

“Can’t talk now, mate”: New Zealand news media and the invisible Afghan war

Donald Matheson argues that the reporting of New Zealand’s special forces in Afghanistan, by far the country’s most significant military commitment outside of peacekeeping for 20 years, has been largely hidden under a blanket of secrecy

Introduction

New Zealand’s involvement in the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan is small, comprising in 2010 a group of about 70 Special Air Service (SAS) troops and twice as many other soldiers involved in what is called ‘provincial reconstruction’. Their activities are of wider interest, however, because the deployment has been conducted under a cloak of secrecy and lack of scrutiny, accompanied at times by quite overt management of news media personnel. New Zealand journalism has allowed this to be done to itself, reproducing the stories of heroic soldiers it has been offered and failing, for the most part, to ask critical questions about the legitimacy of these troops on Afghan soil, about their role in human rights abuses or about military and political strategy.

Why that is the case cannot be answered simply. But the chapter suggests that part of the reason can be found in the country’s journalism culture. New Zealand has almost no tradition of critical foreign correspondence. Its news organisations have over many years failed to invest in overseas postings for journalists, so that newsrooms lack expertise on foreign affairs and, perhaps, also lack confidence in reporting on the country’s military and diplomatic activities. In particular, the stories of journalists holding the state to account for its activities overseas and standing to one side of the space of patriotic nationalism, from Kate Adie in Tripoli in 1986 to Anna Politkovskaya in Chechnya in 1999, have no exemplars in New Zealand. In addition, for historical reasons, the military is reported less as a political and more as a national cultural object, something to be proud of rather than critiqued.

Creating heroes

New Zealand is not a militarist nation. The defence budget and resources are small – the navy, for example, has one large ship. What the country does have, however, is a strong cultural attachment to a version of military history in which the New Zealand soldier is a heroic figure who embodies many of the characteristics of an ideal New Zealand male. The country, along with Australia, remembers World War One not primarily on Armistice Day (a day of peace) but on ANZAC Day, commemorating the botched British-led campaign to take the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey. For almost a century, the day has been an important symbol of national identity formation for New Zealanders and Australians, so that up to 10,000 of them can be found on that date each year at Gallipoli. Fighting prowess is a celebrated element in Māori culture, commemorated in the likes of tales of heroism among the Māori Battalion during the bloody 1944 battle for Monte Cassino, Italy. Military history has provided important cultural reference points and, in particular, ones that give support to key national discourses of self-determination, harmony between Māori and the dominant white culture, and a particular version of masculinity (Phillips 1996, Hucker 2010).

The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) tapped into these tropes of national identity when, in 2007, it invited a Television New Zealand crew to produce a fly-on-the-wall documentary about the awarding of a Victoria Cross to an NZSAS soldier, Willie Apiata, who had saved his commanding officer’s life during an ambush in Afghanistan in 2004. *The Reluctant Hero*, which had the head of the SAS as one of its producers, was screened a year later on ANZAC Day and followed Apiata’s return home for the medal ceremony, along with his welcome on to his home marae (tribal meeting ground) as a hero, and a poignant visit to war graves in Belgium. Other voices, particularly army officers, commented on his bravery, humility and quintessential New Zealandness. The film was a success in the country, garnering little criticism – indeed, to do so at the time would have attracted charges of churlishness – other than some debate about the appropriateness of the NZDF spending \$35,000 on media training for Apiata.

The film contained shadowy reconstructions of the 2004 ambush, but provided no other details on what Apiata and his fellow SAS troops had been doing in Afghanistan. Indeed, to this day no information has been released on who shot at Apiata's patrol and where the incident took place, and no New Zealand journalists have shone any further light on the events. Nor is much known about the fighting that the SAS has taken part in. The lionisation of this one soldier, then, took place in something of a vacuum. The decision to deploy the NZSAS to support the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 was only made public the year after the first rotation of SAS troops had arrived home from Afghanistan (Espiner 2010). More information, in fact, was released about their activities by the White House, when in 2004 they were among special units to receive a US presidential award. The citation stated that the troops had neutralised Taliban and al-Qaeda forces "in extremely high risk missions" in late 2001 and early 2002 that included "destruction of multiple cave and tunnel complexes", "apprehension of military and political detainees" and "identification and destruction of al-Qaeda training camps" (US Navy 2004).

