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A close connection

Thousands of people make the pilgrimage to Old Parliament House each year, but Jim and Wendy Starkey's visit to the heart of Australian democracy was more special than most. Mr Starkey is the great-grandson of former prime minister Joseph Lyons and Mrs Starkey the great-granddaughter of former prime minister Billy Hughes. "It makes you feel proud that our forefathers changed the way Australia was shaped," Mr Starkey said.



Jim and Wendy Starkey outside Old Parliament House. Photo: Sithixay Dithavong

HOSPITAL Daughter seeks answers

Justice sought over death

Andrew Brown

Prior to being admitted to Calvary Hospital, Robyn, who did not want her surname published, said her 85-year-old mother Gwen was full of life and energy.

"She was able to drive herself around and she was living independently in Canberra. She was very lively," Robyn said.

However, that all changed when Gwen was taken to Calvary in late April last year, suffering from an infected leg ulcer. During a weekend visit to see her mother in hospital in May 2017,

Robyn said Gwen's condition deteriorated rapidly after contracting sepsis in one of the wards.

"Mum had gone a very strange colour and she was struggling to breathe and she couldn't be resuscitated," Robyn said.

Despite the pleas from Gwen's family, staff were unable to check her condition over the weekend, as regular doctors and specialists were only available on weekdays.

Robyn said staff told her doctors were not able to be called in for a fear of backlash and intimidation from senior staff. It was these factors, Robyn al-

leged, that led to her mother's death just weeks later. Following her diagnosis of septic shock, Gwen was transferred to Calvary's intensive care unit and eventually discharged into a high-care nursing facility, before she died on July 6 last year.

Her daughter said negligence from staff as well as staff being intimidated as a result of a culture of bullying at the hospital contributed to her mother's death.

An investigation into the circumstances that led to Gwen's

S.A.S. rookie told to shoot unarmed man

Chris Masters
Nick McKenzie

A Special Air Service Regiment trooper on his first deployment to Afghanistan was pressured to execute an elderly, unarmed detainee by fellow higher-ranking soldiers as part of a "blooding" ritual, according to defence insiders who were witnesses at the scene.

And on the same mission, another man with a prosthetic leg was killed by machine-gun fire. His plastic leg was souvenired and later taken back to SAS headquarters in Perth to be used as a novelty beer drinking vessel.

The summary execution of the elderly detainee on Easter Sunday, 2009, is one of several incidents involving a rogue SASR team operating in Afghanistan which

has been uncovered by a Fairfax Media investigation and corroborated by special forces insiders.

The grey-haired, bearded Afghan man executed by the "rookie" was, according to some SASR members, a suspected Taliban member, but at the time presented no threat to Australian soldiers. The newly deployed soldier allegedly shot the man after being prompted by two more senior soldiers, one of whom was earlier overheard proclaiming a need to "blood the rookie".

One of the sources said the killing was less abhorrent than the pressuring. "If shit needs to be done, do it

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Jan Thima with her children Tongthara, 3, Babacha, 5.
Photo: Jason South

Push to get mothers back to work

By Eryk Bagsshaw

More than 360,000 families are set to lose their childcare benefits in less than a month, leaving them hundreds of dollars out of pocket if they fail to sign up to the Turnbull government's childcare package.

The government has urged families to get a move on as it encourages more women back to work through income tax cuts and a \$2.5 billion childcare boost.

The existing two-tiered system - the Child Care Benefit and the Child Care Rebate - will shut down from July 1, as families rush to get their paperwork together for the new all-in-one online platform.

The overhaul, which new figures from the Department of Education show 750,000 families have signed up for, will have childcare subsidies paired to the amount of work

study or volunteering a parent does, with the primary caregiver given a means-tested subsidy of up to 50 hours a week for 24 hours of activity. Department figures show that more than 360,000 families have still to sign up.

The new system will eliminate a cap on childcare that has had thousands of families earning up to \$187,000 run out of subsidies before the end of the year.

"When people run out, typically between March and May, they start looking to cut back those hours of care, or they just do it really tough for those couple of months," said Goodstart early-learning advocacy manager John Cherry.

Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham said the package was the most significant change to childcare in 40 years. "The system that's evolved over

time means too many mums, dads and carers drop out of the workforce."

Labor is "deeply concerned" one in four families may be worse off under the changes, particularly those with a stay-at-home parent who does not meet the minimum four hours of activity required to gain access to the subsidy.

