

More revelations into US military atrocities in Afghanistan

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The deaths of at least seven civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq have been attributed to members of an Army platoon presently facing military pre-trial hearings for murder, mutilating corpses, assault, and other crimes.

Staff Sergeant Calvin Gibbs, who is accused by fellow soldiers of being the mastermind behind the formation of the “kill team,” is also under investigation for similar murders in Iraq, military documents obtained by the *Washington Post* reveal. Army documents also indicate that at least one other unarmed Afghan civilian was shot dead during the group’s killing spree.

Gibbs, 25, the highest ranking among those charged, and four other soldiers were arrested in June for the killing of three civilians in Kandahar. All deny the charges.

Seven other soldiers are being held for related offenses, including collecting body parts from victims, covering up the crimes, and assaulting a fellow soldier who reported rampant drug abuse in the platoon.

The 12, who together face 76 charges, are members of the 2nd Stryker Brigade (formerly named 5th Stryker Brigade) of the 2nd Infantry Division out of the Tacoma, Washington, Joint Base Lewis-McChord. All are currently being held at the base, where the military pretrial, or Article 32 hearing, is being conducted to determine formal charges.

The group is charged with participated in the killing of randomly targeted, unarmed men by shooting and hurling grenades, then mutilating and dismembering the bodies. One soldier is charged with stabbing a corpse. Soldiers posed with photographs of the corpses and severed off fingers, and cut out leg bones, skulls, and teeth as souvenirs of the atrocities. According to a fellow soldier, Gibbs had been collecting finger bones to make a necklace.

The first hearing considered the role of 22-year-old Specialist Jeremy Morlock on Monday. Along with 19-year-old Pfc. Andrew Holmes, Morlock is charged with participating in the January 15 killing of Gul Mudin “by means of throwing a fragmentary grenade at him and shooting him with a rifle,” under the direction of Gibbs.

Gibbs and 29-year-old Spc. Michael Wagon are charged with shooting dead Marach Agha on February 22. After the murder, the group planted a Kalashnikov next to the body to make it look as though the victim were an insurgent who presented a threat.

Gibbs and Spc. Adam Winfield are charged with killing Mullah Adahdad on May 2 by shooting and attacking the cleric with a grenade. Gibbs is charged with collecting Russian-made “drop weapons” to place at the scenes of the murders in order to justify the attacks as self-defense.

The documents obtained by the *Washington Post* describe the killing of a fourth civilian on January 28. Two fellow soldiers told agents of the Army Criminal Investigations Command that the group came upon an unarmed man who was sitting along Highway 1 in Kandahar. Gibbs and another soldier fired on him, then others opened fire, killing him. Afterward, the group planted an AK-47 magazine next to the body “to give the appearance the Afghan was an insurgent.”

Investigators noted that Gibbs had a tattoo on his left calf consisting of a pair of crossed pistols surrounded by six skulls that he indicated was “his way of keeping count of the kills he had.” Three skulls, colored in red, represented Iraq deaths, he told investigators, and the three others, in blue, were Afghanistan deaths.

On his third deployment, Gibbs joined the platoon in November 2009 as a replacement for a wounded sergeant. Soldiers told investigators that he soon began

intimating that he had killed innocent civilians for fun in Iraq, and that it was “easy.” In one instance in Kirkuk in 2004, Gibbs and other soldiers opened fire on an Iraqi family as they drove by in a car, killing a mother, father, and child. Another child was wounded.

The brigade was deployed to southern Afghanistan in June 2009 as part of the Obama administration’s troop buildup along the explosive Pakistan border. Stationed at Forward Operating Base Ramrod, the soldiers engaged in heavy combat against the population, killing thousands and suffering high casualties. During its yearlong deployment, the brigade saw 35 soldiers killed in combat, six more killed in accidents, and 239 others wounded.

Post-traumatic stress disorders and other psychological problems were rampant among the troops at the base, as was drug abuse. Soldiers who had suffered traumatic brain injuries, including Spc. Morlock, were kept on active duty. Military-issued antidepressants, muscle relaxants and other prescription drugs were widely used, along with opium and hashish.

The murders are the worst atrocities committed by US troops against the Afghan population to come to light. Evidence suggests, however, that the killings were widely known within the platoon. Several soldiers told investigators that Sgt. Gibbs displayed the severed fingers to intimidate unit members into maintaining silence over the killings.

The Army has confiscated dozens of digital photographs of soldiers posing with corpses that were passed around and stored on hard-drives. Fearing that the images will inflame popular outrage against the Afghanistan occupation—much like the infamous images exposing US torture of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004—the military is refusing to publicly release them, and has restricted the ability of defense teams to view them in pre-trial hearings.

Other evidence suggests the Army was notified of the January 15 murder by Spc. Winfield, who was present on the patrol at the time of the killing. Winfield, who is charged in the May 2 killing, contacted his parents online February 14 and told them to notify Base Lewis-McChord officers. He wrote, “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.”

Winfield explained that officers were indifferent to the killing, writing, “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.”

Winfield’s father, expressing shock, 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.” He said he relinquished his duties as team leader in the platoon. “I stepped down, I cannot be a leader in a platoon that allows this to happen.”

Winfield wrote, “There are no more good men left here.... I started to think whether I should quit and just give up because it’s stupid to get smoked in Afghanistan. The Army really let me down when I thought I would come out here to do good, maybe make some change in this country.... I find out that it’s all a lie.”

Winfield’s parents made multiple phone calls to Army offices, four to Base Lewis-McChord on February 14, and also contacted Florida Senator Bill Nelson asking for an investigation. The Army claims they have no record of the calls.



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