Deaths of thousands of fighters and civilians – yet no public debate

It can only be guessed how far New Zealand soldiers were involved in the deaths of thousands of fighters and civilians in Afghanistan during that period, or in the torture, summary killings and other human rights violations recorded by later investigations of the US and its allies (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2004). One incident they have been linked to was the *blitzkrieg* bombing of the Shah-i-Kot area in March 2003 (Hager 2003), although it was one of the murkier events in the war, with claims of hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters killed but little evidence (O'Neill 2002). Because the SAS were covert soldiers, there was no public debate beforehand about the legitimacy of New Zealand state involvement in that fighting.

After the deployments began, there has also been little news to juxtapose with the government line that the military involvement was helping to "stabilise" Afghanistan and make the world safer. The government has, until recently, observed a rule of complete secrecy on the SAS, ostensibly to protect its soldiers and their families who might be targeted by terrorists. New Zealand news

organisations send almost no reporters to Afghanistan, the few instances being almost always short trips organised by the NZDF or other state agencies to visit the military engineers involved in reconstruction and the soldiers protecting them. The exception, Jon Stephenson, who has financed many of his trips to the country himself and published mostly in one Sunday newspaper, the *Sunday Star Times*, stands out.

Instead, most coverage of Afghanistan aired or published in New Zealand is taken from US or UK news outlets or from international agencies, in which New Zealand’s troops are not mentioned. The Apiata documentary, then, was disconnected from any political debate, slipping easily and without complication into the ideas of the heroic soldier. The longest-running military campaign in the country’s history, longer now than its participation in the war in Vietnam, and possibly the first deployment of troops in anger since the Gulf War of 1991, is largely invisible.

Secrecy breached

On 20 January 2010, New Zealand suddenly recalled that its soldiers were fighting. The *New Zealand Herald* reported that *New York Times* correspondent Dexter Filkins had identified New Zealanders as among troops involved in heavy fighting in Kabul, in which at least 13 people had been killed (Young 2010). The Prime Minister, John Key, in response was tight-lipped, saying only he had been advised the New Zealand soldiers’ involvement had been “very limited” and that they were “not involved in particular instances that caused harm” (ibid). The next day the newspaper published an image taken by a French photographer in Kabul, showing two NZSAS soldiers in full battle gear walking down a street. One of the soldiers was identified after publication as the famous Apiata himself, as he had removed his helmet and sunglasses.

The image created a storm of controversy, with Key, “rebuking” the newspaper for breaching the long-standing “gentleman’s agreement” that SAS personnel should not be identified, and the military expressing their disappointment, claiming that Taliban could use the image to garner intelligence about the soldiers’ clothing and weaponry. Another newspaper republished the image the

next day, although with the second soldier's identity further concealed. Both newspapers defended their publication on public interest grounds: these soldiers were walking in a public place with no attempt at concealment and the public had a right to know what its forces were doing, said one (*New Zealand Herald* 2010); New Zealanders would want to see their hero, said the other, and besides the NZDF had only itself to blame for making Apiata's face so widely known (*Dominion Post* 2010). For journalism commentators, the incident suggested New Zealand journalism was becoming more assertive. One, Jim Tully, said the media would not have published photos of the SAS five to 10 years earlier (cited in Harding 2010).

The larger point, however, was the rare snippet of information revealed about New Zealand military activities, something that was often lost sight of in the arguments over the identification of the individual SAS soldier in the photograph. This was a rare moment when the battle for control of Afghanistan and the deaths of Afghans could be connected to New Zealanders, and the first direct evidence for three years that the troops' own lives were at risk. The *New York Times'* Filkins expressed himself amused:

The attack on the Central Bank in downtown Kabul this week revealed many things about Afghanistan. But one of the more surprising things it brought to light was that New Zealand is at war.

New Zealand? At war?

Who knew?

Not a lot of New Zealanders, apparently. The news – first reported in my story – that a team of commandos from New Zealand had joined Afghan soldiers at the scene caused a sensation in the little country off the coast of Australia.

I spotted the team of New Zealanders as they moved into Pashtunistan Square, the site of the Taliban attack, which killed five people and

wounded at least 70. All seven militants died or killed themselves. The city was paralyzed for hours.

“Get out of here,” one of the New Zealanders said to me. I saw the patch on his arm announcing his country.

