



The UK Should Learn from the Transgressions of Australian Special Forces

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This summer, Australian Special Forces have been accused of War Crimes that have caused wide-spread outrage. However, although the accusations echo eerily close to those previously raised against British Special Forces, the responses of the two nations could not be more disparate.

While British Defence officials have stymied investigations and therefore have no opportunity to learn its lessons, their Australian counterparts have commissioned further research, and - as a result - may actually understand what went wrong among their Special Forces and how they may be better equipped to prevent transgressions from recurring.

The Allegations

Australian Special Forces' (ASF) tumultuous summer started with the leak of a classified defence inquiry into their operations in Afghanistan. The accusations in the report include allegations that ASF carried out arbitrary executions of unarmed detainees; attempted to cover up such killings by planting weapons on the bodies; flew a swastika during a combat patrol; and used "blooding" rituals for new members (including an initiation rite in which a new Special Forces member was pushed to execute an elderly, unarmed Afghan).

These accusations have more than a fleeting resemblance to the those levied against the UK for its own operations in Afghanistan. The official investigation of British soldiers' crimes in the country, Operation Northmoor, received 675

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complaints, including 52 accusations of wrongful deaths. The majority of these were allegedly perpetrated by special forces.

At the same time, it is worth noting that some of the most shocking incidents perpetrated by the ASF, including the initiation of junior members through arbitrary killings, were “[p]resumed sometimes to be imported from allied Special Forces units, notably British and American”

Any Accountability?

It is in the way the two countries have dealt with the similar accusations that we see a real difference. Australian decision-makers have responded to surfacing accusations by dedicating additional resources to fully understand the cultural, legal, and institutional shortcomings which led to transgressions. In the last two years alone, no less than three inquiries have been launched against the force.

In fact, the accusations which have surfaced this summer stem from what was meant to be an inconspicuous sociological study into the effects of overtasking on ASF culture. This report was dubbed the Cromptoets Report after its main author Samantha Cromptoets, and it was only in response to accusations in Cromptoet’s initial research that the military launched their inquiries.

Subsequently, to address legal shortcomings identified in the Cromptoets Report, the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force – the military’s independent watchdog – began a second inquiry in 2016. This “quasi-judicial inquiry”, has been led by Justice Paul Brereton. A number of respondents have spoken about the “exhaustive” questions and the “level of detail” available to the inquiry.

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This stands in stark contrast to how accusations have been addressed by the UK Government. While Operation Northmoor was meant to run until 2021, *The Times* revealed that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has been pushing strongly for the premature end of Northmoor, as they also wrap up investigations into transgressions in Iraq. In the summer of 2017, they added immense pressure on Northmoor staff to finish the investigation that summer, yet they failed to dedicate any additional resources to speed up the process of reviewing accusations.

As a result, staff have been forced to simply abandon many of the accusations they were previously investigating. To ease this process, the method for jettisoning accusations has been simplified so the approval of an independent lawyer and military prosecutor are no longer needed. One source close to Operation Northmoor also told *The Times* last year that the MOD is keen “to avoid any of the detail of the accusations getting into the press and thereby undermining, in their view, national security, public trust, [and] work with allies.”

So, while Australian investigators have responded to revelations of transgressions by encouraging a deeper look at shortcomings of Special Forces to understand how these can be rectified, their British counterparts have seemingly reacted by limiting resources available and pre-emptively ending the investigation into transgressions.

The Importance of an Open Debate

The dangers of the UK’s approach should be apparent to anyone paying attention to the Australian inquiries: among the most poignant conclusions of

the report is the finding that the shortcomings among ASF were not uniquely Australian, but emblematic to [Special Forces working in modern warfare](#).

For example, overtasking of Special Forces since 9/11 and climates of intense stress and “desensitisation” were [emphasised as major contributors](#) to the degradation of values. While we have very limited information on UKSF, there are strong indications that they may recognise these factors; as [policies](#) continue to place ever-growing emphasis on the importance of UKSF since 9/11, [our own work](#) has suggested that they are increasingly relied upon, and sporadic leaks show they could be both [underfunded](#) and - significantly - [understaffed](#). As such, it is likely that they are familiar with working under “intense stress”.

This appears particularly true in the face of various media stories on extraordinary stress facing British troops in Afghanistan as a whole. For example, the trial of Sgt Alexander Blackman – a British Marine convicted for killing a mortally wounded Taliban fighter - documented the immense pressure on British soldiers in Afghanistan and found that in the case of Sgt Blackman, this stress had been so immense it led to an [adjustment disorder](#).

As such, it appears from the limited information available that the causes identified as leading to the crimes among ASF are also strongly represented among UKSF. It would therefore be unwise to assume that transgressions among Special Forces are uniquely Australian.

Thus, while secrecy may seem ever more appealing as the Australian government grapples with the fallout of its own investigation, the UK must remember how dangerous it is to halt frank debate about the mistakes of the past. If greater oversight was given to UKSF it would allow the government to

institutionalise lessons learned on the causes of transgressions, as the Australians are currently doing.

Image credit: ISAF HQ/Wikimedia Commons.

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