



*The Association of Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Ex-Service
Men and Women (South Australian Branch) Incorporated*

PATRON

*Her Excellency the Honourable Frances Adamson AC
Governor of South Australia*

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Open Monday to Friday
9.30am to 12.30pm

13th of November 2024

The Hon. Prime Minister of Australia

Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

David Anderson

Managing Director and CEO
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
700 Harris St
Ultimo, NSW 2007

Kim Williams AM

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Australian Broadcasting Corporation
700 Harris St
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**Subject: Urgent Call for Accountability and Transparency in ABC's Reporting on
Australian Defence Force**

Dear Prime Minister The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, Mr. Anderson, and Mr Williams AM,
I am writing to raise serious concerns about the recent internal review conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) regarding its "Line of Fire" series, which reported on alleged misconduct by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. The issues raised in this review go beyond simple editorial missteps; they challenge the ABC's commitment to accuracy and impartiality and raise troubling questions about possible bias in its portrayal of the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

The TPI Association of South Australia is a representative body advocating for the interests of disabled veterans across the state. Our association comprises over 90% of these veterans as paid members, making us a significant voice within the veteran community, dedicated to supporting those who have sacrificed their health in service to our nation for over 100 years.

DISABLED VETERANS TOGETHER

At our recent General Meeting, this letter was presented to our members and received full support and endorsement. As an association deeply committed to the well-being and fair treatment of our members, we believe that balanced and accurate media portrayal of the ADF is essential to protecting the dignity and reputation of those who have served, especially those impacted by disability as a result of their service.

1. Questioning the “Accidental” Nature of Editorial Errors

In the "Line of Fire" series, additional gunshot sounds were added to footage depicting ADF personnel during a 2012 operation in Afghanistan. ABC's internal investigation deemed these as “inadvertent” errors, yet this explanation strains credibility. Gunfire was reportedly inserted in two separate segments of footage in both online and televised formats, each time supporting the narrative of an aggressive approach by Australian forces. Are we seriously expected to believe that this insertion was unintentional, given that it happened more than once and directly reinforced the story's message? The repeated nature of these "errors" suggests a pattern that is unlikely to be accidental, and it raises questions about whether the ABC's editorial processes were compromised in ways that unfairly portrayed the ADF.

2. The ABC's Influence and Potential for Viral Misinformation

As Australia's taxpayer-funded broadcaster, the ABC holds a unique place in media and often shapes public discourse, especially on issues of national importance like defence. When ABC content is published, it reaches millions via digital and traditional platforms and is rapidly circulated across social media. Given this, editorial inaccuracies in military reporting have the potential to quickly spiral into misinformation that distorts public understanding and undermines trust in the ADF. A misleading or poorly edited story is not confined to the ABC; it becomes a narrative that spreads virally, often with lasting effects. With sensitive military reporting, the ABC must bear responsibility for anticipating and preventing such harmful amplification.

3. The Responsibility of Experienced Journalists and Editors

The ABC's journalists and editors are among the most experienced professionals in Australia, well-versed in the ethical and practical demands of journalism. They would be acutely aware that even minor errors in investigative work could have a disproportionate impact on public perception, particularly with a subject as sensitive as military conduct. It is concerning, therefore, that such experienced staff could overlook repeated errors like the addition of gunfire sounds, errors that were likely to be misinterpreted by the public. This demands greater accountability from the ABC to safeguard the integrity of their reporting, recognising the potential harm caused by unbalanced narratives and editorial carelessness.

4. The Inadequacy of an Internal Investigation and Lack of Accountability

The ABC's decision to investigate its own conduct and then absolve itself of any deliberate wrongdoing raises questions about its commitment to transparency and accountability. An organisation investigating itself, especially on an issue as sensitive as national defence, inherently lacks the objectivity needed to restore public trust. This self-investigation is akin to a corporation absolving itself of regulatory failures; it leaves the public questioning whether the ABC is truly committed to addressing the issue. Australians, particularly those who serve in our military, deserve to see an open and rigorous investigation, not a self-review that fails to hold anyone to account.

