

A young US Marine's death in Iraq

An interview with the father of Jesús Suárez del Solar

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Jesús Alberto Suárez del Solar, one of the first Marines killed during the invasion of Iraq, would have been 21 years old on November 16. He had been assigned to the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division, based at Camp Pendleton, California. His father, Fernando, spoke to the WSWWS on November 14.

Jesús died on March 27, 2003, under circumstances that have yet to be fully clarified. At first, military authorities informed his parents and wife that he had suffered a head wound from enemy fire. Then they gave the family a second version: he had stepped on an Iraqi land mine while on guard duty at a temporary camp.

It now appears, however, that, while on patrol, he had stepped on an unexploded fragmentation grenade dropped by US forces in the area the day before. Designed to create the greatest number of casualties, this explosive breaks up into many pieces of metal shrapnel. Jesús was the point man in a squad that entered the area and caused the grenade to explode.

He was in agony for two hours after being hit. Then a helicopter rescued him. The effort came too late; he died from his wounds. He left behind his wife, Sayne, his two-year-old son, Erik, and his parents, Rosa and Fernando Suárez del Solar. Three sisters also mourn his death.

Last August, Fernando and Rosa attended a meeting of soldiers' families at which he said: "My question to Mr. Bush is this: how many more of our sons need [to die] before you bring the troops home?" Fernando has been actively working to establish the truth about Jesús's military experience and to clarify the circumstances of his death.

A vocal opponent of the American occupation of Iraq, Fernando has spoken to audiences at protest rallies and high schools, exposing the fraudulent tactics that the military uses to recruit working class youth and demanding an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Rosa, on the other hand, has declined to speak out in public, but has expressed concerns that Jesús and the now more than 450 other US soldiers killed in Iraq will be forgotten—that they will become just numbers.

No single reason motivates young men and women to enlist in the armed forces, but a great many do it because they believe they will obtain job training and financial aid for college. Others, such as Jesús, join because they truly want to make the world a better place. The Marine Corps wasted no time in manipulating these ideals.

Fernando, Rosa and the children came to the United States from Tijuana, Mexico, just south of San Diego, California. Fernando had been a community activist and an advocate of public services for the poor.

The WSWWS interviewed Fernando in Escondido, California, not far from San Diego. He describes how Jesús's experiences in the Marines, and in Iraq and Kuwait in particular, transformed his ideas.

"On many occasions some of my children would come with me. I remember once visiting an extremely impoverished area in which people live from the refuse of others. They would drag containers of garbage into their homes, and sift through them to find things to eat or sell. Among these residents, many children become addicted to drugs very early in life.

People exist that do not care about the suffering of others and peddle drugs; sometimes they give them away to entice eight- or nine-year-olds to steal for them.

"These experiences shook two of my children, Jesús and Olivia. They decided to dedicate their lives to combating the drug epidemic. Jesús participated in drug prevention programs in elementary schools while still attending high school. He enjoyed teaching and being around children."

When the family moved to Southern California, it did so in no small measure because Jesús and Olivia wanted to finish high school there. They thought this would help them enlist in the US Marine Corps and fulfill their dream: to combat drugs efficiently and directly. To recruit young people, the US military spends considerable resources to produce television commercials. It even beams them across the border. Young and impressionable, Jesús and Olivia were affected by this propaganda, coming to believe they could join special anti-drug military units in the United States and truly make a difference in the war against the drug traffic that had plagued Tijuana and devastated so many young lives.

Jesús attended San Pasqual High School and Valley High School, both in Escondido. After joining the Marines, he went to basic training at Camp Pendleton, near San Diego. The Marine Corps officer who recruited him had assured him he would be given the opportunity to join a drug interdiction unit—once he got past his training. He was 18 years old.

The Marines and other military recruiters have complete freedom to enter high schools and community colleges. They are required to answer all students' questions, with one caveat: they do not have to volunteer negative information. All assurances and promises they make to students about career opportunities and scholarships reflect the needs of the military, not the recruits.

His father continued:

"Jesús went into the corps with the intention of staying for some time. He went in blindly, like most of the youth that go into the military. After three months in Camp Pendleton, his thinking changed completely.

"At first Jesus would send glowing letters, telling his mother that he was treated well. They would allow us to see him, but we were not allowed any contact. We would attend mass on Sundays at Camp Pendleton, and sit on a balcony overlooking the soldiers. They were not allowed to turn to look at us. This bothered my wife.

"One day, as we were leaving the church, Jesus lifts his eyes and my wife blows a kiss in his direction. My son was stripped of a grade and was punished for lifting his eyes to look at his mother. He wrote asking her not to make signals, because that got him into trouble."

On September 11, 2001, Jesús was still in Camp Pendleton. The terrorist attacks of that day deeply affected him and changed the course of his life.

By the time he graduated from basic training, which Fernando says can only be described as dehumanizing and humiliating, Jesús was already disenchanted with the Corps. He had begun questioning his reasons for joining. In fact, he had already decided not to re-enlist following completion of his tour of duty. During much of his training, Jesús's

sergeant had subjected him to racist anti-Mexican insults. He was also abused physically and emotionally. His father explained:

“On two or three occasions, his sergeant insulted his national origin, yelling ‘you are nothing but a Mexican s—t; a Mexican f——t. That’s all you’ll ever be.’ Jesús was supposed to accept these insults without saying a word. One time, though, he did yell back at his sergeant: ‘I am a better Marine that you will ever be!’ The sergeant slapped him so hard that he fell to the ground. Then he made him do one-hundred push-ups with another man standing on [Jesús’s] back. Following the push-ups, he asked my son: ‘What are you?’ ‘More of a Marine than you!’ came the reply. The sergeant then ordered him to do even more push-ups.

