

US soldiers mutiny over “suicide mission” in Iraq

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On October 13, 19 soldiers from a US supply unit in Iraq refused to drive seven unarmoured fuel tankers along roads to areas near Baghdad where resistance attacks on convoys are almost a daily occurrence. According to the wife of one of the soldiers, the troops viewed the orders as a “suicide mission”.

The soldiers involved are members of the Army Reserve 343rd Quartermaster Company. It is based in Rock Hill, South Carolina, but has personnel from Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina and Mississippi as well. The unit arrived in Iraq in April as part of the 13th Corps Support Command—a 15,000-strong formation responsible for logistics and supply. Almost 90 percent of its troops are National Guardsmen or reservists and 26 have been killed thus far.

According to information given by several of the soldiers’ families to the Mississippi newspaper, the *Clarion-Ledger*, the 343rd had been involved in attempting to deliver an aviation fuel shipment on October 12, but had been forced to return to their base at Tallil, near Nasiriyah in southern Iraq, because the fuel was contaminated. They then received orders to join a larger convoy taking supplies north to the US base at Taji, a town on the northern outskirts of Baghdad where numerous US troops have been killed or wounded in resistance ambushes or roadside bombs.

The orders outraged the unit. They were tired. The fuel-laden trucks they were driving were unarmoured and not capable of more than 40 miles per hour. Several of the vehicles had mechanical problems, raising the prospect of breakdowns in the middle of hostile territory. They had also been informed that the convoy would not be escorted by infantry in humvees or helicopter gunships.

In the early hours of October 13, 19 members of the platoon refused to show up at the convoy point of

departure. They were read their rights, removed from their barracks and confined in tents at the Tallil base.

The incident involving the 343rd may never have reached the light of day if not for the actions of several soldiers and the *Clarion-Ledger*, which published the first story in its October 15 issue.

An anonymous officer rang Jackie Butler, the wife of Staff Sergeant Michael Butler, on the morning of October 14 in Mississippi. She told the *Clarion-Ledger*: “I got a call from an officer in another unit early morning who told me that my husband and his platoon had been arrested on a bogus charge because they refused to go on a suicide mission. When my husband refuses to obey an order, it has to be serious.”

Sergeant Larry McCook rang his wife in Mississippi early Thursday morning to let her know that he had been detained. She told the *Clarion-Ledger*: “He told me that three of the vehicles were deadlines [classified unsafe]... not safe to go into a hotbed like that.”

Private Amber McClenny, 21, rang her mother, Teresa Hill, in Alabama at approximately the same time and left a message on the answering machine outlining what had happened. She stated in the message: “They [the military] are holding us against our will. We are now prisoners... I’m not even supposed to be using the phone.”

Her mother told the *Clarion-Ledger*: “They knew there was a 99 percent chance that they were going to get ambushed or fired on. They would have had no way to fight back.”

The publicity surrounding the mutiny forced the US military to issue a carefully worded statement. The soldiers, the statement said, had raised “some valid concerns” which some “chose to express... in an inappropriate manner, causing a temporary breakdown in discipline”. The military has denied any of the

soldiers have been arrested and has stated that all 19 have returned to duty. The unit has reportedly been stood down for two weeks to carry out maintenance on its vehicles.

Brigadier General James Chambers, the commander of the 13th Corps Support Command, told a press conference: “Based on our investigations other actions may be necessary.” Two investigations have been announced, but the mutiny has been dismissed as an “isolated incident”.

The incident, however, is of considerable significance. It is the first reported case of overtly rebellious conduct by a group of US troops. Whatever the immediate trigger, it is a reflection of the broad anger, frustrations and discontent among American military personnel. Thousands of soldiers have no ideological commitment to the occupation of Iraq. They see no reason to be killed or maimed in a war they know is unjustified and illegal.

The actions of the 343rd testify to the increasing preparedness of rank-and-file troops to defy their commanders. In recent weeks, soldiers have used media interviews to publicly denounce the war and the Bush administration. (See: “Discontent rife in US military ranks”.) In all likelihood, these events are just the tip of the iceberg.

Every reason that was given by the Bush administration for the invasion has been proven to be a lie. Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and no responsibility for the September 11 attacks on the US. Above all, soldiers are confronted everyday with the fact that Iraqis totally oppose the occupation and want the foreign troops out of their country. They are not fighting against a handful of “terrorists”, but against a nation-wide guerilla resistance that has the sympathy of most Iraqis. More than 80 attacks take place against occupation forces every day, with supply convoys being a prime target.

Far from bringing “liberation” and “democracy”, the occupation has turned Iraq into a living hell, in which the function of American soldiers is to intimidate and repress the population. While soldiers in units like the 343rd are risking their lives in unarmoured trucks, companies like Bechtel and KBR are profiteering from multi-billion dollar contracts and are preparing to loot the country’s oil resources.

The mutiny in Tallil will have sent shockwaves

through the US political establishment and military command. The turn from a draft army to today’s volunteer army was made following the experience of the Vietnam War, where the growing opposition among American soldiers to being forced to fight a criminal colonial war led to the disintegration of morale and discipline. The rebellious sentiment within the military was a contributing factor in the defeat of US imperialism.

Now, less than 18 months into the occupation of Iraq, a similar process is beginning in the ranks of volunteer units. Every day they face the reality of policing an unpopular occupation. Soldiers are aware that the majority of the American people do not support the war and want the troops brought home.

The central question is the development of a broad political movement in the United States and internationally demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign forces from Iraq, against the position of both the Republicans and the Democrats. That is being taken forward by the Socialist Equality Party campaign in the 2004 elections.



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