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Images of war and peace in my inbox

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Mar. 25, 2011 NCR Today

Images of the depraved and heroically good appeared in my inbox this week.

Tuesday?s email included a link to an article in the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* that contained photos of American soldiers smiling and posing beside the corpses of Aghan civilians they have just killed.

This was followed by an exuberant update from my husband, Scott, describing a morning walk through the Afghan capital, Kabul, during which he photographed a man in a shop with a ?terrific face? and a beautiful child.

The ?Kill Team? photos, first published in *Der Spiegel* on Monday, show the aftermath of the deliberate murders of Afghan civilians by a rogue U.S. Stryker unit that operated in southern Afghanistan last year. These are the same soldiers who, according to various press accounts, cut off the thumbs of some of their victims for ?trophies.?

Der Spiegel reportedly has 4,000 ?Kill Team? pictures but has published only three. The rest are in the hands of prosecutors. One of the magazine?s printed images shows a smiling 22-year old Jeremy Morlock holding up the head of a victim by his hair as if the man, identified by *Der Spiegel* as Afghan farmer Gul Mudin, were a prized fish or a slain deer.

American officials responded swiftly to the photos? publication. There were phone calls to their Afghan counterparts, including an exchange between U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and Afghan President Hamid Kharzai. The U.S. Army publicly apologized for the killings and promised prosecution.

On Wednesday, Morlock, one of five U.S. soldiers accused of murdering three Afghan civilians, pled guilty to the charge and was sentenced to twenty-four years in prison. Seven other soldiers face lesser charges, including drug use and desecration of corpses.

One wonders if Morlock, like Lynndie England, the U.S. Army reservist notoriously photographed holding a leash to a naked Iraqi detainee in Baghdad?s Abu Ghraib prison, will be scapegoated for an evil that is systemic.

War, every war, is a brutal business that invariably causes some soldiers to go berserk. We who send them off with parades, prayers, and euphemisms of ?serving God and country? bear responsibility for their disintegration.

After the *Der Spiegel* story hit the newsstands, international organizations working in Afghanistan advised their foreign employees to lay low for a few days. If my husband received such advice, he ignored it.

In his email, he writes of meandering through the streets of Kabul, greeting passers-by with ?Salaam alaykum? (peace be with you).

Scott traveled to the Afghan capital with an international delegation to support a small, but growing, indigenous peace movement. Its leaders are a remarkable group of young people who call themselves the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers.

The group, which is entirely Afghan-led, accepts no money to avoid accusations of corruption, a rampant problem in Afghanistan. The group?s coordinator, who for security reasons only goes by the name Hakim, seems to possess a Franciscan-like commitment to nonviolence and simplicity. Fluent in English and the first in his class in medical school, he left a privileged life to live among the Afghan poor and articulate their aspirations for peace.

The youth volunteers were busy during the internationals? visit. They held a multi-ethnic walk for peace in Kabul and planted fifty trees -- apricot, peach, almond, and poplar. They hosted an all-day Skype-athon, listening and speaking to people in far-flung corners of the globe who, like them, want an end to war. On March 21, the Afghan New Year, they commemorated Afghans killed or injured in the war with a candlelight vigil.

In addition to the ?Kill Team? photos, Tuesday?s email included a link to a YouTube video of the youth?s anti-war march charmingly entitled, ?Afghan ?talk of peace? must walk [1].?

I viewed it after the gruesome photos, which is perhaps why my eyes filled with tears as I watched these young people, girls as well as boys, wearing gloriously blue scarves process behind a banner that read: ?We wish to live without wars.?

Judging from the online tally, the ?Kill Team? photos have been viewed approximately fifteen times more than the peace procession. *Why is the brutality of war so alluring?* The obstacles against the youth?s aspirations for peace are obvious and undeniable. But these brave youth are the forward-thinkers here. Yesterday, a 126-page report by a U.S. think tank [2] declared the war had reached a stalemate and said it was time for a negotiated settlement.

So once the bloodletting stops, then what? The Afghans will do what people victimized by war always do. They will light candles, mourn their dead, and plant trees.

Why not do that work now? Or, as the Afghan youth volunteers sweetly say on their video, ?Why not love??

For more on the Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers and their efforts to build a peace movement in Afghanistan, go to www.livewithoutwars.org or to Voices for Creative Nonviolence [3].

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Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uedQzWck7xc
[2] http://tcf.org/publications/2011/3/afghanistan-negotiating-peace
[3] http://www.vcnv.org