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## The Secret Killers

### Assassination in Afghanistan and Task Force 373

By Pratap Chatterjee

"Find, fix, finish, and follow-up" is the way the Pentagon describes the mission of secret military teams in Afghanistan which have been given a mandate to pursue alleged members of the Taliban or al-Qaeda wherever they may be found. Some call these "manhunting" operations and the units assigned to them "capture/kill" teams.

Whatever terminology you choose, the details of dozens of their specific operations — and how they regularly went badly wrong — have been revealed for the first time in the mass of secret U.S. military and intelligence documents published by the website WikiLeaks in July to a storm of news coverage and [official protest](#). Representing a form of U.S. covert warfare now on the rise, these teams regularly make more enemies than friends and undermine any goodwill created by U.S. reconstruction projects.

When Danny Hall and Gordon Phillips, the civilian and military directors of the U.S. provincial reconstruction team in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, arrived for a meeting with Gul Agha Sherzai, the local governor, in mid-June 2007, they knew that they had a lot of apologizing to do. Philips had to explain why a covert U.S. military "capture/kill" team named Task Force 373, [hunting](#) for Qari Ur-Rahman, an alleged Taliban commander given the code-name "Carbon," had called in an AC-130 Spectre gunship and inadvertently killed seven Afghan police officers in the middle of the night.

The incident vividly demonstrated the inherent clash between two doctrines in the U.S. war in Afghanistan — counterinsurgency ("protecting the people") and counterterrorism (killing terrorists). Although the Obama administration has given lip service to the former, the latter has been, and continues to be, the driving force in its war in Afghanistan.

For Hall, a Foreign Service officer who was less than two months away from a plush assignment in London, working with the military had already proven more difficult than he expected. In an article for *Foreign Service Journal* published a couple of months before the meeting, he [wrote](#), "I felt like I never really knew what was going on, where I was supposed to be, what my role was, or if I even had one. In particular, I didn't speak either language that I needed: Pashtu or military."

It had been no less awkward for Phillips. Just a month earlier, he had personally handed over "solatia" payments — condolence payments for civilian deaths wrongfully caused by U.S. forces — in Governor Sherzai's presence, while condemning the act of a Taliban suicide bomber who had killed 19 civilians, setting off the incident in question. "We come here as your guests," he [told](#) the relatives of those killed, "invited to aid in the reconstruction and improved security and governance of Nangarhar, to bring you a better life and a brighter future for you and your children. Today, as I look upon the victims and their families, I join you in mourning for your loved ones."

Hall and Phillips were in charge of a portfolio of 33 active U.S. reconstruction projects worth \$11 million in Nangarhar, focused on road-building, school supplies, and an agricultural program aimed at exporting fruits and vegetables from the province.

Yet the mission of their military-led "provincial reconstruction team" (made up of civilian experts, State department officials, and soldiers) appeared to be in direct conflict with those of the "capture/kill" team of special operations forces (Navy Seals, Army Rangers, and Green Berets, together with operatives from the Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities Division) whose mandate was to pursue Afghans alleged to be terrorists as well as insurgent leaders. That team was leaving a trail of dead civilian bodies and recrimination in its wake.

Details of some of the missions of Task Force 373 first became public as a result of more than 76,000 incident reports [leaked](#) to the public by WikiLeaks, a whistleblower website, together with analyses of those documents in *Der Spiegel*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times*. A full accounting of the depredations of the task force may be some time in coming, however, as the Obama administration refuses to comment on its ongoing assassination spree in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A short history of the unit can nonetheless be gleaned from a careful reading of the WikiLeaks documents as well as related reports from Afghanistan and unclassified Special Forces reports.

The WikiLeaks data suggests that as many as 2,058 people on a secret hit list called the "Joint Prioritized Effects List" (JPEL) were considered "capture/kill" targets in Afghanistan. A total of 757 prisoners — most likely from this list — were being held at

the Bagram Theater Internment Facility (BTIF), a U.S.-run prison on Bagram Air Base as of the end of December 2009.

## **Capture/Kill Operations**

The idea of "joint" teams from different branches of the military working collaboratively with the CIA was first conceived in 1980 after the disastrous Operation Eagle Claw, when personnel from the Air Force, Army, and Navy engaged in a disastrously botched, seat-of-the-pants attempt to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran with help from the Agency. Eight soldiers were killed when two helicopters collided in the Iranian desert. Afterwards, a high-level, six-member commission led by Admiral James L. Holloway, III, [recommended](#) the creation of a Joint Special Forces command to ensure that different branches of the military and the CIA should do far more advance coordination planning in the future.

