SAS, the faceless unit: twenty years of war in Afghanistan, very few official photographs, and unnamed fallen

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For nearly twenty years, Afghanistan was one of the British Armed Forces' main operational theaters and one of the most extensively documented conflicts of the contemporary era. Thousands of photographs depicted patrols, bases, helicopters, convoys, and combat. Yet when the search is narrowed to the **Special Air Service**, the picture changes dramatically.

Images that can be definitively attributed to the British SAS are exceptionally rare. After extensive research through official archives, photographic collections, and news sources, we were able to identify only **three operational photographs from Afghanistan directly attributed to the SAS by a reliable institutional source**: the British National Army Museum .

The same secrecy applies to casualties. For **22º SAS** no official list of personnel killed in Afghanistan and identified as members of the unit emerges from publicly accessible sources.

Even in cases attributed to the SAS by news sources, the Ministry of Defence has used broader wording, naming the parent regiment without confirming membership in 22º SAS.

This is one of the clearest aspects of the culture of secrecy surrounding the unit: after twenty years of war, not only is it exceptional to be able to state with certainty **“these men belong to the SAS”**, but it remains difficult even to publicly establish **which fallen personnel actually served in 22º Regiment**.

The rare photographs officially attributed to the SAS

One of the most important sources is the **British National Army Museum in Lodra**, which publishes several Afghanistan images explicitly identified as SAS on its Special Forces pages.

The first image shows two SAS operators engaged in combat:

Two SAS men engaging the enemy, Afghanistan, c2006 (© Crown)

Another shows a team calling for fire support:

An SAS team calling in fire support, Afghanistan, c2007 (© Crown)

The National Army Museum also specifies that the latter scene relates to an action along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

A third photograph shows SAS operators conducting a helicopter insertion in Afghanistan in 2006:

SAS troops deploying by helicopter, Afghanistan, c2006 (© Crown)

These three photographs demonstrate just how limited the number of publicly available images is in which an institutional source explicitly uses the acronym **SAS**.

When “Special Forces” does not necessarily mean SAS

The main problem arises when moving from institutional archives to the web.

We also conducted an in-depth investigation, comparing official archives, photographic collections, press reports, and images circulated online. The result is significant: among the many photographs associated with the SAS in Afghanistan, **the only images we were able to identify with an explicit institutional attribution to the British Special Air Service are the three published by the National Army Museum**.

A search for “SAS Afghanistan” produces hundreds of photographs, but closer scrutiny often leads to very different conclusions.

Some depict the **Special Boat Service**, others the **Australian SASR**, and still others Royal Marines or personnel identified simply as **UK Special Forces**.

And “UK Special Forces” does not automatically mean SAS.

In addition to the Special Air Service, the British system also includes the **Special Boat Service, Special Reconnaissance Regiment and 18 (UKSF) Signals Regiment**. The National Army Museum itself clearly distinguishes between these components.

For this reason, a photograph captioned merely “British Special Forces” cannot be used as evidence that the men depicted belonged to the SAS.

During our research, applying a strict standard—**a publicly accessible image, taken in Afghanistan and explicitly attributed to the SAS by a reliable institutional source**—we were able to verify only three photographs: **“Two SAS men engaging the enemy, Afghanistan, c2006”**, **“An SAS team calling in fire support, Afghanistan, c2007”**, and **“SAS troops deploying by helicopter, Afghanistan, c2006”**, all held and published by the National Army Museum.

This does not mean they are the only existing photographs of the SAS in Afghanistan, but based on our research, they are **the only ones we have been able to attribute to the unit with certainty and on an institutional basis**.

Qala-i-Janghi: the images long referred to as SAS

One of the most interesting examples concerns the battle at the **Qala-i-Janghi** fortress in November 2001.

During the Taliban prisoners' uprising, several British special forces operators engaged in the fighting were filmed. The footage quickly circulated through international media.

At the time, several British newspapers referred to the SAS. **Channel 4 also broadcast footage in which some operators were recognizable**, prompting a strong reaction from the Ministry of Defence. An official criticized the decision not to blur their faces, explaining that the ministry was «extremely upset» by the broadcaster's decision.

Subsequent accounts, however, identified those operators as members of the **Special Boat Service**.

This is an important detail because it shows how difficult it is to correctly attribute photographs of UK Special Forces, even when they are filmed during actual operations.

One of the best-known sequences from the opening phase of the war in Afghanistan, presented by the press in 2001 as SAS, is therefore not footage of the SAS.

The Qala-i-Janghi episode nevertheless demonstrates how important protecting operators' identities was considered from the very start of the war.

The release of images in which several British special forces personnel were identifiable prompted intervention by the Ministry of Defence. In the years that followed, scrutiny over the publication of photographs and information concerning the UK Special Forces remained extremely high.

It cannot be claimed that those recordings themselves prompted a change in British policy: **secrecy had already existed for a long time.**

However, the episode clearly shows how sensitive the release of images capable of identifying Special Forces operators was, even in 2001. The Ministry of Defence's firm response to the failure to obscure faces confirms that protecting personnel identities was considered a priority.

