

Statement by Director, News Justin Stevens

In September 2024 the ABC commissioned an independent review into concerns raised over three related stories published in September 2022, one online article and two 7.30 stories known as the 'Line of Fire' stories, which investigated activities by Australian commandos during a 2012 deployment in Afghanistan.

The stories reported on several matters of public importance.

While no specific Australian soldiers were named in the reports, they were identified as being members of the 2nd Commando Regiment. The three stories, comprising two broadcast on 7.30 and one online, included segments of 'helmetcam' footage that had been captured by the commandos and obtained by the ABC. Only one of the substantive public interest issues raised in the 'Line of Fire' stories, regarding two scenes of shots being fired from a helicopter towards a figure running and a figure in a compound, was the subject of public complaints and concerns.

The review investigated how editing errors introduced additional gunshot sounds in a video of helmetcam footage which was embedded in an online article and used during part one of the 7.30 broadcast. It also looked into concerns relating to how some parts of the vision were visually depicted; editing of an interview with former US Drug Enforcement Administration leader Bret Hamilton in one of the 7.30 stories; and why an email to the ABC about the editing of the helicopter footage almost two years earlier had not been acted on.

The review was commissioned by ABC Managing Director David Anderson and conducted by distinguished journalism leader Alan Sunderland. The ABC has committed to publicly releasing the review. We have received an interim report from Mr Sunderland. The ABC will provide an update once it receives the final report.

The review found that in the 56 second video clip in the online article five additional sounds of gunshots were inadvertently but inaccurately introduced into footage showing a commando firing from a helicopter. The review found additional sounds of gunshots were also inadvertently but inaccurately introduced into the 7.30 video, but at different points than in the online video.

Mr Sunderland said: "To be clear, I find no evidence that anybody, at any stage, made a conscious or deliberate decision to introduce additional gunshots. It appears to be an inadvertent consequence of attempts to create clean, accurate and effective sequences in the story (...)

"I have found no evidence to support the conclusion that any of this was done at the direction of the journalists involved or on the initiative of the video editor in order to doctor or deliberately distort the depiction of the events that occurred. On the contrary, what evidence there is suggests it was not a deliberate editorial decision to include additional gunshot audio in order to mislead or deceive."

The review said the errors were not picked up because “there was nothing about the two scenes of shots being fired from a helicopter ... that led anyone to believe that there was an issue to review, or to consider that the sequences may have been edited in a way that introduced additional gunshot audio”.

There was “no evidence that anyone at the ABC ... deliberately doctored, falsified, manipulated or distorted information, material or evidence in order to mislead audiences. On the contrary, there was significant care taken to ensure the stories were checked, discussed, reviewed and upwardly referred.”

The ABC sincerely regrets and apologises for the editing errors in the video clips, including to members of the 2nd Commando Regiment. The video has been removed.

Mr Sunderland rejected complaints over a section of the footage being slowed down, zoomed in and highlighted, saying this wasn’t misleading, inappropriate or problematic.

He said: “To be clear, the only inaccuracy I have found relates to the additional sounds of gunshots. I do not consider any other aspects of the way the sequences were depicted to be materially inaccurate.”

The review found Mr Hamilton’s final comment in an interview that alleged war crimes should always be investigated was not in proper context and therefore did not accurately represent him as talking about allegations of war crimes in general rather than referring to any specific allegations. The review found this was potentially misleading. It found Mr Hamilton’s views were otherwise accurately represented.

ABC News sincerely regrets and apologises to Mr Hamilton as well as our audience members for this. That was not the meaning we intended to convey.

A correction will be published on the Corrections and Clarifications page regarding the editing errors and an Editor’s Note will be appended clarifying the context of Mr Hamilton’s comment.

Importantly, the review found the editing errors did not misleadingly alter the central focus of the ‘Line of Fire’ stories, saying the issues they raised were significant and the stories remained of public importance.

“The ‘Line of Fire’ stories covered issues of the highest importance, dealing with the behaviour of Australian troops in a conflict overseas,” the review said. “They were of public importance at the time the stories were published and broadcast, and they remain of public importance now.

Although no individuals were identified in the stories themselves, the issues raised ... were significant and important.”

Mr Sunderland has made five recommendations:

- Editorial policies and guidance should be reviewed to ensure that the importance of maintaining the integrity of crucial source material is maintained, particularly in investigative stories.
- Training should be reviewed, in particular for non-editorial staff working in investigative areas, to ensure everyone is aware of key editorial principles, including the need to maintain the integrity of source material.

- Editing practices should be reviewed to ensure there is regular, timely and detailed face-to-face contact between editors, reporters and researchers during the editing process.
- When multi-platform stories are being prepared, consistent and equal scrutiny should be applied to all elements of the story across all platforms.
- News should review the guidance note on interviews and discuss.

The ABC stands by the vital importance of its investigations into the alleged conduct of Australian soldiers. The editing errors, while deeply regrettable, do not weaken the value of the ABC's reporting over many years on these crucial issues.

When errors occur we correct them and strive to ensure they are not repeated. In addition to Mr Sunderland's recommendations I will be looking into any further actions we may need to take to ensure this does not happen again.

We must always continue to encourage our journalists to be brave in their pursuit of important journalism on matters of significant public interest that, if it weren't for their work, would never otherwise see the light of day.