Others were more friendly. “Can’t talk now, mate,” another said with a smile (Filkins 2010).

A few journalists noted that Filkins’ account, and that of the photographer Phillip Poupin, was at odds with the version given by the Prime Minister and the chief of the NZDF, Lieut. Gen. Jerry Mataparae, which had placed the troops far from the action. Poupin saw the soldiers enter buildings in which he later saw dead fighters. Their accounts also cast doubt on PM Key’s assurances made the year before that the latest deployment would be involved in the training of Afghan special troops (the CRU) and not in actual combat (Stephenson and Hubbard 2010). These half-truths and evasions were allowed to stand by other journalists, however, and the Prime Minister at his press conferences was not challenged when he evaded questions with vague generalities. More importantly, there was almost no discussion in New Zealand news media about the reasons for the country’s participation in this war. Critical voices, such as the Green Party, the third largest party in parliament, or Amnesty International were buried in stories on the topic, if quoted at all.

“Operating under the strictest censorship in the Western world”

Where journalists did push this story further was in reacting against the Prime Minister’s “rebuke” by questioning the secrecy surrounding the SAS and other military activities and, in particular, the tendency of the government to release information about its activities only when it suited it. One noted that PM Key announced a new SAS deployment – well after they had arrived there – on the eve of a visit to Washington in September 2009, presumably as a “news bump upon his arrival in the US” (Watkin 2009). A number of journalists noted how little was known about the SAS’s deployment. Watkin wrote: “Never has New Zealand committed to a war for so long with so little public coverage” (Watkin

2010). Another observed:

Our media seem to operate under some of the strictest censorship in the Western world when it comes to the operations of the military, and the SAS in particular...The public is entitled to know what is being done and who is being shot at in its name (Espiner 2010).

Commentators observed too that the few snippets about the SAS's operations had come almost entirely from overseas sources, such as Filkins above, or the Norwegian defence minister, who had told journalists there in 2009 that New Zealand SAS troops would be taking over from Norwegians in training the CRU in Kabul. The willingness of the Norwegians, Australians, US and other officials to discuss their special forces' operations after missions were completed, in contrast to New Zealand policy, was also noted (e.g. Beatson 2010a). This criticism, possibly in combination with a reappraisal from within the government of the publicity value of a little more information about the troops, led to a decision a week after the photograph was published, that the NZDF would hold occasional press conferences in relation to the SAS's activities. Certainly, the idea that publishing photographs of soldiers could allow the Taliban to gain sensitive information from studying their clothes and weapons was hard to sustain when the military's own website contained images of these soldiers in combat gear.

Yet these are relatively superficial issues, a matter of asking for more publicity handouts and of defending the right to show a dramatic photograph of a war hero. Critical questions of the military campaign have not followed this slight opening up of public information on the topic. A key question that remains unaddressed by the New Zealand government is over the protocols associated with the handover of prisoners from NZSAS to US and Afghan detentions centres. Longstanding concerns about this question were substantiated in 2009, when the independent correspondent, Jon Stephenson, gathered testimony from former SAS soldiers that they had in 2003 handed over prisoners to a US detention centre in Kandahar, known as "Camp Slappy" for its widespread use of beatings, and done so without recording their captives' identities,

contravening the Geneva Convention (Stephenson 2009).

Another journalist has written about the refusal of the NZDF to let him see the standard operating procedures used by the SAS for detaining and processing captives, and reported Amnesty International’s call on the SAS to refuse to hand captives over until there was no risk of torture or other ill-treatment (Beatson 2010b). Perhaps because of the absence of hard information about the SAS’s share of responsibility for the torture and ill-treatment of captives, these stories have only very sporadically been tackled by other journalists. As noted above, the same is the case on the involvement of SAS troops in doing much more than train Afghan special forces, but fight alongside them. While denied by the government, interviews with Afghan officers suggest they are indeed doing so (Stephenson 2010).

This failure by all but a few journalists to probe the country’s military involvement further is very convenient for a government which has much to gain in trade from helping out the US but little to gain from public debate of that. Why journalists have acceded to that situation, however, is another question, no doubt related to journalism’s chronic lack of time and possibly related to direct requests from officials to journalists to drop the story. Martin Hirst suggests that journalists are allowing themselves to be shaped by the general myth that “the news media MUST take the side of the nation state in matters of national interest” (Hirst 2010). One further example, discussed below, suggests that the dependence on overseas sources of news, combined with the powerful discourse of the Kiwi soldier as the quintessential Kiwi male, makes it difficult for a more critical, combative journalism on Afghanistan to take root here.

