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The Kill Team

How U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan murdered innocent civilians and mutilated their corpses – and how their officers failed to stop them. Plus: An exclusive look at the war crime photos censored by the Pentagon



Cpl. Jeremy Morlock with Staff Sgt. David Bram

3/27/2011

Early last year, after six hard months soldiering in Afghanistan, a group of American infantrymen reached a momentous decision: It was finally time to kill a *haji*.

Among the men of Bravo Company, the notion of killing an Afghan civilian had been the subject of countless conversations, during lunchtime chats and late-night bull sessions. For weeks, they had weighed the ethics of bagging "savages" and debated the probability of getting caught. Some

of them agonized over the idea; others were gung-ho from the start. But not long after the New Year, as winter descended on the arid plains of Kandahar Province, they agreed to stop talking and actually pull the trigger.

Bravo Company had been stationed in the area since summer, struggling, with little success, to root out the Taliban and establish an American presence in one of the most violent and lawless regions of the country. On the morning of January 15th, the company's 3rd Platoon – part of the 5th Stryker Brigade, based out of Tacoma, Washington – left the mini-metropolis of tents and trailers at Forward Operating Base Ramrod in a convoy of armored Stryker troop carriers. The massive, eight-wheeled trucks surged across wide, vacant stretches of desert, until they came to La Mohammad Kalay, an isolated farming village tucked away behind a few poppy fields.

THE CENSORED IMAGES



PHOTOS: The War Crime Files



VIDEO: 'Death Zone'



VIDEO: 'Motorcycle Kill'

To provide perimeter security, the soldiers parked the Strykers at the outskirts of the settlement, which was nothing more than a warren of mud-and-straw compounds. Then they set out on foot. Local villagers were suspected of supporting the Taliban, providing a safe haven for strikes against U.S. troops. But as the soldiers of 3rd Platoon walked through the alleys of La Mohammad Kalay, they saw no armed fighters, no evidence of enemy positions. Instead, they were greeted by a frustratingly familiar sight: destitute Afghan farmers living without electricity or running water; bearded men with poor teeth in tattered traditional clothes; young kids eager for candy and money. It was impossible to tell which, if any, of the villagers were sympathetic to the Taliban. The insurgents, for their part, preferred to stay hidden from American troops, striking from a distance with IEDs.

While the officers of 3rd Platoon peeled off to talk to a village elder inside a compound, two soldiers walked away from the unit until they reached the far edge of the village. There, in a nearby poppy field, they began looking for someone to kill. "The general consensus was, if we are going to do something that fucking crazy, no one wanted anybody around to witness it," one of the men later told Army investigators.

The poppy plants were still low to the ground at that time of year. The two soldiers, Cpl. Jeremy Morlock and Pfc. Andrew Holmes, saw a young farmer who was working by himself among the spiky shoots. Off in the distance, a few other soldiers stood sentry. But the farmer was the only Afghan in sight. With no one around to witness, the timing was right. And just like that, they picked him for execution.

He was a smooth-faced kid, about 15 years old. Not much younger than they were: Morlock was 21, Holmes was 19. His name, they would later learn, was Gul Mudin, a common name in Afghanistan. He was wearing a little cap and a Western-style green jacket. 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.

Mudin buckled, went down face first onto the ground. His cap toppled off. A pool of blood congealed by his head.

The loud report of the guns echoed all around the sleepy farming village. The sound of such unexpected gunfire typically triggers an emergency response in other soldiers, sending them into full battle mode. Yet when the shots rang out, some soldiers didn't seem especially alarmed, even when the radio began to squawk. It was Morlock, agitated, screaming that he had come under attack. On a nearby hill, Spc. Adam Winfield turned to his friend, Pfc. Ashton Moore, and explained that it probably wasn't a real combat situation. It was more likely a staged killing, he said – a plan the guys had hatched to take out an unarmed Afghan without getting caught.

Back at the wall, soldiers arriving on the scene found the body and the bloodstains on the ground. Morlock and Holmes were crouched by the wall, looking excited. When a staff sergeant asked them what had happened, Morlock said the boy had been about to attack them with a grenade. "We had to shoot the guy," he said.

It was an unlikely story: a lone Taliban fighter, armed with only a grenade, attempting to ambush a platoon in broad daylight, let alone in an area that offered no cover or concealment. Even the top officer on the scene, Capt. Patrick Mitchell, thought there was something strange about Morlock's story. "I just thought it was weird that someone would come up and throw a grenade at us," Mitchell later told investigators.

But Mitchell did not order his men to render aid to Mudin, whom he believed might still be alive, and possibly a threat. Instead, he ordered Staff Sgt. Kris Sprague to "make sure" the boy was dead. Sprague raised his rifle and fired twice.

As the soldiers milled around the body, a local elder who had been working in the poppy field came forward and accused Morlock and Holmes of murder. Pointing to Morlock, he said that the soldier, not the boy, had thrown the grenade. Morlock and the other soldiers ignored him.

