

Army sergeant convicted as ringleader of Afghan war crimes

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12 November 2011

A military jury found Army Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs guilty of 15 criminal counts Thursday, including three counts of murder, in a case arising from the killing of three unarmed Afghan civilians whose bodies were mutilated to provide trophies for US soldiers.

The squad was from the Fifth Stryker Brigade, Second Army Division, based at Lewis-McChord Army Base near Seattle, Washington, where the court-martial was conducted.

Gibbs, the leader of the squad, was convicted on the basis of the testimony of a dozen soldiers, including several who had already pleaded guilty to murder and cover-up. The jury of three officers and two non-commissioned officers reached its verdict on 15 counts in barely five hours of deliberation.

The panel rejected Gibbs's own account, given in sworn testimony, that he had nothing to do with two of the deaths, and that the third killing, which he admitted, had been justified as a military response to an immediate threat.

Despite finding, in effect, that he had lied repeatedly under oath and thus showed no remorse for his actions, the jury sentenced him to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole after ten years, as requested by the defense. It rejected the call by the prosecution for a sentence of life without parole. Gibbs is given credit for 547 days of pretrial confinement, and thus would be eligible for parole in 2020, when he will be 35 years old.

In his testimony in his own defense, Gibbs admitted to taking body parts from all three murder victims, including the two he claimed not to have killed. Fingers, leg bones and a tooth were found in his possession. He made the chilling comparison of his actions to those of a hunter taking "antlers from a deer"—language that demonstrates the complete

dehumanization characteristic of the protracted warfare in Afghanistan.

Three soldiers who participated in the killings at Gibbs's direction testified against him. These included Private Jeremy Morlock, who pleaded guilty to all three killings, and was sentenced to 23 years in prison; Private Andrew Holmes, who pleaded guilty to one killing, and Spc. Adam Winfield, who pleaded guilty to one count of involuntary manslaughter and was sentenced to three years in prison.

A total of five other soldiers made up the core group that carried out the three killings in Afghanistan—in January, February and May of 2010. Spc. Michael Wagon, who did not testify, faces court-martial on murder charges next year. Other soldiers became aware of the killings after the fact and helped Gibbs in the cover-up, but later testified against him.

All the soldiers described Gibbs as the ringleader, who selected the victims—two farmers and a Muslim cleric—gave the orders to kill them, and supplied "drop weapons," including grenades and Kalashnikov rifles, to plant on the corpses in an effort to justify the killings as military operations.

Gibbs, a tall, beefy soldier with a commanding personal presence and a war record in Iraq, joined the squad in the fall of 2009, a few months before the killings took place. No officer has been prosecuted in the case. The commander of the brigade, Col. Harry D. Tunnell IV, was removed from command in the summer of 2010 but faced no charges.

The question of command-level responsibility was kept out of the prosecution case, although one of the soldiers involved, Winfield, called his parents after the first killing and passed on a warning to the military authorities that more killings were planned. Winfield's father called the Lewis-McChord base, but no action

was taken.

In his remarks to the sentencing hearing, Major Andre Leblanc, one of the prosecutors, cited Gibbs' claim that the people of Afghanistan "were all dirty savages." The officer remarked, "He is the savage, not the innocent Afghans he murdered. It is monstrous. What kind of savagery does it take to do this? To cut a finger off a victim and show it to people?"

While Major Robert Stelle, another prosecutor, claimed that Gibbs "betrayed his nation," by organizing and directing the killings, these actions actually flowed from the role of US imperialism in Afghanistan. Every colonial war in history has produced such atrocities against the "natives," carried out by the soldiers of the invading power.

Gibbs is guilty of doing on an individual basis—killing innocent men and cutting off fingers and other body parts as grisly trophies—what the US war machine generally does wholesale and remotely, using bombs, missiles and other powerful weaponry to kill and dismember the population of the country they are occupying.

His real crime, as far as the Pentagon and official Washington are concerned, is that he failed to cover up his actions successfully and thus dealt a blow to the propaganda campaign which portrays the US military as a force engaged in the "liberation" of the people of Afghanistan, rather than their oppression and slaughter.



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