This process accelerated greatly after September 11, 2001. That month, a CIA team called [Jawbreaker](#) headed for Afghanistan to plan a U.S.-led invasion of the country. Shortly thereafter, an Army Green Beret team set up Task Force Dagger to pursue the same mission. Despite an initial rivalry between the commanders of the two groups, they eventually teamed up.

The first [covert "joint" team](#) involving the CIA and various military special operations forces to work together in Afghanistan was Task Force 5, charged with the mission of capturing or killing "high value targets" like Osama bin Laden, senior leaders of al-Qaeda, and Mullah Mohammed Omar, the head of the Taliban. A sister organization set up in Iraq was called Task Force 20. The two were eventually combined into Task Force 121 by General John Abizaid, the head of the U.S. Central Command.

In a new book to be released this month, *Operation Darkheart*, Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Shaffer describes the work of Task Force 121 in 2003, when he was serving as part of a team dubbed the Jedi Knights. Working under the alias of Major Christopher Stryker, he ran operations for the Defense Intelligence Agency (the military equivalent of the CIA) out of Bagram Air Base.

One October night, Shaffer was dropped into a village near Asadabad in Kunar province by an MH-47 Chinook helicopter to lead a "joint" team, including Army Rangers (a Special Forces division) and 10th Mountain Division troops. They were on a mission to capture a lieutenant of [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), a notorious warlord allied with the Taliban, based on information provided by the CIA.

It wasn't easy. "They succeeded in striking at the core of the Taliban and their safe havens across the border in Pakistan. For a moment Shaffer saw us winning the war," reads the promotional material for the book. "Then the military brass got involved. The policies that top officials relied on were hopelessly flawed. Shaffer and his team were forced to sit and watch as the insurgency grew — just across the border in Pakistan."

Almost a quarter century after Operation Eagle Claw, Shaffer, who was part of the Able Danger team that had pursued al-Qaeda in the 1990s, describes the bitter turf wars between the CIA and Special Forces teams over how the shadowy world of secret assassinations in Afghanistan and Pakistan should be run.

### **Task Force 373**

Fast forward to 2007, the first time Task Force 373 is mentioned in the WikiLeaks documents. We don't know whether its number means anything, but coincidentally or not, chapter 373 of the U.S. Code 10, the act of Congress that sets out what the U.S. military is legally allowed to do, [permits](#) the Secretary of Defense to empower any "civilian employee" of the military "to execute warrants and make arrests without a warrant" in criminal matters. Whether or not this is indeed the basis for that "373" remains a classified matter — as indeed, until the WikiLeaks document dump occurred, was the very existence of the group.

Analysts say that Task Force 373 complements Task Force 121 by using "white forces" like the Rangers and the Green Berets, as opposed to the more secretive Delta Force. Task Force 373 is supposedly [run](#) out of three military bases — in Kabul, the Afghan capital; Kandahar, the country's second largest city; and Khost City near the Pakistani tribal lands. It's possible that some of its operations also come out of [Camp Marmal](#), a German base in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Sources familiar with the program say that the task force has its own helicopters and aircraft, notably AC-130 Spectre gunships, dedicated only to its use.

Its commander appears to have been [Brigadier General Raymond Palumbo](#), based out of the Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Palumbo, however, [left](#) Fort Bragg in mid-July, shortly after General Stanley McChrystal was relieved as Afghan war commander by President Obama. The name of the new commander of the task force is not known.

In more than 100 incident reports in the WikiLeaks files, Task Force 373 is described as leading numerous "capture/kill" efforts, notably in Khost, Paktika, and Nangarhar provinces, all bordering the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of northern Pakistan. Some reportedly resulted in successful captures, while others led to the death of local police officers or even small children, causing angry villagers to protest and attack U.S.-led military forces.

In April 2007, David Adams, commander of the Khost provincial reconstruction team, was [called to meet](#) with elders from the village of Gurbuz in Khost province, who were angry about Task Force 373's operations in their community. The incident report on WikiLeaks does not indicate just what Task Force 373 did to upset Gurbuz's elders, but the governor of Khost, Arsala Jamal, had been publicly complaining about Special Forces operations and civilian deaths in his province since December 2006, when five civilians were killed in a raid on Darnami village.

"This is our land," he [said](#) then. "I've been asking with greater force: Let us sit together, we know our Afghan brothers, we know our culture better. With these operations we should not create more enemies. We are in a position to reduce mistakes."

As Adams would later [recall](#) in an op-ed he co-authored for the *Wall Street Journal*, "The increasing number of raids on Afghan homes alienated many of Khost's tribal elders."