To identify the body, the soldiers fetched the village elder who had been speaking to the officers that morning. But by tragic coincidence, the elder turned out to be the father of the slain boy. His moment of grief-stricken recognition, when he saw his son lying in a pool of blood, was later

recounted in the flat prose of an official Army report. "The father was very upset," the report noted.

The father's grief did nothing to interrupt the pumped-up mood that had broken out among the soldiers. Following the routine Army procedure required after every battlefield death, they cut off the dead boy's clothes and stripped him naked to check for identifying tattoos. Next they scanned his iris and fingerprints, using a portable biometric scanner.

Then, in a break with protocol, the soldiers began taking photographs of themselves celebrating their kill. Holding a cigarette rakishly in one hand, Holmes posed for the camera with Mudin's bloody and half-naked corpse, grabbing the boy's head by the hair as if it were a trophy deer. Morlock made sure to get a similar memento.

No one seemed more pleased by the kill than Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs, the platoon's popular and hard-charging squad leader. "It was like another day at the office for him," one soldier recalls. Gibbs started "messaging around with the kid," moving his arms and mouth and "acting like the kid was talking." Then, using a pair of razor-sharp medic's shears, he reportedly sliced off the dead boy's pinky finger and gave it to Holmes, as a trophy for killing his first Afghan.

According to his fellow soldiers, Holmes took to carrying the finger with him in a zip-lock bag. "He wanted to keep the finger forever and wanted to dry it out," one of his friends would later report. "He was proud of his finger."

After the killing, the soldiers involved in Mudin's death were not disciplined or punished in any way. Emboldened, the platoon went on a shooting spree over the next four months that claimed the lives of at least three more innocent civilians. When the killings finally became public last summer, the Army moved aggressively to frame the incidents as the work of a "rogue unit" operating completely on its own, without the knowledge of its superiors. Military prosecutors swiftly charged five low-ranking soldiers with murder, and the Pentagon clamped down on any information about the killings. Soldiers in Bravo Company were barred from giving interviews, and lawyers for the accused say their clients faced harsh treatment if they spoke to the press, including solitary confinement. No officers were charged.

But a review of internal Army records and investigative files obtained by *Rolling Stone*, including dozens of interviews with members of Bravo Company compiled by military investigators, indicates that the dozen infantrymen being portrayed as members of a secretive "kill team" were operating out in the open, in plain view of the rest of the company. 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. Staged killings were an open topic of conversation, and at least one soldier from another battalion in the 3,800-man Stryker Brigade participated in attacks on unarmed civilians. "The platoon has a reputation," a whistle-blower named Pfc. Justin Stoner told the Army Criminal Investigation Command. "They have had a lot of practice staging killings and getting away with it."

From the start, the questionable nature of the killings was on the radar of senior Army leadership. Within days of the first murder, *Rolling Stone* has learned, Mudin's uncle descended on the gates of FOB Ramrod, along with 20 villagers from La Mohammad Kalay, to demand an investigation. "They were sitting at our front door," recalls Lt. Col. David Abrahams, the battalion's second in command. During a four-hour meeting with Mudin's uncle, Abrahams was informed that several children in the village had seen Mudin killed by soldiers from 3rd Platoon. The battalion chief ordered the soldiers to be reinterviewed, but Abrahams found "no inconsistencies in their story," and the matter was dropped. "It was cut and dry to us at the time," Abrahams recalls.

Other officers were also in a position to question the murders. Neither 3rd Platoon's commander, Capt. Matthew Quiggle, nor 1st Lt. Roman Ligsay has been held accountable for their unit's actions, despite their repeated failure to report killings that they had ample reason to regard as suspicious. In fact, supervising the murderous platoon, or even having knowledge of the crimes, seems to have been no impediment to career advancement. Ligsay has actually been promoted to captain, and a sergeant who joined the platoon in April became a team leader even though he "found out about the murders from the beginning," according to a soldier who cooperated with the Army investigation.

Indeed, it would have been hard not to know about the murders, given that the soldiers of 3rd Platoon took scores of photographs chronicling their kills and their time in Afghanistan. The photos, obtained by *Rolling Stone*, portray a front-line culture among U.S. troops in which killing Afghan civilians is less a reason for concern than a cause for celebration. "Most people within the unit disliked the Afghan people, whether it was the Afghan National Police, the Afghan National Army or locals," one soldier explained to investigators. "Everyone would say they're savages." One photo shows a hand missing a finger. Another depicts a severed head being maneuvered with a stick, and still more show bloody body parts, blown-apart legs, mutilated torsos. Several show dead Afghans, lying on the ground or on Stryker vehicles, with no weapons in view.

In many of the photos it is unclear whether the bodies are civilians or Taliban, and it is possible that the unidentified deaths involved no illegal acts by U.S. soldiers. But it is a violation of Army standards to take such photos of the dead, let alone share them with others. Among the soldiers, the collection was treated like a war memento. It was passed from man to man on thumb drives and hard drives, the gruesome images of corpses and war atrocities filed alongside clips of TV shows, UFC fights and films such as *Iron Man 2*. One soldier kept a complete set, which he made available to anyone who asked.

