

Operation Burnham public hearing 22 May 2019

Nicky Hager: the military and political context

I have been asked to speak about the military and political context of the events covered by this Inquiry. The book *Other Peoples Wars*, which I wrote a few years before *Hit and Run*, gives a broad overview of the war in Afghanistan. I will begin by mentioning some bits of the book, which is largely based on internal NZDF documents.

The book opens on the then SAS commanding officer Tim Keating sitting at his desk on September 11, 2001, writing a report on his recent trip to the US special forces command in Tampa, Florida, where he had been pushing for more contact between the US and NZ commandos. It explains that he was back in Tampa shortly after lobbying for NZSAS troops to be allowed to work as part of the US special forces in the new Afghanistan war. His lobbying was successful. Keating is central to the current inquiry; a long-term supporter and defender of the SAS.

The “CDF Directive” for the SAS's deployment to Afghanistan had a “legal annex”, which explained that the purpose of the military action was to destroy the Al Qaeda network and bring Osama bin Laden to justice. The SAS contingent touched down at its new base in Kandahar on, by chance, the same day that Osama bin Laden crossed the mountains into Pakistan, at which point the stated purpose of the deployment had largely disappeared. Two and a half months later the NZ Joint Forces commander Martyn Dunne visited the SAS in Kandahar and, as he wrote in his trip report, found that there seemed to be (quote) ‘no overarching operational campaign plan that drives future planning or links tasks so far carried out,’ and that there was “a lack of coherent strategy or even clear commander's intent”. The New Zealand public was never told about these problems and doubts.

Years of incoherent strategy in Afghanistan followed. Dunne also visited New Zealand peacekeeping troops in Kabul who were supposed to be helping unload humanitarian aid flights into the city. He expressed concern about a “blurring” of roles, including “special agency helicopter operations”. Other documents showed that the so-called peacekeepers were spending a lot of their time loading CIA helicopters, and also loading huge volumes of explosives for assault troops. Internal documents instructed the NZDF personnel to keep their non-peacekeeping operations secret.

Later that year, when the NZ Navy wanted to send the two frigates to work with US Navy forces in the Middle East, Prime Minister Helen Clark was concerned that the deployment might clash with her government's decision not to join the coming invasion of Iraq. She gave strict instructions to ensure that the operation (quote) “was not linked to Iraq or any possible future Iraq operations”. These instructions were conveyed to senior NZDF officers at Defence HQ. Yet between January and May 2003 the two New Zealand frigates escorted 92 aircraft carriers, warships and ammunition ships into the Persian Gulf, a large proportion of the invasion force. NZDF went to great lengths to hide and deny what it had done, with its PR staff issuing stories about inspecting ships for smuggling or stopping terrorists escaping from Afghanistan.

When NZDF persuaded the Clark government to send peacekeepers to southern Iraq following the invasion, the public was told the purpose was to repair schools and drinking water supplies for the city of Basra. In reality, much of the contingent's time went to supplying infrastructure for the occupation force (eg building defences on UK military bases) – a highly political and controversial role to play straight after the invasion. But all the security roles were hidden and the NZDF PR people promoted stories such as that New Zealand troops were “bringing water to over 200,000 people for the first time in a generation.” This was almost completely untrue. A New Zealand water

engineer working in Basra for a real aid project explained that Basra had a good drinking water system until it was bombed during the invasion; and that the water work NZDF did was helping install two small reverse osmosis plants arranged by the US military and funded by the Kuwait government that supplied some outlying villages with water for sale.

And so on through the book, often with a gulf between what NZDF does and what it chooses to tell the public and Parliament. It is the same in the book *Hit & Run*, which describes the way that the NZDF's Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamiyan province was presented to the New Zealand public from 2003 on largely as an aid project, whereas the reality was that New Zealand had taken over counter-insurgency warfare in the province, including all the usual counter-insurgency warfare components: psychological operations staff, intelligence operations, military patrols and, indeed, development aid, but as a conscious tool for managing the population. We published the PRT's public relations plan that said the 'key messages' for all military communications about the Bamiyan deployment were to be that 'the focus of this mission is reconstruction' and that defence force personnel were 'not going to war'. Neither of those was true. It went on that the aim was to 'encourage support for the NZDF' and 'generate and maintain public support for the [provincial reconstruction team] operations' in Bamiyan.

