

How a special forces 'band of brothers' culture leads to civilian deaths in war

Written by Megan MacKenzie, Associate Professor, Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney



An anonymous veteran described the Australian special forces' culture as competitive, lacking in accountability, and focused on self-glorification. AAP

This has not been a great week for the Australian Defence Force. The ABC [has reported](#) that at least two children were killed by Australian troops in Afghanistan – and that ADF soldiers allegedly covered up one of these killings. Hundreds of pages of documents were [also leaked](#), claiming multiple cases of special forces soldiers deliberately killing innocent civilians.

Meanwhile, in a [scathing account](#), an anonymous veteran described Australia's special forces' culture as competitive, lacking in accountability, and focused on self-glorification.

The ABC reports consistently mention “warrior culture” and systemic problems within the special forces. But what do civilian deaths in Afghanistan have to do with military culture?

The dark side of ‘band of brothers’ culture

The public has long known that military culture is unique. It is often depicted romantically in movies as a place where men form exclusive and mysterious bonds that help them defend their nation.

“[Band of brothers](#)” is widely associated with military unit dynamics, particularly the all-male special forces units. Yet there is a dark underbelly of band of brothers culture within these units, including [hazing and bonding rituals](#), systemic [sexual assault and rape](#), evidence of [fear of reporting](#) depression and mental health issues, and shockingly high [suicide rates](#).

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Combat and special forces units are also often characterised using the band of brothers e-trifecta: elite, essential and exceptional. They have historically been presented as “the tip of the spear”, and the most essential and responsible units for protecting the nation.

This image is reinforced regularly. Special forces troops are described as [warrior elites](#). Their missions are understood to be exceptional. They are regarded as the most physically fit soldiers who operate on secretive and dangerous missions.

The allegations of criminal ADF behaviour in Afghanistan raise serious concerns about dysfunctional aspects of special forces units. If true, the claims reveal that band of brothers military culture is directly leading to civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

The cost of the super warrior

There is [ample evidence](#) that soldiers form unique bonds. These are not inherently negative. However, [history](#) and [cross-national cases](#) show that band of brothers culture can fuel group mentality that is centred on adrenalin, competitiveness, violence and impunity.

For example, a US platoon in Afghanistan was dubbed the “[Kill Team](#)” after it was revealed that at least five members had faked combat situations to justify killing innocent civilians.

Drawing comparisons between this case and the ADF special forces scandal illustrates how culture can lead to civilian deaths. Specifically, the internalised belief that military units are elite, essential and exceptional fuels racism, disregard for the [rules of war](#), and a fixation on violence and killing.

The current scandal within the ADF has striking similarities to the reported actions of the US Kill Team soldiers in Afghanistan. In both cases, soldiers are accused of trying to “[get kills up](#)”, including targeting civilians and – in some cases – planting weapons on civilian bodies to justify their deaths.

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Similarly, both groups are [accused](#) of using unnecessary and obscene forms of violence – like [mutilating Afghan bodies](#) and keeping body parts as [trophies](#)

Reality check on war

During the trial of the Kill Team members, testimony revealed a tension between their elite training and the occasionally boring and banal realities of war and counterinsurgency objectives.

[Counterinsurgency operations](#) call for soldiers to form relationships with civilians, consult with locals, and train and co-operate with national militaries. Combat and special forces units that see themselves as elite fighting units can become bored, frustrated, and unable to do their job the way they were trained.

Kill Team member Jeremy Morlock [explained](#) that he and other members sought to “get kills” because they were bored and had been tasked with doing work that “was nothing like people hyped [war] to be”.

The Kill Team trial also demonstrated that the culture of exceptionalism within military units can lead to racism and a disregard for the lives of local civilians. Both the US military and the ADF have a troubling record when it comes to racism. A [2007 US Army survey](#) found that:

... only 38% of marines and 47% of soldiers said non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect.

In 2011, the Australian Army [launched an investigation](#) after soldiers posted videos from Afghanistan that included racist comments. In the videos, soldiers referred to Afghans as “sand coons”, “dune coons”, “niggers”, “ragheads”, and “smelly locals”.

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Similarly, in 2012, [a private Facebook group](#) saw former and current ADF members call Muslims “ragheads”.

Another investigation [found](#) some ADF service members were part of the racist Australian Defence League – an online group that asks members to “fight Muslim infiltration of our country”.

Impunity and acknowledgement

Elitism and a mentality of exceptionalism perpetuates lack of accountability and an “above the rules of war” attitude in military units. It also leads to racist, dehumanising behaviour that places civilian lives under threat.

The anonymous special forces veteran claimed the ADF interpreted the rules of war “flexibly”, and saw itself as immune to them. The veteran described how “the measure of success within special operations shifted towards enemy body counts”, while soldiers actively participated in “protectionism, or non-reporting of CIVCAS [civilian casualties]”.

Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International [have argued](#) there is no accountability for civilian deaths in the ongoing “war on terror”. And these deaths are suggested to be [largely ignored](#) by the public.

These allegations reveal a deeply problematic culture within the ADF, similar to the US military. The issue requires an acknowledgement that band of brothers culture has a dark underbelly, and that these individual acts of atrocity might be a reflection of broader, systemic issues.

Further reading: [Explainer: how Australia's military justice system works](#)

Megan MacKenzie receives funding from the Australian Research Council.

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