“At times the [officers] would make [the soldiers] eat their lunch in two or three minutes. They had to dump what they did not finish in a common container. At night they were forced to eat out of that container, food that was cold and all mixed-in together.”

Jesus’s unit was sent to Kuwait in 2002. During his stint there, he witnessed an incident that affected him greatly: a group of so-called terrorists attacked his barracks. The American soldiers gave chase to the attackers and surrounded the gunmen in an apartment building. The ensuing shootout resulted in the indiscriminate killing of women and children. When Jesús, under orders, went into the building to remove the bodies, he was appalled by the callous disregard for innocent human life that the Marines themselves had shown. Fernando recalled:

“He called me at home early in the morning and we spoke for six hours during which he described the corpses of women and children and cried over what he had seen. ‘I am not a murderer. I did not join the Marine Corps to kill women and children,’ he said. I asked him to see a military psychologist. He told me that all they do was say that ‘I am a Marine now and should not cry.’ He had begun to see through the government’s pretexts for invading Iraq. At the same time, he was very shaken by the human misery that he witnessed along the Iraq-Kuwait border, including high levels of child mortality; lack of basic services; and lack of health care... He sincerely hoped that a US invasion would make things better for the Iraqi children. He was beginning to question militarism, and he was determined not to obey any orders that he considered immoral. My son was a very moral individual. It was important for him to find a moral justification for him to participate in the impending invasion of Iraq. He understood that Bush was lying and looked for a personal ideal—creating a better society for Iraqi children—to justify his participation.”

Jesús was killed on March 27, the very same day that his father spoke at an anti-war meeting.

Fernando continued.

“On March 28, at 8:15 a.m., three soldiers from Camp Pendleton came to our house, one of them a military chaplain. I had just stepped out. They asked to speak to Sayne, Jesús’s wife. My wife called me to come home. She kept yelling over the phone, ‘Make them go away, they are bearers of misfortune.’ I knew then what had happened. When I got home, the soldiers told me that only Jesús’s wife was privy to the information they had. I reacted violently against one of the men. Finally, one of them said, ‘Your son is a hero! He died in Iraq last night in the field of battle. He was shot in the head by enemy fire.’

“They couldn’t give us more details, so I threw them out. Several days later, I saw a newscast in which [Jesús’s] sergeant in Iraq stated that Jesús had stepped on a US bomb. ‘It was a tragic accident,’ the sergeant said. I then found out from a reporter for the *San Diego Union-Tribune* that the army had dropped cluster bombs—fragmentation grenades—on March 26. On the 27th, the troops, including my son, had been ordered to march along a stretch of highway without being informed that the area had been sown with these grenades. Jesús was the scout; the group was marching low to the ground with night vision equipment. They were on the lookout for the Iraqis, not minding the ground. My son steps on one of these mines and then spends nearly two hours waiting for medical help.

“Four weeks ago there was a ceremony in Camp Pendleton to honor the 39 Marines who had died in Iraq. In my opinion, this was a hypocritical ceremony, because I feel that they don’t really care about our pain or about the death of these young people. During that ceremony, I asked for, and was given, a third version of the event: Jesús had stepped on a mine while giving directions to a truck moving in reverse. The Camp Pendleton commander said that, while Jesús stepped on a land mine while directing the truck, the squad had not been advancing but setting up camp. The commander said that there was no way of knowing if the mine was American or Iraqi, because fragments of both were found in the area. The commander agreed to give me this version in writing, but I never got it.

“All this upset Rosa very much, and she began to insist that I speak out. That and the fight we had over the funeral. These bastards first asked me if we wanted a military or a civilian funeral. [Jesús’s] wife and mine together decided on a civilian service. What upset them most was that the Marines were callously placing a price over a person’s life. They offered to pay \$4,325 toward the funeral in addition to the casket and transportation to the morgue. The actual cost was more than \$7,000.

“After many complaints and after people began sending donations to pay for the funeral, the Corps found the money to pay for the funeral.”

Since Jesus’s death, Fernando has continued speaking out against the war. He made a commitment to finish his son’s dream: to improve social conditions for the young.

Even before the war against Iraq began, Fernando was passionately opposed to it, rejecting the argument that it was for freedom and democracy. He had compared it to the US invasion of Mexico in 1840, but Jesús had not agreed with him. With tears in his eyes, Fernando told the WWS that Jesús, following his experiences in Kuwait and Iraq itself, began to change and to oppose the war, at one point telling one of his fellow Marines that his dad had been right all along.

Today, Fernando’s personal loss has made him committed to fighting against the war as well as the tactics the military uses to recruit young men and women, most of whom are Jesús’s age, and send them to their deaths. He recently flew to Iraq under the auspices of Global Exchange to try reaching Iraqis, especially children, with the message that Americans are not the enemy; that many people in the United States oppose the war and what is being done to the Iraqis, and that the Bush administration is a criminal government.



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