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Air Force Report Faults Crew in Afghan Strike Killing 23 Civilians

By Julian E. Barnes

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A U.S. airstrike on a convoy that killed 23 civilians in the Uruzgan district of Afghanistan in February resulted from faulty communication by the crew tracking the vehicles and Army officers' failure to evaluate whether the convoy was an immediate threat, according to an Air Force report released Friday.

The strike was conducted by two Kiowa Warrior helicopters, which launched Hellfire missiles and rockets at the civilian vehicles. Initially, the convoy was tracked by an unmanned Air Force Predator drone which fed reports to an Army unit on the ground that ordered the strike.

The report shows how the military has struggled to reduce the numbers of civilian casualties, and the difficulty, even with advanced technology, of identifying insurgents on the battlefield.

An earlier Army report also criticized the Predator crew for "inaccurate and unprofessional" reporting. As a result of that investigation, six officers were recommended for punishment.

The Air Force didn't release discipline recommendations in its report. But a defense official said at least two members of the Predator air crew would face disciplinary action.

Predators have two operators in their aircrew—an officer as pilot and an enlisted airman controlling the camera—who fly the craft remotely from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada.

Predator data are analyzed by the Air Force at ground stations, where airmen trained to analyze imagery describe what they see in the video feed.

In the Uruzgan incident, the analysts at the ground station identified children in the convoy. But the Predator crew reported to the ground force only that there were "possible children."

Reports of adolescents were also downplayed, compared to reports of the presence of "military age males."

"The use of imprecise non-standard terms lead to confusion throughout the operation," wrote Air Force Brigadier General Robert Otto in the report.

Gen. Otto said the Air Force must work to standardize the terms used by analysts and aircrew members and to provide more training on counter-insurgency fights.

The report found that the air crew's actions didn't follow the intent of NATO's Tactical Directive to limit civilian casualties. It found that the Army ground commander decided the convoy was making a flanking movement based on reports from the Predator. But the airmen observing the convoy hadn't been trained to identify such maneuvers and weren't asked for their assessment.

The Air Force investigation concurred with the earlier Army investigation that the ground force commander should have re-examined the belief that the convoy posed a threat and the people were an imminent threat.

Gen. Otto found that the Army commander "clearly wanted to engage" the convoy. Wanting to support the Army commander, the Predator crew was hunting for weapons. But Gen. Otto wrote that he didn't find an inappropriate desire to use force.

"The crew was alert and ready...but there was no resemblance to a 'Top Gun' mentality," Gen. Otto wrote.

The Air Force investigation also criticized Army ground forces for providing inadequate command and control. Senior members of the unit involved were asleep, and a junior battle captain was monitoring the situation at the operations center.

When the more experienced day shift came on duty they recommended using non-lethal force to engage the convoy, but by that time it was too late and an aggressive operation had begun.