

Psychological Warfare in Afghanistan

Atrocities committed under US Command

By [John Martinkus](#)

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Since September 11, we've all become uncomfortably familiar with names like Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, Fallujah and maybe even Bagram in Afghanistan. They're all places we now associate with human rights violations or worse – military atrocities and possibly potential war crimes. But after our first story tonight, you can add another placename to that list – Gonbaz in southern Afghanistan, about a 100km from the former Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. In recent months, the former Muslim extremist Taliban and their al-Qa'ida allies have launched more attacks against US forces than at any time since the Americans first invaded in 2001.

Earlier this month, Dateline's John Martinkus was in Afghanistan to cover their elections, but his story tonight actually starts with some startling footage from another Australian, photojournalist Stephen Dupont, who, while he was embedded with the Americans, managed to record some of the grotesque tactics being used by Australia's allies in that part of the world. Dateline should warn you that this report does include some pretty disturbing scenes, particularly for any Muslim viewers.

VIDEO

[SBS TV Interview with Photojournalist Steven Dupont](#)

Transcript

REPORTER: John Martinkus

This is how the Americans are now fighting in Afghanistan – loaded up with guns and loud music. The racks of speakers on top of this Humvee are a bizarre weapon dreamt up by the army's PsyOps unit – experts in psychological warfare. The idea is that the music will flush the Taliban out of their hiding places in the mountains. The Taliban banned music when they ruled Afghanistan so these troops are hoping that the sound of Fleetwood Mac will provoke them into an attack. No-one can say if the music is having the desired effect but the Afghan special forces, travelling with the Americans seem to appreciate it.

SOLDIER: Pull people out, search their house looking for weapons obviously, and for anything that indicates that they're responsible for tonight's attack.

A few hours ago there was an ambush near here. One American and one Afghan army

soldier have been killed. Two Taliban have also been shot dead. These soldiers have been sent to the village of Gonbaz to find those involved in the attack.

SOLDIER: Just go ahead and supervise the search, I want to talk to this guy. How you doing? My name is Lieutenant Nelson. We apologise for the... sorry for the interruption. We want to make it safe for these guys.

All the soldiers in this unit have served in Iraq. The endless searches and interrogations are familiar work for an army used to occupation.

SOLDIER: He's very upset. We're not the kind of soldiers who want to come through and arrest a bunch of people and raid their houses.

As the level of attacks by insurgents has risen in southern and eastern Afghanistan, killing 1,400 people in the last six months, the main problem has become finding the enemy.

SOLDIER: This guy was sitting right out the front here watching us.

The soldiers look for weapons but the search is frustrating and ultimately pointless.

SOLDIER: You know what that is? I can tell you what is right now – that's a battery pack made to power that radio. That's all it is. Some shit he put together because he couldn't find the parts.

Many attacks are the result of crude, home-made bombs, which the army calls improvised explosive devices or IEDs. Anything with batteries is potentially dangerous.

SOLDIER: That is enough juice, by the way, ..to set something off. That's enough juice, yeah. One of those is...you only need – you know the 55-90 Yeah. You know after a 55-90 is dead and unusable, it still got enough juice to set off an IED. We found this bad boy, so we're kind of oh, oh...

Eventually two of the villagers are bound and questioned before the troops leave to camp nearby. The next morning, anti-Taliban propaganda messages are read out over the loudspeakers.

LOUDSPEAKERS (Translation): When you look at them, these men, they are the servants of Pakistan and slaves to the Punjabis.

SOLDIER: Tell them to stop right there. Hey, John, tell them to stop right there. Tell him to stop. Bus! Bus, bus, bus. Tell him we're going to come to them.

Two civilians wounded in the previous night's attack are brought in seeking treatment.

SOLDIER: Is this one of the guys that was wounded last night? Can you bring my aid bag over, somebody? It's sitting right on the top of my truck.

MAN (Translation): I was providing for my children. I was working. In the afternoon, before sunset.

MAN 2 (Translation): The evening prayer wasn't finished. That's when he was shot.

SOLDIER (Translation): Which side? Did the Americans shoot him?

MAN 2 (Translation): Yes, it was the Americans. He never thought the Americans would shoot civilians. They didn't differentiate between enemy and civilians.

SOLDIER: That definitely looks like our work, huh? Looks like shrapnel wounds.

The man's son is also hurt, cut by shrapnel. The soldiers admit they're responsible for the injuries but no-one seems too concerned.

