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The Fraud of War

U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan have stolen tens of millions through bribery, theft, and rigged contracts.

[http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/05/u s troops have stolen tens of millions in iraq and afghanistan center for.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/05/u_s_troops_have_stolen_tens_of_millions_in_iraq_and_afghanistan_center_for.html)

By Julia Harte
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U.S. soldiers patrol a checkpoint southeast of Baghdad on Sept. 6, 2007.

U.S. Army Specialist Stephanie Charboneau sat at the center of a complex trucking network in Forward Operating Base Fenty near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that distributed daily tens of thousands of gallons of what troops called “liquid gold”: the refined petroleum that fueled the international coalition’s vehicles, planes, and generators.

A prominent sign in the base read: “The Army Won’t Go If The Fuel Don’t Flow.” But Charboneau, 31, a mother of two from Washington state, felt alienated after a supervisor’s harsh rebuke. Her work was a dreary routine of recording fuel deliveries in a computer and escorting trucks past a gate. But it was soon to take a dark turn into high-value crime.

Troops were selling the U.S. military’s fuel to Afghan locals on the side, and pocketing the proceeds.

She began an affair with a civilian, Jonathan Hightower, who worked for a Pentagon contractor that distributed fuel from Fenty, and one day in March 2010 he told her about “this thing going on” at other U.S. military bases around Afghanistan, she recalled in a recent telephone interview.

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Troops were selling the U.S. military’s fuel to Afghan locals on the side, and pocketing the proceeds. When Hightower suggested they start doing the same, Charboneau said, she agreed.

In so doing, Charboneau contributed to thefts by U.S. military personnel of at least \$15 million worth of fuel since the start of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. And eventually she became one of at least 115 enlisted personnel and military officers convicted since 2005 of committing theft, bribery, and contract-rigging crimes valued at \$52 million during their deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to a comprehensive tally of court records by the Center for Public Integrity.

Many of these crimes grew out of shortcomings in the military’s management of the deployments that experts say are still present: a heavy dependence on cash transactions, a hasty award process for high-value contracts, loose and harried oversight within the ranks, and a regional culture of corruption that proved seductive to the Americans troops transplanted there.

Charboneau, whose Facebook posts reveal a bright-eyed woman with a shoulder tattoo and a huge grin, snuggling with pets and celebrating the 2015 New Year with her children in Seattle Seahawks jerseys, now sits in Carswell federal prison in Fort Worth, Texas, serving a seven-year sentence for her crime.

Additional crimes by military personnel are still under investigation, and some court records remain partly under seal. The magnitude of additional losses from fraud, waste, and abuse by contractors, civilians, and allied foreign troops in Afghanistan has never been tallied, but officials probing such crimes say the total is in the billions of dollars. And those who investigate and prosecute military wrongdoing say the convictions so far constitute a small portion of the crimes they think were committed by U.S. military personnel in the two countries.

Former Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction Stuart Bowen, who served as the principal watchdog for wrongdoing in Iraq from 2004 to 2013, said he suspected “the fraud ...

among U.S. military personnel and contractors was much higher” than what he and his colleagues were able to prosecute. John F. Sopko, his contemporary counterpart in Afghanistan, said his agency has probably uncovered less than half of the fraud committed by members of the military in Afghanistan.



U.S. soldiers inspect damage to their armored vehicle near the village of Eber in Logar province, Afghanistan, on Sept. 26, 2009.

As of February, he said he had 327 active investigations still under way, involving 31 members of the military. “You don’t appreciate how much money is being stolen in Afghanistan until you go over there,” said Sopko, who says price-fixing and other forms of financial corruption are rampant in Afghanistan.

These and other experts, as well as some of those who have pleaded guilty to criminal wrongdoing, point to some recurrent patterns in the corrupt activity, which in turn illustrate the special challenges created when a sizable military force is deployed abroad. Sometimes ill-trained military personnel were forced to handle or oversee large cash transactions, in a region where casual corruption in financial dealings—bribes, kickbacks, and petty theft—was commonplace. Commanding officers, they add, were typically so distracted by urgent war challenges that they could not carefully check for missing fuel or contractor kickbacks.

So far, officers account for approximately four-fifths of the value of the fraud committed by military personnel in Iraq, while in Afghanistan, the ratio was flipped, with enlistees accounting for roughly the same portion, according to the Center for Public Integrity’s tally. The reasons for the difference are unclear. But Sopko said he expects more officers to be investigated for misconduct in Afghanistan as the U.S. military mission there continues, so the ratio could change.

Troops who had little or no prior criminal history, like Charboneau, say the circumstances of their deployments made stealing with impunity look easy, and so they made decisions that to

their surprise eventually brought them prison sentences ranging from three months to more than 17 years. Many, like Charboneau, were savvy about the military's way of doing things—her mother, her first husband, and her second husband were service members, according to a statement her lawyer, Dennis Hartley, filed on Jan. 30, 2014, before her sentencing.

They say that they knew of other military personnel who also broke the law, but without getting caught. Hightower convinced her to steal fuel from Fenty, Charboneau said, by pointing out that the troops at nearby bases “aren’t getting caught, so you shouldn’t have to worry about it.”

Retired Army Reserve Maj. Glenn MacDonald, editor-in-chief of the website MilitaryCorruption.com, said the volume and value of fraud committed by troops in Afghanistan and Iraq seem higher to him than what he recalled as a young soldier in Vietnam in the 1960s. “What you can make out of these [recent] wars is staggering. It’s an opportunity for anybody, even a noncommissioned officer, to become very rich overnight,” MacDonald said.

Many have probably been tempted, he said, because they saw others getting away with the theft of thousands or even millions of dollars.

Pocketing thousands in cash from illicit fuel sales

Military fuel in Iraq and Afghanistan has been a perennial target of theft during the past 14 years of war. In Afghanistan, fuel moved around the country in “jingle trucks,” tankers adorned with kaleidoscopic patterns and metal ornaments. At Fenty, for example, jingle trucks bearing fuel arrived every few days from suppliers in Pakistan, all driven by locals under contracts with the base. Officers at Fenty then distributed it to 32 nearby bases, with the largest ones using up to 2 million gallons of fuel a week.



A U.S. soldier sits in an MRAP vehicle as he prepares for an early morning mission at Forward Operating Base Fenty in Afghanistan on Dec. 19, 2014.

To describe the system as loosely controlled might be an understatement: Standard contracts allowed each driver to take seven days to bring the fuel to a destination that might be only a few

hours away, according to Army Maj. Jonathan McDougal, who oversaw motor vehicle logistics in northeast Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011 from Bagram Airfield. “It was like they planned for something to go wrong with every convoy,” McDougal told the Center for Public Integrity.

Charboneau’s role in the Fenty fuel theft ring was simple. She ordered trucks to transport more fuel than needed, then filed fake records showing the extra fuel had been delivered to a base. After leaving Fenty in a convoy, the extra trucks diverted their loads to prearranged meeting spots, where buyers offloaded the fuel and paid in cash, with the proceeds divided later among Charboneau and her co-conspirators. The scheme worked—for a while—because the fuel storage amounts and truck delivery amounts matched (although of course the bases’ records of delivered fuel did not).

This represented, Charboneau said, “a big gap” in the fuel oversight system. And the rewards were enticing—about \$5,000 in net profit from a single extra truckload.

One month after she joined the scheme, according to the government’s sentencing memo, filed on Jan. 15, 2014, in U.S. District Court in Colorado, her supervisor, Sgt. Christopher Weaver, jumped in. She described the widening of the conspiracy in instant messages intended for her sister in Colorado, sent using the screen name “dollface_kc”: