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The Afghan War's Nine Lives

By Amy Goodman

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Eight youths, tending their flock of sheep in the snowy fields of Afghanistan, were exterminated last week by a NATO airstrike. They were in the Najrab district of Kapisa province in eastern Afghanistan. Most were reportedly between the ages of 6 and 14. They had sought shelter near a large boulder, and had built a fire to stay warm. At first, NATO officials claimed they were armed men. The Afghan government condemned the bombing and released photos of some of the victims. By Wednesday, NATO offered, in a press release, “deep regret to the families and loved ones of several Afghan youths who died during an air engagement in Kapisa province Feb. 8.” Those eight killed were not that different in age from Lance Cpl. Osbrany Montes De Oca, 20, of North Arlington, N.J. He was killed two days later, Feb. 10, while on duty in Afghanistan’s Helmand province. These nine young, wasted lives will be the latest footnote in the longest war in United States history, a war that is being perpetuated, according to one brave, whistle-blowing U.S. Army officer, through a “pattern of overt and substantive deception” by “many of America’s most senior military leaders in Afghanistan.”

Those are the words written by Lt. Col. Danny Davis in his 84-page report, “Dereliction of Duty II: Senior Military Leaders’ Loss of Integrity Wounds Afghan War Effort.” A draft of that report, dated Jan. 27, 2012, was obtained by Rolling Stone magazine. It has not been approved by the U.S. Army Public Affairs office for release, even though Davis writes that its contents are not classified. He has submitted a classified version to members of Congress. Davis, a 17-year Army

veteran with four combat tours behind him, spent a year in Afghanistan with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force, traveling more than 9,000 miles to most operational sectors of the U.S. occupation and learning firsthand what the troops said they needed most.

In a piece he wrote in Armed Forces Journal (AFJ) titled "Truth, lies and Afghanistan," Davis wrote of his experience, "What I saw bore no resemblance to rosy official statements by U.S. military leaders about conditions on the ground." Speaking out is strongly discouraged in the U.S. military, especially against one's superiors. His whistle-blowing was picked up by The New York Times and Rolling Stone, whose reporter, Michael Hastings, told me, "The fact is that you have a 17-year Army veteran who's done four tours—two in Afghanistan and two in Iraq—who has decided to risk his entire career—he has two and a half more years left before he gets a pension—because he feels that he has a moral obligation to do so."

Davis interviewed more than 250 people—U.S. military personnel and Afghan nationals—in his recent year in the war zone. He compared what he learned from them with optimistic projections from the likes of David Petraeus, former head of the military's CENTCOM and of the U.S. military in Afghanistan, and now head of the CIA, who told Congress on March 15, 2011, that "the momentum achieved by the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2005 has been arrested in much of the country, and reversed in a number of important areas."

In his AFJ piece, Davis wrote, "Instead, I witnessed the absence of success on virtually every level ... insurgents controlled virtually every piece of land beyond eyeshot of a U.S. or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base."

His observations concur with the death of Osbrany Montes de Oca. His girlfriend, Maria Samaniego, told the New York Daily News, "He was walking out of the base and he was immediately shot."

The number of U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan approaches 2,000, which is about the number of civilians killed there annually. Nic Lee, the director of the independent Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, wrote in his year-end report for 2011, "The year was remarkable for being the one in which the US/NATO leadership finally acknowledged the unwinnable nature of its war with the Taliban."

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta recently remarked, "Hopefully by the mid- to latter part of 2013 we'll be able to make a transition from a combat role to a training, advise and assist role." Petraeus countered, saying the U.S. remains committed to ending the combat mission by the end of 2014. Meanwhile, images surface of U.S. Marines urinating on Afghan corpses, or posing with a Nazi SS flag, and the drumbeat continues, death by death. Lt. Col Davis wrote, "When having to decide whether to continue a war, alter its aims or to close off a campaign that cannot be won at an acceptable price, our senior leaders have an obligation to tell Congress and the American people the unvarnished truth."