SOLDIER: It looks like the bullet actually cut and grazed him. It doesn't feel like the bullet is in.

Civilian casualties in this war are common when the only way to distinguish the enemy from the population is whether they are shooting at you or not.

SOLDIER: It doesn't actually feel too bad. It's OK, just got to look at his leg, OK?

A helicopter is later called in to evacuate them to the base hospital. The troops head back to the village of Gonbaz trying to find the endlessly elusive enemy. There's nothing subtle about their approach. The soldiers terrify this old man in the mosque.

SOLDIER: Tell him I'm sorry about the way we came in, but I called to see if there was anyone there, you know.

Interrogations continue in an attempt to find those in the village who are associated with the militants.

SOLDIER: That's OK. If you can give us that information, we can actually reward you. If you can give us that information, you will be doing a lot to help the people around here who are innocent and shouldn't be arrested. Because I am trying to do what I can right now, to find the bad guys because we don't want to end up having to punish everyone.

VILLAGER (Translation): I have no knowledge of the Taliban themselves. I do not know the person who reports to the Taliban in this village or who from the Taliban side is asking about the Americans.

SOLDIER: I just have one more question for him. You just tell him, that it's really important that you help me, 'cause I'll say it again. What my commander wants to do with all the forces in this whole area is round up everyone in this town since no-one is helping us and nobody is turning over the people in this village who actually are part of the attack. So I'm gonna be leaving in about five minutes this is going to be your last chance to try to help yourself.

At the top of the hills above the village the soldiers have taken the tactics of psychological warfare to a grotesque and disturbing extreme. US soldiers have set fire to the bodies of the two Taliban killed the night before. The burning of the corpses and the fact that they've been laid out facing Mecca is a deliberate desecration of Muslim beliefs.

SOLDIER: Wow, look at the blood coming out of the mouth on that one, fucking straight death metal.

PsyOps specialist Sergeant Jim Baker then broadcast an inflammatory message over the loudspeakers in order to taunt and bait the enemy.

SGT JIM BAKER Attention, Taliban, you are all cowardly dogs. You allowed your fighters to be laid down facing west and burned. You are too scared to come down and retrieve their bodies. This just proves you are the lady boys we always believed you to be.

SOLDIER 2: The first message we sent was - Attention, Mullah Tahir, Mullah Sadar, Mullah Kairadullah, Mullah Abdullah Khan and other Taliban, we know who you are. Your time in Afghanistan is short. You attack and run away like women. You call yourself Talibs but you are a disgrace to the Muslim religion and you bring shame upon your family. Come and fight like men instead of the cowardly dogs you are. And the second one. Attention Mullah Tahiir and other Taliban fighters, we have you surrounded, there is no way for you to escape. Come down from the mountains now and you will not be harmed. We will give you food and cold water. If you persist and stay in the mountains it will become your graveyard.

The soldiers say they're burning the bodies for hygiene purposes but out here, far away from the village, this appears to make no sense. These soldiers have clearly been trained to denigrate and enrage Muslims. Such blatant disrespect for the corpses of their enemy is a breach of the Geneva Convention. It also heightens the perception of local people that the Americans are just as barbarous as the Taliban say they are. Australian troops operate out of the same army base and in the eyes of the locals, as members of the same coalition, there is no distinction between American and Australian forces. This is what happened in Afghanistan the last time American soldiers were accused of mocking Islam. In May this year, reports that the Koran had been desecrated in Guantanamo Bay sparked unrest in the eastern city of Jalalabad. Rioters forced the foreign aid community to flee and destroyed their offices and vehicles. Now I'm on my way to that same city, Jalalabad, home to Afghanistan's deeply conservative Pashtun majority. Parliamentary elections are due to be held here soon - the first in 36 years - and foreign aid workers have again left the city, fearing a repeat of the violence. I want to find out more about how the ongoing war is affecting Afghanistan's fragile democracy. Strangely enough, I come across an Afghan-Australian, Dr Farooq Mirranay, running for election in Jalalabad. He's returned after 17 years of exile to help rebuild his country. At a campaign rally, he attacks the tribal warlords who remain the real powerbrokers here.

DR FAROOQ MIRRANAY SPEECH (Translation): These people have been unfaithful to Afghanistan. Their mission is to change the direction of the democracy. They want to make a mess of our good and proper election process and to give it a bad name.

