

Three British soldiers killed by US friendly fire in Afghanistan

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Three British soldiers were killed in southern Afghanistan on Thursday by “friendly fire” after an American F15E fighter plane dropped a 500-pound bomb on their position in the Helmand province at around 18:30 local time.

Privates Aaron McClure, Robert Foster and John Thrumble were with the 1st Battalion, The Royal Anglian Regiment. Two of the fatalities were teenagers, on their first tour of duty in Afghanistan. Their deaths are the worst “friendly fire” incident involving British soldiers since 1991. Since 1990, “blue-on-blue” incidents involving US troops have resulted in the deaths of 12 British servicemen in Iraq.

According to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) the incident happened when UK forces came under attack while on a daily mission northwest of a dam construction project in Jajaki and radioed for close air support (CAS). Two US F15E aircraft were detailed to provide support to the British troops and were given the coordinates of the Afghan fighters. The planes then dropped the bomb killing the three soldiers, who were declared dead at the scene. Two other soldiers were badly injured and were flown to a medical centre at Camp Bastion for treatment.

The fatalities bring to 73 the total number of reported deaths of British forces in Afghanistan since operations began in November 2001. Of these, 50 were killed in action while the other 23 died from illness, accidents or injuries not from combat. The 7,000 British troops in Afghanistan are centred mainly in the Helmand province in the south of the country.

The deaths of the soldiers at the hands of US aircraft are believed to be the second incident of its kind involving British troops in Afghanistan. In December Royal Marine Jonathan Wrigley, 21, is believed to have been killed as the result of being fired on by a US A-10 “Tankbuster” fighter plane. The MoD is currently investigating the circumstances surrounding his death. At the time, a

British soldier who witnessed that attack said, “I saw it. It was the A-10. I was five feet away. We called in a strike on the next trench. Then I saw it swooping toward us. I will never forget that noise. It was horrible.”

Such incidents demonstrate the increasing recklessness of the US military in Afghanistan. In 2002, four Canadian soldiers were killed when an American F-16 pilot on a night patrol dropped a 500-pound bomb near the southern city of Kandahar. In August 2006, a bomb dropped by a US warplane killed 10 Afghan police officers on a patrol in the southeast of the country.

These incidents have led to criticism of US operations and tactics by the British military. According to a report in the *New York Times* earlier this month, an unnamed senior British officer revealed that such were the differences in the approach of how to deal with the situation in Afghanistan that he had asked American Special Forces teams to pull out of the town of Sangin in Helmand. The officer stated that the actions of the US military were causing deaths and undermining any local support for the British troops.

In order to limit the damage from such an open attack on the US military, British Defence Secretary Des Browne issued a statement that the views were those of a single officer. Browne said, “It is not the view of the alliance. These things can be said in the heat of battle.”

The latest attack has caused alarm and consternation among British troops, according to reports. The August 24 *Times* cited comments expressing incredulity regarding the US air attacks. One soldier said, “I just can’t figure out how this has happened. How do you tell the families they were killed by supposed allies?”

Another added, “Whenever I hear we have American jets overhead I get f***ing worried. They just don’t seem to know what they are doing a lot of the time.”

Another said, “They have a different approach to us, they fire first and think later.”

“Here we are fighting the Taliban and they (US warplanes) are dropping bombs on us,” said another. “They are meant to have the best equipment, yet this still happens time and time again. You have to wonder what they are doing.”

Last month a *Times* reporter visited Sangin and was told by British soldiers that tensions resulting from the US military approach were causing problems for the British operation. One soldier commented, “They have a different approach to us, if we get in an ambush we pull back and assess the situation. They try and shoot their way through it and kill as many people as possible.”

Professor Sheila Bird of the Medical Research Council found that the rate of incidents of “friendly fire” have been three times higher for non-US coalition forces than for US forces. British troops had the highest ratio by far of troops killed in such incidents to numbers on the ground. She concluded, “The present rates in both theatres [Iraq and Afghanistan] are what you would expect for major hostilities, rather than the low-intensity warfare that the fighting is portrayed as being.”

The increase in the number “friendly fire” deaths is a clear indication of a sharp escalation in the war in Afghanistan. The official portrayal of an Afghanistan on the verge of “stability” is starkly contradicted by senior military figures such as General Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the British Army, who wrote recently, “We now have almost no capability to react to the unexpected.” Reinforcements for emergencies or for operations in Iraq or Afghanistan were “now almost nonexistent,” he added.

An August 26 *Sunday Times* article, “Bombed by their allies,” quoted the views of Brigadier John Lorimer, commander of the British taskforce in Afghanistan. Lorimer said that the British Army was completely reliant on US air support. “I can’t even begin to count the number of close air support missions that have been flown by American, UK and other coalition air missions in support of us in the past four-and-a-half months,” he said. “It is a daily occurrence and I can categorically say that American aircraft by dropping bombs have saved the lives of hundreds of British troops. Close air support plays an absolutely vital role in support to troops on the ground. We simply could not exist without it.”

In ominous tones, the Brigadier concluded, “This is hard-core, in-yer-face infantry fighting at its most visceral. This is soldiers on the ground closing with the enemy as their forefathers have done many years before. We should not dress it up. We are at war and we are fighting and mistakes can and will be made.”

Whilst British government war spending is now running at a level of £80 million a month, virtually nothing has been done to improve battlefield recognition systems. In 2002, a National Audit Officer Report on Ministry of Defence attempts to improve combat identification criticised the government for delays in the implementation of a £400 million “identification friend or foe system.” The report noted that this system was still not fully compatible with the systems of other NATO countries or Britain’s potential coalition partners.

The report summarised that while more needed to be done, “History shows that fratricide is an unavoidable feature of warfare.”

In the same year, the Public Accounts Committee attacked the MoD for being slow in developing “combat identification” systems. The committee said, “The department has only just approved a policy paper on combat identification, and many of the solutions required to implement that policy are years away from fruition.”

The following year, Lt.-Col. Andrew Larpent, who in 1991 had been the commander of nine British soldiers killed by US “friendly fire” in the first Iraq war, accusing the MoD of “serious negligence” in failing to introduce an identification system. Further criticism of the government came earlier this year from the Public Accounts Committee, which stated that critical equipment for identifying troop formations had been “delayed, deferred or re-scoped.” The committee report revealed that a “Battle Target Identification programme” slated for introduction last year was now unlikely to be available until the next decade.



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