The collection also includes several videos shot by U.S. troops. In a jumpy, 30-minute clip titled "Motorcycle Kill," soldiers believed to be with another battalion in the Stryker Brigade gun down two Afghans on a motorcycle who may have been armed. One of the most chilling files shows two Afghans suspected of planting an IED being blown up in an airstrike. Shot through thermal imaging, the grainy footage has been edited into a music video, complete with a rock soundtrack and a title card that reads 'death zone.'

Even before the war crimes became public, the Pentagon went to extraordinary measures to suppress the photos – an effort that reached the highest levels of both governments. Gen. Stanley

McChrystal and President Hamid Karzai were reportedly briefed on the photos as early as May, and the military launched a massive effort to find every file and pull the pictures out of circulation before they could touch off a scandal on the scale of Abu Ghraib. Investigators in Afghanistan searched the hard drives and confiscated the computers of more than a dozen soldiers, ordering them to delete any provocative images. The Army Criminal Investigation Command also sent agents fanning out across America to the homes of soldiers and their relatives, gathering up every copy of the files they could find. The message was clear: What happens in Afghanistan stays in Afghanistan.

By suppressing the photos, however, the Army may also have been trying to keep secret evidence that the killings of civilians went beyond a few men in 3rd Platoon. In one image, two dead Afghans have been tied together, their hands bound, and placed alongside a road. A sign – handwritten on cardboard from a discarded box of rations – hangs around their necks. It reads "Taliban are Dead." The Pentagon says it is investigating the photos, but insists that there is little more investigators can do to identify the men. "It's a mystery," says a Pentagon spokesman. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure they know where to take it next. All we have is two apparently dead Afghans handcuffed to each other against a mile marker. We don't know much beyond that. For all we know, those two guys may have been killed by the Taliban for being sympathizers."

But such statements suggest that the Pentagon isn't following every lead. A Stryker vehicle in the photos, for example, bears identifying marks that are clearly visible in the image. And according to a source in Bravo Company, who spoke to Rolling Stone on the condition of anonymity, the two unarmed men in the photos were killed by soldiers from another platoon, which has not yet been implicated in the scandal.

"Those were some innocent farmers that got killed," the source says. "Their standard operating procedure after killing dudes was to drag them up to the side of the highway."

Army prosecutors insist that blame for the killings rests with a soldier near the bottom of the Stryker Brigade's totem pole: Calvin Gibbs, a three-tour veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan who served as a squad leader in 3rd Platoon. Morlock and five soldiers charged with lesser crimes have pleaded guilty in exchange for testifying against Gibbs, who faces life in prison for three counts of premeditated murder.

The 26-year-old staff sergeant has been widely portrayed as a sociopath of Mansonesque proportions, a crazed killer with a "pure hatred for all Afghans" who was detested and feared by those around him. But the portrait omits evidence that the Army's own investigators gathered from soldiers in Bravo Company. "Gibbs is very well-liked in the platoon by his seniors, peers and subordinates alike," Spc. Adam Kelly reported, adding that Gibbs was "one of the best NCOs I've ever had the pleasure of working with in my military career. I believe that because of his experience, more people came back alive and uninjured than would have without him having been part of the platoon." Another soldier described Gibbs as an "upbeat guy, very funny. He was one of those guys you could talk to about anything and he would make you feel better about the situation."

At six-feet-four and 220 pounds, Gibbs could certainly intimidate those around him. Growing up in a devout Mormon family in Billings, Montana, he had dropped out of high school to get an equivalency degree and enlist in the Army. He plunged into soldiering, accumulating a slew of medals in Iraq, where the line between legitimate self-defense and civilian deaths was often blurry at best. In 2004, Gibbs and other soldiers allegedly fired on an unarmed Iraqi family near Kirkuk, killing two adults and a child. The incident, which was not prosecuted at the time, is now under investigation by the Army.

Before he joined Bravo Company in November 2009, Gibbs worked on the personal security detail for one of the top commanders in Afghanistan, a controversial, outspoken colonel named Harry Tunnell. Tunnell, who at the time was the commander of 5th Stryker Brigade, openly mocked the military's approach to counterinsurgency – which emphasizes the need to win the support of local civilians – as better suited to a "social scientist." "Political correctness dictates that we cannot talk about the oppressive measures employed during successful counterinsurgency campaigns," he wrote. Tunnell also pushed his men to go after "guerrilla hunter killers," insisting that the enemy "must be attacked relentlessly."

When Gibbs left Tunnell's detail and arrived at the front, he quickly became an extreme version of a relentless attacker. After he took command, Gibbs put a pirate flag on his tent. "Hey, brother," he told a friend. "Come down to the line and we'll find someone to kill." A tattoo on his left shin featured a pair of crossed rifles offset by six skulls. Three of the skulls, colored in red, represented his kills in Iraq. The others, in blue, were from Afghanistan.

