

Special Forces commander admits Australian troops committed war crimes in Afghanistan

By Jason Quill
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Special Forces commander Adam Findlay told a secret military briefing in early March at Perth's Campbell barracks that "some elite soldiers committed war crimes in Afghanistan."

Findlay blamed the atrocities on "poor moral leadership up the chain of command" of the Special Air Services (SAS), according to leaked information published by Nine Entertainment's "60 Minutes" television program and Melbourne's *Age* newspaper.

Findlay claimed that only a few officers and soldiers were involved. He said a "small number of commissioned officers had allowed a culture where abhorrent conduct was permitted" and "a handful of experienced soldiers including patrol commanders and deputy patrol commanders, who typically led five-man SAS teams on missions, had also enabled this culture to exist."

The briefing was given to dozens of current SAS soldiers, who were told that these "war crimes may have been covered up." Findlay said, "Australia's special forces will take a decade to recover from the long-running investigation" overseen by a judge, Paul Brereton. The judge is due to release the findings of his four-year inquiry to the military chiefs and Liberal-National government in the coming weeks.

The Special Forces commander also revealed for the first time that the inquiry itself did not originate from concerns in the upper echelons but from SAS soldiers writing letters to the top brass about misconduct. This had forced Defence Force Chief General Angus Campbell to call for inquiries to "examine our soul because it wasn't right."

The comments are the first direct admission by someone of such high rank of the cover-up culture that has been fostered in the armed forces. However, Findlay, who himself served in Afghanistan, Iraq and

East Timor, did not make these admissions for the purpose of exposing the criminal conduct, much less to clarify why it occurred.

In fact, the commander said it was "unfair that the misconduct of a few soldiers who served in Afghanistan had damaged the reputation of the majority of the SAS who had done nothing wrong."

Such attempts to attribute war crimes to supposed "bad apples" are a diversion. The systematic unlawful killings and other abuses—as well as the protracted cover-ups—are the inevitable product of the types of brutal, neo-colonial invasions and occupations mounted by the US and its allies to attempt to secure control over the strategic and resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia region.

The Special Forces have been on the front line of these operations precisely because their members are trained and conditioned to kill anyone regarded as an enemy, that is, most of the population.

Findlay's purpose was to warn the military and political establishment of the likely backlash when some of these revelations are made public, while proposing tactical measures to try to repair the tattered reputation of the armed forces at home and abroad.

While saying that those identified as "perjurers," who lied under oath out of a "misguided loyalty," should be "removed from the SAS at a minimum," Findlay insisted: "We have to rehabilitate the reputation and the capabilities and everything of this command ... we can't wallow in it."

This is necessary, according to Findlay, to resolve an "issue of trust" between the Special Forces, which comprise the SAS and the Commandos, and the Australian people and the wider military.

In his closed-door inquiry, Brereton, a New South Wales Supreme Court Justice and army reserve Major

General, has reportedly conducted over 250 interviews and looked into at least 55 alleged war crimes incidents between 2005 and 2016.

Findlay said Brereton was compiling “a raft of findings” but his inquiry had taken four years because “a number” of new whistleblowers had recently emerged.

The “60 Minutes” segment featured an interview with one such whistleblower, former medic and SAS member, Dusty Miller, who was allegedly involved in the killing of Afghan farmer and father of seven, Haji Sardar, in the southern Afghanistan village of Sarkum during March 2012.

Miller was put in charge of treating Haji Sardar, who had a gunshot wound through his thigh, although he was not suspected to be with the Taliban. It was an uncomplicated medical procedure. When Miller said, “this guy is going to survive,” a senior SAS soldier ordered him to hand over the injured farmer.

“At the time, I thought it was very, very strange,” Miller said. “I’m wondering why. But probably in the back of my mind, I knew exactly what was going on.” Miller continued: “A few minutes later, that same person, the senior operator came back to me and said, ‘Hey Kilo (Miller’s call sign) ... that guy didn’t make it’.”

Miller reported the farmer’s death as soon as he returned to base, but said his senior regimental medical officer brushed off his concerns. “I assumed that he was killed basically,” Miller said. “He didn’t die of his wounds, I can promise you that.”

In March this year, Miller made contact with the farmer’s family via Skype to beg for their forgiveness, saying, “I wanted to tell them that I was sorry for what happened to their father and that I should have done more.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison refused to comment on the revelations, saying he had “no intention of involving himself in an independent process.” But his government is prosecuting former military lawyer **David McBride**, who faces a closed-door trial for allegedly leaking classified material to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) documenting at least 10 possible war crimes. The Federal Police also **raided the ABC headquarters**, and ABC journalist Dan Oakes could still be prosecuted as well.

Far from curbing the Special Forces, Morrison’s

government is boosting them, as its Labor Party predecessors did. Last August, Morrison announced extra funding of \$3 billion over 20 years, including \$500 million over the next four years, to upgrade the Special Forces’ weapons and resources.

The move is part of intensifying preparations for war. Australian governments have relied almost totally on the Special Forces for every military intervention since the Vietnam War.

These units also could be deployed internally, with “shoot to kill” powers, to put down civil unrest under the expanded military call-out laws introduced in 2018. New powers were created for the government or the chief of the armed forces to **call out troops** to put down “domestic violence.”

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