Labor's spokeswoman for early childhood education Amanda Rishworth says she has concerns about parents who work casually being forced to estimate the number of hours they will receive to establish their subsidy entitlement.

A Senate inquiry heard this week that up to 90 per cent of a part-time working parent's wage was taken by childcare and a cut in family tax benefits if they opted to work a fourth day a week.

"The biggest trap in the whole

system is for people who work part-time with kids in childcare," said the Grattan Institute's chief executive, John Daley.

Mr Daley found Australia would be up to \$25 billion better off if it matched Canada's female workforce participation rate, which has soared on the back of generous childcare subsidies and low to middle-income tax cuts.

Melbourne mother Jan Thima said without the extra childcare subsidy she will receive she would have had to cut back on toys and clothes for her three-year-old son.

"I want to be back at work, but I don't have any family here like a grandma or grandpa, so childcare is a solution to look after my kids."

The government believes its proposed 32.5 per cent flat tax for those earning between \$40,000 and \$200,000 a year will

complement the childcare package by cutting the number of taxpayers who congregate just below a tax bracket increase, known as "bunching". An ANU study of 160 million taxpayer records between 1999 and 2014 found bunching was most noticeable for mothers and self-employed.

The elasticity - or disincentive to work more - increased with the number of children they had.

PricewaterhouseCoopers partner Paul Abbey said women having children and not returning to work full-time was a key weakness of Australia's workforce participation. "The flat tax rate] takes bunching out of the equation for them, especially if they are self-employed and have flexibility," he said. "The rate change will no longer be a disincentive to committing more time and effort."

S.A.S. rookie 'blooded' by executing an unarmed man

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yourself," the soldier said.

SASR sources claim the man with the prosthetic leg was machine-gunned by a soldier that, for legal reasons, Fairfax Media will call "Leonidas".

Leonidas is also implicated in the killing of a detainee three years later in September 2012 during a SASR mission in the village of Darwan. Leonidas kicked handcuffed detainee Ali Jan Faqir off the edge of a small cliff, badly injuring his face, according to claims of two defence force insiders who witnessed the event.

As the detainee lay injured, hands still bound, the two witnesses say Leonidas was party to the decision among soldiers to "get him out of his misery". The claims have been

backed by the relatives of Faqir and who were interviewed this week by an Afghan journalist on assignment with Fairfax Media.



Australia's ugly turn in Afghanistan
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The allegations, which have circulated among insiders for years have now been corroborated by various sources across the globe during a six-month Fairfax Media investigation.

They are likely to be central to inquiries commenced two years ago by the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force, assisted by NSW Supreme Court Judge,

Major General Paul Brereton.

The IGADF inquiry was commissioned by then Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Angus Campbell (soon to become Chief of the Defence Force) following a scoping study instigated by then Special Forces commander, Major General Jeff Sengelmann, and conducted by Dr Samantha Crompvoets.

At the time, General Sengelmann took what must have been an unpopular stand among some of his peers by lifting the lid on the secrets of the SASR, but also raising questions about command failure. Dr Crompvoets' report came to detail "unsanctioned and illegal application of violence on operations" and a "complete lack of accountability" involving Australians elite special forces. The main

combat elements of Australian

Special Forces are the Special Air Service Regiment and the Commandos. Observers say

Australia's longest war was allowed to bleed on, desensitising Special Forces operators engaged in too many deployments. Over time, the secretive status of Special Forces generated a culture allowing mateship to overwhelm accountability.

The IGADF inquiry into "rumours of the possible breaches of the Laws of Armed Conflict" parallels an International Criminal Court investigation into alleged atrocities committed in Afghanistan by Taliban, militants and coalition forces.

The ICC's interest is likely to be one reason the ADF wants to stay ahead of the curve for the sake of its

international reputation.

Dr Crompvoets' report describes "enormous and difficult challenges" facing the Australian government in combating rogue actions by soldiers, warning the misconduct goes "well beyond blowing off steam" and involves "problems deeply embedded in the culture of the Special Forces".

In a statement, the defence force said the ongoing inquiry by Justice Brereton inquiry would make "recommendations" about how to deal with any substantiated allegations of war crimes.

"The IGADF Afghanistan Inquiry has, for some time, been aware of allegations of significant issues involving the Special Operations Task Group in Afghanistan, which are within the scope of the Inquiry," the statement said.