

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If Shakespeare had stumbled upon the story of Ben Roberts-Smith, he may well have considered it worthy of a play. He likely would have dismissed any claim it was true. But what you are about to read is a work of non-fiction. In mid 2017, I embarked on an investigation that would change many lives. Exposing the involvement of Australia's most famous and revered soldier in the nation's worst war crimes scandal has been the most difficult undertaking of my twenty-year career. I still shake my head in wonder at the rollercoaster ride this story has taken me on. Much of it I, too, wouldn't believe if I hadn't lived it.

This book aims to tell the Roberts-Smith story from my own perspective, as well as capturing the thoughts, conversations, feelings and actions of other key characters: SAS witnesses, Afghan victims and villagers, politicians, lawyers, investigators and Roberts-Smith's friends, foes and lovers. And, of course, Ben Roberts-Smith VC, MG.

But this book is not only about Australia's most infamous war crimes scandal, and the soldier at the centre of it. It is about Australia's media, its justice system and its defence force, and how history can be hijacked by vested interests. It is about how power and money can threaten truth and justice, and how Australia's hunger for military

myth created a monster. It is also about how the pen can be mightier than those elite and powerful Australians who have never stopped backing Roberts-Smith, even when it seemed clear he wasn't the man he claimed to be.

Telling my own story was relatively easy. It was and remains burnt into my brain.

I have recreated the conversations, thoughts, feelings and actions of others, including SAS soldiers and Roberts-Smith, as faithfully as possible from multiple credible sources.

Roberts-Smith's decision to sue Chris Masters and me provided a wealth of material. Most of the key SAS characters in the book are trial witnesses whose stories I have recreated from trial transcripts and other court documents. Entire chapters are sourced from the witness box, as SAS soldiers recounted, blow by blow, their dealings with Roberts-Smith and their recollections of key missions, conversations and incidents.

I have supplemented this with extensive briefings from confidential sources, including SAS insiders or other informants.

The extensive report by another character in the book, war crimes investigator Justice Paul Brereton, helped me tell some of the story as it relates to the judge, as did other public source documents authored by him or about him or his father. So too did briefings from sources who had direct dealings with Justice Brereton, including in Afghanistan.

Some of the characters I interviewed at length or on multiple occasions, including defence force consultant Samantha Cromptoets, SAS medic Dusty Miller, SAS captain turned politician Andrew Hastie and the Afghan family members of one of Roberts-Smith's victims. I conducted many other interviews with sources I can never name to protect their safety or livelihoods.

Roberts-Smith was grilled on the stand for days, and I have used this testimony, along with his speeches and media interviews, to write about him. I also had access to more than two dozen sources who have dealt with him at various periods of his life, including his days as a young infantry soldier, as an SAS patrol team member and commander in Afghanistan, as a media executive and as a friend, family man, comrade or confidant. Some of the conversations I have recreated are based on actual covert audio recordings made of Roberts-Smith. These, too, have been provided to me by confidential sources.

Further notes about sourcing for each chapter is in an endnotes section.

I have no doubt Ben Roberts-Smith will deny much, if not all, of my account of his descent from famous to infamous but Federal Court Justice Anthony Besanko has made it clear Roberts-Smith cannot be believed. The judge concluded he is a liar, bully and war criminal.

The timing of some of the events I have described has been truncated or may be out of sequence, but is otherwise told faithfully. For instance, my dealings with Dusty Miller occurred over a far greater period than reflected in the book. I have had hundreds of conversations with my lawyers, but only very few are described.

I have also only written about certain key moments in the defamation trial. One could write an entire book just on the court case, but this story is a far broader telling of events that happened well before the trial was underway.

To protect legal privilege or the identity of some sources, some of the contents of certain conversations or events as they pertain to legal or source dealings have been altered. However, nothing deviates from the essential truth of the journey I lived and breathed for more than five years.

Some Australians will ask, justifiably, why I have written this book given Roberts-Smith may yet face a criminal trial. If Roberts-Smith is criminally charged, then it will be for a jury to weigh the evidence put before it in deciding whether he is guilty to the criminal standard of beyond reasonable doubt.

This book is not about whether Roberts-Smith will or should be convicted of any crimes. Only a jury of his peers can decide that.

Yet it should also be said that my decision to tell this story is partly based on the fact that it was Roberts-Smith who forced so much of it into the public domain by suing me. It was he who chose to put a vast amount of detail about his own activities before a civil court for a judge, and the nation, to hear.

Having done this with the intention of using our nation's defamation laws to suppress the truth, and having been declared by a judge (to the civil standard of 'balance of probabilities') to have engaged in the very war crimes and cover-ups I accused him of in my original reporting and again in my trial defence, it could hardly be said that I should now fall silent.

Ben Roberts-Smith tried to defeat the truth. This book tells the story of how the truth triumphed.

—Nick McKenzie