On June 12, 2007, Danny Hall and Gordon Philips, working in Nangarhar province just northeast of Khost, were called into that meeting with Governor Sherzai to explain how Task Force 373 had killed those seven local Afghan police officers. Like Jamal, Sherzai made the point to Hall and Philips that "he strongly encourages better coordination... and he further emphasized that he does not want to see this happen again."

Less than a week later, a Task Force 373 team [fired](#) five rockets at a compound in Nangar Khel in Paktika province to the south of Khost, in an attempt to kill Abu Laith al-Libi, an alleged al-Qaeda member from Libya. When the U.S. forces made it to the village, they found that Task Force 373 had destroyed a *madrassa* (or Islamic school), killing six children and grievously wounding a seventh who, despite the efforts of a U.S. medical team, would soon die. (In late January 2008, al-Libi was [reported killed](#) by a Hellfire missile from a Predator drone strike in a village near Mir Ali in North Waziristan in Pakistan.)

Paktika Governor Akram Khapalwak met with the U.S. military the day after the raid. Unlike his counterparts in Khost and Nangarhar, Khapalwak agreed to support the "talking points" developed for Task Force 373 to explain the incident to the media. According to the WikiLeaks incident report, the governor then "echoed the tragedy of children being killed, but stressed this could've been prevented had the people exposed the presence of insurgents in the area."

However, no military talking points, no matter in whose mouth, could stop the civilian deaths as long as Task Force 373's raids continued.

On October 4, 2007, its members [called](#) in an air strike — 500 pound Paveway bombs — on a house in the village of Laswanday, just six miles from Nangar Khel in Paktika province (where those seven children had already died). This time, four men, one woman, and a girl — all civilians — as well as a donkey, a dog, and several chickens would be slaughtered. A dozen U.S. soldiers were injured, but the soldiers reported that not one "enemy" was detained or killed.

### **The Missing Afghan Story**

Not all raids resulted in civilian deaths. The U.S. military incident reports released by WikiLeaks suggest that Task Force 373 had better luck in capturing "targets" alive and avoiding civilian deaths on December 14, 2007. The 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne) was asked that day to support Task Force 373 in a search in Paktika province for Bitonai and Nadr, two alleged al-Qaeda leaders listed on the JPEL. The operation took place just

outside the town of Orgun, close to U.S. Forward Operating Base (FOB) Harriman. Located 7,000 feet above sea level and surrounded by mountains, it hosts about 300 soldiers as well as a small CIA compound, and is often visited by chattering military helicopters well as sleepy camel herds belonging to local Pashtuns.

An airborne assault team code-named "[Operation Spartan](#)" descended on the compounds where Bitonai and Nadr were supposed to be living, but failed to find them. When a local Afghan informant told the Special Forces soldiers that the suspects were at a location about two miles away, Task Force 373 seized both men as well as 33 others who were detained at FOB Harriman for questioning and possible transfer to the prison at Bagram.

But when Task Force 373 was on the prowl, civilians were, it seems, always at risk, and while the WikiLeaks documents reveal what the U.S. soldiers were willing to report, the Afghan side of the story was often left in a ditch. For example, on a Monday night in mid-November 2009, Task Force 373 conducted an operation to capture or kill an alleged militant code-named "[Ballentine](#)" in Ghazni province. A terse incident report announced that one Afghan woman and four "insurgents" had been killed. The next morning, Task Force White Eagle, a Polish unit under the command of the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division, reported that some 80 people gathered to [protest the killings](#). The window of an armored vehicle was damaged by the angry villagers, but the documents don't offer us their version of the incident.

In an ironic twist, one of the last Task Force 373 incidents recorded in the WikiLeaks documents was almost a reprise of the original Operation Eagle Claw disaster that led to the creation of the "joint" capture/kill teams. Just before sunrise on October 26, 2009, two U.S. helicopters, a UH-1 Huey and an AH-1 Cobra, [collided](#) near the town of Garmsir in the southern province of Helmand, killing four Marines.

Closely allied with Task Force 373 is a British unit, [Task Force 42](#), composed of Special Air Service, Special Boat Service, and Special Reconnaissance Regiment commandos who operate in Helmand province and are mentioned in several WikiLeaks incident reports.

## **Manhunting**

"Capture/kill" is a key part of a new military "doctrine" developed by the Special Forces Command established after the failure of Operation Eagle Claw. Under the leadership of General Bryan D. Brown, who took over the Special Forces Command in September 2003, the doctrine came to be known as F4, which [stood for](#) "find, fix, finish, and follow-up" — a slightly euphemistic but not hard to understand message about how alleged terrorists and insurgents were to be dealt with.

