

# **And – by whose standards shall we judge them?**

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We know because we read about it in august organs of the print media, such as The Australian; that there is an enquiry into the battlefield behaviour of Australian troops in the field of combat in Afghanistan.

We also know that the troops in the frame are the soldiers of the Australian Special Air Service – the SAS.

We also know that the enquiry is being conducted by an eminent being, draped, possibly even cloaked in law degrees – but apparently not much in the way of battlefield experience. Military service in the Reserve Force, yes, but combat command and experience ? This does not disqualify this person from conducting the enquiry – he is the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force and has been chosen for that role by his professional eminence.

We also know that the enquiry had its genesis in the secret report from a Canberra sociologist who was covertly inserted into the ranks of returned soldiers from Afghanistan with the sole purpose of “ discovering the culture “ of these men.

Now, that is a bloody good start. An enquiry based upon the secret testimony of a Canberra sociologist. A sociologist who describes herself on her Twitter account as a “ sociologist, feminist and taxidermist “ and who holds a PhD from ANU for her research into the treatment of women with breast cancer.

Nothing I say here is pejorative about the Doctor. No ridicule is directed towards her qualifications – I am merely stating the fact that this was the person who wrote a secret report into the activities of returned members of the armed forces from Afghanistan and gave it to the ADF, who refused to release the taxpayer-funded report to the public.

Why? Why not release the report? The ADF says that the report will create controversial public comment. So what? A Defence expert has commented – [ diversity training, PC classes, pink fingernails, unbalanced recruitment targets, don't create controversial public comment?]

So, on the face of it, these soldiers and their actions, their thinking and their mindset have already been judged by an anonymous sociologist from Canberra! And, subsequent to this judgement, a formal enquiry, by the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force was instituted into the battlefield actions of these soldiers.

We don't know what standards were used by the Canberra sociologist to judge these soldiers – because the report is secret. So we can only guess what a self-declared ‘

sociologist, feminist and taxidermist ' would use as standards to judge combat soldiers from some of the most vicious and personal combat operations ever conducted by Australian troops.

I stand mute, in public, palms extended and the letters " BS " floating in a thought bubble above my head.

I have, many years ago now, heard, felt and smelt the sounds of military combat in Vietnam. I was an Artillery Officer, calling artillery, air strikes and naval gunfire onto the communist forces that confronted us ...enemy soldiers were killed in action during these moments, they were supposed to be! That is why we were there. Military combat is a brutal killing business, it is not a game and there are no trays of oranges at half time. None!

I can tell you all, that I would not want a ' sociologist, feminist and taxidermist ' examining my actions during that time and writing a secret report about them. No Sir, I would not. The only regret that I have about those moments on the battlefield in Vietnam is that I was not able to destroy more communist soldiers than I did. Is that grounds for a secret enquiry by a Canberra sociologist, feminist and taxidermist ??

I bloody well think not.

So, we move on. The secret report has now become a formal enquiry by the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force.

Do we judge these men by the standards of the society in which they fought?

Afghanistan in those years was a brutal place; the Taliban were and are religious zealots, they kill as quickly as changing shirts. They deceive, they appear and disappear, they hide amongst villagers, women, children, defenceless old villagers and they know that our soldiers are bound by a code of decency that prevents them from acting in the same fashion as they, the Taliban act.

So, I don't suppose we can judge them by the standards of the Afghanistan society at that time.

Well, what standards apply?

Do we use the International War Crimes Commission? A body which has its house in the Netherlands and spends much of its time condemning Israel and the United States for action those nations take against international terrorists – although this body has shown some interest in the activities of Russia in Ukraine, but not much in Syria.

The possibility of using the IWCC standards in making a judgement against our combat soldiers indeed exists, although I doubt that this body would deliver a fair and reasonable assessment of what went on in Afghanistan some time ago.

Do we then judge them by the standards of integrity and honesty common to our current political climate?

That would be interesting?

Men and women on both sides of our political spectrum display, on a regularly distressing and frequent basis that our standards of integrity and honesty need a fair bit of bloody work!

So that won't work.

In my many years in the military, during the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's it was impressed upon me, indeed driven into my soul mercilessly, by Instructors of young Officers and, as time passed more Senior Officers, that there is an iron rule in the military, a law that stands unchallenged – “ there are no bad soldiers, just poor Officers! “

And indeed, in my experience, it is so.

We can explore that, in the context of this opinion piece.

The troops under investigation had a different command structure than all the other Australian forces in Afghanistan. This structure may have been imposed upon them by political requirements, by a desire to keep some of the SAS activities ring-fenced from other sections of the Australian Army, who knows?

What I do know, and military experience tells me so – that once you begin to make 'special command arrangements' for individual sections of the deployed force, the integrity of the command structure is affected.

So did we make our own problem?

I believe we did.

And I believe that we must be very, very careful how we attend to this matter; for Australian soldiers are decent men and women, they do not torture, they do not commit murder, they do not act as battlefield thugs. They are tough, hard-minded men and women. To paraphrase the words of US Marines – Australian soldiers are ' no better friends and no worse an enemy. '

By what standards would you judge them?

I know how I would judge.