5. Lack of Consequences for Errors of This Magnitude

The ABC's response indicates that no one within the organisation has faced disciplinary measures or further consequences for these significant editorial lapses. In most industries, failures of this magnitude would prompt immediate review of responsibilities and likely result in policy changes and accountability measures. Without visible consequences, the ABC's response risks appearing dismissive of public concerns, suggesting that such errors do not warrant scrutiny or change. This lack of accountability only deepens mistrust in the ABC's editorial standards.

6. A Broader Pattern of Bias in ABC's Reporting on the ADF

The issues raised by "Line of Fire" are not isolated. This incident, when considered alongside previous ABC reporting, suggests a pattern of editorial bias in its portrayal of the ADF:

- **Misrepresentation of Alleged War Crimes in the Brereton Report (2020):** In 2020, the ABC extensively covered the Brereton Report on alleged war crimes by Australian special forces. While these allegations deserved investigation, the ABC's coverage focused almost exclusively on the most severe accusations without adequately contextualising the actions of the majority of ADF personnel. This disproportionate focus risked misrepresenting the ADF as a whole and unjustly damaged its reputation.
- **Coverage of Allegations Against Ben Roberts-Smith (2021):** The ABC's reporting on allegations against Ben Roberts-Smith, a Victoria Cross recipient, heavily emphasised unproven accusations, potentially prejudicing public opinion before legal proceedings had concluded. This pre-emptive approach, particularly in cases that involve military personnel, risks creating a negative narrative that unfairly influences public perception of the ADF as a whole.
- **Repeated Errors in the "Line of Fire" Series (2022):** The additional gunshots inserted into the footage, coupled with selective editing of interview segments, created a depiction of ADF actions that supported a preconceived narrative. Notably, the interview with former U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration leader Bret Hamilton was edited in a way that could mislead viewers. Hamilton's comments about the importance of investigating alleged war crimes were presented out of context, giving the impression that he was specifically referring to the actions of Australian troops in Afghanistan when, in fact, he was speaking more generally. This selective editing, combined with the addition of gunfire sounds, reinforces a narrative of presumed wrongdoing.

Given the context of previous ABC reporting on the ADF, it is difficult to dismiss this as an isolated mistake. These repeated errors reflect a troubling pattern that appears to lack balance and impartiality, casting the ADF in an unfairly negative light and raising questions about the ABC's editorial approach in covering sensitive military matters.

Recommendations for Action

In light of these recurring issues, I urge you to consider the following actions to ensure that the ABC upholds its responsibilities to truth, fairness, and transparency:

1. Commission an External, Independent Investigation

To rebuild public trust, an external, independent review should examine the ABC's

editorial practices, particularly in its military reporting, to determine if there is a culture of selective or biased reporting and if oversight processes are sufficient.

2. Establish Clear Accountability Measures

The ABC must implement concrete guidelines for accountability, ensuring that individuals responsible for significant editorial errors are held to account. A culture of accountability is essential for sustaining credibility in an organisation entrusted with public funds.

3. Strengthen Transparency and Misinformation Protocols

The ABC's digital reach means that errors in sensitive reporting can quickly go viral, becoming lasting misinformation. The ABC should implement transparent protocols for addressing inaccuracies and proactively managing public response to prevent misperception.

4. Implement Bias Awareness and Sensitivity Training for Journalists

Given the stakes involved, sensitivity training on military reporting should be mandatory for ABC staff to foster balanced representations and avoid perpetuating narratives that unfairly impact those who serve.

Conclusion

The ADF personnel who serve Australia deserve fair and accurate representation in the media. As Australia's public broadcaster, the ABC must be held to the highest standards of impartiality and transparency, particularly on issues of national significance. I ask you to consider these recommendations to protect public confidence in our national broadcaster and to ensure the ABC's commitment to responsible journalism in reporting on the ADF.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Major Brett Grosser (Retd) MA GDLP LLB JP(Qual)| President

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