Historians call out War Memorial chief

Michael Bachelard

Australians should look unflinchingly at the actions of the nation's soldiers in war zones, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us, say military historians who have strongly criticised comments this week by War Memorial director Brendan Nelson.

Dr Nelson, a former Liberal defence minister, said allegations contained in articles in Fairfax Media about Victoria Cross winner and former SAS trooper Ben Roberts-Smith were an attempt to "tear down our heroes".

Reporting of an alleged domestic violence incident was "one of the lowest blows I have ever seen", he said, adding in comments to The Australian, "I am very concerned that if the media pursuit of Ben Roberts-Smith and others continues ... we run the risk of becoming a people unworthy of such sacrifice."

Of Mr Roberts-Smith's war service, Dr Nelson told radio 2GB: "I don't doubt that what you and I might think, in the cold, hard light of day, that bad things have happened. War is a messy business.

"But as far as I'm concerned, unless there have been the most egregious breaches of laws of armed conflict, we should leave it all alone." Mr Roberts-Smith was "by any standard, one of the greatest Australians ... I stand with him. I stand with the men and the SAS. I stand with their families, their widows and their children," Dr Nelson said.

But military historian Peter Stanley, of the University of NSW disagreed, saying: "We need to know the truth, whatever it is.
"As a nation, our commitment to honesty and accountability should impel us to acknowledge our defenders' actions in war - whatever they may be - and to decide on consequences with compassion for both victims and perpetrators."

Professor Stanley is a former principal historian at the War Memorial.

Edward Cavanagh, an Australian who is a research fellow at Cambridge University, said people need to be able to ask hard questions about how war is conducted. "Right now they cannot [ask questions] - ashamed, as they are, into a sense of guilt by hagiographers like Brendan Nelson ... who is thrown a microphone now and then to invoke the 'heroism' of some 'Digger'."

As for Dr Nelson's argument that "war is a messy business", Dr Cavanagh said: "All the more reason to clean it up."

Peter Rees, the author of a number of military histories, including Bearing Witness about journalist turned war historian Charles Bean, said truth is "fundamentally important". "We've got to know how our military staff, our servicemen, perform in action. Bean was of the strong belief that any incidents that might reflect on the army negatively still needed to be included in the official history 'because some reference or other to it is sure to get into future histories, and it will appear to have been hushed up'."

Australian National University professor Frank Bongiorno said he was "very disturbed" by Dr Nelson's comment questioning what national interest was served by Fairfax Media's reporting.

"A democratic society requires a media that's capable of asking difficult questions, as well as historians asking similar questions," Professor Bongiorno said.

"The idea there are no-go areas or areas that belong to the sacred, that journalists, historians and other academics shouldn't encroach on is dangerous for a democracy."

Dr Nelson told Fairfax Media that the War Memorial was "an archive" where "we reveal as much fact as we can".

It also played "a significant role as commemoration", and was an "extremely important part of the therapeutic milieu for a soldiers and their families coming to terms" with their service and the "impact on them".

He would not define what he meant by "most egregious breaches", but said the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force was investigating alleged war crimes in Afghanistan, which meant that "defence leadership must believe that the most egregious breaches have occurred".

"Of course the truth is essential," he told Fairfax Media.