

Rolling Stone publishes photos of US war crimes in Afghanistan

Naomi Spencer
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Rolling Stone magazine has published a detailed report and images that document war crimes in Afghanistan committed by the so-called Army “kill team” in 2010. The exposé, “The Kill Team,” written by Mark Boal and published online March 27, includes 18 gruesome photographs and two videos taken by soldiers who took part in patrols in Kandahar province.

The images, which are far more graphic than the three published by the German magazine *Der Spiegel* last week, are part of a collection of some 4,000 photographs that the US military has sought to suppress for fear of a popular backlash—both domestically and in Afghanistan—against the war. *Rolling Stone* obtained more than 150 of the images.

In several photos, soldiers are shown grinning over the corpses of unarmed civilians. Images also show the hand of a victim whose finger had been removed as a memento by soldiers, a soldier hoisting up a severed head with a stick, badly mutilated body parts, and propped-up corpses bound together with signs hung on them in front of military vehicles.

Both the volume and content of the images reveal that the murder of innocent civilians in Kandahar was commonplace, widely known about, and celebrated. The evidence also suggests that the number of sport killings exceeded the four for which 12 members of the 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Division have been charged. Moreover, some of the images may document war crimes carried out by other brigades.

Primary responsibility for these crimes rests with the Obama administration, which is overseeing the occupation of Afghanistan, grotesquely titled “Operation Enduring Freedom,” and its escalation across the border into Pakistan. In the past year, military forces have carried out drone attacks and bloody night raids that have reaped a civilian death toll in the thousands.

The release of these images comes as the Obama administration, in collaboration with European powers, has launched another neocolonial war in Libya under the pretext of defending civilians.

Before the images were leaked to the media, the military sought to confiscate all files from soldiers and their relatives. As early as May of 2010, Afghanistan commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal and President Hamid Karzai were warned of the potential for a public explosion. As the photos begin to come to light, officials at the highest levels of the Pentagon and Obama administration have strained to present the crimes that are depicted as simply the work of a handful of depraved individuals.

The material exposes the war for what it is: a bloody colonial occupation of a country whose inhabitants, already living in dire poverty and oppression, have been subjected to relentless military brutality, dehumanization and grief.

As with the Iraqi Abu Ghraib torture photographs, the kill team images reflect an attitude that is deliberately cultivated among troops sent to carry out colonial occupation, which treats all members of the population—overwhelmingly and justifiably hostile to their occupiers—as

potential enemies, expendable targets. Soldiers are encouraged to regard the people of Afghanistan as less than human. That this finds its form in countless, almost unspeakable acts of barbarism is the rule, not the exception.

On March 23, 23-year-old Spc. Jeremy Morlock was sentenced to 24 years in prison after pleading guilty to the murder of three unarmed Afghan civilians as part of the “kill team.” Four other soldiers also charged with murder—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. (See “Afghan ‘kill team’ soldier sentenced to 24 years in prison for murder”)

Gibbs, who the Army accuses of being the mastermind in the kill team murders, is likely to face the stiffest sentence. He maintains that he is innocent and all the killings were “legitimate combat engagements.” “The Army wants Gibbs,” a defense lawyer in the proceedings at the Tacoma, Washington-area Joint Base Lewis-McChord commented to *Rolling Stone*. “They want to throw him in jail and move on.” No officers higher in rank than Gibbs have been charged either in the murders or for conspiracy to cover up the crimes.

Boal explains in his article how the soldiers systematically plotted to kill unarmed civilians. Among the crimes documented is the January 15, 2010 murder of an unarmed boy named Gul Mudin, in the farming village of La Mohammad Kalay, near Kandahar: “Reports by soldiers at the scene indicate that Mudin was about 15 years old.” Spc. Morlock and Pfc. Holmes admitted in sworn statements that they had “staged the killing to make it look like they had been under attack.”

Boal writes: “He held nothing in his hand that could be interpreted as a weapon, not even a shovel. The expression on his face was welcoming. ‘He was not a threat,’ Morlock later confessed.

“Morlock and Holmes called to him in Pashto as he walked toward them, ordering him to stop. The boy did as he was told. He stood still.

“The soldiers knelt down behind a mud-brick wall. Then Morlock tossed a grenade toward Mudin, using the wall as cover. As the grenade exploded, he and Holmes opened fire, shooting the boy repeatedly at close range with an M4 carbine and a machine gun.”

Other soldiers on patrol did not respond to the gunfire with an emergency response, since many knew the killing had been planned and that the victim posed no danger to the unit. Boal notes that when Morlock claimed Mudin had possessed a grenade, the top officer on patrol, Captain Patrick Mitchell, “thought there was something strange about Morlock’s story,” but rather than ordering soldiers to “render aid to Mudin, whom he believed might still be alive, and possibly a threat... he ordered Staff Sgt. Kris Sprague to ‘make sure’ the boy was dead. Sprague raised his rifle and fired twice.”

After the killing, a village elder approached the platoon and accused Morlock and Holmes of staging the attack; his protests were ignored. Soldiers brought another elder, Gul Mudin’s father, to the scene to

identify the body. “The father’s grief did nothing to interrupt the pumped-up mood that had broken out among the soldiers,” Boal writes. Morlock and Holmes took turns posing with the boy’s corpse, holding his head up by the hair.

