From Bravo Two Zero to today's British inquiry on SAS in Afghanistan: when saving or killing a civilian changes the face of the mission. And your own life

Published on 22/07/2026

In 1991, in the Iraqi desert, a child accidentally discovers a SAS patrol infiltrated behind enemy lines. The British soldiers know that letting him go could compromise the entire operation. They could stop him permanently, eliminating the risk of him raising the alarm. Instead, they decide to spare him.

The child flees and alerts the Iraqis.

It is one of the most remembered passages of *Bravo Two Zero*, the best-selling book in which Andy McNab recounts the dramatic mission conducted in January 1991 by a Special Air Service patrol during the Gulf War.

Thirty-five years later, the SAS is at the center of a public inquiry into episodes of a completely opposite nature: Afghan civilians who, according to some testimonies, may have been killed during night raids even though they posed no threat.

Two different scenarios, two different wars, and two generations of special operators. But a common question: what happens when, during a mission, a soldier must decide if the person in front of them is a civilian to protect, a potential witness to neutralize, or an enemy ready to strike?

The child who could compromise the mission

In McNab's account, the Bravo Two Zero patrol was composed of eight men from the 22nd SAS and had been infiltrated into western Iraq during Operation Desert Storm.

The objective was to operate deep behind enemy lines, observe Iraqi movements, and strike infrastructures or systems connected to Scud ballistic missiles.

The mission became complicated almost immediately. Communications did not work as expected, the Iraqi military presence in the area was greater than anticipated, and the terrain offered few opportunities for concealment.

Then the child arrived.

According to McNab's published account, a young Iraqi shepherd discovered the patrol's hideout. The SAS men faced an extreme choice: kill him to protect the mission or let him go, accepting the risk that he might alert the Iraqi forces.

The child was spared.

Soon after, the area was reached by Iraqi soldiers and armed men. The patrol had to abandon the position and began a long escape in the desert, which ended tragically: three men died, four were captured, and only Chris Ryan managed to reach Syria.

The act of sparing the child is often remembered as a morally right but militarily disastrous decision. However, it is too simplistic to reduce what happened to a choice between humanity and effectiveness.

It is not possible to establish with certainty that the entire mission failed solely because of the young shepherd. The patrol was already in difficulty, had communication problems, and was operating in a more populated and controlled area than expected.

But the moral dilemma described in those pages retains its strength.

When the right choice becomes a condemnation

For a special unit, surprise, secrecy, and concealment are often essential conditions for survival.

A civilian who discovers a patrol can become, even unintentionally, a threat to the entire unit. They can report what they have seen, indicate a position, or provoke the arrival of enemy forces.

But an unarmed child remains an unarmed child.

The decision not to kill him separates military action from murder. It establishes that operational necessity cannot automatically erase all limits.

The men of Bravo Two Zero paid a huge price. The mission failed, some died, others were wounded, captured, interrogated, and tortured.

Even those who survived had to live for the rest of their lives with what happened in the desert.

This is precisely the central point: in special operations, decisions made in a few seconds do not only change the outcome of a mission. They can determine the death of comrades, the fate of civilians, and the ability of the soldier to live with their actions in the following years.

Sparing a life can mean endangering your own. Killing a person to eliminate a risk can instead allow you to survive physically, leaving a moral wound destined not to close.

From Iraq to Afghanistan

The current British public inquiry into operations conducted in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2013 describes a very different scenario.

It is not about an isolated patrol, fleeing behind enemy lines and accidentally discovered by a child. It is about planned capture operations, night raids, and people who were already under the control of British forces.

The Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan is examining allegations that some UK Special Forces operators may have illegally killed civilians and Afghan men of fighting age, subsequently presenting them as people who had attempted to grab a weapon or attack the soldiers.

The inquiry has not yet reached definitive conclusions, and the accusations cannot be considered as already established responsibilities. It must determine whether there were extrajudicial executions, whether military police investigations were adequate, and whether anyone tried to hide any unlawful conduct.

The testimonies collected are, however, extremely serious.

Some military personnel reported suspecting the existence of a practice whereby Afghan men were killed even when they did not pose an immediate threat. A witness spoke of the possible killing of all males of fighting age present at certain targets.

Others contested the repetitiveness of official reconstructions, in which people who had just been arrested or separated from other inhabitants would suddenly find a weapon and attack highly trained operators.

The three farmers killed in Helmand

The latest testimony that emerged, reported by the *Times*, concerns a raid conducted in July 2012 in the village of Rahim, in the Nahr-e-Saraj district, in the Afghan province of Helmand. Christopher Green, then a captain of the Grenadier Guards, recounted that three young men were killed in their home during a nighttime operation by British Special Forces.

According to Green, the conventional forces present on the ground did not have information linking those three men to the Taliban. In the local community, they were considered farmers. The officer then asked on what intelligence elements the operation had been authorized and attempted to obtain the video recordings produced during the raid. The request would not be followed up.

When he expressed his doubts to a SAS liaison officer, Green claims he was labeled a «Taliban-loving apologist», a defender or sympathizer of the Taliban. His testimony alone does not prove that the three men were killed illegally. It will be up to the inquiry to examine the documents, available recordings, testimonies, and the chain of command.

However, it reveals a deeper problem: the risk that those who raise doubts about the conduct of a special unit are considered disloyal, naive, or even close to the enemy. Green spoke of a culture of “exceptionalism”, in which some members of the Special Forces believed they were not subject to the same checks applied to the rest of the Armed Forces.

Saving civilians is not weakness

Special Forces operate in the most difficult environments, often with incomplete information and decision times reduced to a few seconds.

Expecting every choice to be simple, clear, and without consequences means not understanding war.

But recognizing complexity does not mean eliminating limits.

The protection of civilians is not an obstacle imposed from outside on military effectiveness. It is part of the effectiveness itself.

In Afghanistan, the death of civilians during nighttime raids contributed to deteriorating the relationship between the population, the Kabul government, and international forces. Concerns also reached the then Afghan president Hamid Karzai, while some Afghan partner forces became reluctant to operate alongside certain British units.

A unit can win every tactical engagement and still lose the campaign.

It can eliminate a suspect, storm a building, and return to base without losses. But if the man killed was innocent, if his family witnesses the scene, or if the village considers the operation an execution, the result can be the birth of new enemies.

The population is not simply the backdrop against which the fight takes place. In counterinsurgency campaigns, it is one of the decisive elements of the conflict.

Killing a civilian can compromise years of relationships built by conventional units, delegitimize local institutions, and turn a nighttime victory into a strategic defeat.

The danger of exceptionalism

The prestige of the Special Forces arises from selection, training, and the ability to take on responsibilities that other units could not bear. Precisely for this reason, however, operational

autonomy must be accompanied by rigorous controls.

The idea that an elite unit can act above procedures because it is composed of the best represents a danger to the military institution itself.

Excellence does not consist of having fewer rules. It consists of being able to respect them even in circumstances where it would be easier to ignore them. When the secrecy necessary for operations becomes protection from accountability, the line between confidentiality and impunity risks disappearing.

The accusations examined by the British inquiry also concern this: not only what might have happened during the raids, but the way in which the suspicions were received, evaluated, and transmitted to the military police.

The inquiry will have to determine whether the institutions truly sought the truth or protected the unit's reputation.

The enemy that remains within

Finally, there is a dimension that no operational report can fully measure.

It is that of individual conscience.

A soldier can be acquitted by a court and continue to feel guilty. He may have acted in compliance with the rules and still wonder if he could have chosen differently. He may have saved a civilian and attribute that decision to the death of his comrades.

Or he may discover, years later, that the man killed during a mission was not the enemy described by intelligence.

The decisions made during a raid do not end when the helicopter returns to base.

They follow the operators into their families, into leave, into sleep, and into memory.

This is why clear rules of engagement, a responsible chain of command, and an honest debriefing are not only necessary to protect civilians. They also serve to protect military personnel from the burden of decisions that should never be left solely to instinct, anger, or the pressure of results.

Two images of the same unit

On one hand, there remains the image depicted in *Bravo Two Zero*: isolated men in the desert who choose to take a huge risk rather than kill a child.

On the other, there are the accusations currently examined by the British inquiry: Afghan people who may have been eliminated without posing a real threat and officers who claim they were discredited when they tried to ask for explanations.

It is not yet possible to know which accusations will be confirmed.

However, it is already possible to understand why this inquiry is important.

The value of a Special Force is not measured only by the ability to achieve an objective, hit a target, or survive in enemy territory. It is also measured by the ability to distinguish who must be fought from who must be protected.

In 1991, at least according to Andy McNab's account, that distinction had the face of a child left free to run in the desert.

In Afghanistan, it might have had the face of three farmers killed in their own home.

It is in that space, between the need to survive and the obligation to remain human, that a mission changes face.

And, often, also the life of those who participated in it.

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