

Twelve U.S. soldiers face trial after Afghan civilians 'were killed for sport and their fingers collected as trophies'

The Daily Mail

A dozen US soldiers are facing trial accused of being part of a 'kill team' that allegedly killed Afghan civilians in an arbitrary fashion - and they even collected their victims' fingers as trophies of war.



Five soldiers have been charged with the killing three Afghan men 'for sport'. And seven more are accused of covering up the murders.

In one of the most serious accusations of war crimes to come out of the Afghan war, the deaths are alleged to have been carried out by members of a Stryker infantry brigade based in Kandahar province, southern Afghanistan.

But the father of one of the five accused of murder said today he tried to warn the Army that troops in his son's unit had killed civilians.

By the time suspects were arrested in May, two more Afghans were dead.

Christopher Winfield said his son Adam, 22, was so disgusted after the first killing that he sent Facebook messages home asking for help.

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Winfield called the Army and a military hotline asking officials to investigate - to no avail.

His son's lawyer said he was ordered to shoot at the third victim but deliberately shot high.

An Army spokeswoman declined to comment about whether the base received any tips about the case.

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The new details about Winfield's efforts to alert the Army and his son's pleas raised questions about the Army's handling of the case and its system for allowing soldiers to report misconduct by their colleagues.

The soldiers have been accused of conspiracy and premeditated murder. The highest ranking of them is Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs, who, with Cpl. Jeremy Morlock, are accused of taking part in all three killings. Pte Andrew Holmes is charged with murder in the first killing, and Specialist Michael Wagnon is charged in another. Both deny the charges. Winfield is charged with murder in the final killing, and his lawyer insists he was ordered to shoot after Gibbs hit the civilian with a grenade. Winfield deliberately shot high and missed, he said.

Gibbs has denied the charges. His lawyer said his client maintains that the shootings were 'appropriate engagements' and denies involvement in any conspiracy to kill civilians.

The soldiers, all assigned to the 5th Stryker Brigade, deployed in July 2009 and were stationed at a base in Kandahar Province. Gibbs, 25, arrived in the unit late last year and soon began discussing how easy it would be to kill civilians, some in the platoon told Army investigators.

The first indication for Christopher Winfield and his wife, Emma, that something was amiss came on January 15, the day of the first killing.

'I'm not sure what to do about something that happened out here, but I need to be secretive about this,' their son wrote them in a Facebook message. But, he wrote, those involved told him about it and urged him to 'get one of my own.'

He said that virtually everyone in the platoon was aware of what was going on, but no one seemed to object. He added: 'If you talk to anyone on my behalf, I have proof that they are planning another one in the form of an AK-47 they want to drop on a guy.'

He continued that he didn't know who to trust and feared for his safety if his comrades learned he was talking to authorities. 'Should I do the right thing and put myself in danger for it. Or just shut up and deal with it,' he asked his parents.

'There are no more good men left here. It eats away at my conscience everyday.'

In statements to investigators, at least three platoon members said Gibbs directly threatened Winfield. One soldier, Private first class Justin Stoner, who reported hashish smoking in the unit, said he was beaten by several platoon members.

Gibbs and Morlock then paid him a visit, with Gibbs rolling out on the floor a set of severed fingers, he told investigators. Morlock told him that 'if I don't want to end up like that guy ... shut the hell up.'

The killings eventually came to light when the soldier who had reported the drug use told investigators that Morlock 'had three prior kills that none of which I believe were actually justified.'

Preliminary hearings in the case are expected to begin this autumn.

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