

'I Would Have Refused Such An Order': Former RAF Pilot Gives His View Of US Bombing Of MSF Hospital In Kunduz

By [Media Lens](#)

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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In our previous media alert, '[Sick Sophistry](#)', we examined media coverage of the deliberate US bombing of a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan on October 3. In particular, we exposed the BBC's Pentagon-friendly reporting of the hospital as having been '[mistakenly](#)' bombed.

On October 24, MSF announced that 30 people had now tragically died, up from the initial toll of 22. The humanitarian organisation, also known as Doctors Without Borders, continued to [call](#) for an independent international investigation into what it has called a '[war crime](#)'. Associated Press has just [reported](#) new evidence 'that U.S. forces destroyed what they knew was a functioning hospital'.

The report comments:

'The Army Green Berets who requested the Oct. 3 airstrike on the Doctors without Borders trauma center in Afghanistan were aware it was a functioning hospital but believed it was under Taliban control, The Associated Press has learned.'

Damningly, AP adds:

'A day before an American AC-130 gunship attacked the hospital, a senior officer in the Green Beret unit wrote in a report that U.S. forces had discussed the hospital with the country director of the medical charity group, presumably in Kabul, according to two people who have seen the document.'

Meanwhile, there has *still* been no leading article in any UK newspaper backing MSF's call for an independent inquiry.

In response to our alert, we were contacted by a former RAF pilot with twenty years' military experience in several countries, including Afghanistan. He had discovered our alert by following a link in a comment posted underneath a recent Guardian [piece](#) mentioning the attack.

The former pilot gave us his name but, for obvious reasons, wishes to remain anonymous. He told us that he has experience of flying fast jets and multi-engine aircraft, and that he served operationally in the Balkans, Kosovo, Afghanistan and elsewhere. As far as we can

tell, he appears to be genuine. He wrote to us in a series of emails (October 21-24):

'First time I have ever come across your organisation and I am very impressed by your work.'

He then wrote:

'It has been my firm opinion from the very beginning that Kunduz hospital was indeed deliberately targeted. I slightly digress from the [Lindorff article](#) in that the C-130 Gunship is a pinpoint platform with a choice of munitions. The fact that the hospital was targeted on five separate occasions with unerring accuracy simply underlines how deliberate this attack was. The Gunship itself is a revered weapon on the battlefield, manned by elite crews who are very highly trained. I was involved in the Afghan campaign almost from the beginning when things were pretty hairy. The aircraft of choice for UK Special Forces on the ground was the Gunship and they lobbied for a UK version. It is expensive and due to the side-mounted howitzer limited to one role and so their requests were denied. The Gunship gives unsurpassed support to troops on the ground because of its multi-hour endurance and loiter capability and the accuracy of its smaller calibre cannon and capability of its enormous 105mm howitzer.'

He continued:

'I do not accept that the target could have been mistakenly targeted. The crew and command centre would have been fully aware they were attacking a hospital. I followed one of your links suggesting that the C130 crew [challenged their orders](#) to target the hospital. This is the very least that I'd have expected to happen. I have extensive operational experience flying in Afghanistan. I am struggling to comprehend in what circumstance I would blindly follow an order to attack a fully manned civilian hospital. If the [description](#) provided by MSF's director-general is accurate I can say without hesitancy that I would have refused such an order for it is an obvious war crime. During the Kosovo war it was fairly routine for RAF Harrier pilots to return home with bombs still loaded because they had been unable to confirm visual acquisition of targets. RAF pilots are probably more inclined to think for themselves than American crews who are extremely tightly controlled. American military personnel give up many rights when they join up, but I am still disappointed that this crew did not appear to do more to challenge their orders. Back in the UK, we lost crown immunity many years ago and it is essential to challenge every questionable act carried out on the battlefield (our emphasis).

'Given that we agree that the hospital was deliberately targeted it would be useful to try and understand why. It is my opinion that whilst possible, it is unlikely that this was a mistake, intentional or otherwise, by Afghan commanders on the ground. I saw an unconfirmed report stating that US Special Forces were on the ground in Kunduz so it is unlikely that Afghans alone would have called in the attack. So the alternative is that the crew were given their mission from [US Central Command](#) or it was called in on the ground by their own people. This is why I doubt we'll see an independent inquiry. Very senior military officers would be on the hook for what happened in Kunduz because they would have authorised the sustained attack. It is still possible that the Kunduz hospital is seen as an operational "success"; the world of special operations is opaque. It is also a vague possibility that this was an act of gross incompetence, but that would still constitute a war crime. In any case, I simply do not believe it to be incompetence because of the sustained nature

of the attack.'

He also commented on media coverage:

'The response in the mainstream media mainly consisted of repeating what came off the wires. Unfortunately, the US military changed their version several times which weakened their case immediately. My own experience of BBC journalists is positive but when it comes to describing a major news event there is an immediate suspicion of editorial control from on high. I think it is extremely valuable that you target both individual journalists and the reporting of such events in general. I absolutely commend this approach, which is why I am happy to support you in your endeavours.'

You may be shocked that even the deliberate bombing of a hospital may be regarded as an operational 'success'. There is no doubt that, were the full truth to emerge, the attack on the MSF hospital would be even more deeply embarrassing and damaging to Western interests than it already is. After all, 'we' do not commit war crimes; only 'our' enemies do that.

Long-time readers may recall that, in 2007, a serving British army officer in Iraq [responded](#) to an [exchange](#) we'd had with Mark Urban, the diplomatic editor of BBC Newsnight. The officer strongly rejected Urban's contention that the central US aim was that of 'forcing a democracy into the heart of the Middle East' (Newsnight, BBC2, April 12, 2005), commenting:

'There is a widespread, and well-sourced, belief based on both experience and evidence, in both the British military and academia, that the US is not "just in Iraq to keep the peace, regardless of what the troops on the ground believe. It is in Iraq to establish a client state amenable to the requirements of US realpolitik in a key, oil-rich region. To doubt this is to be ignorant of the motives that have guided US foreign policy in the post-war period and a mountain of evidence since 2003." (quote from Media Lens).'

The officer gave rare voice to widespread scepticism within the military:

'That the invasion was "illegal, immoral and unwinnable", and the "greatest foreign policy blunder since Suez"... is the overwhelming feeling of many of my peers, and they speak of loathsome six-month tours, during which they led patrols with dread and fear, reluctantly providing target practice for insurgents, senselessly haemorrhaging casualties, and squandering soldiers' lives, as part of Bush's vain attempt to delay the inevitable Anglo-US rout until after the next US election.

'Given a free choice most of us would never have invaded Iraq, and certainly would have withdrawn long ago.'

In response, Urban discussed the officer's email on the BBC's Newsnight programme; a rare concession to media activism.

Recall that the former RAF officer who emailed us after our Kunduz media alert made this particularly welcome point:

'it is essential to challenge every questionable act carried out on the battlefield'.

It certainly is essential. And this is true, not just for military personnel with destructive high-tech weaponry at their fingertips; but also for journalists whose reporting has the power to facilitate or obstruct crimes against humanity.

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