By the time Gibbs arrived, morale in the Stryker Brigade had hit rock bottom. Only four months earlier, the unit had been deployed to Afghanistan amid a chorus of optimism about its eight-wheeled armored vehicles, a technological advancement that was supposed to move infantry to the battlefield more quickly and securely, enabling U.S. troops to better strike against the Taliban. By December, however, those hopes had dissolved. The Taliban had forced the Strykers off the roads simply by increasing the size and explosive force of their IEDs, and the brigade had suffered terrible casualties; one battalion had lost more soldiers in action than any since the start of the war. Gibbs, in fact, had been brought in after a squad leader had his legs blown off by an IED.

The soldiers were bored and shellshocked and angry. They had been sent to Afghanistan as part of a new advance guard on a mission to track down the Taliban, but the enemy was nowhere to be found. "To be honest, I couldn't tell the difference between local nationals and combatants," one soldier later confessed. During the unit's first six months in Afghanistan, the Taliban evaded almost every patrol that 3rd Platoon sent out. Frustrations ran so high that when the unit came across the body of an insurgent killed by a helicopter gunship in November 2009, one soldier took out a hunting knife and stabbed the corpse. According to another soldier, Gibbs began playing with a pair of scissors near the dead man's hands. "I wonder if these can cut off a finger?" Gibbs asked.

The Pentagon's top command, rather than addressing the morale problems, actually held up the brigade as a media-worthy example of progress in the war. The month after the helicopter incident – only four weeks before the killings began – the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

Adm. Mike Mullen, paid a heavily publicized visit to the area. The military's strategy of counterinsurgency, he reminded members of 5th Stryker Brigade, required them to win hearts and minds by protecting the population. "If we're killing local civilians," he cautioned, "we're going to strategically lose."

Gibbs had a different idea about how to breathe new life into 3rd Platoon. Not long after he arrived, he explained to his fellow soldiers that they didn't have to wait passively to be attacked by the enemy's IEDs. They could strike back by hitting people in towns known to be sympathetic to the Taliban. "Gibbs 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," Morlock recalled. Killing an Afghan – any Afghan – became a way to avenge the loss.

The members of Bravo Company began to talk incessantly about killing Afghans as they went about their daily chores, got stoned or relaxed over a game of Warhammer. One idea, proposed half in jest, 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. According to one soldier, 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." Another elaborate plan involved waiting for an IED attack, then using the explosion as an excuse to kill civilians. That way, the soldiers reasoned, "you could shoot anyone in the general area and get away with it."

"We were operating in such bad places and not being able to do anything about it," Morlock said in a phone interview from the jail at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state. "I guess that's why we started taking things into our own hands."

After killing the Afghan boy at La Mohammad Kalay, members of 3rd Platoon were jubilant. "They were high-fiving each other about having killed the guy," one soldier recalled. They put the corpse in a black body bag and stowed it on top of their Stryker for the ride back to FOB Ramrod. No sooner had they arrived at the base than they were recounting the tale to soldiers they barely knew.

A few hours after the shooting, during a routine checkup at the base's clinic, Holmes and Morlock bragged about having killed an insurgent to Alyssa Reilly, a fair-skinned, blond medic who was popular among the men in the unit. Reilly later paid the soldiers a social visit, and they all sat around playing spades. When it came time for their wager, Morlock and Holmes said they would bet a finger. Then they tossed the finger that Gibbs had sliced from Mudin's body on the card pile. "I thought it was gross," Reilly told investigators.

Morlock was particularly eager to volunteer the truth to his fellow soldiers, evidently unconcerned about how they would react to his having murdered an unarmed Afghan. The same evening he shot Mudin, several members of Bravo Company convened in the privacy of a Stryker vehicle for a nightcap of hashish, a common activity among the unit. Hash supplied by Afghan translators was a major part of the daily lives of many soldiers; they smoked up constantly, getting high in their vehicles, their housing units, even porta-potties. Now, in the

tanklike interior of the Stryker, surrounded by its mesh of wires and periscopes and thermal-imaging computers, Morlock passed the hash and recounted the killing in detail, even explaining how he had been careful not to leave the grenade's spoon and pin on the ground, where they might have been used as evidence that a U.S. weapon had been involved in the attack. For the same reason, he'd also been careful to brush away traces of white explosive powder around Mudin's body.

Before the military found itself short of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, Morlock was the kind of bad-news kid whom the Army might have passed on. He grew up not far from Sarah Palin in Wasilla, Alaska; his sister hung out with Bristol, and Morlock played hockey against Track. In those days, he was constantly in trouble: getting drunk and into fights, driving without a license, leaving the scene of a serious car accident. Even after he joined the Army, Morlock continued to get into trouble. In 2009, a month before he deployed to Afghanistan, he was charged with disorderly conduct after burning his wife with a cigarette. After he arrived in Afghanistan, he did any drug he could get his hands on: opium, hash, Ambien, amitriptyline, flexeril, phenergan, codeine, trazodone.

As Morlock bragged about the killing, word of the murder spread back home to families and friends. Soldiers e-mailed photos to their buddies and talked about the killing during visits home. On February 14th, three months before the Army launched its investigation, Spc. Adam Winfield sent a Facebook message to his father, Chris, back in Cape Coral, Florida. A skinny, bookish 21-year-old, Winfield was pissed off at being disciplined by Gibbs. "There are people in my platoon that have gotten away with murder," he told his father. "Everyone pretty much knows it was staged. . . . They all don't care." Winfield added that the victim was "some innocent guy about my age, just farming."

