

## Grisly Descriptions of Chaos and Horror At Soldier's Hearing

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#), Published: November 10, 2012

JOINT BASE LEWIS-McCHORD, Wash. — Through a live video feed from half a world away in [Afghanistan](#), in an extraordinary night court session, descriptions of chaos and horror poured into a military courtroom here as if from an open spigot.



*California half a year killed.*

**Lois Silver/FR 170774 Associated Press, via Associated Press**

*In a courtroom sketch, Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, lower right, is shown during testimony on Friday.*



*Sergeant Bales, left, training at Fort Irwin in before 16 Afghans were still on the pillows,”*

“Their brains were said Mullah Khamal Adin, 39, staring into the camera with his arms folded on the table, describing the 11 members of his cousin’s family he found dead in the family compound — most of the bodies burned in a pile in one room.

Mr. Adin, in a hearing that started here late Friday, was asked about the smell. Was there an odor of gasoline or kerosene?

Just bodies and burned plastic, he replied through a translator.

The Army’s preliminary hearing in the case against Staff Sgt. [Robert Bales](#), accused of killing 16 Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province this year, unfolded last week mostly in the bustling daylight of a working military base an hour south of Seattle. But to accommodate witnesses in Afghanistan, and the 12-and-a-half-hour time difference, the schedule was shifted at week’s end, with testimony through cameras and uplinks in Afghanistan and here at

Lewis-McChord starting at 7:30 p.m. Pacific time on Friday and running until shortly after 2 a.m. Saturday.

The attacks, which occurred on March 11 in a deeply poor rural region while most of the victims were asleep, were the deadliest war crime attributed to a single American soldier in the decade of war that has followed the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and they further frayed the relationship between the American and Afghan governments.

The military says Sergeant Bales, 39, was serving his fourth combat tour overseas when he walked away from his remote outpost in southern Afghanistan and shot and stabbed members of several families in a nighttime ambush on two villages. At least nine of the people he is accused of killing were children, and others were women. After the victims were shot, some of the bodies were dragged into a pile and burned.

“ ‘What are you doing? What are you doing?’ ” one witness, a farmer named Haji Naim, said he had shouted to the American soldier, whom he described as wearing a blindingly bright headlamp in a house that, without electricity, was pitch black. The gunman said nothing, Mr. Naim said, and simply kept firing.

“He shot me right here, right here, and right here,” he said, indicating wounds from which he has apparently recovered.

Most of the testimony, however graphic, was circumstantial, pointing to a lone American gunman but not directly implicating Sergeant Bales. The villagers testified on the fifth day of a military proceeding known as an Article 32 investigation, held to establish whether there is enough evidence to bring Sergeant Bales before a court-martial. If a court-martial is ordered and the Army decides to continue the prosecution as a capital case, the sergeant could face the death penalty.

Sergeant Bales, a decorated veteran of three tours in Iraq before being sent to Afghanistan last December, was deployed from Joint Base Lewis-McChord. He was held at the military prison at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas before being brought here for the hearing.

Witnesses earlier in the week talked about the blood-soaked clothes that Sergeant Bales was seen wearing when he returned to his base in Kandahar and his comments to fellow soldiers about having done “the right thing.” There was also testimony about the test for steroids in his system that came back positive three days after the killings.

The hearing’s night sessions, which were scheduled to continue on Saturday, were all about the violence that unfolded the night of March 11. Mr. Adin, who was summoned to his cousin’s compound by a telephone call early the next morning, told of boot prints that were on some bodies, including the head of a child who had apparently been shot and stomped or kicked. Mr. Adin talked about a small child who he said appeared to have been “grabbed from her bed and thrown on the fire.” But Mr. Adin never saw the gunman, arriving after the fact.

Another witness, a boy named Sadiquallah, who said he was “around 13 or 14,” ran with another boy and hid behind some curtains in a back room. Sadiquallah said he had seen a man with a gun and a light, but had been more intent on hiding than looking around.

“In that room where I was hiding behind the curtains, a bullet hit me,” he said. The bullet struck one of his ears, but he said he had not heard the gunfire. The boy hiding with him was wounded as well, Sadiquallah said.

A 14-year-old boy named Quadratullah said he had known the shooter was an American because of the pants he wore. He also said the man had worn a T-shirt, which matches what other witnesses said Sergeant Bales had been wearing when he returned to his base. Quadratullah said he had followed footprints back to the American base after the sun had come up.

Speaking in a matter-of-fact tone but sometimes animatedly gesturing with a finger — creating the image of a pointed gun as a translator communicated his words to the courtroom — Quadratullah described “a grandmother” whose name he did not know. She came running to their house, he said, her clothes having

been “ripped off.” A few minutes later, he added, “she was shot and she was dead.”

Both defense and prosecution lawyers apologized for their questions, probing for details about scenes of death or the actions of the victims.

Mr. Adin, for instance, was asked whether he believed the clothing had been stripped off or burned off the pile of bodies from his cousin’s family. He answered with a practical, if horrific, observation.

“Nobody was alive to ask whether they were naked before they were burned or killed,” he said.

Sergeant Bales, who has been in custody since the morning of the attack but has not entered a plea, has mostly sat to the right of his lawyers for the testimony, and has rarely shown emotion. When the witness accounts began on Friday, though, he moved close to the big flat-screen monitor mounted on a wall, peering up, a hand on his chin, and occasionally looking down.

Two Afghan Army guards testified on Friday night that they had seen an American soldier leaving and returning to the base near the times that matched the attacks, but neither man could identify the soldier, cloaked as he was in darkness and distance. One remembered, though, that the soldier had laughed when they confronted him and asked what he was doing.

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