

WHERE'S WILLIE



Wild Willie Apiata on ops in Afghanistan.

NZSAS file pic by Andy Deere

On 18 January 2010, while covering a gun battle in Kabul, Afghanistan, a French freelance photographer took a photo of two New Zealand SAS soldiers in the near vicinity of the fighting.

The photo was published around the world, sometimes with and sometimes without attempts to disguise the soldiers' faces.

On 20 January, at least two New Zealand newspapers published the photo – and the Prime Minister reportedly confirmed that one of the men in the photo was in fact New Zealand VC winner Corporal Willie Apiata.

And a proverbial shitstorm erupted.

The media fell back on 'the public's right to know'. Defence and politicians cited the extant and 'robust gentleman's agreement' that heretofore upheld their self-imposed blanket ban on all commentary on SAS activities.

A week after the incident, however, NZ's Prime Minister John Key has apparently adopted a new, more open attitude towards divulging information on SAS operational activities. Specifically in relation to the photographed incident on 18 January, the PM hosted a press conference in which Chief of Defence Lieutenant General Jerry Mateparae gave the following comprehensive briefing...

Background

The NZSAS Task Force is authorised to conduct the following missions in support of Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (HQ ISAF):

- > Reconnaissance
- > Combat operations, and
- > Military assistance, including training and liaison to a Ministry of Interior (MOI) Special Operations Unit (SOU).

At all times the NZSAS Task Force is under my full command and the NZSAS Task Force commander on the ground has the authority to accept or decline missions consistent with his mandate.

All operations conducted by the NZSAS must be approved by HQ ISAF and authorised by the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. There must be an Afghan face to activities, which means Afghanistan Security Force participation in all NZSAS operations. The SOU provides specialist personnel in support of our missions.

The aim of the military assistance mission is to improve the capability of the SOU in the conduct of counter-insurgency operations. (This is in direct response to HQ ISAF's goal of increasing the capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces.)

We achieve this by conducting advanced training and by providing liaison.

Advanced training takes place at a training camp outside of Kabul. The training consists

of operational planning, weapons training and close-quarter fighting techniques. The liaison role requires NZSAS soldiers deploying with the SOU to provide situational awareness for HQ ISAF from an incident area. In this role our people neither come under the command and control of the Afghan unit, nor do they command an Afghan force or elements of the SOU. They provide a means by which the SOU is able to call for additional operational support from HQ ISAF as required, including from our own SAS Task Force.

To date, our people have been involved in a number of activities since arriving in theatre. I will only mention a couple, because operations are still ongoing. Each week I receive a brief on operations conducted by the NZSAS. I also get briefings on occurrence for significant events. I brief the minister regularly on operations, including SAS operations.

When they arrived, all personnel attended an ISAF-sponsored theatre brief on: the roles

and structure of ISAF; counter-insurgency operations; and, counter-improvised-explosive-device (IED) techniques.

It was a pre-employment requirement. In direct support of the SOU, the NZSAS has also conducted disruption operations against insurgent networks, predominantly insurgent IED networks. A recent operation saw members of our SAS contingent assist the Afghan Security Force take into custody people who were alleged to have participated in rocket and IED attacks in Kabul and who were alleged to be planning further attacks. The Afghan personnel detained were in possession of bomb-making materials.

When I was in Kabul last year, the NZSAS responded to a report of insurgents preparing to fire rockets into Kabul. A small SAS group deployed to an area in the outskirts of Kabul and located the firing point and rockets, which they destroyed. The insurgents had scarpered.



NZSAS file pic



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