In the vacuum following the fall of the Taliban, many warlords are trying to use this election to consolidate their power.

MIRRANAY SPEECH (Translation): You will have to be very cautious, my dear friends. Here we have many candidates who would like to upset the voting process. They're standing after being bribed by others, wanting to divide the votes of the villages and districts.

Haji Zaman is a leader in nearby Tora Bora. He sided with the US in 2001 when it came looking for Osama bin Laden, and now he's backing Mirranay.

Haji ZAMAN (Translation): Those Taliban act in the name of al-Qa'ida and maybe under other opposition forces too. But let me stress one thing for you - if the locals defend their country, no-one will interfere.

But Haji Zaman is also critical of the Americans, accusing them of harassing innocent

civilians in their search for the militants.

Haji ZAMAN (Translation): In our country, certain people are in conflict with each other and they tip them off to the foreigners and the intelligence. The foreigners raid their houses following baseless reports and they find nothing – no arms, no al-Qa’ida, no narcotics, nothing.

Even with the support of leaders like Haji Zaman, Mirranay can’t take any chances. He’s cancelled his program to campaign in areas like Tora Bora after another candidate, Safia Siddiqi, was attacked.

SAFIA SIDDIQI: My bodyguard and also the driver, they were in the front. When they first shoot, my bodyguard said...asked the driver, “Please stop, please stop,” because, you know, it was a very small way, we couldn’t move faster and we had to stop there. Then, first...after that my brother and me, we just lay down, first on the seat then after the dd-dd-dd – when they start shooting and firing, then we just lay down on the floor. I was on the ground and my brother was just on top of me and he said, “Safia, please, I want you...please I want you don’t lose yourself. And if you are dying, I’m dying with you.” It was really terrible.

The attacks on candidates have drastically curtailed the campaign. Few are now prepared to travel outside the provincial capital.

MIRRANAY: I received a call from my HQ in Kabul and they said, “You are not allowed to go to the village because security situation is not good.”

REPORTER: Who do you think is behind the threats against you?

MIRRANAY: Actually I think it’s... Most people know we have al-Qa’ida, Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami. And Pakistan, our neighbouring country, really don’t want peace in Afghanistan.

Brigadier Abdul Ghafour, the main police spokesman in Jalalabad, agrees that Pakistan is trying to destabilise Afghanistan.

ABDUL GHAFOUR (Translation): Be they the Taliban, terrorists or al-Qa’ida, we can fight them. Unfortunately they are sent over on a mission of destruction and due to the short distance they cross back quickly. They’re raised in Pakistan, not here in Afghanistan.

He says the police arrest many Pakistani agents in Jalalabad. Pakistan security forces have long supported the Taliban and, according to local police, they still operate here.

GHAFOUR (Translation): Another good example is that approximately 1,200kg of explosives and 5000 fuses were brought into Nagrahar through Pakistan. As I said, they were brought in onion bags that we confiscated.

Behind me is the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The militants who are seeking to disrupt the election and attack American forces are able to cross very freely through the mountain passes behind me. On the other side is Pakistan’s tribal areas. Now the Pakistani military are unable or unwilling to go into those areas to secure them and block the routes through which the militants travel back and forth. And they say that Osama bin Laden himself is actually seeking refuge in this area behind me. On the same day I was filming at the border, Pakistan’s President, Pervez Musharraf, responded to international criticism and said he would erect a fence to keep the militants from crossing. Looking at this terrain, it’s

an absurd suggestion. He was merely paying lip-service to his backers in Washington. I'm traveling to the neighbouring province of Kunar to get another perspective on the war. In August the Taliban filmed this attack on a US army helicopter near here. 16 marines died, along with three Navy SEALs that they were attempting to rescue.

GUIDE (Translation): The American helicopter which was shot that was also on the left side of us. Yes, you can see that now.

Less than an hour later, I'm going on a patrol down the same road with the US Marines. They're hunting for insurgents who've been spotted not far from here.

SOLDIER: A few insurgents coming, probably 80 – they're never really quite sure how many. And if the insurgents are there and they wanna get into a fight, then we'll bring the fight to them.

Although the casualty rate among US troops in Afghanistan is a lot lower than Iraq, 200 have been killed so far – 82 of those this year alone. Shortly after I left, these marines had their base attacked. One of their Humvees was also blown up by an improvised explosive device or IED, seriously wounding four marines. The soldiers don't know where the enemy is but in this part of the country there is a lot of contact. Stuck on the roads in their vehicles, they are often ambushed.