During Facebook chats, Winfield continued to keep his father in the loop. "Adam told me that he heard the group was planning on another murder involving an innocent Afghanistan man," Chris Winfield, himself a veteran, later told investigators. "They were going to kill him and drop an AK-47 on him to make it look like he was the bad guy." Alarmed, the elder Winfield called the command center at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and told the sergeant on duty what was going on. But according to Winfield, the sergeant simply shrugged it off, telling him that "stuff like that happens" and that "it would be sorted out when Adam got home." Tragically, commanders at the base did nothing to follow up on the report.

Back in Afghanistan, Winfield was having second thoughts about reporting the incident. He believed the killings were wrong, but he had finally earned a place in the "circle of trust" erected by Gibbs, who had started off thinking of him as too "weak" to belong to the kill team. Reversing course, he begged his father to stop contacting the Army, saying that he feared for his life. Winfield said Gibbs had warned him that if he told anyone about the murder, he would "go home in a body bag." His father agreed to keep the matter quiet.

Given the lack of response from their superiors, the soldiers of 3rd Platoon now believed they could kill with impunity – provided they planted "drop weapons" at the scene to frame their victims as enemy combatants. The presence of a weapon virtually guaranteed that a shooting would be considered a legitimate kill, even under the stricter rules of engagement the military

had implemented as a key element of counterinsurgency. A drop weapon was the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card. And in the chaotic war zone, they were easy to find.

The military keeps close track of the weapons and ammunition it issues to soldiers, carefully documenting every grenade exploded, every magazine expended. So Gibbs made it his business to gather "off the books" weapons through a variety of channels. He got friendly with guys in the Afghan National Police and tried to trade them porn magazines in exchange for rocket-propelled grenades; he cajoled other units to give him munitions; he scrounged for broken and discarded UXO – unexploded ordnance – until he had collected a motley arsenal of random weaponry, old frag grenades, bent RPG tails, duct-taped claymore mines, C-4, mortar rounds. His best find was a working AK-47 with a folding butt stock and two magazines, which he pulled from the wreckage of an Afghan National Police vehicle that had been blown up near the base's gate. Gibbs placed the AK-47 and the magazines in a metal box in one of the Strykers. Later, a corporal named Emmitt Quintal discovered the gun and wondered what it was doing there. As he recalled, Staff Sgt. David Bram "sat me down and explained to me that it was basically to cover our ass if anything happened."

Two weeks after the murder of Gul Mudin, something did.

It was the night of January 27th and the platoon was driving along the highway near their forward operating base. Suddenly, through their thermal imaging, they spotted a human heat signature on the side of the road – a potentially suspicious sign, since the Taliban often operate at night, using the cover of darkness to plant IEDs.

The patrol stopped 100 yards away from the man, and a handful of soldiers and an interpreter got out of their vehicles. They could see that the man was crouched down, or curled up like a ball close to the ground. As they approached, the man stood up and held his arms in front of his chest. To the soldiers, the motion was either an indication that he was cold, or that he was hiding a suicide-bomb vest.

Shouting to the man in Pashto, the soldiers illuminated him with intense, high-power spotlights and ordered him to lift up his shirt. But the man began to pace back and forth in the blinding white light, ignoring their calls. "He was acting strange," recalls a soldier. For several minutes the man shuffled around as the soldiers fired warning shots at him. The bullets skipped around him.

Then – ignoring the warnings – the man began walking toward the troops. "Fire!" someone yelled. Gibbs opened fire, followed by at least five other soldiers. In the course of a few seconds, they expended approximately 40 rounds.

The man's body lay on the ground. He turned out to be completely unarmed. According to official statements made by several soldiers, he also appears to have been deaf or mentally disabled. Above his beard, a large portion of his skull was missing, blown away by the hail of bullets. Spc. Michael Wagon collected a piece of the skull and kept it as a trophy.

It was the team's second killing of an unarmed man in as many weeks, and the second time they violated a body. But rather than investigate the shooting, the platoon's officers concentrated on trying to justify it. When 1st Lt. Roman Ligsay radioed Capt. Matthew Quiggle, the platoon's commanding officer, and informed him that the same unit had shot an unarmed Afghan male, the captain was furious. "He strongly believed that we had illegitimately killed a local national," recalls Quintal.

Quiggle ordered Ligsay to search until they found a weapon. "Lt. Ligsay was pretty freaked out," Quintal recalls. "He was positive he was going to lose his job." For the next hour the platoon swept the area with their flashlights looking for weapons, but they couldn't find anything.

Then Staff Sgt. Bram ordered Quintal to hand him the AK-47 magazine that Gibbs had stowed in the metal box in the Stryker. A private named Justin Stoner passed it down. A few minutes later, a voice called out in the darkness. "Sir!" Bram yelled. "I think I found something."