Under Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in the Bush years, Brown began setting up "joint Special Forces" teams to conduct F4 missions outside war zones. These were given the anodyne name "Military Liaison Elements." At least one killing by such a team in Paraguay (of an armed robber not on any targeting list) was [written up](#) by *New York*



*Times* reporters Scott Shane and Thom Shanker. The team, whose presence had not been made known to the U.S. ambassador there, was ordered to leave the country.

"The number-one requirement is to defend the homeland. And so sometimes that requires that you find and capture or kill terrorist targets around the world that are trying to do harm to this nation," Brown [told](#) the House Committee on Armed Services in March 2006. "Our foreign partners... are willing but incapable nations that want help in building their own capability to defend their borders and eliminate terrorism in their countries or in their regions." In April 2007, President Bush rewarded Brown's planning by [creating](#) a special high-level office at the Pentagon for an assistant secretary of defense for special operations/low-intensity conflict and interdependent capabilities.

Michael G. Vickers, made famous in the book and film [Charlie Wilson's War](#) as the architect of the covert arms-and-money supply chain to the *mujahedin* in the CIA's anti-Soviet Afghan campaign of the 1980s, was nominated to fill the position. Under his leadership, a [new directive](#) was issued in December 2008 to "develop capabilities for extending U.S. reach into denied areas and uncertain environments by operating with and through indigenous foreign forces or by conducting low visibility operations." In this way, the "capture/kill" program was institutionalized in Washington.

"The war on terror is fundamentally an indirect war... It's a war of partners... but it also is a bit of the war in the shadows, either because of political sensitivity or the problem of finding terrorists," Vickers [told](#) the *Washington Post* as 2007 ended. "That's why the Central Intelligence Agency is so important... and our Special Operations forces play a large role."

George W. Bush's departure from the White House did not dampen the enthusiasm for F4. Quite the contrary: even though the F4 formula has recently been [tinkered with](#), in typical military fashion, and has now become "find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze," or F3EA, President Obama has, by all accounts, expanded military intelligence gathering and "capture/kill" programs globally in tandem with an [escalation of](#) drone-strike operations by the CIA.

There are quite a few outspoken supporters of the "capture/kill" doctrine. Columbia University Professor Austin Long is one academic who has [jumped on](#) the F3EA bandwagon. Noting its similarity to the Phoenix assassination program, responsible for tens of thousands of deaths during the U.S. war in Vietnam (which he defends), he has called for a shrinking of the U.S. military "footprint" in Afghanistan to 13,000 Special Forces troops who would focus exclusively on counter-terrorism, particularly assassination operations. "Phoenix suggests that intelligence coordination and the integration of intelligence with an action arm can have a powerful effect on even extremely large and capable armed groups," he and his co-author William Rosenau [wrote](#) in a July 2009 Rand Institute monograph entitled "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency."

Others are even more aggressively inclined. Lieutenant George Crawford, who retired from the position of "lead strategist" for the Special Forces Command to go work for Archimedes Global, Inc., a Washington consulting firm, has suggested that F3EA be replaced by one term: "Manhunting." In a [monograph](#) published by the Joint Special Operations University in September 2009, "Manhunting: Counter-Network Organization for Irregular Warfare," Crawford spells out "how to best address the responsibility to develop manhunting as a capability for American national security."

### **Killing the Wrong People**

The strange evolution of these concepts, the creation of ever more global hunter-killer teams whose purpose in life is assassination 24/7, and the civilians these "joint Special Forces" teams regularly kill in their [raids](#) on supposed "targets" have unsettled even military experts.

For example, Christopher Lamb, the acting director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, and Martin Cinnamond, a former U.N. official in Afghanistan, penned an article for the Spring 2010 issue of the *Joint Forces Quarterly* in which they [wrote](#): "There is broad agreement... that the indirect approach to counterinsurgency should take precedence over kill/capture operations. However, the opposite has occurred."

Other military types claim that the hunter-killer approach is short-sighted and counterproductive. "My take on Task Force 373 and other task forces, it has a purpose because it keeps the enemy off balance. But It does not understand the fundamental root cause of the conflict, of why people are supporting the Taliban," says Matthew Hoh, a former Marine and State Department contractor who resigned from the government last September. Hoh, who often worked with Task Force 373 as well as other Special Forces "capture/kill" programs in Afghanistan and Iraq, adds: "We are killing the wrong people, the mid-level Taliban who are only fighting us because we are in their valleys. If we were not there, they would not be fighting the U.S."

Task Force 373 may be a nightmare for Afghans. For the rest of us — now that WikiLeaks has flushed it into the open — it should be seen as a symptom of deeper policy disasters. After all, it raises a basic question: Is this country really going to become known as a global Manhunters, Inc.?