

# The Narrative of the Leakers: Collateral Murder and the Assange Indictment

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*When the superseding indictment was returned by a federal grand jury in the Eastern District of Virginia against Julian Assange on May 23, 2019, there was one glaring omission. It was an achievement, it might even be said the achievement, that gave the WikiLeaks publisher and the organisation justified notoriety. [Collateral Murder](#), as the leaked video came to be called, featured the murderous exploits by the crew of Crazy Horse 1-8, an Apache helicopter that slew 11 people on July 12, 2007 in east Baghdad. Among the dead were Reuters photographer Namir Noor-Eldeen and a driver and fixer, Saeed Chmagh.*

As WikiLeaks announced at the time,

“Reuters has been trying to obtain the video through the Freedom of Information Act, without success since the time of the attack. The video, shot from an Apache helicopter gun-sight, clearly shows the unprovoked slaying of a wounded Reuters employee and his rescuers. Two young children involved in the rescue were also seriously wounded.”

It is worth remembering at the time that the current stable of media outlets, including the *New York Times*, preferred to see something rather different: [that the video was purposely edited](#) by WikiLeaks to convey maximum public impact while giving the impression of US venality in battle. Patriotism, and the blinding of the record, comes first.

This conveniently sidestepped the vacillations taking place in the Pentagon over the incident and its recording. Dean Yates, who was Reuters Baghdad chief at the time, recalls in horrid vividness the unfolding events, including the seizure of Namir’s cameras and the US military statement:

“Firefight in New Baghdad. US, Iraqi forces kill 9 insurgents, detain 13.”

As Yates, who has been painfully silent over this episode, [told](#) the *Guardian*,

“The US assertions that Namir and Saeed were killed during a firefight was all lies. But I didn’t know that at the time, so I updated my story to take in the US military’s statement.”

On the return of the tampered cameras, no evidence of insurgent activity, or clashes with US forces, were evident. Yates and a Reuters colleague subsequently met two US generals

responsible for overseeing the investigation, all off record, of course. They were told of the request by Crazy Horse 1-8 to engage “military-aged males” supposedly armed and acting “suspiciously”. Photographs of AK-47s and an RPG [Rocket-propelled grenade] launcher, were produced. Yates was left wondering “how much of that meeting was carefully choreographed so we could go away with a certain impression of what happened.” For a time, he conceded, “it worked” with poisonous effect.

What niggled was the revealing of some footage from the camera of Crazy Horse 1-8, a miserly three minutes. Cue the permission sought by the Apache to engage on seeing Namir crouching with his long-lens camera, supposedly mistaken for an RPG. The appearance of the van later in the scene, ostensibly to assist, was airily dismissed by the generals as an act of aid for insurgents. Yates, disturbed, was left with the mistaken impression that Namir had somehow been responsible for his own demise and those of his companions.

In the meantime, Reuters persisted in their vain attempts to secure the full video, even as they continued good faith off-the-record meetings with the US military for reasons of safety. Yates wished to break the arrangement on the video; his superiors thought otherwise. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder began to show. Sleeplessness crept in. When the video was released on April 5, 2010, Yates was with his family walking in Cradle Mountain national park, Tasmania.

The video casts a shadow over the indictment, despite being a screaming omission. It is crude, expressive, and unequivocal in disclosing a war crime and its cold blooded execution. It codifies a form of deliberate, incautious violence. It reveals breathtaking cruelty at play: “Look at those dead bastards; “Nice”; “Good shoot’n”. As Christian Christensen [remarked](#), “These particular images were, in many ways, the crystallization of the horrors of war.”

Barrister Greg Barns, a tireless advisor to the Australian Assange Campaign [claimed it](#) to be “very much part of the broader prosecution case [because of what it illustrates about the US rules of engagement] and it is one of the many reasons to oppose what is happening to Assange”.

Australian politicians otherwise unaccustomed to distract themselves from the teat of the US imperium have also noted the potency of the video, and the act of evading it in the indictment. “The omission of the leaked Collateral Murder footage from the indictment surprised me,” [suggested](#) Australian Greens Senator Peter Whish Wilson of the Parliamentary Friends of the Bring Julian Assange Home Group, “but on reflection of course it’s not in the US government’s interests to highlight their own injustices, deceit and crimes.” The effort to indict Assange for espionage charges is fatuous but dangerously calculating: to bury a narrative; to make history, at least as it is told by the leakers, disappear.

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