The thing story I found over and over with the Afghanistan and Iraq wars is that NZDF only told the public and government what they wanted them to hear. This doesn't mean they were untruthful all the time, of course; just when they didn't want to admit the truth. NZDF seems to believe it is entitled to hide news that might not be welcomed by New Zealanders and to bend the facts whenever necessary to avoid criticism or scrutiny: not just mistakes made in war, but toxic foam used on bases, the scale of sexual abuse in the forces and much more. This, I believe, is the most important piece of context needed as preparation for this Inquiry.

I have realised, through years researching and writing about NZDF, that the root problem is that the organisation is obsessed with making itself look good in public. This is done by a combination of keeping embarrassing things secret – claiming operational security – and employing a small army of PR staff to control information reaching the public about military issues. The LinkedIn page of the NZDF Director of Public Affairs says she leads “a team of 60 marketing and communications professionals”. Sixty. Internal NZDF PR plans say:

* “The Public Affairs group purpose is to directly enhance the reputation... of the NZDF.”

* It “plays an important role in maintaining confidence in the NZDF...”

* It is to “Maintain an environmental, political and institutional awareness of issues and risks with the potential to impact on the NZDF...”

* The public relations staff are to “Ensure that all internal and external public affairs and publications... enhance the organisation's reputation.”

These internal plans always come back to protecting the organisation's reputation. This is very important for understanding this Inquiry. It does not say the public relations staff are to “Ensure that all internal and external public affairs and publications are truthful”, or that all organisations make mistakes and that the real road to public confidence is to be willing to front up and admit the mistakes.

NZDF almost never admits mistakes until utterly forced to, and even then they will minimise and spin the news. Reputation trumps being up front. Also the PR plans identify “primary target

audiences” and on top of the list, quote outrageously, is the Government, followed by Parliament, as if it is legitimate for the military to use public relations to maintain political support for its operations. When Tim Keating was working out his denials over Hit and Run, and later lobbying to try to stop this Inquiry, he had John Key's former chief spin doctor at his elbow in nearly every meeting. There is far too much PR influence in the NZDF. The result is extremely unhealthy and ill-suited to a democratic country.

All this applies to the current Inquiry as well. It was PR people who helped set up the two million dollar Special Inquiry Office (without even asking their minister for permission) and the plans said “Strategic policy, information and communications advice will be a key requirement for the Special Inquiry Office”. The lynch pin of this office is the Strategic Inquiry Liaison Advisor, whose job description called for an expert in public relations and media management with a “proven ability to operationalise strategy”, working closely with the Defence Public Affairs unit. A “key working relationship” is with the Queens Council and other external legal counsel; and a key task is “to carry out risk analyses and provide mitigation strategies as necessary”. This is far, far from just handing over documents and witnesses to the Inquiry and letting it do its job.

One part of the job description stands out. It requires “An ability to gather, analyse and synthesise information from a range of sources into a cohesive word picture.” These “cohesive word pictures” are what we have been getting from NZDF as it tries to deny that its staff killed and injured innocent people, that it knew almost straight away that it had, that it gave no assistance to these people and that it has covered it up since.

The NZDF's reaction to Hit and Run in March 2017 is a clear example of the NZDF's attitude to fact and truth. In a first press release on 21 March, NZDF said that an ISAF investigation “concluded that the allegations of civilian casualties were unfounded” – which was not actually what the ISAF investigation had concluded nor what NZDF knew to be true.

A few days later, on 26 March 2017, NZDF issued a press release with what would become their main rebuttal for the next year of the debate. “The central premise of Nicky Hager and Jon Stephenson’s book, Hit and Run,” the Chief of Defence Force, Tim Keating said “is incorrect”.

“NZDF troops never operated in the two villages identified in the book.... Upon review of Hit and Run, it is evident there are some major inaccuracies – the main one being the location and names of the villages.... The villages are named in the book as Naik and Khak Khuday Dad, but the NZDF can confirm that NZDF personnel have never operated in these villages. The authors appear to have confused interviews, stories and anecdotes from locals with an operation conducted more than two kilometres to the south, known as Operation Burnham.”

I assume everyone here is well aware of this but it deserves to stand as a black mark on NZDF's response to Operation Burnham.

NZDF has quietly ditched this ridiculous “location” argument by now – after using it for as long as it would work – but it tells us everything about the attitude of the organisation. They could have admitted that they accidentally killed and injured innocents at that point, and offered medical and other aid (which is still needed). This whole current Inquiry would not have been needed. But instead the idea of defending reputation meant that they ran this utterly disingenuous line for month after month.

