

Florida National Guardsmen victimized for wedding Iraqi women

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In the late 1950s, perhaps under the pressure of the civil rights movement as well, Hollywood produced a number of works that argued for tolerance and racial or ethnic harmony. *Sayonara* (1957), for example, tells the story of a West Point hero who falls in love with a Japanese opera performer and secretly lives with her, jeopardizing his Air Force career. Other films such as *South Pacific* (1958) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) had similar themes.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq have evoked an opposite reaction in US ruling circles. Racist and colonialist remarks, often laced with religious zealotry, have been forthcoming from leading figures in the Bush administration.

There is the notorious case of Lt. Gen. William “Jerry” Boykin, the deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence. The three-star general has made well publicized anti-Islamic remarks. He has enjoyed immunity from censure precisely because his bigoted, Christian fundamentalist statements meet with the approval of the Bush administration.

The repeated claims that the US-led coalition is bringing “decency, freedom and progress” to Iraq are accompanied by the media’s overblown treatment of such stunts as George W. Bush’s sneaking into Baghdad to serve Thanksgiving dinner to the 1st Armored Division at the Bob Hope Dining Facility. Everything about the media coverage rings false.

To the extent that real stories of the hardships of the Iraqi people and US soldiers find their way to the American public, a very different picture emerges.

At the same time that Bush was dishing out holiday turkey to a vetted group of soldiers from the 1st Armored Division, two Florida National Guardsmen

attached to the same division were facing disciplinary measures for the “crime” of marrying Iraqi women.

From two small towns in northern Florida, Sgt. Sean Blackwell, 27, and Cpl. Brett Dagen, 37, are with the state’s National Guard’s 3rd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, which, while deployed to Iraq, has been attached to the 1st Armored Division.

On August 17, the two soldiers married Iraqi physicians—both of whom were working in Baghdad for the US occupation forces—in a double ceremony during a break on the same patrol. The marriages-on-patrol were necessary because the soldiers’ commanding officers were trying to block the weddings. Blackwell, who is likely to be discharged from the army, has not seen his wife since the wedding and has only recently been given permission to contact her by phone or email.

Blackwell believes he is innocent of the charges he received in a written reprimand: disobeying an order and abandoning his post. He told the *New York Post*: “We had completed all assigned tasks for the patrol when I got married. A large majority of patrols that go out stop either at restaurants, shops or homes of families they’ve befriended in their sector.”

Blackwell’s attorney, Richard Alvoid, spoke to the WSWS: “There is a cloud of uncertainty as to what the military will do to Sean. I have been concerned from Day One about the safety of Sean and Ehda’a [Sean’s wife] and we are working very hard to get her out of Iraq as soon as possible. Sean is not facing difficulties from other soldiers. The problems seem to be coming from the battalion commander on up, as well as other commanders. It seems personal, but racial issues may also be playing a role.”

Ehda’a applied for a visa to France, seeking to live there while awaiting a US green card. She was refused

the document by the French consul who told her that Paris did not want to come into conflict with American authorities.

Alvoid commented: “When Sean’s mother and myself were being interviewed on the Fox television program *Hannity & Colmes* last Friday night, [right-winger Sean] Hannity had strong opinions against fraternizing with the Iraqi people and putting American troops in danger. But then, the media is not in opposition to this war.

“I am opposed to the war, although I was not opposed to the removal of Saddam Hussein. I hope I am wrong, but I believe this war is turning into another Vietnam. The US has created a mess and has replaced one dictator with another evil—anarchy. We should bring the troops home.

“In this context, I believe that Sean’s case is more than a Romeo and Juliet story. It’s also about people wanting something other than killing. When you come down to it, we are all human beings and we fall in love. This story gives me hope that there is another side to the war.”

Blackwell’s mother, Vickie McKee, from Pace, Florida, has been an avid campaigner against the military’s victimization of Sean and his wife. She made the following statement to the WSWS:

“The army will not tell us anything, but it seems that my son will be discharged and we are waiting to hear whether it will be an honorable or a dishonorable one. I don’t believe Mr. Dagen [the other soldier] is getting discharged, which is strange because they both got married to Iraqi women at the same time.

“Sean is in Baghdad right now and was originally scheduled to come home in February—one year since he left for Iraq—but could come home sooner because of the discharge. He is ready to leave Iraq, although he does not want to be dishonorably discharged—he does not deserve to be. He has spent seven years in the army and went to Korea twice. He joined the National Guard because he really wanted to go to college. In fact, he was set to start school to become a nutritionist when he was called up and sent to Iraq.

“The army claims that he disclosed the location of a patrol, but it was a routine patrol—the Iraqis knew about it and it was not top secret. The charge against him is really just an excuse. Some of his superiors have said racist things, such as ‘Muslims and Christians don’t

jive.’ They have given him a very hard time for falling in love with an Iraqi.”

(Sean told Cox News Service that he was “very excited about spending the rest of my life in a multicultural family.”)

Ms. McKee added, “I am very worried because both Sean and Ehda’a are in danger over there. I worry about it all the time.

“From the beginning he found it very hard to be in the war. He was writing me letters about seeing dead bodies. He had a firefight with the *fedayeen* [Iraqi guerrillas] and some of them got killed. He was very disturbed by this. He has always been good at his job, but some of his officers have disappointed him. My son has always looked up to the government and was very patriotic. Now he finds it hard to feel this way because his freedom of speech has been attacked.

“On the *Hannity & Colmes* show, they were saying things like Sean had no business fraternizing with the Iraqis. I started rolling my eyes. And then I said, I just don’t get it. The troops were fraternizing in Vietnam, in Korea and other wars, such as World War II.

“I don’t like this war one bit. I did not vote for Bush to start with. Why are we staying in Iraq? Bush is too far into it. I think the war is about oil and Bush’s buddies!

“I speak out because my son cannot, even though I am ill and don’t have the strength I used to have. The army just better not try and stop me from talking.”



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