

US military scapegoats pilots over “friendly fire” deaths in Afghanistan

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In what amounts to a cynical exercise in scapegoating, the US Air Force announced last Friday its intention to charge two F-16 pilots over the deaths of four Canadian soldiers and the injury of eight others in a “friendly fire” incident in Afghanistan on April 17. Major Harry Schmidt and Major William Umbach each face four charges of involuntary manslaughter, eight of aggravated assault and one of dereliction of duty. If court-martialed and found guilty, each could face up to 64 years in jail and the loss of all pay and allowances. Only once before—in Iraq in 1994—have US military personnel been prosecuted over a “friendly fire” incident in a combat zone.

The timing of the announcement points to its real purpose. The incident itself occurred over five months ago and provoked outrage in Canada, along with demands that the US military be called to account. A joint US-Canadian investigation into the causes was completed in early June—three months ago—but the report was not released. Then, in the midst of the Bush administration’s intense diplomatic activity to line up support in the UN for a war on Iraq, a heavily censored version of the report was released and the charges announced.

The decision to prosecute the two pilots was clearly aimed at removing an embarrassing obstacle to Canadian support for a tough UN resolution on Iraq. Canadian Defence Minister John McCallum described the charges as “unusually severe” and declared “from a Canadian standpoint, this is very positive news”. On Monday, Canada, which had not previously backed a strike against Iraq, joined the chorus demanding Iraq readmit weapons inspectors or face a US attack.

There is no doubt that Schmidt and Umbach bear a measure of responsibility for the deaths of the four soldiers. Canadian troops were engaged in a live-fire

exercise at the Tarnak Farms training area near the southern Afghan city of Kandahar on the night of April 17. Schmidt and Umbach, who were patrolling in F-16 fighters, assumed that the fire was hostile and directed at their planes.

After initially being told to “hold fire” by a controller in an AWAC aircraft, Schmidt declared: “I’ve got some men on a road and it looks like a piece of artillery firing at us. I am rolling in, in self-defence.” He dropped altitude, locked onto the target and unleashed a 250-kilogram, laser-guided weapon at the Canadian troops. Umbach, who was in command of the patrol, has been charged for failing to prevent the attack.

The official report was highly critical of Schmidt for failing to observe protocol and for breaching the formal rules of engagement. Correct procedure, it stated, would have been for the pilots to climb in altitude and evade any danger. The report concedes, however, that neither pilot was briefed on the Canadian night exercise, even though Canadian officers had informed the US military command. Nor does it appear that the AWAC controllers were aware of the Canadian exercise.

Schmidt’s lawyer Charles Gittins has pointed out that, in the month prior to the incident, there had been eight occasions in which pilots wrongly reported “enemy fire” near the same Tarnak Farms training area used by the Canadians. His client was not briefed on the incidents nor on the Canadian exercise. Gittins said that if Schmidt had been informed, he would have been able to lock the “friendly” location into his aircraft’s computers, which would have prevented a missile being fired on the position.

However, the debate over proper procedure ignores the most obvious question. Why would Schmidt respond to flashes of gunfire by “rolling over” and

attacking when he had failed to determine who was firing and why? As it turns out, the Canadian troops were not firing at the F-16s, but horizontally at ground targets. They were using anti-tank weapons and machine guns, not “a piece of artillery”.

It was not a matter of inexperience. Schmidt was a highly-regarded navy pilot, a graduate of the US Navy’s elite Top Gun weapons school and a full-time instructor at the Illinois Air National Guard 183rd Fighter Wing. His decision to attack rather than evade only makes sense when placed in the context of the conduct of the war in Afghanistan by the Bush administration and the Pentagon.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Pentagon officials have repeatedly dismissed reports of civilian casualties of US attacks as the tragic, but unavoidable, consequences of the war. The US Command keeps no record of the number of civilian deaths and, in the vast majority of cases, has carried out no official investigation. According to independent estimates, the civilian death toll is more than 3,000. In a number of cases, Afghan forces loyal to the US-backed Afghan president Hamid Karzai have been bombed or attacked by ground forces.

One of the most widely publicised attacks took place in the early hours of July 1 when a US AC-130 gunship attacked a compound in the village of Kakarak, resulting in the deaths of 48 people, mainly women and children, and the injury of another 117. Karzai was compelled to issue a mild protest to the US military, as those killed included his local supporters. The US military has denied any responsibility and continues to claim, despite the lack of any evidence, that its warplane was fired upon by an anti-aircraft gun.

Against this backdrop, the most likely explanation for Schmidt’s actions on the night of April 17 was that he was carrying out his brief. While he may have been in breach of formal procedure, Schmidt was acting in line with operational objectives, which, as stated in the formal investigation, were to “neutralise the Al Qaeda and Taliban network and military capabilities, smoke out the command and control, destroy targets, maintain surveillance and develop intelligence, maintain combat readiness, demonstrate US resolve, and protect US interests.”

How a pilot should realise these objectives—to distinguish between friend and foe, civilian and

combatant, at night at high altitude—was left unstated. But the obvious answer is that anyone not formally designated as “friendly” is considered an enemy and thus a legitimate target for attack. By diving to attack an unidentified group of armed men, Schmidt was simply carrying out what other pilots had done many times before. If ever questioned, he would simply claim “self-defence” and expect to be backed by his superiors.

Schmidt’s aggressive attitude was encouraged by what the official report guardedly referred to as “ineffective leadership and complacency in enforcement of discipline and standards,” which created “an atmosphere of complacency for pilots in the squadron”. But the real responsibility for creating a climate of “complacency” in which fighter pilots felt they could attack unidentified targets with impunity rests with the entire chain of command. The chief culprit is the Bush administration, which has prosecuted its colonial adventure in Afghanistan with contemptuous indifference for human life.

In the case of the Kakarak incident, a formal US investigation completely exonerated the military. Despite the failure of the investigators to find any evidence at the site, the report insisted that an anti-aircraft gun existed and had fired on the US AC-130 from the compound. The US Central Command has only released an unclassified executive summary of the report, containing none of the cockpit radio transmissions and other operational detail, even in heavily censored form.

The only reason that Schmidt and Umbach have been charged is that the dead turned out to be Canadian soldiers. Had the casualties been Afghans, the incident would have been swept under the carpet and forgotten.



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