

Military families speak out against Iraq war at Pittsburgh rally

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The daughter of Staff Sergeant Charles Pollard, who is stationed in Iraq, and her mother spoke out against the Iraq war and called for US troops to be brought home at a noon-time press conference Wednesday, July 30, outside the federal building in downtown Pittsburgh.

Robin and DeShauna Ponton also took part, along with some other military families, in a 200-strong protest against George W. Bush's appearance at the Urban League convention held July 26-30 in this Pennsylvania city.

Staff Sergeant Pollard is a 43-year-old reservist from Pittsburgh. He was called up and sent to Iraq with the 307th Military Police Company. He is a 22-year military veteran and has been in Iraq since May 24. Pollard was featured along with other soldiers in a July 2 *Washington Post* story in which he and other US troops spoke out against the war. "U.S. officials need to get our asses out of here," he told the *Post*. "I say that seriously. We have no business being here. We will not change the culture they have in Iraq, in Baghdad.... All we are here is potential people to be killed and sitting ducks."

When asked how soon he thought the US should pull out of Iraq, his reply was, "As soon as we can get the hell out of here." He added, "The President needs to know it is in his hands, and we all need to recognize this isn't our home, America is, and we just pray that he does something about it."

At last Wednesday's rally, Tim Vining from the Thomas Merton Center, a Catholic charitable group that organized the antiwar demonstrations in Pittsburgh and the protest against Bush's appearance at the Urban League, introduced the speakers. He said, "We are gathering here today to lend our support to Charles Pollard, a US soldier who spoke out and was featured in the July 1 *Washington Post* article on low troop morale. We are here to give voice to soldiers who are asking hard questions of our officials."

DeShauna Ponton, Robin's mother, was first to speak. DeShauna is from Perry Hilltop in Pittsburgh and is a child nutrition advocate with the Just Harvest organization. "President Bush has been lying about the weapons of mass destruction that have caused our soldiers to be in Iraq. I think it is time to bring the troops home. President Bush says he is looking for the weapons of mass destruction. He should look in the mirror. He is not only killing many Iraqis, but he is killing people from here. They should bring the troops home."

Robin Ponton, Sergeant Pollard's daughter, is a 13-year-old eighth grade student at Frick International Studies Academy in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh. Speaking tearfully, she said, "I want my Dad home. I don't want him to be in Iraq. I don't want him to die. I want them to bring my Dad home."

Sanford Kelson, a local attorney and Vietnam War veteran opposed to the occupation of Iraq, also spoke. He said, "Like so many wars, we are finding out that people are being sent to war to die for lies. Three-and-one-half-million Vietnamese died in Vietnam. How many Iraqis have died? Bring the troops home now."

DeShauna and Robin Ponton spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* after the rally. DeSahuna explained, "I came here because I support my daughter in speaking up about what has happened to her father. When we are out together, and if we hear on the news or hear someone talking about another soldier having been killed, Robin begins to worry that it is her dad until the name is made known.

"Robin and her father were born on the same day. She was born on his 30th birthday. On her birthday, he sent her a card that was signed by everyone in his unit. Bush does not see the human side of this war. Each letter her father writes to Robin, he writes as though it is his last. We are proud of him; we are proud that he went to fight and proud that he is strong enough to speak out about the

war.

"I feel we have been lied to. We were told that basically Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. We were told we had diagrams, we knew where they were. They have not been found. Where do you think Saddam Hussein is hiding them? In his back pocket? We have been lied to and the troops are over there being shot at. They should be brought home now.

"I am glad the lies are coming out, but Bush is not sending the troops home. There are many reasons for this war. Bush wants to control a country and control the oil. It is also like the movie *Wag the Dog*. Bush's popularity was going down so he started this war. The point is that people like Robin's father are over there fighting and being killed, not for the reason we were told, but for other reasons.

"The money they are using for this war could be used to feed people. A lot of people are hungry and children need to get the right nutrition. This war money could be used to feed the hungry, for education and for housing. There are a lot better ways to use this money than waging this war in Iraq. They attacked Clinton for lying about an affair. As far as I am concerned that is no business of mine. That is between Hillary and him. But these lies, they involve American soldiers and people are getting killed because of his lies.

"I can't say that Charles has been used. He signed up on his own and knew what he was getting into. He went to Iraq to do his duty, but now we have found out that Bush lied. It is now time to bring them home. There are people in the military and in military families who are against the war. They are not being represented in the press. We are proud of him that he went over and we are proud of him that he spoke up. We have not heard from him since he spoke out and was quoted in the *Post* at the beginning of July. We expect to hear from him soon.

"I support my daughter speaking up. I have always taught her to look beyond herself, to look at the needs of other people who may not have food or parents. I have always taught her to see that many people are not as fortunate as her and to speak up about injustices."

Robin Ponton also elaborated on her feelings, "Those against the war are not being represented. All of the people want to come home. It is too hot over there, and they don't like what they are there for. My friends are against the war. One of my friends, her cousin's father is also in the war and she told me she knows how worried I am. Bush lied. Bush said that the troops would be brought back, but they probably won't be coming home soon.

Every time I call my grandmother, the conversation is about my dad. Everybody misses him. All my family backs me up. My father had planned a vacation with me. He was going to retire soon and we were going to travel together. Now all of those plans have been messed up because of the war."

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz attempted to quiet the soldiers and smooth over the crisis in his recent trip to Iraq. After his return, Wolfowitz reported on the July 27 Sunday morning talk shows that the soldiers were not opposed to their assignment in Iraq; they just wanted to know a firm date for when their tours of duty would end. Wolfowitz reiterated that plans to build up an Iraqi police force were a top priority, as were efforts to bring in military forces from other countries to relieve the US contingents.

The day after Uday and Qusay Hussein were killed in a US military operation in Mosul, the Army announced a plan for rotating fresh troops into Iraq and bringing home the troops who have been stationed there the longest. Soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Division, who were sent to Kuwait last September and have twice had their orders to return home rescinded, are to be replaced under the plan by a Stryker brigade, elements of the 82nd Airborne Division and additional National Guard units.

However, a day after announcing the plan for rotating the troops, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld qualified it. Speaking to reporters at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld declared, "There are a whole series of unknowables that are buried in there. And I think what will determine what actually happens will be several things. One is the number of international forces that we are able to bring in. A second will be how the security environment evolves over a period of time. And it is those things that will determine the actual number of US forces that will be needed."

ABC News quoted one unidentified 3rd Infantry Division soldier the week before saying, "If Donald Rumsfeld were here, I would ask him for his resignation."



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