

# US pilots face trial for Canadian "friendly fire" deaths in Afghanistan

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18 January 2003

In a case riddled with hypocrisy, the United States Air Force this week began prosecuting two F-16 pilots for killing four Canadian soldiers and injuring eight others in a "friendly fire" incident in Afghanistan last April 17. A preliminary military tribunal commenced taking evidence Tuesday at the Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.

The so-called "Article 32" hearing—expected to last for two weeks—will decide whether Major Harry Schmidt, 37, and Major William Umbach, 43, will be court-martialed on four charges of involuntary manslaughter and eight of aggravated assault. Schmidt is also charged with failing to exercise appropriate flight discipline and breaching rules of engagement. Umbach, the flight commander, is charged with failing to exercise appropriate flight command.

If found guilty, each could face up to 64 years in jail, dishonorable dismissal and the loss of all pay, allowances and retirement benefits.

It is the first time that the US Air Force has filed criminal charges against pilots for combat actions. Right-wing and media commentators have denounced the trial for setting a dangerous precedent that will cause American soldiers to think twice before opening fire in a war zone. According to *USA Today*, "Some military experts wonder how it might affect troop morale, especially among the National Guard and Reserve units expected to account for about half of the 200,000-250,000 US forces in the region for a possible war against Iraq."

Clearly, top-level decisions have been made at the Pentagon and in the White House to pursue the charges nevertheless. Apart from injured Canadian soldiers, who described the deaths and injuries caused when Schmidt dropped a 247-kilogram, laser-guided bomb on them, the first prosecution witness was a senior US officer. Col. Lawrence Stutzriem, deputy director of air force air operations in Afghanistan, was on duty at the Coalition Air Operations Centre (CAOC), based in Saudi Arabia, on the night the accident happened at the US-controlled Tarnak Farms training area near Kandahar.

Stutzriem strenuously defended the military's war zone procedures and accused the pilots of disregarding them. Stutzriem's testimony was entirely in line with the findings of twin US-Canadian military investigations, which recommended

the charges. He described as "extremely unusual" Schmidt's request to use 20-mm cannon fire to "strafe" ground forces he thought were attacking him and Umbach, who was flying alongside in another F-16. Stutzriem said he heard an air controller advising Schmidt to hold fire while they checked into reported surface-to-air fire, but within three minutes Schmidt declared self-defense and dropped his bomb.

"There was nothing CAOC could do for them [the Canadian soldiers]," Stutzriem testified. The air crew "was in complete control of the situation." Stutzriem also said he would have expected a skilled aviator such as Schmidt, a Top Gun fighter pilot school instructor, to have known about the Tarnak Farms firing range without having to be briefed in advance.

Those killed were Sgt. Marc Leger, 29, Cpl. Ainsworth Dyer, 24, Pte. Richard Green, 21, and Pte. Nathan Smith, 27. All were members of Alpha Company, the third battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, who had been engaged in a live-fire exercise at Tarnak Farms. Many of their relatives are at Barksdale watching the hearing on close-circuit TV in a holding room on the base, separated from families of the accused pilots, who are watching elsewhere.

The official report of the incident that night is 4,000 pages, but the US military's board of inquiry released only a 56-page summary. If the declassified summary is to be believed, there seems little doubt that the pilots were at least partly responsible for the deaths. They had been flying at 23,000 feet, far above the 600-foot range of the small arms that the Canadian soldiers were firing. Instead of evading any danger by climbing in altitude, and then waiting for confirmation before unloading their bomb, they simply assumed—no doubt in line with the general conduct of the war in Afghanistan—that the people in their sights were armed supporters of the ousted Taliban government.

Yet, it is also obvious that the airmen have been made scapegoats by the US military and the Bush administration. The official report itself acknowledges that the pilots were never told that the Canadians were training with live ammunition because the command center did not require such exercises to be reported. No one, including the Canadian commander on the Airborne Warning and Communications System (AWACS) jet that provided traffic control for the pilots, knew what the

Canadians were doing on the ground.

Moreover, Schmidt and Umbach were nearing the end of what would be a 20-hour shift, despite Air Force regulations limiting shifts to no more than 12 hours. They also wore night-vision goggles, which can distort peripheral vision and depth perception.