In Keating's infamous press conference, he dug in further: *“There has been no evidence produced from the village that we operated in... that casualties occurred in that village.”*

“It’s not on an operation the NZSAS conducted,” he said. And much more like this.

If the substance of the book – about civilian casualties, not giving aid and cover-up – was genuinely not correct, why would NZDF resort to such a transparently false and irrelevant diversion?

The same attitude to fact and truth – the standard NZDF attitude of hiding and denial – is seen in the NZDF Narrative of what happened in Op Burnham. I am referring to the document called “NZDF unreferenced account of events at issue” that NZDF provided to the Inquiry in November last year. This document was requested by the Inquiry more than a year after the book was published so there was no excuse for it not to be rigorously accurate. It is a key document in the Inquiry process.

I want to focus on the Narrative, which contains and so highlightts key falsehoods in the NZDF case. The document, produced by the SIO and filed with the Inquiry by its senior lawyers, is a classic example of a “cohesive word picture” prepared with assistance of the PR staff. Whenever the narrative gets near to difficult issues, it bends or does not tell the truth.

The main purpose of the Narrative, the document says, is to (quote) “confirm the fundamental elements of information released publicly on other occasions, including that NZDF personnel did not kill or harm any civilians during these operations.” In other words, the authors of the narrative remain determined not to admit what the SAS did. Instead, in words that have clearly been carefully worked out and argued over by the PR staff, the document says that “the NZSAS ground forces did not *cause*, or *observe*, any civilian casualties.”

This is why it is important to remember NZDF's proven record of hiding any information that does nor suit it. We are forced to figure out the evasions, omissions and untruths in what they have written.

First, as the document itself says, all attacks during Operation Burnham were authorised by the Ground Force Commander: a New Zealand SAS officer. That means that NZDF was inndisputably *responsible* for any civilian casualties. They are hoping to get around this by changing the language and using the word “caused” instead.

Then the Narrative moves on to rewrite the facts of what the NZDF did. Let's take, for example, the following statement in the narrative:

“At approximately 0125 hours, the ISR RPA [US drone] observed an armed insurgent moving along the ridge line south of the village towards the observation position where the Commander and his team were stationed.”

The NZSAS ground force commander authorised an NZSAS sniper to shoot and kill this man. It all sounds understandable with an armed insurgent coming towards them. The trouble is that the narrative is not true. To any reader, the action sounds justified (as they intended it to) because a insurgent is heading for our troops with a weapon. In fact, in Afghanistan, carrying a weapon in the countryside doesn't mean you're an insurgent. But we do not need to even consider that, because the person who approached the SAS observation post was not armed. He did not have a weapon. This is confirmed in other documentation. The statement in the narrative is self-justifying and false.

So what actually seems to have happened is that, an hour after the raid began, one of the male civilian villagers was walking on the hills above the town to keep out of the trouble going on below.

Unbeknown to him there was a group of hidden NZSAS troops in an observation post, directing the operation. Here was an unarmed man, on his own, accidentally wandering close to a group of heavily armed SAS troopers in full body armour and with night vision equipment – and the SAS commander assessed him such a risk to them that they had to kill him on the spot.

There was nothing justified or legal about this. Indeed, this is not how many New Zealand SAS would behave. Did NZSAS “cause” this death? Of course they did. They shot him. The trick was that they hid the wrongness of the act by making up that he was armed and, by that little act of “cohesive word picture”, hid the fact that he was a civilian villager.

Many of the other civilian casualties that night were caused by a US helicopter gunship attacking another single “insurgent” – an attack authorised by the SAS commander via the SAS Joint Tactical Air Controller who was with him. NZDF was obviously responsible for these decisions and actions. This is the attack where, NZDF says, “several rounds fell short due to a gun sight malfunction and this resulted in a building near the HLZ being inadvertently hit by gunfire.” A woman and two children had been seen leaving this building and returning to it. This “coherent word picture” is the basis for the NZDF position that there “may” have been civilian casualties but they have no evidence that there definitely were.