Lt. Ligsay walked up and saw the black magazine lying on the ground. He called it in, and the platoon breathed a sigh of relief. The members of the kill team knew it was a drop magazine, but it turned the shooting into a legitimate kill.

"The incident was staged to look like he may have had a weapon," Stoner told investigators. "Basically, what we did was a desperate search to justify killing this guy. But in reality he was just some old, deaf, retarded guy. We basically executed this man."

Under the rules of engagement, however, the U.S. military still considers the man responsible for his own death. Because he ignored the platoon's warnings and moved in their direction, no one has been charged in his killing – even though the Army now knows he was gunned down by soldiers intent on shooting unarmed civilians for sport.

Within a month, according to the Army, Gibbs executed another civilian and planted a weapon on the body. It was during Operation Kodak Moment, a routine mission to photograph and compile a database of the male residents of a village called Kari Kheyl. On February 22nd, the day of the mission, Gibbs hid the AK-47 he had stolen from the Afghan National Police in a black assault pack. As the platoon made its way through the village, he went to the hut of Marach Agha, a man he suspected of belonging to the Taliban, and ordered him outside.

First Gibbs fired the AK-47 into a nearby wall and dropped the weapon at Agha's feet. Then he shot the man at close range with his M4 rifle. Morlock and Wagnon followed up with a few rounds of their own. With the scene staged to his satisfaction, Gibbs called in a report.

Staff Sgt. Sprague was one of the first to respond. Gibbs claimed that he had turned a corner and spotted the man, who had fired at him with the AK-47, only to have the rifle jam. But when Sprague picked up the Kalashnikov, it seemed to be in perfect operating condition. A short time later, as he walked down a dusty alley in the village, Sprague himself came under attack from small-arms fire. He responded instinctively by squeezing the trigger on the AK-47 – and the gun fired "with no problems at all."

Sprague reported the discrepancy to Lt. Ligsay. When the body was identified, relatives also reported that Agha was a deeply religious man who would never have taken up arms. He "did not know how to use an AK-47," they told Ligsay. Once again, however, no action was taken, nor was Gibbs disciplined.

With their commanding officers repeatedly failing to investigate, the kill team was starting to feel invulnerable. To encourage soldiers in other units to target unarmed civilians, Gibbs had given one of the "off the books" grenades he had scrounged to a friend from another battalion, Staff Sgt. Robert Stevens. "It showed up in a box on my desk," recalled Stevens, a senior medic. "When I opened the box, I saw a grenade canister, which had a grenade in it and a dirty green sock." Figuring the sock was some kind of joke, Stevens threw it away. Later, when he saw Gibbs, he mentioned getting the grenade.

"Did you get the other thing?" Gibbs asked.

"What, the sock?" Stevens said.

"No, what was in the sock," Gibbs replied.

Inside the sock, Gibbs had placed a severed human finger.

Stevens got the message. On March 10th, as his convoy was driving down Highway 1, the central road connecting Kandahar to the north, Stevens stuck his head out of his Stryker's open hatch and tossed the grenade. It detonated a few seconds later than he had anticipated, and when it blew, it thudded into the vehicle. Stevens immediately began firing at a nearby compound of huts, yelling at another platoon member to do the same. "Get the fuck up, Morgan!" he screamed. "Let's go, shoot!"

No casualties were reported from the incident, but it earned Stevens an Army Commendation Medal and a Combat Medical Badge. Stevens later admitted that he had concocted the ambush not only because he wanted to get rid of the illegal grenade but because he "wanted to hook up the guys in the company" with their Combat Infantryman Badges, 14 of which were awarded in the aftermath of the shooting. All of the awards were revoked when the Army learned the attack had been faked.

The assault staged by Stevens suggested a new way to target Afghan civilians. In addition to approaching targets on foot, Gibbs decided to use his Stryker as a shooting platform, affording greater mobility with the protection of armor. In a perverse twist, the vehicle that had proved ineffective at combating the Taliban was about to be turned on the very people it was supposed to defend.

On March 18th, during a maintenance run to Kandahar Airfield, 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.

There is no way to know how many, if any, casualties resulted from the fusillade. Lt. Ligsay, who was in the same Stryker with Gibbs and Jones, maintains that he mistakenly believed the attack to be genuine and ordered the convoy to keep moving. The platoon did not return to the area to conduct a battle damage assessment, and no charges were ever filed in the incident.

A few weeks later, sometime in late March or early April, members of 3rd Platoon fired on unarmed civilians twice on the same day, indicating a growing sense of their own invincibility. Five soldiers were part of a patrol in a grape field in the Zhari District when they spotted three unarmed men. According to Stevens, Gibbs ordered the soldiers to open fire, even though the men were standing erect and posed no threat. All five soldiers fired their weapons at the men, but they managed to escape unscathed. Gibbs was not pleased. "He mentioned that we needed to work on our accuracy," Stevens recalled, "because it did not appear that anyone was hurt."

That same evening, while manning a guard tower overlooking a field in the Zhari District, soldiers from 3rd Platoon were directly told not to shoot at an elderly farmer who had been granted permission to work his land nearby. Despite the warning, two soldiers reportedly shot at the farmer as if he were an armed combatant. They once again failed to hit their target, but the officer in charge was furious. "This farmer has never been a problem," he later told investigators. "He's 60 to 70 years old."