British Special Boat Service (SBS) operators on the tower of Qala-i-Janghi fortress, Afghanistan, November 2001, during the Taliban prisoners' uprising. Frame from video footage recorded during the fighting.

Secrecy mandated by British rules

The confidentiality surrounding the UK Special Forces is not merely a unit tradition.

The British government explicitly states that the security of UKSF personnel, their equipment, tactics, techniques and procedures must be protected, and that **strict rules govern the publication of information relating to the Special Forces**.

Protection therefore extends far beyond an operator's face.

A photograph may reveal a particular weapons configuration, a radio system, specialized equipment, infiltration methods, vehicles, sensors or operational procedures.

Seemingly insignificant details can provide important information to those studying the unit's capabilities.

British Army doctrine itself emphasizes that the Special Forces maintain high levels of secrecy regarding **operations, capabilities, information and personnel**.

There is also a further element that illustrates how deeply rooted this protection is within the British system.

The **Freedom of Information Act 2000** provides for special treatment of information concerning the Special Forces. The legislation allows information directly or indirectly supplied by, or relating to, the Special Forces to be exempted from normal disclosure.

The Ministry of Defence publication scheme also explicitly distinguishes conventional Armed Forces from the **Special Forces**.

This is therefore not simply an informal SAS custom: the protection of information is embedded in the British institutional system.

Even the fallen of 22º SAS remain unnamed

The same secrecy applies to casualties. Open sources do not make it possible to compile an official list of 22º SAS personnel killed in Afghanistan who were publicly identified as belonging to the unit.

This does not mean that the regiment did not sustain casualties. According to figures reported by the British press, by 2010 the **UK Special Forces** had already suffered several fatalities and numerous serious injuries in the Afghan theater. Names, units, and operational affiliations were, however, largely protected.

The manner in which these losses were announced is also significant. When a special forces serviceman was killed in **Musa Qala** in May 2008, the Ministry of Defence initially announced only the death of **“a soldier”**, without identifying his regiment. *The Guardian* explicitly noted that the absence of the serviceman’s parent unit suggested the involvement of the **Special Forces**.

The emblematic case is that of **Corporal Lloyd Newell**, killed in Helmand on **16 June 2011**. News sources attributed him to **22º SAS**, but the official Ministry of Defence release identified him only as a member of the **Parachute Regiment**, with no reference to the SAS. It is a concrete example of how membership in the Special Forces can remain excluded from official communications even when the name of the fallen serviceman is made public.

The situation changes, however, for the **SAS Reserve (reservists)**. In 2008, *The Guardian* openly identified **Sean Reeve, Richard Larkin and Paul Stout** as personnel of **23º SAS**, killed in Helmand alongside Corporal **Sarah Bryant** of the Intelligence Corps. The same article identified **Major Sebastian Morley** as commander of **D Squadron, 23º SAS**.

The contrast is clear: for **23º SAS Reserve**, there are cases in which names and unit affiliation have been made public, whereas for the **regular 22º SAS**, the official record remains far more opaque.

This is a further indicator of the level of secrecy surrounding the unit: not only are photographs officially attributed to 22º SAS extremely rare, but even its operational casualties are difficult to reconstruct through open sources.

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Operations in Afghanistan

Corporal Lloyd Newell killed in Afghanistan

It is with sadness that the Ministry of Defence must confirm that Corporal Lloyd Newell of The Parachute Regiment was killed in Afghanistan on Thursday 16 June 2011.

The official British government statement on the death of Corporal Lloyd Newell, killed in Afghanistan on June 16, 2011. The Ministry of Defence identifies him solely as belonging to the Parachute Regiment, with no reference to the SAS.

The war is over, but the protection of operators is not

Secrecy continues long after operations have ended.

In 2025, during the Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan, the British government reminded the media of the ban on publishing information that could identify seven Special Forces witnesses. Their identities were replaced with codes, while references to their service history and units were redacted or summarized specifically to prevent their identification.

Their identities were replaced with codes, and information relating to their backgrounds and units was also redacted whenever it could have enabled their identification.

More than ten years after the events under investigation, therefore, **protecting the identity of UKSF personnel continues to carry decisive weight.**

It is precisely the comparison with the rest of the British Armed Forces that makes the phenomenon clear.

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The unit without faces. And without names.

It would not be accurate to say that **only three photographs of the SAS in Afghanistan exist**.

Military archives may contain many more images that have never been published. Private photographs, classified material, or images in which the unit's men appear without being identified as such may also exist.

But if we impose three conditions—**a publicly accessible image, taken in Afghanistan and explicitly attributed to the SAS by a reliable institutional source,** the number becomes surprisingly small.

The same applies to names. Even when fatalities attributed to the 22º SAS emerge, **official communications do not state their affiliation with the unit**. Rare photographs, protected identities, parent units often cited in place of the actual operational assignment: all of this helps keep the SAS out of public view.

And perhaps this is the most effective demonstration of the culture of secrecy surrounding the unit.

After twenty years of war in Afghanistan, in a conflict documented by military photographers, television crews, journalists, and thousands of soldiers, the **Special Air Service remains far better known for what it has done than for the faces—and even the names—of the men who did it**.