murder and torture was done in the remaining 13 years of Australia's longest war?



Major General Paul Brereton, who authored the report into Australian war crimes in Afghanistan.

(IMAGE: Rick McQuinlan, ADF)

English has a word for killers who gratuitously murder civilians and non-combatants for ideological reasons: 'terrorist'. The term has been noticeably absent from official reactions to Brereton's report. But the report precisely confirms that state-sponsored, Australian terrorists in ADF uniforms were on a five-year rampage in Afghanistan.

Increasing the SAS deployment there in 2007, Howard [said](#) "there is a lot at stake if terrorism acquires a safe haven again in Afghanistan". And yet, as it turned out, the safest terrorist havens of them all – the ones that would never be attacked by Western missiles or helicopters – were in the ADF's own bases in Uruzgan province.

This is the 'warrior culture' that we somehow expected to 'bring democracy' to Afghanistan. What an edifying demonstration we've had of the Australian idea of democracy since the revelations were first aired: journalists raided, whistleblowers persecuted with the full might of the state, while the psychopaths responsible for the crimes, some of them decorated by the highest Australian dignitaries, were defended by politicians.

Now, after the report, we're witnessing the obligatory expressions of horror, part of a concerted attempt to preserve public confidence in the army and, indeed, the political establishment that's so heavily invested in it. Regardless of how genuine the horror is, it won't be too long before it's forgotten in the next spasm of our political cycle, as militaristic and Islamophobic as it is mediocre.

One thing we can be sure of is that, if a reprisal attack occurs on Australian soil, the official response will attribute no part of the blame to the SAS.

Less than 24 hours after Brereton's report, *The Australian* was already tiring of the widespread criticism of the army. The report, its editorialist [suggested](#), had gone too far in critiquing the SAS' 'warrior ethos': that ethos 'is vital' and it should not be disparaged, the paper stated.

Away from the far-right gutter, in the supposedly progressive media, we've often heard about how the actions of a 'few individuals' will 'damage the legacy' or 'taint the contribution' of the tens of thousands of other Australian soldiers deployed to Afghanistan.

The casual violence of this propagandizing should be breath-taking. Regardless of the few clinics or schools it also started, Australia's role in Afghanistan wasn't a 'contribution' to the

cause of global peace or democracy, but to the [destruction of a society](#). Originally promised for the benefit of Howard's re-election campaign in 2001, [without the US even asking](#), Australian involvement was later continued for the base political advantage and the slavish US me-tooism of the Australian political class.



Prime Minister John Howard meets soldiers of the Australian Special Forces Task Group deployed on Operation Slipper in Afghanistan in 2005. (IMAGE: Sgt John Carroll, ADF)

With Brereton's report, politicians have finally been forced to pull their heads out of the sand. The 'hear no evil, see no evil' charade that has surrounded the Afghan war for so long is now over, at least in part. But it's important not to overstate the likely consequences of the revelations, and to read what Brereton himself has said about his report's purpose.

"Moral authority," he writes ([p. 42](#)), "is an element of combat power. If we do not hold ourselves, on the battlefield, to at least to the standards we expect of our adversaries, we deprive ourselves of that moral authority, and that element of our combat power."

Brereton sees his investigation, in other words, as distasteful housekeeping, necessary to allow the ADF to fight future overseas wars as effectively as possible. Moral reckoning is envisaged mainly as a means of improving the army's combat-readiness. On that line of reasoning, if it could be shown that, in fact, the SAS' 'warrior culture' was on balance an advantage to the ADF, there would be fewer grounds to question it.

The crimes of the SAS are the ones that Australian public culture can acceptably criticise. There is every reason for horror at the murders that Brereton's report unmasked. But once the bad apples of the Afghan campaign are tried or forgotten, the army will be free to prosecute whatever next bloody deployment politicians commit it to, accompanied by the usual comforting reassurances that, as the ABC's political editor put it, "[the Anzac ideal is still worthy of veneration](#)".

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