

The cult of Ben Roberts-Smith — the soldiers' hero

For many Australians — and especially veterans — Ben Roberts-Smith is still a war hero who can do no wrong.

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After US President Joe Biden vowed to end the “forever war” in Afghanistan, Australia dutifully followed suit. Our longest military conflict, one which has [barely registered](#) in the public consciousness, will end by September.

It's a war which has cost 41 Australian lives, and billions in defence spending. But in recent years, the war in Afghanistan has been remembered for allegations of Australian war crimes, and the fall from grace of a widely-revered hero: Ben Roberts-Smith.

Kerry Stokes is not for turning. It's up to Seven's independent board members to act on Roberts-Smith

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Already accused of committing multiple war crimes in Afghanistan (allegations he strenuously denies), a *60 Minutes* investigation last Sunday claimed he had intimidated witnesses and buried evidence relating to those war crimes.

But despite everything, for many Australians, Ben Roberts-Smith is still the war hero who can do no wrong.

There are the Facebook commenters on the *60 Minutes* story, furious at the perceived character assassination of their man. There's Kerry Stokes, the Seven boss, who is bankrolling Roberts-Smith's lawsuit against Nine and without whom the soldier says he'd be “fucked”. And then there's the military itself.

It's a community divided between those repulsed by Roberts-Smith's alleged actions, and those who — no matter how many allegations are aired or incriminating photos released, no matter the outcome of a high-profile defamation trial against Nine this year — remain fervent in their support for a man they lionise.

The soldiers' hero

In 2012, TV host Yumi Stynes made an [offhand joke](#) suggesting Roberts-Smith was a brainless jock — and the outrage was deafening. There was a deluge of vitriol on social media, a [racist headline](#) in *The Herald Sun*, and disproportionate attacks on Stynes compared to her white male cohost. Sponsors pulled out of the soon-to-be-cancelled show.

Stynes had hit a nerve. Roberts-Smith, a Victoria Cross (VC) recipient who'd singlehandedly stormed a Taliban position, was, to many, an untouchable hero. He was a symbol of bravery and courage — the best of Australia's military.

A decade on, and numerous allegations later, many haven't flinched in their support for Roberts-Smith.

Nowhere is that stronger than in parts of the veterans community, where the allegations against Ben Roberts-Smith have always been troubling. Many held him up as a hero, and seeing that heroism exposed can feel like an attack on one's faith.

Veteran and Flinders University military sociologist Ben Wadham says the VC winner is seen as both a hero and a villain in the sector. While many feel like he's guilty of something, others think he's being unfairly targeted and hung out to dry by a military top brass disconnected with the harsh realities of the battlefield. Most generals lack the kind of intense wartime experiences of Special Air Service (SAS) troops like Roberts-Smith.

"The hero worshippers are mainly SAS acolytes who think strong men like BRS [Roberts-Smith] walk the walls so we can sleep soundly at night, and anything they do in the war zone is justified," Wadham said.

One former soldier who served in Vietnam and maintains close ties with the veterans' community told *Crikey* that if you took a vote among veterans, there would be a 50:50 split over Roberts-Smith's culpability for his alleged actions.

"My assessment from the veterans I've spoken to is the feeling isn't as negative towards BRS as the public might think," he said. "Unless you're in that sort of environment yourself, there's never any comprehension of how intense it is. I can't help liking him, I just can't."

This sentiment was common among veterans in response to the findings of the [Brereton report](#), which pointed to a deeply rotten warrior culture among elite troops serving in Afghanistan: civilians (and civilian institutions) will never understand the true horrors of war, the severe psychological toll of serving multiple tours with little respite, the kind of split-second decision-making needed to take on an enemy combatant in a hostile environment.

Many believe that outsiders who have never been there simply cannot understand, and are too quick to judge.

The cult of the SAS

But by now, the case against Ben Roberts-Smith goes well beyond a few firefights that went awry. There are photos of Roberts-Smith grinning as fellow soldiers get around in KKK attire and drink from a prosthetic leg taken from an Afghan man he killed. He's alleged to have buried evidence against him in a pink lunchbox in his backyard and sent intimidating emails to potential witnesses, which if proven in court would constitute a criminal offence.

Sounds of silence. After just a few months Brereton's 'brave' report slips out of view

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But what really strengthens the cult of Roberts-Smith is where he sits on the military ladder. His regiment, the SAS, are the elites — the cream of the military hierarchy. To get to that level, soldiers must endure a gruelling, years-long examination. Their work involves the most dangerous, often highly secretive missions. It's this deification of the SAS that helped breed many of the problems spelled out in the Brereton report. And it's what makes Roberts-Smith so untouchable.

Nobody exemplifies that hero worship of the SAS better than Kerry Stokes — chair of the Seven Network and the Australian War Memorial, and Roberts-Smith's very generous benefactor. When the Brereton report was released, Stokes promised [financial support](#) to the families of SAS troops accused of war crimes. He's a trustee of the SAS Resources Fund, which provides relief to members of the regiment. Mining magnate Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest also sits on the board, along with a number of high-profile Western Australian personalities.

And yet, despite our collective disinterest in the Afghan conflict, the support and idolisation of Roberts-Smith runs deep, from everyday veterans to regular Australians who see him as a hero. That support gets its power from the financial and reputational backing provided by people like Stokes. And, as the last few months have shown, that support will likely never be shaken.

"I don't think anything that could happen, even if he's prosecuted for war crimes, will make those true believers change their mind at all," Wadham said.

"It's an ideological [belief] rather than a commonsense one."