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Bragging about killing Afghan civilians was met with disbelief

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TACOMA, Wash. — Staff Sgt. Calvin Gibbs' big talk about killing Afghan civilians and getting away with it made him stand out when he joined a new platoon at an Army base in southern Afghanistan a year ago, according to written statements from his comrades.

Some of his Stryker platoon mates from Joint Base Lewis-McChord told investigators they didn't know what to make of him. They thought he must be kidding.

Now Gibbs is at the center of an Army war crimes investigation that netted 11 of his comrades from the 5th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. They await their own trials for misdeeds they allegedly committed under Gibbs' direction. Five soldiers, including Gibbs, are charged with murder.

On Tuesday, Gibbs is scheduled to appear in court at Lewis-McChord for a pretrial hearing that could help decide whether he goes to a full court-martial where he could face the death penalty.

The 25-year-old Montana native has the longest charge sheet in the group. He's accused of murdering three civilians, keeping "off the books" weapons to plant on dead Afghans, assaulting a fellow soldier and mutilating corpses to get body parts to keep as trophies.

The gory charges threaten to overshadow the 5th Brigade's accomplishments over its yearlong deployment to a bloody corner of Afghanistan.

With bravado and intimidation, Gibbs had a bigger presence than a typical squad leader commanding half a dozen soldiers in Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, according to written accounts.

He lured a friend to his platoon from another unit by bragging that they'd "find someone to kill" in combat, a pledge that Staff Sgt. Robert Stevens took to mean they'd just be doing their jobs in Taliban-infested territory.

Gibbs reportedly bullied soldiers who didn't go along with him, threatening to hurt them or giving them a glimpse of the severed fingers he told them he collected from his kills, according to statements from two soldiers who were on the outs with Gibbs.

One soldier didn't buy the talk. Spc. Adam Kelly told investigators he thought Gibbs was "full of" it.

Since being charged in June, Gibbs has remained more of a mystery than his co-defendants. The Army says it doesn't have the standard-issue head photo that it has for the others and has released to the media. He's being held at a city jail in Buckley apart from his co-defendants who are in custody at Lewis-McChord.

He refused to testify at a co-defendant's hearing last month. His family and friends have been tight-lipped leading up to the court date, declining interview requests.

Gibbs denies the charges through his civilian lawyer.

"All of the combat engagements Gibbs was involved in were appropriate engagements," said attorney Phillip Stackhouse, who declined to comment further.

Stackhouse will have to make his case against a pile of witness statements from Gibbs' platoon mates who say the killings were staged and that Gibbs kept Afghan weapons to cover his tracks. At least two of Gibbs' co-defendants say they participated only because they were afraid of him. Here's a look at the charges Gibbs faces, and how his platoon mates described the incidents behind them, based on sworn statements, as well as Army charge sheets and court testimony.

MURDER --The first killing: None of Gibbs' comrades claim that he fired a weapon in this killing, which took place in January near the village of La Muhammad Kalay. Instead, they say he planted the seed for the murder by giving a grenade to Cpl. Jeremy Morlock and outlining a scenario to kill an Afghan with the weapon when no one was looking.

Morlock told investigators that he recognized a chance to carry out the scenario on a patrol. Morlock told investigators he tossed the grenade at an Afghan and ordered Pfc.

Andrew Holmes to fire a machine gun at the man. Both now are accused of murder with Gibbs.

--The second killing: It happened in February, outside the village of Khari Kleyl. Gibbs told Staff Sgt. Kris Sprague, who arrived at the scene moments after he heard a shooting, that an Afghan had fired two rounds at him with an AK-47. Gibbs said he responded by shooting the Afghan to death when the man's weapon jammed.

Morlock, who was there for the killing, told investigators that the AK-47 actually belonged to Gibbs, and that Gibbs set up the killing by isolating the Afghan and shooting the AK-47 at a wall.

He dropped the gun and shot the Afghan with his Army-issued M4 rifle, Morlock said.

Morlock and Spc. Michael Wagnon also are accused of murder in this incident. They shot at the Afghan, and Morlock told investigators they were aware that the killing was staged.

--The third killing: In early May, Gibbs allegedly threw a grenade at an Afghan man and planted a Russian-made grenade on him to make it appear as if the man had attacked Gibbs' squad.

Spc. Adam Winfield and Wagnon say Gibbs was ahead of the group when he saw an Afghan standing alone in a compound. Gibbs said "let's do this guy, this is perfect," Winfield told investigators.

Winfield and Morlock claim Gibbs told them to fire at the Afghan, too. They're all charged with murder.

CONDUCT PREJUDICIAL TO GOOD ORDER AND DISCIPLINE

Gibbs reportedly kept severed fingers and flashed them to his platoon mates at various times during his deployment to intimidate or impress the soldiers.

Pfc. Justin Stoner, who led Army investigators to Gibbs when Stoner blew the whistle on drug use in the platoon, first saw the fingers in January. Stoner saw them again in May, when he said Gibbs made threats to deter him from talking with officers about misconduct in the unit.

Several soldiers say they saw Gibbs collect body parts on patrols. One allegedly took place in November, when Gibbs reportedly persuaded another soldier to cut a finger from an enemy combatant who had been killed in a confrontation with an Apache helicopter.

In April, Gibbs reportedly dug up leg bones from a grave and played around with them.

In May, he allegedly pulled a tooth from the victim of the third murder -- the man he's accused of killing with a grenade. Soldiers said he kept blue trauma shears in his fatigues and used them to sever the body parts.

ASSAULTING A FELLOW SOLDIER, IMPEDING AN ARMY INVESTIGATION

Gibbs faces one count of assault and battery for his role in a May 5 assault on Stoner. He allegedly led the beating when he learned Stoner's identity from officers in his company.

Gibbs also allegedly threatened to injure Winfield by dropping a weight on him. Winfield called his parents to raise concerns about Gibbs in February, saying he was afraid of the squad leader.

"I told them I did not tell anyone about this because I had no one I could trust and talk to, in fear that it would get back to Staff Sgt. Gibbs," Winfield told investigators in May.

HOARDING 'OFF THE BOOKS' WEAPONS

Gibbs faces three charges of failing to obey orders stemming from the foreign weapons he kept in his living quarters and his Stryker infantry carrier. The weapons include an AK-47, AK-47 magazines, Afghan body armor, rocket-propelled grenades, mortar rounds, claymore mines and fragmentary grenades.

Soldiers told investigators that it was common knowledge Gibbs kept the weapons to plant on bodies. Gibbs and Staff Sgt. Stevens visited an Afghan National Army unit in March and attempted to trade a pornographic magazine for weapons Gibbs could use "as an insurance policy in case he accidentally killed someone," Stevens told investigators.

AGGRAVATED ASSAULT AGAINST AFGHAN CIVILIANS

Gibbs and other soldiers were on a foot patrol west of the village of Lackarel in March when Gibbs called out that he saw Afghans with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Five soldiers reportedly shot at the Afghans, but several soldiers who were there say they knew the villagers weren't a threat. They searched the site about 45 minutes later and did not find evidence that they'd hit their targets.

Stevens was among the soldiers who thought the Afghans weren't a threat.

"I aimed and shot to miss the guys that Staff Sgt. Gibbs was ordering us to fire on," he told investigators. "I was extremely thankful to find out that we had not killed or wounded either of these two guys, and I regret not trying to stop Staff Sgt. Gibbs from trying to kill innocent people."