

# Mike Hoffman of Iraq Veterans Against War speaks to the WSWS

## “We’re fighting average Iraqis who don’t want the US there”

Jeff Riedel  
8 November 2004

There are a growing number of soldiers returning home from the war in Iraq, whose disillusionment has grown into anger over the now obvious lies that the Bush administration used to launch the war and the criminal character of the war itself. Mike Hoffman, co-founder of the Iraq Veterans Against War (IVAW), is one of them.

Hoffman spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the eve of the US presidential election, explaining his transformation from a willing recruit to the leader of a movement of soldiers against the US war in Iraq.

He joined the Marines after finishing high school and drifting from what he describes as “dead-end job to dead-end job.” A friend introduced him to a recruiting officer, who quickly convinced him to sign up. He went off to boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, in February 1999, and entered Iraq as part of the initial invading force in March of 2003.

Conditions in his hometown of Allentown, Pennsylvania, played a major role in his decision to join the Marines, Hoffman explained. “Allentown is an industrial town, he said. “The steel mills and railroads were very big in its history, but by the time I graduated high school most of that had gone away. All of the factories and industries in the area had gone overseas or were completely bankrupt.

“So if you were looking for a job in the area, there weren’t many chances. At that point in my life, someone comes up and says ‘I’m going to give you full health insurance, a roof over your head, three square meals a day, you get to travel the world and on top of that, you get to defend your country,’ I mean it sounds like a really good idea.”

After boot camp, Hoffman went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for artillery training and then to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. It was there—aside from a short stint in Japan—that he spent most of his four years in the Marines. He was at Camp Lejeune when the September 11, 2001, attacks took place. By this point, he had already begun to question US foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East.

“When September 11 happened, unlike most people who were sitting around saying, ‘Let’s go kill the people that did this,’ I was the oddball sitting there saying ‘Before we go kill them, let’s try to figure out why they did this.’”

Having just completed two months of intensive desert training, like most enlisted men after September 11, Hoffman braced

himself for deployment to Afghanistan. Instead, he was kept on duty in the US as part of a domestic operation ominously named the ‘Quick Reaction Force.’

“It was part of ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ and ‘Operation Noble Eagle,’ he said. “We were trained in riot-control duty and told that if anything happened within the US, we would be the ‘quick reaction force’ to go out there and maintain order. It was riot control and things like that for within the United States, which for a lot of us was kind of a scary thing.”

As the Bush administration made its case for war against Iraq, using bogus intelligence and lies about weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda, American troops once again prepared themselves for deployment to the Middle East. The desert training continued, and some Marines have revealed that they were supplied with detailed maps and terrain models of the oilfields south of Basra nearly a year before the invasion.

Having just returned from a deployment in Okinawa in December, Hoffman and others in the Second Marine Division did not think that they would be sent to Iraq. Yet, by February, they were shipped out to Kuwait and then thrown into the US invasion.

“We came in behind the front line of artillery and saw burned out buildings and land laid waste—nothing was left,” he recalled. “Everything had basically been steamrolled. A lot of guys from my unit were attached up front as observers and put with Second Tank Battalion. They saw some heavy, heavy fighting. They got hammered in places like Nasiriyah and some other towns, and they had some horrible stories.

“One sticks in my mind. They were some of the first to go through the town of Nasiriyah. Somebody screwed up on their directions, and they missed their turn and rolled straight through an ambush. Somebody in command said that they needed to turn back and go through the kill zone; go back to the turn that they were supposed to make. My friend’s lieutenant got shot through the head and died in his arms right there. I saw a picture of their vehicle—it looked like Swiss cheese, it was completely chewed up. They were lucky to have only lost one person in that one.”

Hoffman spoke about the US government’s current preparation for a full-scale massacre of the Iraqi population in Fallujah and other cities that Washington has branded as terrorist and insurgent strongholds.

“You have to make people really aware of what’s happening in

places like Fallujah,” he said. “You’ve got to make them understand that what’s being painted on the screen right now is that we’re out there killing a bunch of foreigners who have come in to create discord and chaos within Iraq, so that the Americans cannot form a stable government.

