PANJWAI ROGUE NIGHT RAIDER: PROBABLY NOT A MALINGERER

In yet another “isolated event” in Afghanistan that is guaranteed to incite a number of other “isolated events”, at least one US soldier in the Panjwai district of Kandahar Province killed sixteen Afghan civilians early Sunday morning. Most of the dead were women and children.

Details of the attack are still emerging. Marcy posted on the event yesterday, and I would especially urge reading the series of comments by MadDog, where he discusses the security arrangements at Forward Operating Bases and poses the very important question of how a soldier could have left the base alone. I would add that soldiers being off base and alone is given heightened concern since Bowe Bergdahl was captured after being lured away from his base. What is even more curious about the soldier being allowed to leave the base is that Dawn reports via AFP that the soldier was “heavily armed and with night vision equipment”.

Perhaps the most important point still not fully resolved is whether the soldier acted alone or if a group of soldiers, possibly even drunk, carried out the attack. In today’s New York Times, we have this from Abdul Hadi, who survived the attack:

> “My father went out to find out what was happening, and he was killed,” he said. “I was trying to go out and find out about the shooting, but someone told me not to move, and I was covered by the women in my family in my room, so that is why I survived.”
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> Mr. Hadi said there was more than one soldier involved in the attacks, and at least five other villagers described seeing a number of soldiers, and also a helicopter and flares at the scene.

The competing narrative comes from US officials:

> United States officials and diplomats insisted that there had been only one attacker. A senior American diplomat told a meeting on Monday morning with diplomats from allied countries that the gunman acted alone after walking off the base, first to a village and then to a cluster of houses some 500 yards away. He kept shooting before returning to the base. He is to face charges under the military justice system, the officials said.
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> While some Afghans had speculated that helicopter-borne troops were involved, the senior American diplomat said helicopters and other troops arrived only after the shooting and that helicopters were used to evacuate the wounded.

Although the bodies appear to have been buried already, we will know just how serious the US is about establishing the number of shooters involved in the attack if they actually visit the homes invaded to recover shell casings and bullets. Even rudimentary forensic evaluation should be able to establish conclusively how many weapons were fired. Slightly more advanced forensics can determine whether all the weapons involved were in the possession of the soldier who has turned himself in.

The few details that have emerged about the suspected attacker who turned himself in are very disturbing on two related points. First, we have learned that although this was the soldier's first deployment to Afghanistan, he had been deployed three times previously to Iraq in a military career that appears to be at least 11 years long. The military's reliance on repeated deployments for the small all-volunteer force exacts a terrible toll, and it is very difficult to see how the repeated deployments for this soldier were not at least a

contributing factor to whatever prompted him to act in this deranged way.

Second, we have learned that the soldier is from a unit based at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. This particular base has been especially troubled and was also the home of the infamous “kill team”:

> Four soldiers from a Stryker brigade out of Lewis-McChord have been sent to prison in connection with the 2010 killing of three unarmed men during patrols in Kandahar province’s Maiwand district, which is just northwest of Panjwai.
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> They were accused of forming a “kill team” that murdered Afghan civilians for sport — slaughtering victims with grenades and powerful machine guns during patrols, then dropping weapons near their bodies to make them appear to have been combatants.

But it gets worse. From the same article:

> Jorge Gonzalez, executive director of a veterans resource center near Joint Base Lewis-Mcchord named GI Voice-Coffee Strong, said Sunday’s killings offer more proof that the base is dysfunctional.
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> “This was not a rogue soldier. JBLM is a rogue base, with a severe leadership problem,” he said in a statement.
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> He cites the “kill team” incident, multiple suicides among base personnel and spousal abuse by soldiers as more symptoms of problems at the base.

Especially prominent in the “management issues” at Lewis McChord is the medical team and its approach to PTSD diagnoses:

> An Army ombudsman reported in November — in a memo obtained by the Los Angeles

> Times – that an Army physician at Madigan cautioned colleagues at a forensic psychiatry lecture that a PTSD diagnosis could cost the Army up to $1.5 million over the lifetime of a soldier.
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> /snip/
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> Matt McAlvanah, who has investigated the issue for U.S. Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), who chairs the Senate's veterans affairs committee, said the senator has received reports of "derogatory language" used by Madigan physicians about PTSD complaints.
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> "They were making comments about them not having PTSD, or sort of faking it. They used the word malingerers," McAlvanah said in an interview.

I think we can safely remove one potential malingerer from the list. Anyone capable of this deranged act has no business being deployed by our military.

Afghanistan's parliament has reacted to the killings:

> We seriously demand and expect that the government of the United States punish the culprits and try them in a public trial before the people of Afghanistan," the lower house of parliament said in statement.
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> Condemning the killings as "brutal and inhuman", parliament declared that "people are running out of patience over the ignorance of foreign forces".

Oops. I wonder why the legislators would mention the ignorance of our troops. Everyone knows these events are isolated and have no underlying theme, since the evidence to the contrary has been retroactively classified.

But look for ignorance at the highest levels to

rule in this case. In their call for a public trial, it appears to me that the Afghan legislators aren’t demanding that the trial be in Afghanistan’s court system (which of course the US would insist on in a reversed situation if a foreigner killed a number of US citizens in their homes). Instead, it appears that they are asking the US to conduct their trial in public in Afghanistan. The odds of that happening are probably zero, and that point goes a long way toward describing why we will never reach a true level of understanding and cooperation between the US and Afghanistan. In addition to our regular troops being ignorant of the divides between US and Afghan culture, that ignorance is just as pervasive, and infinitely more damaging, at the highest level of our military and their civilian overseers.