

US Army clears “kill team” brigade commander of responsibility

Naomi Spencer
8 April 2011

An Army investigation into officers in charge of the brigade involved in murdering Afghan civilians for sport last year concluded that its commander had no responsibility for the atrocities.

Colonel Harry D. Tunnell IV was found to have pursued an aggressive “strike and destroy” strategy, but the Army determined it bore no “causal relation” to the rampant criminal activities of soldiers in the 5th Stryker Combat Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division while they were stationed in Kandahar province.

Tunnell was dispatched to Forward Operating Base Ramrod in the summer of 2009 as part of the Obama administration’s “surge,” meant to quell the resistance along the border with Pakistan.

The decision on Tunnell was contained in an internal report leaked to the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* and the *Washington Post*; both publications issued reports with a few selected quotes from the 532-page document.

Generals serving over the commander at FOB Ramrod complained that Tunnell “buted heads with superiors,” the *Washington Post* reported, and in particular with British Major Gen. Nick Carter, then overseeing operations in southern Afghanistan. Tunnell openly mocked the counterinsurgency strategy to “win hearts and minds” of the population. The brigade’s motto was “Strike—Destroy.”

In testimony in November, Tunnell stated, “US Army forces are not organized, trained or equipped to implement the [counterinsurgency] doctrine and Americans are not culturally suited to accept predominantly European colonial and imperial tactical ... and operational practices.”

As the base sustained heavy casualties, Tunnell directed forces to conduct “counter-guerrilla” operations during patrols, focusing on raids into the

small farming villages and lethal force. *Der Spiegel* cited testimony in the report that “Tunnell himself had spoken about ‘small kill teams,’ who were supposed to ruthlessly hunt down the Taliban.” One soldier quoted in the report characterized the policy after Tunnell outlined the strategy: “If I were to paraphrase the speech and my impressions about the speech in a single sentence, the phrase would be: ‘Let’s kill those motherfuckers.’”

The probe, completed in February by Brig. Gen. Stephen Twitty, recommends Tunnell be issued only a letter of admonition. Twitty recommends that two junior officers receive letters of reprimand, a more serious penalty in terms of the possibility of career advancement. Tunnell is currently working at an Army base in Kentucky.

The report was kept confidential and separate from ongoing courts martial against five members of the unit accused of war crimes.

Last month, Spc. Jeremy Morlock was sentenced to 24 years in prison for participating in the murder of three unarmed Afghan civilians between January and May 2010. The 23-year-old soldier was also found guilty of obstruction of justice and conspiracy to cover up the killings, along with illegal drug use.

Four other soldiers—29-year-old Spc. Michael Wagon, 22-year-old Spc. Adam Winfield, 19-year-old Pfc. Andrew Holmes, and the accused kill team ringleader, 26-year-old Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs—have also been charged with murder. Seven other unit members are charged with lesser, related crimes, including collecting thousands of photographs and videos of the killings and keeping body parts as trophies.

Because the case threatens to provoke public outrage against the military occupation, both within

Afghanistan and in the United States, the Army has sought to suppress details of the killings. On March 27, *Rolling Stone* magazine published 18 photographs and two videos alongside a lengthy exposé of the kill team's activities. (See, "Rolling Stone publishes photos of US war crimes in Afghanistan")

The material makes clear that far from being the product of a few low-ranking "rogue soldiers," as the Army insists, the atrocities were widely known about and encouraged by the culture of the military.

Moreover, the material strongly suggests that the charge sheet in the kill team case represents the tip of the iceberg, with some photos documenting mangled, unidentified corpses and bound bodies propped up before Stryker vehicles belonging to other platoons. Army documents obtained by *Rolling Stone* describe incidents in which soldiers lobbed grenades from their Stryker vehicles into heavily populated areas to make it appear the unit had come under attack, then opened fire on civilians.

The report on Tunnell also contains details of rampant drug use and sadism among soldiers at the base. According to the *Washington Post*, Col. Twitty found that "soldiers killed chickens and dogs for sport, and that one platoon member negligently fired a grenade launcher, destroying a protective barrier" at the base. "Soldiers also regularly scrawled the word 'Crusader' on portable bridges over Afghan irrigation ditches."

Military brass was well aware of the "counter-guerrilla" strategy being pursued at FOB Ramrod. The military newspaper *Army Times* carried a report on Col. Tunnell's leadership on December 21, 2009, just a few weeks before the first murder for which the soldiers are charged in the kill team case.

"In command briefings and interviews, 5/2 Stryker Brigade leaders are keen to give the impression that the unit has fully embraced the tenets of counterinsurgency doctrine," the *Times* noted. "There is much discussion of the governance, reconstruction and development fusion cell..."

However, one officer told the paper, "When we first started operation, we were told we were going to stay enemy-focused." Another officer commented, "That has absolutely been the message that's been delivered from higher." Tunnell told the *Army Times* that the base policy was drawn directly from the Army Field Manual

90-8.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact