

By Lynzy Billing

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Deadly night raids. Faulty U.S. intelligence. A “classified” war loophole. Reporter Lynzy Billing’s investigation offers an unprecedented insight into the civilian casualties of Afghanistan’s Zero Units.

In 2019, [reporter Lynzy Billing returned to Afghanistan](#) to research the murders of her mother and sister nearly 30 years earlier. Instead, in the country’s remote reaches, she stumbled upon the CIA-backed Zero Units, who conducted night raids — quick, brutal operations designed to have resounding psychological impacts while ostensibly removing high-priority enemy targets.

So, Billing attempted to catalog the scale of civilian deaths left behind by just one of four Zero Units, known as the 02, over a four year period. [The resulting report](#) represents an effort no one else has done or will ever be able to do again. Here is what she found:

- **At least 452 civilians were killed in 107 raids. This number is almost certainly an undercount.** While some raids did result in the capture or death of known militants, others killed bystanders or appeared to target people for no clear reason.
- **A troubling number of raids appear to have relied on faulty intelligence by the CIA** and other U.S. intelligence-gathering services. Two Afghan Zero Unit soldiers described raids they were sent on in which they said their targets were chosen by the United States.
- **The former head of Afghanistan’s intelligence agency acknowledged that the units were getting it wrong at times and killing civilians.** He oversaw the Zero Units during a crucial period and agreed that no one paid a consequence for those botched raids. He went on to describe an operation that went wrong: “I went to the family myself and said: ‘We are sorry. ... We want to be different from the Taliban.’ And I mean we did, we wanted to be different from the Taliban.”
- **The Afghan soldiers weren’t alone on the raids; U.S. special operations forces soldiers working with the CIA often joined them.** The Afghan soldiers Billing spoke to said they were typically accompanied on raids by at least 10 U.S. special operations forces soldiers. “These deaths happened at our hands. I have participated in many raids,” one of the Afghans said, “and there have been hundreds of raids where someone is killed and they are

not Taliban or ISIS, and where no militants are present at all.”

- **Military planners baked potential “collateral damage” into the pre-raid calculus — how many women/children/noncombatants were at risk if the raid went awry,** according to one U.S. Army Ranger Billing spoke to. Those forecasts were often wildly off, he said, yet no one seemed to really care. He told Billing that night raids were a better option than airstrikes but acknowledged that the raids risked creating new insurgent recruits. “You go on night raids, make more enemies, then you gotta go on more night raids for the more enemies you now have to kill.”

- **Because the Zero Units operated under a CIA program, their actions were part of a “classified” war,** with the lines of accountability so obscured that no one had to answer for operations that went wrong. And U.S. responsibility for the raids was quietly muddled by a [legal loophole](#) that allows the CIA — and any U.S. soldiers lent to the agency for their operations — to act without the same level of oversight as the American military.

- **Congressional aides and former intelligence committee staffers said they don’t believe Congress was getting a complete picture of the CIA’s overseas operations.** Lawyers representing whistleblowers said there is ample motivation to downplay to Congress the number of civilians killed or injured in such operations. By the time reports get to congressional oversight committees, one lawyer said, they’re “undercounting deaths and overstating accuracy.”

- **U.S. military and intelligence agencies have long relied on night raids by forces like the 02 unit to fight insurgencies around the globe.** The strategy has, again and again, drawn outrage for its reliance on sometimes flawed intelligence and civilian death count. In 1967, the CIA’s Phoenix Program famously used kill-capture raids against the Viet Cong insurgency in south Vietnam, creating an intense public blowback. Despite the program’s ignominious reputation — a 1971 Pentagon study found only 3% of those killed or captured were full or probationary Viet Cong members above the district level — it appears to have served as a blueprint for future night raid operations.

- **Eyewitnesses, survivors and family members described how Zero Unit soldiers had [stormed into their homes at night](#)**, killing loved ones** at more than 30 raid sites Billing visited. No Afghan or U.S officials returned to investigate. In one instance, a 22-year-old named Batour witnessed a raid that killed his two brothers. One was a teacher and the other a university student. He told Billing the Zero Unit strategy had actually made enemies of families like his. He and his brothers, he said, had supported the government and vowed never to join the Taliban. Now, he said, he’s not so sure.

- **Little in the way of explanation was ever provided to the relatives of the dead — or to their neighbors and friends — as to why these particular individuals were targeted and what crimes they were accused of.** Families who sought answers from provincial officials about the raids were told nothing could be done because they were Zero Unit operations. “They have

their own intelligence and they do their own operation,” one grieving family member remembered being told after his three grandchildren were killed in an airstrike and night raid. “The provincial governor gave us a parcel of rice, a can of oil and some sugar” as compensation for the killings. At medical facilities, doctors told Billing they’d never been contacted by Afghan or U.S. investigators or human rights groups about the fate of those injured in the raids. Some of the injured later died, quietly boosting the casualty count.

In a statement, CIA spokesperson Tammy Thorp said, “As a rule, the U.S. takes extraordinary measures — beyond those mandated by law — to reduce civilian casualties in armed conflict, and treats any claim of human rights abuses with the utmost seriousness.” She said any allegations of human rights abuses by a “foreign partner” are reviewed and, if valid, the CIA and “other elements of the U.S. government take concrete steps, including providing training on applicable law and best practices, or if necessary terminating assistance or the relationship.” Thorp said the Zero Units had been the target of a systematic propaganda campaign designed to discredit them because “of the threat they posed to Taliban rule.”

The Department of Defense did not respond to questions about Zero Unit operations.

With a forensic pathologist, Billing drove hundreds of miles across some of the country’s most volatile areas — visiting the sites of more than 30 raids, interviewing witnesses, survivors, family members, doctors and village elders. To understand the program, she met secretly with two Zero Unit soldiers over the course of years, wrangled with Afghanistan’s former spy master in his heavily fortified home and traveled to a diner in the middle of America to meet with an Army Ranger who’d joined the units on operations.

She also conducted more than 350 interviews with current and former Afghan and American government officials, Afghan commanders, U.S. military officials, American defense and security officials and former CIA intelligence officers, as well as U.S. lawmakers and former oversight committee members, counterterrorism and policy officers, civilian-casualty assessment experts, military lawyers, intelligence analysts, representatives of human rights organizations, doctors, hospital directors, coroners, forensic examiners, eyewitnesses and family members — some of whom are not named in the story for their safety.

While America's war in Afghanistan may be over, there are lessons to be learned from what it left behind. Billing [writes](#) :

"The American government has scant basis for believing it has a full picture of the Zero Units' performance. Again and again, I spoke with Afghans who had never shared their stories with anyone. Congressional officials concerned about the CIA's operations in Afghanistan said they were startled by the civilian death toll I documented.

As my notebooks filled, I came to realize that I was compiling an eyewitness account of a particularly ignominious chapter in the United States' fraught record of overseas interventions.

Without a true reckoning of what happened in Afghanistan, it became clear the U.S. could easily deploy the same failed tactics in some new country against some new threat."

[Read her full report here.](#)