What we see repeatedly with Operation Burnham is that when the story gets blurry, brief and imprecise, it is likely that NZDF is trying to hide things. That is the case here. First, who says the man was an insurgent? The narrative did not call him an “armed insurgent” so it seems he was not armed. No evidence is given for why the NZSAS commander ordered an attack by a helicopter gunship against an apparently unarmed man. Also, why did they order an attack in the midst of a civilian village? (I will explain this point further tomorrow)

The next bit of the “cohesive word picture” is the idea that only “several rounds fell sort”. There's a chance this is truthful and that this caused so much civilian injury – we haven't been allowed to see the gunship weapon video to check – but it doesn't sound right. An Apache helicopter 30mm cannon fires about 600 rounds per minute, which means that “several rounds” would be something like a one second burst of firing. That is unlikely to have caused all the casualties to women and children that happened that night. Also, those few rounds went into that house but the woman and children harmed were not actually in that house. We are getting a massaged story, where much more is hidden than revealed.

But the most most glaring, and morally offensive, part of the narrative is that the dead and injured villagers, the ones that NZSAS was responsible for but never went back to help, are almost absent from the narrative. It is completely silent on who was injured and killed where and what the NZDF knows about them. The furthest it goes is suggesting (quote) “the possibility of civilian casualties”.

The narrative begins by explaining that “this account reflects the NZDF's current understanding of what occurred”. NZDF's QC, who filed the narrative with the Inquiry, said it is “as accurate as possible”. But this is not true.

When NZDF wrote the narrative, in November last year, they did not know that the inquiry would end up releasing some of the NZDF documents on Operation Burnham that that organisation has worked hard to keep secret. These are the 14 redacted documents released by the Inquiry about two weeks ago on 7 May. They are some of the original intelligence updates written in Afghanistan in the first few days after the SAS raid,

Operation Burnham happened in the early hours of 22 August 2010. By 24 August intelligence

updates began appearing that list the names of people believed to be dead and injured. Two of them declare unambiguously that “a small number of civilians have been killed or wounded,” including a “sister”, “(possibly) daughter of...”, “2 female injured” and so on. Why isn't this key information included in the narrative?

Then a nasty thing can be seen in the 2010 documents. In the successive NZSAS reports over the period of about a week, they gradually drop the the civilians from the lists and call nearly everyone left an insurgent. We can see the SAS beginning the cover up.

But at the same time that the NZSAS has airbrushed the civilian casualty problem away, down the road at the Bamiyan province PRT, a report by non-NZSAS intelligence officers gives exactly the opposite story. The non-NZSAS report written on 26 August 2010 concludes “Several Local Nationals killed” – local national means civilian – and “Several Local nationals wounded”. This is what the intelligence officers at the base most closely watching the villagers concluded.

The same PRT intelligence report states that “Names of casualties do not match the TB ORBAT from 23 August contact.” In other words, these people aren't the known insurgents who they came to the villages looking for. It also says (as we did in the book), that the “LN [Local National] funerals were recorded”; which refers to a video of the funerals made by a local Afghan PRT informer and supplied to the PRT intelligence staff. If they got a video of the funerals of the civilians, they obviously would have got first hand accounts of the civilians killed and injured as well, as mentioned in their 26 August intelligence report.

This is very serious. Why weren't we told about local nationals killed and wounded? It directly contradicts the repeated claims from the NZDF. Here in the documents we can see the SAS cover up but also plenty of signs that NZDF staff knew in detail about civilian casualties. Of course they did: the deaths and injuries were also being reported in local media and the New York Times. The declassified document number 13 reports that two Local Nationals “possibly linked to this operation are at PEK hospital”. (PEK is the Baghlan capital Pul e Khumri.) We have details of those two women in hospital in Hit and Run. Why didn't the NZSAS go and see them; check what happened and offer help? Why wasn't this in the Narrative? Because this key contribution to the Inquiry is a PR job.

That's not all. For instance, why does the narrative not mention the fact – which I had to extract from NZDF using the OIA – that none of the so-called insurgents fired a single shot at the NZSAS-led forces during the entire three hours of the raid? Were any bullets fired at the SAS-led troops? No. Were any RPGs fired at the SAS-led troops. No. This does not fit their cohesive word picture and so it was omitted.

In short, the narrative did not actually “reflect the NZDF's current understanding of what occurred” and it is certainly not “as accurate as possible”. It should have referred to these intelligence reports in the days after, and that they confirm what was written in the book; namely, that intelligence reports discussing the civilian casualties were written in the days after the raid. They are key documents which the NZDF had in its possession. Without these reports the narrative has given a false and misleading picture of what had happened.

I want to say on the record that I think it is wrong that military officers and lawyers – each with their own professional responsibilities – would participate in misleading the public. Officers should tell the truth and their lawyers should not file inaccurate and incomplete documents on their clients' behalf. I also think it is wrong that the military lawyers attended briefings of ministers and the public, standing there while officers claimed we wrote about the wrong operation; ie. as the ministers in charge and the public were misled.

