

Military hearings on Afghanistan “kill team” begin

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Pre-trial military hearings began September 27 into atrocities committed by US Army soldiers over the past year in Kandahar, Afghanistan. In all, twelve soldiers face 76 charges, including murder, assault, dismembering corpses, filing false reports, drug abuse, and other crimes.

Five of the soldiers were arrested in June for targeting civilians at random while out on patrol, killing them, then covering up the crimes by planting weapons on the victims, falsifying paperwork, and lying to superior officers.

The soldiers belong to the platoon of the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division (now known as the 2nd Stryker Brigade), stationed at the time of the killings at Forward Operating Base Ramrod in Kandahar province. The brigade saw heavy fighting in southern Afghanistan from the time it was deployed there in July 2009, and 33 members died in combat over the year.

Working under Staff Sergeant Calvin Gibbs, the highest ranking of those charged, soldiers on the so-called kill team also posed for photos with corpses, and kept human bones as souvenirs. One member of the platoon who became aware of the activities was assaulted and threatened with death, apparently for fear he would inform higher-ranking officers, as he ultimately did.

The abuse of prescription drugs and hashish was widespread among the troops. Psychological problems, traumatic brain injuries, and post-traumatic stress disorder were also rampant throughout the brigade. Two of the five soldiers involved in the kill team, including the 25-year-old Gibbs, were on their third combat deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, and had been involved in the wars since 2004. Gibbs allegedly bragged to fellow soldiers about how easily he got away with committing atrocities in Iraq in 2004.

The five are currently being held at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Tacoma, Washington, where the military pre-trial, or Article 32 hearing, is being held to determine formal charges.

Testimony Monday centered on Specialist Jeremy Morlock, 22, who faces three charges of premeditated murder. Along with the four other soldiers who participated in the killings, he could face the death penalty if convicted. All five of the soldiers deny the charges.

According to the Army charge sheet, Morlock was involved in murders committed in a four-month period earlier this year. On January 15, Gul Mudin was killed “by means of throwing a fragmentary grenade at him and shooting him with a rifle,” which Morlock and Pfc. Andrew Holmes, 19, carried out under the direction of Gibbs.

Morlock is also charged with involvement in the murders of Marach Agha on February 22 and Mullah Adahdad on May 2, along with Gibbs, 22-year-old Spc. Adam Winfield, and 29-year-old Spc. Michael Wagon II. After the victims were killed, “drop weapons” not of US origin were placed at the scene to make it look as though the men were insurgents.

Morlock faces five other charges, including conspiracy to commit premeditated murder, assaulting another soldier, using hashish, violating a lawful general order, and trying to impede an investigation. (See, “The twelve soldiers charged in atrocity and cover-up”)

Morlock did not testify on Monday; of 18 military witnesses called on to testify, all but four invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination, including the lieutenant who commanded the platoon. Coinciding with the hearing, however, a videotape of Morlock describing the killings was aired widely on

television. Morlock's defense team wants the video withheld from evidence in the hearings.

The video was taken in May by Army investigators in Afghanistan, who detained Morlock as he was traveling from the operating base to receive mental health treatment in Germany. His statements, delivered without apparent emotion, characterized Gibbs as the mastermind of the murders. "So, we identify a guy, and Gibbs makes a comment like, 'Hey, you guys wanna, you guys wanna wax this guy or what?'" he said. "And you know, he set it up, like, he grabbed the dude."

Acknowledging that the Afghan civilian was fully cooperating and unarmed, Morlock explained, "We had this guy by the compound, so Gibbs walked him out, and set him in place and said 'sit here.'"

"You know, he pulled out one of his grenades, an American grenade, you know, popped it, throws the grenade, and then you know, tells me, Winfield, 'Alright dude,' you know, 'Wax this guy. You know, kill this guy, kill this guy.'"

After the January killing, Spc. Winfield contacted his parents and told them to report the crime. In an interview with ABC News, Winfield's parents said their son feared for his life. They called six different Army offices, as well as Florida Senator Bill Nelson, to report the atrocity and plead for help. According to Chris Winfield, a sergeant at Fort Lewis told them, "You know, it's a terrible situation, but from our end, it's a he-said, she-said conversation and there's nothing we can do about it."

In the video interview with Morlock, an investigator can be heard asking, "Did you think he [Gibbs] was serious about discussions about he may have to take out Winfield?" Morlock responded, "Oh fuck yeah, for sure, definitely." The investigator asked, "So you didn't take that as a joke, or like maybe it was just bullshit, or he was just talking, or...?" Morlock answered, "He doesn't bullshit. He doesn't need to."

The criminal conduct of the soldiers is the product of the criminal nature of the war itself. As in Iraq, soldiers in Afghanistan are charged with carrying out a brutal colonial occupation, which entails suppressing a population that is naturally hostile to their presence. Encouraged to dehumanize the population, exposed to both relentless chauvinist propaganda and traumatic psychological experiences, many soldiers see the entire population of the country as the enemy.



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