But perhaps the most damaging revelation is that the Air Force gave the pilots Dexedrine, the stimulant dexamphetamine, allegedly as part of a “fatigue management” program for their long flights from Kuwait to Afghanistan and back. There were also “no-go pills,” usually the depressant Ambien, to help them sleep. The investigative report said the pills were “not a factor,” but experts have questioned that conclusion.

According to Harvard University neurology professor Clifford Saper, the drug “may make a pilot misjudge his abilities or a situation.” The military maintains that the pills help keep pilots alert, but amphetamines are not approved by the US Food and Drug Administration to combat fatigue and are listed by the Drug Enforcement Administration as a Schedule Two Narcotic, in the same category as Cocaine.

Amphetamines are known on the street as “uppers” or “speed” and are addictive. In an investigative report, the American ABC television network said there were reports that during the Gulf War, American pilots became psychologically addicted to the “go pills.” Yet, the report claimed, the Air Force has informed pilots they could be considered unfit to fly certain missions if they did not voluntarily take the pills.

Dr. Robert DuPont, a former White House drug czar and a leading US authority on drug addiction, told ABC: “It’s a frightening concept to me from my experience in dealing with amphetamines to have it as a routine activity... people who get strung out on amphetamines are usually crazy. They’re paranoid, they stop eating. Their judgment is impaired and they do very bad things. They are among the sickest of all drug addicts.”

As the hearing opened, there was further evidence of a whitewash to protect more senior officers. There were media reports of a leaked protest note by Col. David Nichols, commander of the 332nd Air Expeditionary Group, which included Schmidt and Umbach. In his memo, written last July, Nichols stated that after earlier “friendly fire” casualties he and other officers had called the CAOC “over 100 times” to express concerns over the lack of information given to pilots about where allied troops were deployed. Nichols said the CAOC ignored “repeated telephone calls and e-mails” and refused “to accept inputs or even listen to concerns from Commanders and Aircrews in the field.”

For raising these concerns, Nichols was reprimanded by investigators for breeding a “climate of mistrust” within his unit.

Apart from the protection of higher officers, the pilots have been targeted for unusually harsh treatment for definite political

reasons. The first is to cover up the roots of such reckless conduct—the military aggression unleashed by the US against the people of Afghanistan.

The use of disorienting stimulant drugs in and of itself ensures that there will be scores of mistaken targets. It underscores the cynicism and deceit behind Washington’s claims that the military takes great care to avoid civilian casualties.

Estimates of innocent civilian casualties from the US war in Afghanistan number as many as several thousand, with the vast majority of incidents remaining uninvestigated. Even where they have been acknowledged, the victims have been treated with contempt. After a bomb struck a wedding in Uruzgan province on July 1, killing 48 civilians and wounding 118 others, the families were promised a total of about \$18,500—\$200 for each individual killed and \$75 for each wounded person.

In another documented incident, in October 2001, US bombers struck a Red Cross compound in Kabul twice in 10 days, killing one woman and injuring three others. No charges have been laid in these cases.

A clear double standard is on display. A day after the wedding bombing, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld flatly declared such casualties to be inevitable. “It’s going to happen. It always has, and I’m afraid it always will.” But the death of four Canadian soldiers has galvanised the Pentagon into staging a highly-publicised trial.

The second reason for this hypocrisy is to assist the Canadian government of Prime Minister Jean Chretien to overcome popular hostility to its planned participation in a US-led invasion of Iraq. The deaths caused an outcry in Canada, with one media poll finding that 85 percent of people thought the Liberal government should demand compensation if American pilots were at fault.

One final feature of this affair must be noted. For all the glorification by the US government and media of US troops as heroic combatants in the “war on terrorism,” there is, in reality, little genuine official concern for the fate of US soldiers. Schmidt and Umbach were both “Top Gun” pilots, regarded as among the cream of the crop of US combat fliers. As their experience demonstrates, American soldiers are drugged-up, brutalised and turned into trained killers. But once they have served their purpose, or otherwise become expendable, they can quickly become “collateral damage” in Washington’s diplomatic maneuvers and its political and propaganda war.



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