The NZDF makes much of having a lawyer posted in Afghanistan. But it only counts for anything if lawyers are prepared to check for themselves and object when false statements are made and wrongful things occur. Where were the NZDF lawyers investigating the allegations of civilian casualties?

I note that NZDF has supplied over a thousand documents to the Inquiry and we have been given just 14 so far, but even this few showed that the official NZDF narrative was hiding more than it revealed about the central issue of the Inquiry. This helps explain why NZDF has fought so hard to keep all its documents secret and to have to give evidence only in secret hearings.

It goes on. The NZDF QC sent a memorandum to the Inquiry last week, on 17 May, disputing the Inquiry's Comparative Analysis of public accounts of events during Operation Burnham. He wrote: "NZDF notes that the headings of certain paragraphs... contain, or are based upon factual premises that remain disputed or have not yet been determined conclusively by the Inquiry." The headings he objected to were..... "How many civilians were killed in the operation?" and "How many civilians were injured in the operation?" He said: "the question of whether civilian deaths or injuries occurred during the operation has not yet been determined."

What is going on here? Both the lawyer and the people who instructed him have presumably read the 2010 intelligence updates, seen photos of the little girl Fatima and seen her parents on New Zealand television talking about their daughter's death. Surely it is unnecessary and bad taste to hold so firmly to the denials that he needs to dispute a heading saying "How many civilians were killed in the operation?"

A few footnotes are needed to this point. First, the officers and lawyers might argue that they didn't include the news of civilian casualties in the narrative because this information was classified. That would be a weak argument, both in principle and considering that the Ombudsman forced them in February 2018 to acknowledge that five intelligence reports from after the raid mention the death of a child. If that's not classified, neither are other details of civilian deaths and injuries.

Also, NZDF might claim, as it has before, that the civilian deaths were not "verified". This is the idea expressed by Tim Keating in March 2017 that "there is no confirmation that any casualties occurred"; and expressed coldly by NZDF a year later in a 23 March 2018 OIA response when it wrote: "The NZDF have no grounds for believing or not believing a child might have been killed during the operation."

And herein lies one of the particularly dishonourable parts of this, because NZDF knew that there were reports of dead and wounded civilians, including a dead child and people in serious need of medical assistance. It was their job and legal obligation to investigate, but they did nothing. The only reason the civilian casualties were not verified was because they didn't try to verify them.

Moving on now from the narrative, I want to mention a few related matters.

First, looking at the 14 recently declassified documents on Operation Burnham, a very interesting picture emerges: not from what is there, but from what NZDF has fought to have redacted. The usual story is that military documents need to be redacted or withheld to keep methods and capabilities secret. This, when applied genuinely, makes sense. But these documents mention capabilities such as human intelligence and the drone and AC-130 gunships provided by the United

States military.

The thing that NZDF has insisted on having redacted is, instead, the names and details of the various insurgents and civilians listed as injured or killed in the intelligence updates. I have argued at various times during this Inquiry that I believe the answer to resolving the mystery of Operation Burnham lies in this detail: which supposed insurgents in the NZDF version were where and at what time. I believe that this is how we can resolve the opposing stories and, in many cases at least, find that the ordinary farmers and their families that we wrote about were mistaken to be insurgents. I suspect that this is precisely the reason why NZDF is determined to keep this information secret from the other parties to the Inquiry.

Note that next to the redacted names in the intelligence updates, the document reviewers wrote: “noting that some individuals have since been publicly identified, the individuals identified in this table appear to correlate with some of those who have been publicly identified.” I believe this supports the idea that, once the information is not suppressed, very worthwhile correlation can occur. Many of the villager names are already in the book but that if genuine privacy risks to those people exist there will be easy ways to mitigate them.

I submit therefore, in the interests of the Inquiry and in fairness to the victims, that the Inquiry ask NZDF to release the following information to all parties:

1. The names and details of all the people it knows of who were killed or wounded in the raid (whether claimed insurgents or civilians).
2. Precisely where and when that person was shot or wounded.
3. What grounds, if any, NZDF has for believing each person was an insurgent.
4. Supporting documents.

I urge the Inquiry to do this.