For the platoon leader, Staff Sgt. Gibbs, Mudin’s death “was like another day at the office,” one soldier is quoted as saying. Gibbs started “messing with the kid,” moving his limbs and “acting like the kid was talking,” then took out a pair of medic’s shears he carried in his pocket and severed one of the boy’s fingers for Holmes to keep as a trophy. Afterward, one soldier recounted, “They were high-fiving each other about having killed the guy.”

The soldiers involved in Mudin’s murder were not disciplined in any way, and at least three other Afghan civilians were murdered in similar fashion over the next four months. Internal Army files reviewed by *Rolling Stone* indicate that the kill team operated “out in the open, in plain view of the rest of the company,” Boal notes. “Far from being clandestine, as the Pentagon has implied, the murders of civilians were common knowledge among the unit and understood to be illegal by ‘pretty much the whole platoon,’ according to one soldier who complained about them.” This stands starkly at odds with the efforts of the Army to portray the kill team as a “rogue unit” operating without the knowledge of officers up the chain of command.

Rolling Stone’s investigation also found that within days of Gul Mudin’s murder, the boy’s uncle “descended on the gates of FOB [Forward Operating Base] Ramrod, along with 20 villagers from La Mohammad Kalay, to demand an investigation.” Villagers said several children had witnessed the killing. Lt. Col. David Abrahams, who ranked second in command at the base, said that soldiers were re-interviewed, but there were “no inconsistencies in their story... It was cut and dry to us at the time.” Lower ranking officers who were in a position to have known about the sport killings were promoted, including some who soldiers say knew about the atrocities from the beginning.

The months before the January 15 killing were characterized by frustration, rampant drug abuse, and high casualty rates for the 5th Stryker Brigade. The brigade had been deployed to FOB Ramrod in June 2009 as part of Obama’s “surge” in southern Afghanistan to put down rising resistance in the Pakistan border region. The Stryker units were required to patrol roadways, where soldiers were at considerable risk of running over improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The brigade suffered some of the highest casualty rates of any in the course of the war. Many of the soldiers deployed to Kandahar were on their second, third, or even fourth tours of Afghanistan and Iraq, including some who had known psychiatric problems and serious drug addictions.

Boal notes that at a highly publicized photo-op at FOB Ramrod only a month before the first sport killing, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, held up the 5th Stryker Brigade as the poster child of progress in the war because of the strategy “to win hearts and minds by protecting the population. ‘If we’re killing local civilians... we’re going to strategically lose.’”

Soldiers at the base, who recognized such statements as nothing more than public relations propaganda, followed a diametrically different policy with regard to the local population. Staff Sgt. Gibbs, Morlock noted, “told everyone about this scenario by pitching it—by saying that all these Afghans were savages, and we had just lost one of our squad leaders because his legs got blown off by an IED.”

Another soldier recalled that scenarios of killing villagers were formulated incessantly. One, Boal writes, “was to throw candy out of a Stryker vehicle as they drove through a village and shoot the children who came running to pick up the sweets ... they also talked about a second scenario in which they ‘would throw candy out in front and in the rear of the Stryker; the Stryker would then run the children over.’” One plan involved waiting for an IED explosion, then using it as an “excuse to kill

civilians. That way, the soldiers reasoned, ‘you could shoot anyone in the general area and get away with it.’”

Less than two weeks after Gul Mudin was killed, the team stopped in the road during a night patrol and fired on an unarmed man, who was either mentally ill or deaf, when he did not follow their orders to lift up his shirt. After the killing, Spc. Michael Wagnon pulled out a piece of the man’s shattered skull to keep as a trophy. Officers up the chain of command, angry that the team would come under scrutiny for another civilian killing, ordered soldiers to search until they found a weapon. After planting a magazine from an AK-47, officers filed the report as a thwarted insurgent attack.

The next month, Gibbs dragged Marach Agha out of his hut in the village of Kari Kheyl, where he executed the man and planted a stolen AK-47 on his body.

On May 2 in the village of Qualaday, the team pulled an old man, Mullah Allah Dad, from a compound full of children, took him to a ditch and ordered him onto his knees. Then soldiers lobbed a grenade at the man and opened fire on him. “He seemed friendly,” Winfield recalled. “He didn’t seem to have any sort of animosity toward us.” After the murder, the team planted a Russian-made grenade on his mangled body and pushed away his distraught wife and children.

The killing provoked outrage among the villagers, who demanded an investigation. Rather than launching an inquiry, however, the unit’s commanding officer ordered in a team to convince some villagers to say they had seen Mullah Allah Dad with a grenade beforehand.

On multiple occasions, soldiers from the 5th Stryker Brigade randomly fired on farmers as they worked in their fields.

The *Rolling Stone* report also lists incidents in March 2010 that involved lobbing grenades from moving Stryker vehicles to make it look like the unit had come under attack, then opening fire on civilians.

On March 18 near Kandahar Airfield, Boal writes, “the unit drove past a populated area of the city. According to one soldier, Gibbs opened the hatch of the moving Stryker and tossed out a grenade. As it exploded with a loud bang, shrapnel hit the Stryker. ‘RPG!’ Gibbs shouted, ‘RPG!’ Sgt. Darren Jones, who had discussed faking attacks with Gibbs, opened fire indiscriminately on the local residents, who frantically scrambled to avoid the incoming rounds. Gibbs raised his M4 and laid down fire as well.” The platoon did not record how many casualties resulted from this or other similar incidents, and no charges have been filed in relation to the attacks.



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