One morning that spring, Gibbs approached Morlock flashing what looked like a small metal pineapple. "Hey, man, I've got this Russian grenade," he said. Gibbs added that the weapon would be the perfect tool to fake another attack, since the Taliban were known to carry Russian explosives. Morlock liked the idea. The night before, talking with a bunch of soldiers outside their bunk rooms, he had announced that he was looking to kill another *haji*, a pejorative term that U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan use for Muslims. One soldier who took part in the conversation dismissed it as idle talk. "I didn't really think anything of it," he told investigators, "because soldiers say stuff like that all the time."

The morning of May 2nd, the platoon was on a routine patrol in a village called Qualaday, a few miles from base. Following standard procedure, the unit's leaders entered a house to talk with a man who had previously been arrested for having an IED. That inadvertently left the rest of the platoon free to roam the village looking for targets, without having to worry about an officer's supervision.

Outside the house, Morlock was overheard instructing Winfield in how a grenade explodes, cautioning him to remain on the ground during the blast. Then the two soldiers moved off with Gibbs. Nearby, in a compound filled with children, they picked out a man with a white beard and escorted him outside. "He seemed friendly," Winfield recalled. "He didn't seem to have any sort of animosity toward us."

Gibbs turned to his men. "You guys want to wax this guy or what?" he asked. Morlock and Winfield agreed that the man seemed perfect.

Gibbs walked the Afghan to a nearby ditch and forced him to his knees, ordering him to stay that way. Then he positioned Morlock and Winfield in a prone position behind a small berm no more than 10 feet away. "To be honest," Morlock later told investigators, "me and Winfield thought we were going to frag ourselves, 'cause we were so fucking close."

With everyone in position, Gibbs took cover behind a low wall and chucked a grenade toward the Afghan. "All right, dude, wax this guy!" he shouted. "Kill this guy, kill this guy!"

As the grenade went off, Morlock and Winfield opened fire. Morlock got off several rounds with his M4. Winfield, who was armed with the more powerful SAW machine gun, squeezed off a burst that lasted for three to five seconds.

Gibbs shouted for Morlock to proceed with the next stage of the plan. "Get up there and plant that fucking grenade!"

The man lay where he had fallen. One of his feet had been blown off by the blast; his other leg was missing below the knee. Morlock ran up and dropped the Russian pineapple grenade near the dead man's hand. Gibbs walked up to the body, stood directly over it, and fired twice into the man's head, shattering the jaw.

Later, when the scene had calmed down – after soldiers had pushed away the dead man's wife and children, who were screaming, hysterical with grief, and Morlock had spun the story to the higher-ups – Gibbs took out a pair of medical shears and cut off the corpse's left pinky finger, which he kept for himself. Then, wearing a surgical glove, he reached into the dead man's mouth, pulled out a tooth and handed it to Winfield.

Winfield held the tooth for a while. Then he tossed it aside, leaving it behind on the ground at Qualaday.

This time, though, the villagers refused to be placated. The dead man, it turned out, was a peaceful cleric named Mullah Allah Dad. Two days later, the murder provoked an uproar at a districtwide council attended by Capt. Quiggle, the unit's commanding officer. The district leader launched into a blistering attack of the platoon. "He pretty much told us that we planted the grenade in order to shoot the guy," recalled 1st Lt. Stefan Moye, who escorted Quiggle to the meeting.

But the next day, instead of launching an inquiry into the platoon's behavior, Quiggle dispatched Moye to the scene of the shooting to do damage control. With Gibbs hovering nearby, the lieutenant found two elderly villagers who claimed to have seen Mullah Allah Dad with a grenade. Relieved, Moye urged them to spread the word. "This is the type of stuff that the Taliban likes to use against us and try to recruit people to fight against us," he said.

His mission accomplished, Moye left the village feeling that the platoon could return to its usual rhythms. "After that," he said, "everything was normal."

Things might have remained "normal," and the killings might have continued, if it hadn't been for what began as a trivial spat between bunkmates. Around midnight, the same evening that Moye returned from pacifying village elders, Pfc. Stoner walked into the company's tactical operations center to register a complaint. Stoner, who had helped plant the AK-47 magazine on the civilian murdered by the highway, said he was sick and tired of other soldiers in the unit using his room as "a smoke shack for hash." Worried that the lingering odor would get him busted, he had asked them to find another place to get stoned. They had refused, pausing only to remove the battery from the room's smoke detector.

"They baked the room many times until it stank constantly," Stoner said. "I was worried for my own job." Emphasizing that he wasn't a snitch, Stoner told the sergeant on duty that he didn't want to get his fellow soldiers in trouble. Then, growing emotional, he mentioned that "he and a bunch of other guys had executed a local national out on Highway 1." The sergeant didn't take the story seriously enough to report it up the chain of command. "I thought he was just upset and needed to talk to someone about the incident," he later recalled. Instead of alerting his superiors about the murder allegation, the sergeant simply assured Stoner that the matter of hash smoking in his room would be handled quietly, and that his identity would be kept confidential.

