

# The Fort Bragg murders: a grim warning on the use of the military

Bill Vann  
2 August 2002

The murders of four Fort Bragg soldiers' wives in the space of six weeks has stunned the North Carolina army post and shocked the American public. Fort Bragg is the home of the elite Special Forces Command. Three of the four soldiers had recently returned from Afghanistan, where they served with Special Forces units.

The string of murders began June 11, when Sergeant First Class Rigoberto Nieves, returned just two days earlier from Special Forces duty in Afghanistan, fatally shot his wife, Teresa, and then killed himself.

On June 29, just weeks after returning from Afghanistan, another Special Forces soldier, Master Sergeant William Wright, strangled his wife Jennifer and buried her in a shallow grave.

Sergeant Cedric Ramon Griffin, a member of an engineering battalion, stabbed his estranged wife, Marilyn, 50 times and then set her house on fire July 9.

On July 19, the same day that Wright was arrested for murder, Sergeant First Class Brandon Floyd shot his wife Andrea to death and then turned the gun on himself, taking his own life. According to the *Fayetteville Observer*, Floyd was a member of the super-secret Delta Force, an elite unit specializing in assassination and covert hit-and-run operations, who had returned from Afghanistan in October.

In a fifth domestic-related killing involving a member of the Special Forces at Fort Bragg, police on July 30 arrested the wife of a major for allegedly shooting him in the head and chest while he slept.

These killings, tragic from an individual standpoint, are all the more troubling in the context of the government's expanding use of military forces to carry out policing operations within the US. In the wake of September 11, the American people have been conditioned to accept the presence of National Guard troops armed with automatic weapons at airports, train stations and bridges. Within the ruling elite, any commitment to the core democratic principle of military subordination to civilian authority has vastly eroded.

Most ominously, the Bush administration has floated plans to lift existing restrictions on the use of the military for domestic police functions. These were laid down in a 124-year-old statute known as the *Posse Comitatus Act*, passed at the end of the Reconstruction period that followed the Civil War. If Bush succeeds in this effort—and there is little reason to believe that the Democrats in Congress will seriously oppose it—forces such as the Green Berets could be sent into action on US soil.

Undoubtedly, each of the killings at Fort Bragg involved unique personal problems and, very likely, pre-existing marital conflicts. But they had one thing in common: soldiers who were deployed to kill defenseless civilians in Afghanistan employed the same methods after returning home.

Pentagon spokesmen, who at first dismissed any connection between the homicidal domestic violence and the Afghan war, now say military internal investigations will consider the soldiers' experience in Afghanistan as one possible contributing factor. In point of fact, Special Forces troops in Afghanistan have been at the center of operations that can only be described as massacres: the bombing of villages, the slaughter of unarmed prisoners, the killing of bands of irregular and largely defenseless militiamen.

Some of those closest to the victims have drawn a direct connection between the killings and the recent combat. "He was like my own child," said Wilma Watson, describing her son-in-law Master Sergeant Wright. "Until he came back from Afghanistan, I didn't worry about violence," said Ms. Watson of the man who killed her daughter. "He was getting these attacks of rage. She was afraid of him. I begged her to come home. She still loved him."

"I truly in my heart believe that his training was such that if you can't control it, you kill it," said Penny Flitcraft, the mother of Andrea Floyd, who was slain by her husband, the Delta Force Sergeant. Her assessment was backed up by one of the police officials in charge of the investigation into the murders. "They're trained people," said Sheriff Earl Butler of Cumberland County, North Carolina. "Their job is to go to Afghanistan to fight.... I think the nature of their training has a lot to do with these types of killings."

The stresses of military life—prolonged separations during overseas deployments and frequent transfers from one post to another, not to mention the brutalization resulting from training, military discipline and combat itself—result in an inordinate amount of domestic violence. According to one 1999 report, the rate of incidents of domestic violence in the military rose to 25.6 per 1,000 soldiers in 1996, from 18.6 in 1990. During the same period, incidents within the overall population were on the decline. Some studies have indicated that the rate of domestic violence in the military is two to five times higher than among civilians.

The murders at Fort Bragg reveal something more than a general tendency toward domestic abuse within the military. The manager of an Army family support program at Fort Bragg described the chain of killings as "mind-boggling."