REPORTER: Can you tell us what's going on? What are you looking for?

SOLDIER: Anybody with weapons. They'll have lookouts up on the ridge lines like this. And they'll start radioing in all the way down the valley to let the guys now if there's an ambush set up or if they got guys working on the road, they'll give them a heads-up from a long ways off. They usually see us coming from miles away. They've been having fucking white puffs of smoke lately. They've been doing that a lot.

REPORTER: So what are we doing now?

SOLDIER: We're gonna head up the road. We're gonna find out... We put a patrol out here.

This is the place where the insurgents had been spotted and where local police have arrested a man who had unusual homemade bomb or IED.

REPORTER: So he was caught with an IED, yeah?

SOLDIER: Oh, yes, he was caught with an IED. We're gonna bring some EOD guys down and see what it's made out of and see if it was used in other further attacks or past attacks and see what kind of stuff we are working with because it was supposedly brought over from Pakistan.

CHRISTOPHER HAGAN: So it's the first... I've seen 0.82 mortar rounds, they're everywhere around here but I've never seen one used like an IED. And this one, it looks like it's a brand-new mortar round, probably from China so it's showing they are using fresh explosives that they probably carried over from somewhere.

REPORTER: Yeah. So you think they come from Pakistan, these ones?

HAGAN: I don't...I don't know. I'll say I don't know.

Because Pakistan's involvement in the insurgency is politically sensitive, the lieutenant couldn't admit what his men already had told me. Off-camera he agreed it was obvious where the mortar, which had been wired to two landmines, had come from. Later he also told me about a daring attack on his platoon just two weeks earlier.

CHRISTOPHER HAGAN: That ambush was pretty wild, yeah. What was really strange was it was the first time that they had shot at us from like very close. Normally they shoot at us from like about 700m - it's like just right at the max range of their weapons. These guys, a lot of them were pretty close. They were shooting at us from houses, they were shooting at us from like cornfields, like everywhere basically. They were using like little kids as distractors, because before we went to the ambush site, before we got ambushed they had these like kids standing in pairs up along the road. They looked kind of nervous. I mean, there's kids everywhere and stuff but in this one part the kids tend to stay away from the US forces but when we went there this one time they were kind of standing deliberately and making it a point to shake each one of our hands. We were like, "OK, what's going on?" and then they just opened up on us. And you know, pretty wild. There's no lie there is a pretty heavy enemy presence up in those mountains. That's where all the enemy hides out because the terrain there is just so difficult to operate in. Because, you know, a marine with his pack and everything will be carrying literally over 100 pounds of gear and you've got these insurgents who are just carrying, you know, like pyjamas and an AK, and they can run like the wind, they know where to hide, they know all the trails and everything.

Unable to travel far from their fortified bases, the troops are resupplied and flown in and out on choppers. One soldier told me he felt like he was fighting on the moon. Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, recently told journalists he didn't think there was a need for US military activity in Afghanistan any longer and operations such as house searches and air strikes should be curtailed. But as this footage from photojournalist Stephen Dupont reveals, the US-led operations are still being carried out. In the south, where these troops are based, more than two dozen Afghan soldiers, 18 police, two US soldiers and five aid workers have been killed in the last fortnight. The response US troops are provoking with their psychological warfare is set to continue well into the future and Australian troops operating from the same base as these men will also be in the firing line.

Stephen Dupont Interview Startling scenes of what can be done in the name of a just war, by Dateline's John Martinkus and freelance photojournalist Stephen Dupont. And earlier this evening Stephen and George Negus looked at that Taliban burning footage and then talked about it here in the studio. 6:16 secs

GEORGE NEGUS: Steve, even though you were embedded with the Americans, I have to say I was surprised that you were even able to film that stuff. Why do you think they had no problem with you doing it?

STEPHEN DUPONT, PHOTOJOURNALIST: Well, I believe that they had a certain amount of trust and I think, when you're embedded with the Americans, they tend to sort of let you have free reign. Once you're in there - it's very difficult to get in there.

GEORGE NEGUS: No restrictions?

STEPHEN DUPONT: None that I saw on my embed. I just think that they're - you know, they've invited you in, they've invited me in so they're showing me pretty much what's going on.

GEORGE NEGUS: Do you think they understood the ramifications of what they're doing? The burning of the bodies, pointing towards Mecca and going to the trouble of reading to you in English the deliberately provocative stuff that they were shouting across the valley to the Taliban?