But discretion wasn't exactly the unit's strong suit. By the next day, everyone knew that Stoner had ratted them out. "Everyone began to panic," Quintal recalls. Gibbs, who didn't care for hashish, gathered members of the kill team in his room. "We need to address the situation with Stoner," he reportedly said. "Snitches get stitches."

On May 6th, Gibbs and six other soldiers descended on Stoner's room, locking the door behind them, and attacked Stoner while he was sitting on his bed. Grabbing him by the throat, they dragged him to the floor and piled on, striking him hard but taking care to avoid blows to the face that might leave visible bruises. "I've been in the Army four years," Morlock said as he pummeled Stoner in the stomach. "How could you do this to me?" Before leaving, they struck Stoner in the crotch and spit in his face.

A few hours later, Gibbs and Morlock returned to Stoner's room. As Stoner sat on his bed, still dazed from the assault, Morlock explained that the beating would not happen again, so long as Stoner kept his mouth shut "from fucking now on." If Stoner were disloyal again, Gibbs warned, he would be killed the next time he went out on patrol. "It's too easy," he added, explaining that he could hide Stoner's body in a Hesco barrier, one of the temporary structures used to fortify U.S. positions.

Then Gibbs reached into his pocket and took out a bit of cloth. Unfolding it, he tossed two severed fingers on the floor, with bits of skin still hanging off the bone. If Stoner didn't want to end up like "that guy," Morlock said, he better "shut the hell up." After all, he added, he "already had enough practice" at killing people.

Stoner had no doubt that Morlock would follow through on the threat. "Basically, I do believe that Morlock would kill me if he had the chance," he said later.

But the beating proved to be the kill team's undoing. When a physician's assistant examined Stoner the next day, she saw the angry red welts covering his body. She also saw the large tattoo across Stoner's back. In gothic type, beneath a grinning red skull flanked by two grim reapers, it read:

WHAT IF IM NOT THE HERO

WHAT IF IM THE BAD GUY

Stoner was sent to talk to Army investigators. In the course of recounting the assault, he described how Gibbs had thrown the severed fingers on the floor. The investigators pressed him about how Gibbs came by the fingers. Stoner told them it was because the platoon had killed a lot of innocent people.

At that point, the investigators asked Stoner to start from the beginning. When had the platoon killed innocent people? Bit by bit, Stoner laid out the whole history, naming names and places and times.

As other members of the platoon were called in and interviewed, many confirmed Stoner's account and described the shootings for investigators. Morlock, who proved particularly gregarious, agreed to speak on videotape. Relaxed and unconcerned in front of the camera, he nonchalantly described the kills in detail.

Morlock's confession kicked off an intense search for evidence. When the Army's investigators were dispatched to FOB Ramrod, they went straight to the top of a Hesco barrier near Gibbs' housing unit. Right where Morlock said it would be, they found the bottom of a plastic water bottle containing two pieces of cloth. Inside each piece of cloth was a severed human finger. But then a strange thing happened. When investigators compared prints of the two fingers to those in the company's database, the prints didn't match up. Either the records were screwed up, which was quite possible, or there were more dead guys out there who were unaccounted for.

Last week, on March 23rd, Morlock was sentenced to 24 years in prison after agreeing to testify against Gibbs. "The Army wants Gibbs," says one defense lawyer. "They want to throw him in jail and move on." Gibbs insists that all three killings he took part in were "legitimate combat engagements." Three other low-level soldiers facing murder charges – Winfield, Holmes and Wagon – also maintain their innocence. As for the other men in Bravo Company, five have already been convicted of lesser crimes, including drug use, stabbing a corpse and beating up Stoner, and two more face related charges. In December, Staff Sgt. Stevens was sentenced to nine months in prison after agreeing to testify against Gibbs. He was stripped to the lowest service rank – private E-1 – but over the protests of military prosecutors, he was allowed to remain in the Army.

So far, though, no officers or senior officials have been charged in either the murders or the cover-up. Last October, the Army quietly launched a separate investigation, guided by Brig. Gen. Stephen Twitty, into the critical question of officer accountability. But the findings of that inquiry, which was concluded last month, have been kept secret – and the Army refuses to say whether it has disciplined or demoted any of the commanders responsible for 3rd Platoon. Even if the commanding officers were not co-conspirators or accomplices in the crimes, they repeatedly ignored clear warning signs and allowed a lethally racist attitude to pervade their unit. Indeed, the resentment of Afghans was so commonplace among soldiers in the platoon that when Morlock found himself being questioned by Army investigators, he expressed no pity or remorse about the murders.

Toward the end of Morlock's interview, the conversation turned to the mindset that had allowed the killings to occur. "None of us in the platoon – the platoon leader, the platoon sergeant – no one gives a fuck about these people," Morlock said.

Then he leaned back in his chair and yawned, summing up the way his superiors viewed the people of Afghanistan. "Some shit goes down," he said, "you're gonna get a pat on the back from your platoon sergeant: Good job. Fuck 'em."