It is hardly a leap of logic to link this eruption of violence with the kind of war these troops were waging in Afghanistan and the nature of the training they received as Special Forces soldiers. Returning US military personnel have confirmed that from the beginning of the intervention last fall, it was the Pentagon's policy to bomb villages believed to be harboring or aiding Al Qaeda and Taliban members in any way. In the main fighting that took place in eastern Afghanistan, troops were told that all inhabitants were hostile and should be killed—men, women and children alike.

One well-known Gulf War veteran who tried unsuccessfully to join the Special Forces described the impact of a similar form of combat, saying it contributed to his own decision to carry out one of the most horrific crimes in US history—the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal building.

Timothy McVeigh described himself as “gung-ho” when he was sent into the 1991 US led war against Iraq, but was disillusioned by the slaughter of virtually defenseless Iraqis in which he participated. A former member of McVeigh's unit described how it prepared for battle, drilling to the cadence of “Blood makes the grass grow. Kill! Kill! Kill!”

The training of these forces is aimed at preparing them to carry out actions that under other circumstances would result in their imprisonment for murder. They are sent overseas with no political understanding of the real motives underlying the military actions they are called on to carry out, or of the country and people they are attacking.

In motivating the troops to fight, military commanders propagate a hollow patriotism combined with the demonization of the enemy. Behind the obligatory rhetoric about defending democracy and eradicating terrorism lurk racism and xenophobia, along with military elitism and extreme anti-communism—all designed to prepare Special Forces troops to wage war on civilian populations.

Fort Bragg, it should be recalled, figured in the early attacks by the Republican right on President Bill Clinton. In 1993, Senator Jesse Helms (Republican of North Carolina) publicly declared that the Democratic president would be ill advised to come to the army installation without a strong bodyguard. Helms' extraordinary remark was more a threat than a warning. The fascist-minded senator was pointedly giving voice to the extreme hostility within the military to the former anti-Vietnam War protester.

These are the forces upon which the US government increasingly relies internationally. They are already deployed not only in Afghanistan, but also throughout the Persian Gulf, in Colombia, the Philippines, several former Soviet republics, the Balkans and elsewhere on a virtually permanent basis. Special Forces troops also rotate in and out of scores of other countries under a program known as Joint Combined Exchange Training, which is designed to create similar units to be used by the foreign host governments for internal repression.

There is no doubt that planning is underway at the highest levels of the state to unleash such forces against the American people as well. Since September 11, the government has erected what amounts to the institutional framework for a martial law regime. A secret parallel government has been created and is already installed in fortified bunkers.

The soon-to-be constituted Homeland Security Department will

wield unprecedented domestic police powers. Included in the agencies to be brought under its umbrella is the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). During the US interventions in Central America in the 1980s, FEMA drew up a secret plan known as REX-84 that called for the mass roundup of Central American immigrants as well as political opponents of US policy and their incarceration in concentration camps.

The implementation of such plans requires military force. Expressing frustration over the restrictions on the use of the military for domestic operations, White House Office of Homeland Security spokesman Gordon Johndroe declared recently, “We have a situation where we need to deploy troops, but we have to talk to a lawyer to figure out if we can do it or not.”

The plans to lift the restrictions on domestic use of the military mark a dangerous step toward martial law in America. Reflected in this turn is the fear within ruling class circles that the widening chasm between wealth and poverty and the discrediting of both the government and big business, compounded by rising unemployment and economic distress, will produce a movement of opposition from below that spins out of control.

The danger is that the same breed of US military forces who organized the assassinations of tens of thousands of Vietnamese during Operation Phoenix in Vietnam; who trained and “advised” the death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala; and who most recently carried out war crimes in Afghanistan will be deployed against working people in the US itself.

It is in this sense that the spasm of killings at Fort Bragg must be taken as a warning. In every country where the military has been called out to repress the population—from the bloodbath that followed the 1973 CIA backed coup in Chile to the massacre of unarmed Chinese demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989—the refrain has always been the same: How could they do this to their own people? The seemingly gratuitous brutality and bloodlust appeared incomprehensible. But a great deal of effort was expended by the ruling powers to emotionally and psychologically condition its shock troops to carry out the most savage and inhuman acts.

The American people are not immune to the worldwide eruption of US militarism. Torture, death squads and “disappearances” that so many peoples have suffered at the hands of US backed dictatorships can, indeed, happen here.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**