I note also that an ongoing reason for withholding crucial information from the non-NZDF parties is the claim that the US military and NATO would not let us have access to their documents and weapon systems video. This is also a reason for redactions in the 14 Operation Burnham documents. It is my strong belief that if the other parties can study the video, and compare it with what their other sources have said, then much of the truth will come into focus. But it seems my requests to the Inquiry, to arrange access to this material, have been ignored.

I was surprised to discover, as I raised in my 24 April 2019 submission to the Inquiry, that no one seems to have actually asked the US military and NATO for permission for core participants in the Inquiry to have access to the documents and video. If this is the case, please can you do that now? It could possibly resolve the whole thing.

I also want to address an apparent misunderstanding in the NZDF arguments about Operation Burnham. The argument, at its heart, is that if civilians were killed and injured it's not NZDF's fault, because it was a mechanical error (ie the Apache helicopter gun sites causing several cannon rounds to fall short). How can NZDF be blamed for a mechanical error?

This could sound initially convincing. But it is actually almost irrelevant for the following reasons.

First, many of the civilian deaths were not caused by the supposed few rounds falling short. They were fleeing farmers misidentified as insurgents and attacked at other times during the operation.

Second, the story about a single equipment failure and some rounds falling short might be true but, based on past performance, it may well be stretched or untrue. “Several” rounds did a ghastly amount of damage to flesh and buildings.

But, most important, the book is clear that the civilian casualties were accidental.

Tim Keating said, after publication of the book, that we had written that they deliberately killed civilians. But this was not the case and just another diversion. We believe and wrote that it was an accident. So whether the accident occurred through mechanical failure or some other cause, that's not the main point. The main wrong done by the NZSAS – the thing they are responsible for – is 1. any carelessness in the orders given to the attack aircraft, 2. not going back to give medical assistance and aid – which was the standard thing for soldiers in their position to do – and 3. hiding and denying what they had done.

I want to end with a final example of the NZDF's greater concern for reputation than truth.

After Operation Burnham, when NZDF could have been investigating and providing assistance to injured and homeless villagers, it was instead arranging medals for two of the SAS troopers who went on the raid. One of the people awarded was a Joint Tactical Air Controller, meaning a person who called in air attacks.

The one-page medal “citation” document was released under instructions from the Ombudsman in the NZDF Operation Burnham Information Pack early last year, that explained in 22 lines his noteworthy deeds.

More than half of the citation is about how, on 20 August 2010 (the wrong date), the trooper made an epic 2km journey on foot to get into position for Operation Burnham (the NZDF narrative map marks this journey as being about 100 metres). Then the citation suddenly gets very sketchy and non-specific, saying he brought “effective aerial fire to bear” on “the enemy, during which a number were killed”.... and that the insurgents massed for two further attacks.

This was a medal for the person who called in the air attacks, in a primarily civilian residential area, that caused most of the civilian casualties; and who called in various other attacks all or most against farmers whom there are good reasons to believe were believe were also innocent.

The man was given the Distinguished Service Decoration, which is awarded to people for (quote) “outstanding performance of military duties ... which brings great credit to the New Zealand Defence Force.” According to an SAS source interviewed by the New Zealand Herald, his SAS colleagues were aware of reports of civilian casualties and felt he should give the medal back. But the SAS officers advocated for the medal and the SAS commanding officer signed off the application. They were awarding the man who had accidentally helped cause a large number of civilian casualties, with the medal presumably proposed by the ground force commander who authorised all those attacks. In a rational and honourable organisation, this would not have happened.

My conclusion, from everything I have said today, is that great caution is needed over everything that NZDF claims about Operation Burnham:

Was that armed insurgent really an insurgent?

Was that armed insurgent even armed?

Are confidently repeated pieces of fact actually true?

Are original 2010 SAS documents correct, or just original pieces of the cover up?

Is an obvious truth, for instance about insurgents in the villages, really just some PR person's "coherent word picture"?

NZDF's relentless denials about Operation Burnham appear to be entirely standard operating procedure; a tool deployed despite the facts to try to defend the indefensible.

They are also uncannily reminiscent of climate change deniers. Most of the public probably does not believe the denials, facts will never lead the deniers to change their minds and lurking behind the denials is a strong sense of vested interests: the oil industry on the one hand and on the other the NZDF with its obsession for defending its reputation at all costs. Facts are bent and stretched, no point is ever openly conceded, the deniers distract, divert and muddy the water; and behind it all is a lack of conscience about who is hurt by their denials.

If the Inquiry would like me to supply any of the references I have mentioned, I will be glad to.