

The Kill Team: Are US military atrocities in Afghanistan just the work of a few “bad apples”?

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Dan Krauss

The Kill Team, written and directed by Dan Krauss, is a fictionalized version of the events known as the Maywand District murders, the killing and mutilation of unarmed Afghan civilians carried out by US soldiers in the Maywand District in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan in 2010.

Krauss’ first feature film follows on the former photojournalist’s harrowing 2013 documentary, also titled *The Kill Team*. The Maywand atrocities were carried out by a platoon from the Fifth Stryker Brigade, Second Infantry Division, based at Lewis-McChord Army Base near Seattle, Washington.

The WWSW review of Krauss’ documentary noted that in a four-month period in 2010, the so-called Kill Team platoon “carried out three murders of Afghan civilians for sport and kept finger and leg bones, a tooth and a skull as grisly trophies in one of the most widely publicized cases of American criminality in Afghanistan ... Its known victims were Gul Mudin, age 15; Marach Agha, age 22; and Mullah Allah Dad, age 45.” American military officials later revealed they believed Marach Agha was deaf or mentally handicapped.

However, at a time when the general violence of US imperialism has dangerously increased and its wars in the Middle East and elsewhere are more unpopular than ever, Krauss has made a weaker film. To its credit, the 2013 documentary revealed through its interviews with soldiers that US occupation forces in Afghanistan routinely murdered civilians in the course of the neo-colonial war obscenely dubbed “Operation Enduring Freedom.”

By contrast, the new fiction film tends to suggest that

the “Kill Team” was an aberrational exception in America’s otherwise praiseworthy fighting force. One has to assume that Krauss, not holding deep-going opposition to the status quo, has listened to external—and perhaps internal—voices telling him to adapt to political and commercial pressures and to accommodate himself to the Pentagon.

The movie opens in 2009 in Afghanistan’s Kandahar Valley. A naive, gung-ho Army private, Andrew Briggman (Nat Wolff), comes to realize the horrifying fact that members of his unit, including Rayburn (Adam Long), are murdering innocent Afghan civilians. The bloodlust only increases when the squad comes under the command of Staff Sgt. Deeks (Alexander Skarsgård), a veteran of three tours of duty who believes American forces are in Afghanistan to kill the “towelheads,” and the rest of the “depraved animals.” He turns every mission into a sadistic safari. (“We kill people. That’s what we do.”)

Proving his point, Deeks slaughters a random Afghan, planting a weapon by the victim’s corpse. (“Who’s ready to have some fun?”)

The morally conflicted Briggman, initially under the influence of his commanding officer, shouts at one point: “F--- those motherf---ers. I’d like to see their whole country burn, man. Every village. Every goddamn house. Every bush, every tree. I just want to see this whole f---ing country burn to the ground.” This is the mindset promoted by Deeks, but when Briggman begins to waver and communicate his misgivings to his father (played by Rob Morrow), he runs the risk of becoming a casualty himself.

The Kill Team focuses on Briggman’s internal struggles, placing the savagely abused Afghan civilian

population in the background. Again, probably in the supposed interests of marketing, the filmmakers have decided to create dramatic tension by emphasizing Briggman's fears for his own life, legitimate as they may be, at the expense of a scathing exposure of US war crimes.

In an attempt to make Briggman complicit in the unit's civilian murders, Deeks forces the reluctant private to shoot a villager in cold blood. During a target practice scene, a paranoid Briggman fears being slain by his own team.

The 2013 documentary was more forthright. In that work, one of the interviewed American soldiers says bluntly: "You're training us from the day we join to the day you're out [of the army] to kill. Your job is to kill. ... Your job is to kill everything that's in your way. ... Well, then why the hell are you pissed off when we do it?" The same soldier, claiming that US military murders in Afghanistan are ubiquitous, asserts: "We're just the ones that got caught."

The new movie's postscript explains that: "In 2010, five US army soldiers were charged with the premeditated murder of Afghan civilians. One of the accused, a young recruit pled guilty to involuntary manslaughter. At the trial, he testified against his staff sergeant who insisted the killings are justified. The young recruit was sentenced to three years. His staff sergeant was sentenced to life."

The Kill Team exposes a few of the psychopathic actions of a group of US soldiers, but it is neither consistently anti-war nor anti-military. Krauss makes legitimate points in the movie's production notes about the troops responsible for the Maywand crimes, noting that for "a young person of 18, 19, 20 years old to go to a place as unfamiliar as southern Afghanistan—it's almost as if they've been transported to another planet. For a lot of these soldiers, it's the first time they've been out of the country."

Yes, but *why* were they sent there? The appropriate conclusion should be to place the blame for the world-historical crimes committed in Afghanistan—hundreds of thousands killed, millions displaced and a society destroyed—at the feet of the US military command and America's rulers, driven by geopolitical interests, as a whole.

But in an interview with *Forbes*, Krauss asserts: "One of the highlights of my career was being invited

to West Point [the US military academy] to show the documentary with Adam Winfield, the subject [of the documentary]. I was astonished by the eagerness and openness of the military academy and cadets to try to understand what went wrong and hopefully take some learning from that and not see it as an attack on the military, which is not ... The vast majority of soldiers are true blue, but just like with any organization or any system, there are bad apples. In the military, the bad apples, they have guns and so it can lead to dangerous things."

Deeks is the personification of obsessive, homicidal criminality, but it is the drive by the US ruling elite to dominate the globe that creates the conditions where individual psychosis and sadism inevitably flourish. Crimes like his, and far worse ones, are the hallmark of all imperialist wars of conquest against impoverished and oppressed nations.

Donald Trump now threatens the Middle East with a catastrophic war in the wake of his mass killings in Iraq and Syria, and, most recently, the targeted assassination of an Iranian general. But he follows a long line of presidents, both Democratic and Republican, and their accomplices who should be in the dock charged as war criminals. It is this starker reality to which Krauss and *The Kill Team* significantly close their eyes.

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