STEPHEN DUPONT: Look, I think the airborne unit that were responsible with the burning of the two Taliban soldiers weren't really thinking in that way. I think the psychological operations unit, who were responsible for the broadcast along with some other broadcasts to the Taliban, they're quite well aware of it. They're older guys. That's their job. They're PsyOps. They use it as a weapon. And the Americans are so frustrated. They're frustrated because they can't find the enemy. They're chasing shadows all the time.

GEORGE NEGUS: The guys burning the bodies probably did they think were doing it for reasons of hygiene that were mentioned in the story?

STEPHEN DUPONT: I believe that. That was the feeling I got as I climbed up the hill. As I got to the crest of the hill, they started burning the bodies. My initial reaction was, "My God, I've got to film this. This is really important stuff. It's my responsibility as a journalist to -

GEORGE NEGUS: The PsyOps had a different purpose?

STEPHEN DUPONT: I believe so. Niece guys - they said to me, "We've been told to burn the bodies, the bodies have been here for 24 hours and they're starting to stink so, for hygiene purposes, this is what we've got to do." Later on, when I was down with the PsyOps operations people, they used that as a psychological warfare I guess you'd call it. They used the fact that the Taliban were burned facing west -

GEORGE NEGUS: They were deliberately setting out to humiliate the Taliban?

STEPHEN DUPONT: They deliberately wanted to incite that much anger from the Taliban so the Taliban could attack them.

GEORGE NEGUS: Smoke them out.

STEPHEN DUPONT: Smoke them out. They want the Taliban to fight them because they can't find them otherwise. It's a really crazy situation. And, you know, the fact that they're announcing these kind of, you know, sort of incredible statements, I think, says a lot about the war that's going on there. I mean, they really want to be attacked. That's the only way they can find them.

GEORGE NEGUS: They don't know where the enemy is, who the enemy is. It's like fighting a ghost.

STEPHEN DUPONT: Absolutely. We're talking about a place that really does look like the moon, look like some planet in outer space.

GEORGE NEGUS: In the context of things like Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, Bagram and Fallujah, do you think there will be ramifications when this stuff gets to the world? The last time somebody desecrated the Koran in Guantanamo Bay they went off their faces in Afghanistan.

STEPHEN DUPONT: I think it's highly possible. I can't say for sure. I think it's strong enough,

certainly, to send a clear message to Muslims around the world that this is, this is not good. This is a clear breach of Islam. And, you know, it's just another thing that's going to really anger the Islamic population.

GEORGE NEGUS: That being the case, do you think that the psychological war is working?

STEPHEN DUPONT: Look, I think it's having some success. I do believe – I think it's very, very slow. I think there is a certain amount of success because they are engaging with the enemy, as in the Taliban. The Americans are using this, you know, psychological warfare to announce – to make announcements to get the enemy to fight them. It is working on that level. And they are being attacked and so they are responding and they are taking prisoners of war and so forth. So, in the eyes of the Americans and the coalition, there is a sense that things are working, but it's very, very slow.

GEORGE NEGUS: Is it the most amazing thing you've photographed? Close?

STEPHEN DUPONT: It's close. And, at the time, George, I really didn't think of it that way. When I was filming it, I think I was just on such a mission to capture these images and it was so extraordinary – it's more when I came home and I started looking at the video footage and the photographs that I took that, you know, it started to come around to thinking, "My God, these are really poignant historical images."

GEORGE NEGUS: The Australians are in the same area. Any contact whatsoever with them?

STEPHEN DUPONT: They're keeping a very low profile. I saw some at Kandahar air base and Bagram air base and I instigated some conversation that really kind of went nowhere.

GEORGE NEGUS: By stark contrast, the Americans are totally open about what they're doing, even something like what we've just seen.

STEPHEN DUPONT: Absolutely, absolutely open. I think I mentioned before – once your embedded with them, you can pretty well see what they're doing. If there was anything the Americans didn't want me to see, I wouldn't have seen it, that's what I believe. I really believe that the fact that they were burning these bodies, it didn't mean much to them. I think maybe that's common. They make these decisions on the spot.

GEORGE NEGUS: Steve, good talking to you.

STEPHEN DUPONT: Thanks, George.

GEORGE NEGUS: Sorry we're talking about something as horrific as this.

STEPHEN DUPONT: Yeah, cheers.

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