“But that’s not what’s really going on there. If you talk to the guys that are on the ground right now, they’ll tell you that who they’re fighting is not a bunch of militants from Syria and Lebanon and places like that—they’re fighting average Iraqis who do not want the United States there, who want to run their own country and control their own country. And I think they have the basic right to do it—that is the definition of sovereignty.

“People should be made aware of the fact that we are fighting average Iraqis; that when we’re dropping 500-pound bombs in residential neighborhoods, yeah, we may be killing one or two so called insurgents, but we’re also killing innocent women and children who live in or around that building. That’s what’s building up the insurgency. We’re using the same basic tactics used in Vietnam, which were a complete failure.

“I read a while ago, and again I forget who said it, but they have this idea that if we kill X number of insurgents, then we win. Well, here’s the problem, every time we kill X number of insurgents, we create X-times-two insurgents. Nobody seems to understand that. We need to make people realize that we’re fighting a losing war and we’re doing it on purpose.”

“I hate to keep using catchphrases, but one man’s terrorist is another man’s revolutionary,” Hoffman said. “These people are just fighting with whatever means they have right now. They’re watching their friends and family killed all around them, and they are striking back in whatever way they have. If you talk to any of the guys on the ground over there right now, whether they agree with the war or not, they would all say that if someone came to the US and did what we’re doing over there, they would all be fighting back. We would all be doing exactly what the Iraqis are doing by any means we had.”

Since returning home, Hoffman said he had been struck by the Democratic Party’s complicity in the buildup to the war and their presidential candidate John Kerry’s vow to continue the occupation and “win” in Iraq.

“I talked to a lot of people around him and his party who tried to get me to come out and support John Kerry. I refused to do it, because he hasn’t come out against the occupation,” Hoffman said. “They say that he’s afraid that if he makes the argument to end the occupation, people will turn against him. I’ve heard people close to him say that if he’s elected, he’s going to change his rhetoric a lot—that he’s just trying to get into office. Though I hope that’s true, I can’t believe it.

“My argument is that all people right now are waiting for is someone in power to say ‘let’s end the occupation.’ There are so many people who are thinking it—they just need someone to lead them in doing it. He’s in the position to do it and I’m really disappointed that he’s not willing to. I read this quote somewhere that says, ‘The Democratic Party has been the graveyard of many great social movements.’ They have this horrible tendency of sucking up the momentum from anything progressive going on in the country and destroying it, and we can’t let that happen.”

“That’s why I refused to come out and campaign with the Democrats because they aren’t saying what needs to be said. And until they do that, I won’t go out to support them. We need to build a movement on the streets; we need a real grassroots movement. We need millions of people on the streets demanding an end to this occupation.”

Hoffman kept his feelings about the war close to his chest when he returned home to finish out his enlistment, receiving an honorable discharge in August of last year. Last March, he began attending rallies, including some at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, home of the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division. He began thinking about starting an organization for soldiers opposed to the war around that time, and by July 2004 he formed the Iraq Veterans Against War (IVAW).

“We have over 50 members right now and we’re picking up more week to week. We’re just starting to get the message out. We’re already a good source for a lot of newspapers—the BBC has contacted me on a regular basis. So we’re breaking through to the mainstream media.

“I get a lot of email from soldiers and families of soldiers offering their support. This is an outlet that people have been looking for. The morale over there is horrible. They’re over there without a clear-cut mission. The only thing that anyone is fighting for right now is their own lives and the lives of their friends.”

Asked whether soldiers now view the war as a mission based on lies, Hoffman responded:

“Yes, absolutely. No one knows that more than the guys on the ground right now. I think a lot of guys work the mission up for themselves while they’re over there so they have something to keep going, but after they come home, things fall apart quickly—a lot of drinking, mood swings, depression. I hear a lot from girlfriends and wives and families of these guys, and it makes me nuts knowing that this is happening. But it’s so hard to get anyone to go for help because the military builds up this mentality, especially when it comes to mental health, that if you ask for help, then you’re a weak person.

“I always tell people to remember that the majority of those who are serving in the military are just as much victims of this war as the people of Iraq. They never joined up to do something like this, and you have to remember that. They’re not to blame for what’s going on over there. Most are simply doing their jobs and trying to get by, day to day. We’ve got to place blame where blame is due and that’s up top—that’s the people who put them in these situations.”



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