

Afghan “kill team” soldier sentenced to 24 years in prison for murder

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25 March 2011

Jeremy Morlock, a 23-year-old Army specialist, was sentenced to 24 years in prison on Wednesday after pleading guilty to the murders of three unarmed Afghan civilians last year. Morlock was the first to face court-martial at the Washington state Joint Base Lewis-McChord in a war crimes trial against a five-member “kill team” that murdered civilians for sport.

Morlock was found guilty of three counts of premeditated murder and one count each of conspiracy, obstructing justice, and illegal drug use. The sentence was handed down by Lt. Col. Kwasi Hawks as part of a plea bargain that the soldier, who had faced life in prison, agreed to in exchange for testifying against his co-defendants in the case.

The Tacoma, Washington *News Tribune* reported March 24 that as part of the plea deal, Morlock will not even be discharged from the military; rather, “he’ll be demoted to private, will forfeit his pay, and could apply for parole in as few as seven years, his attorney said.”

Morlock told Lt. Col. Hawks that the killings were non-combat and pre-meditated. “The plan was to kill people, sir,” the soldier stated. He apologized to fellow soldiers, the families of victims, and “the people of Afghanistan themselves,” adding, “I lost my moral compass.”

Four other soldiers also charged with murder in the case—26-year-old Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs, 22-year-old Spc. Adam Winfield, 19-year-old Pfc. Andrew Holmes, and 29-year-old Spc. Michael Wagnon—are to face court martial in the coming months.

Seven other soldiers are charged with lesser crimes including conspiracy to cover up the killings by filing false reports and planting weapons on the victims, mutilating the corpses, keeping body parts and photographs as mementos, firing on Afghan farmers,

assault on would-be whistle-blowers, and drug use. Taken together, the 12 soldiers were charged on 76 counts related to the killings and cover-ups.

The Army has strained to conceal facts and evidence in the case, including thousands of photographs collected by unit soldiers. On Monday, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* announced it had acquired some 4,000 images and published three. (See, “Photos released of atrocities by US ‘kill team’ in Afghanistan”) One of the photos shows Morlock grinning and holding up the head of an unarmed farmer, 37-year-old Gul Mudin, whom the soldiers had just slaughtered in front of the man’s son. The murder, on January 15, 2010, was the first of at least three others that Morlock and his co-defendants are charged with in the first five months of that year.

Other accounts by witnesses and soldiers have suggested that the unit may have killed other civilians between January and May 2010. (See, “More revelations into US military atrocities in Afghanistan”)

Evidence also suggests that the Army brass were aware of the killings and other crimes well before the unit came under investigation in the summer of 2010. Spc. Winfield asserts that he alerted officers higher in the chain of command than Staff Sgt. Gibbs at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ramrod. In a Facebook chat with his parents February 14, just a month after Gul Mudin was murdered, Winfield commented, “Pretty much the whole platoon knows about it. It’s okay with all of them pretty much. Except me.... I want to do something about it [but] the only problem is I don’t feel safe here telling anyone.”

Explaining that the chain-of-command was indifferent to the atrocity, Winfield wrote, “I talked to someone and they told me this stuff happens all the time and that when we get back there is always

someone that spills the beans so it normally works its way out.” When his father asked, “No one else thought it was wrong?” Winfield replied, “No, everyone just wants to kill people at any cost, they don’t care, the Army is full of a bunch of scumbags, I realized.” After being stonewalled by officers, Winfield relinquished his duties as team leader. “I stepped down,” he wrote. “I cannot be a leader in a platoon that allows this to happen.”

Immediately after the online exchange, phone records show that Winfield’s parents alerted multiple military officials at Joint Base Lewis-McChord as well as the office of US Senator Bill Nelson. The military continues to deny having received any warning of the crimes.

Fearing a popular backlash both within Afghanistan and internationally as happened with the exposure of atrocities at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, the military and Obama administration have sought to present the war crimes in Afghanistan as the product of “a few bad apples.” The depravity of the individuals who carried out the killings, however, can only be understood as a product of the policy of colonial war and the aims of the American ruling class itself.

All were part of a company of the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, which was deployed to Kandahar province in June 2009 as part of the Obama administration’s Afghanistan surge. The unit, stationed at FOB Ramrod, was responsible for putting down the considerable and growing resistance of the Afghan population to US occupation in the explosive border region near Pakistan.

A great many of the soldiers in the company, including Morlock and the accused ringleader of the kill team, Staff Sgt. Gibbs, had already served multiple deployments and were sent back into combat despite evident signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric problems. Abuse of opium and hashish—along with military-issued anti-depressants, muscle relaxants, and other prescription drugs—was rampant, and widely known, in the company.

The kill team atrocities are of a piece with the overarching policy of the occupation. Overseen by Obama, 2010 marked the bloodiest year of the decade-long war, with thousands of Afghan civilians killed and many more wounded. Military raids, drone attacks, and other offensives have not only increased many times over in

Afghanistan, but have expanded across the border into Pakistan.

A recent investigation by Britain’s Channel 4 found major increases in casualties in southern Afghanistan. In Kandahar, the International Committee of the Red Cross-supported Mirwais Hospital registered a 163 percent increase in the number of wounded civilians it treated in the first ten months of 2010—to 3,056, up from 1,159 in all of 2009. Hospitals in nearby Helmand province also reported substantial increases, even as the war prevented many patients, including those in need of non-combat illnesses and injuries, from reaching the hospitals for care.

Overall, civilian casualties in the country increased by one-third, according to United Nations data. Yet another report on 2010 civilian deaths by the Conflict Management Centre found that unmanned Predator drone attacks had killed at least 929 people, almost all of them civilians. (See, “Obama’s reign of terror in Afghanistan”)

The military has racked up thousands of other deaths under the specious terms “insurgents,” “suspected terrorists,” and “Taliban fighters.” Under the Obama presidency, activities of Special Forces units have increased six-fold. In the last three months of 2010, these assassination squads have carried out nearly 1,800 raids on the homes and workplaces of Afghans, killing or capturing 880 so-called “insurgent leaders,” along with killing 384 others and capturing 2,361 others. Those who are not killed are disappeared into prisons where they are subjected to the most brutal conditions, including torture by US and Afghan military police.



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