The kind of hero that war makes

On 9 March 2010, Television New Zealand’s main news programme began: “Tonight we salute a war hero. You’ll hear how a Kiwi soldier saved his comrades’ lives.” Correspondent Paul Hobbs, based in London, reported that a 29-year-old New Zealand soldier, James McKie, serving in the British army, had the week before saved the life of his commanding officer in Afghanistan by

tossing away a grenade a second before it exploded. Hobbs described the story as “one of those heroic stories that comes out of a war zone.” Back in New Zealand, his colleague Kathy Wheat interviewed the soldier’s father, Andrew McKie: “Did James show any early signs of bravery as a child?”

As with the Apiata story, the New Zealand media quickly and easily located the story within the discourse of the Kiwi male. One newspaper described McKie as a gentle man, an avid sports fan and a loyal friend, qualities that had turned him into a hero (Capital Times 2010). Jon Stephenson, interviewed on Radio New Zealand’s *MediaWatch* programme, lamented the way the story was covered. Heroism, he suggested, could also be found among the Afghan people suffering under waves of invasion and insecurity, yet was almost never reported:

We don’t really get to hear anything about Afghanistan unless one of those soldiers has done something heroic or is involved in the capture of some Taliban leader or is involved in some sort of ambush or attack, so I think it’s very sad that most of our coverage seems to be towards the entertainment end of the spectrum rather than towards the informative and enlightening. (interviewed on *MediaWatch* 2010).

Indeed, as the *Mediamatch* team revealed, the story was taken directly from the Helmand Blog, written by Major Paul Smith of the UK forces’ “Media Ops” department, prompting the programme to suggest that New Zealand news media were being led by the nose by military public relations. The photographs of a blood-stained McKie used on television and in newspapers accounts were taken directly from the website. As with the other cases discussed above, the problem here is not so much in what was said but in what was absent. The coverage of McKie contained no mention of whom he was fighting against, what the larger battle was or why both sides were there. As with the previous cases, that is largely because the New Zealand news media were in a dependent position with little knowledge, reporting on Afghanistan without having any correspondents there and reporting on the war without experienced and senior staff able and willing to critique what they were being told.

Conclusion

The BBC's world news editor Jon Williams described Afghanistan in January 2010 as the most important story for the broadcaster. "If we, and other news organisations, are to report it accurately, then doing so from the front line is vital," he wrote (Williams 2010). The contrast with New Zealand is stark, and a reminder of the consequences of reducing the country's foreign correspondent corps down to a total of half a dozen individuals. Although New Zealand is widely regarded as a country with a high degree of openness and press freedom, there is a high degree of restriction on the news media in relation to military matters.

The reporting of its special forces in Afghanistan, by far the country's most significant military commitment outside of peacekeeping for 20 years, has been covered in a piecemeal and often uncritical way that at times has bordered on hagiography. Most news about the country's military involvement has come from overseas media. The half-truths and omissions of the government have been given little scrutiny. Without a lively tradition of foreign correspondence, there have been only a few reporters, most prominently the freelancer Jon Stephenson, who have been able and willing to ask the difficult questions and thereby to hold the government to account.

On one level, the country's military commitment is so small that this failure to force the actions of the military into the sphere of legitimate public debate has few consequences. Similarly, the human rights abuses committed by allied forces could be seen as a moral issue but not one that New Zealand is likely to have much purchase on. But on another level, the lack of scrutiny of the New Zealand military is of wider significance for the country's political direction. In mobilising certain historic ideals of the Kiwi male, the government and the military have successfully aestheticised politics, aligning New Zealandness with loyalty to a Western world order through nostalgic appeal.

There are, however, competing discourses of the nation, particularly ones that arose in the 1980s as New Zealand forged a nuclear-free foreign policy and a South Pacific identity. Within that latter discourse, questions were raised about

the need of this small country for an offensive military capability and for participation in the United States' security, intelligence and military network. Those questions should be asked again. In allowing the only stories about New Zealand soldiers in Afghanistan to be stories of individual heroism, journalists have allowed the important political debate about the country's place in the world to be elided away and have, therefore, allowed themselves to be used in that wider politics.

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