

“Suicide by cop”: Marine provokes police shootout to avoid return to Iraq

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On January 8, 19-year-old Andres Raya, a US marine, killed one police officer and seriously wounded another before being shot dead in his hometown of Ceres, a small agricultural community near Modesto in northern California. The apparent motive was Raya's determination not to return to duty in Iraq.

Raya, who fought in Fallujah last spring, returned from Iraq in September for a holiday visit. His mother, Julia Cortez Raya, told the *Modesto Bee*, “He came back different.”

Raya complained several times to his family that he did not want to return to Iraq. On January 2, Raya reported to Camp Pendleton to reunite with his unit. Last Saturday, January 8, Raya said he was stepping out to get something to eat and never returned. A day later he was back in Ceres with an SKS assault rifle, a Chinese version of the weapon he was trained to use in the military.

According to police, Raya went to a local liquor store in downtown Ceres Sunday evening, wearing a poncho and “talking about how much he hated the world.” He asked the store owner to call the police, and Ceres police officer Sam Ryno responded. Raya pulled the assault weapon from underneath his poncho and shot Ryno, seriously injuring him in the legs and lower back.

When he saw Ceres police officer Howard Stevenson drive into the liquor store parking lot, Raya again opened fire, shooting up the car before Stevenson could get out. Raya ran up to Stevenson, seriously wounded and sprawled out on the pavement, and shot him twice in the back of the head.

According to press reports, Raya calmly walked away, disappearing into a home or backyard. Eventually, three neighboring police departments and the California Highway Patrol responded, closing off a

square mile of streets and deploying SWAT officers to search house-to-house for Raya.

Raya emerged from an alleyway and fired on four officers. The officers fired back, wounding Raya. According to the officers, Raya dropped his rifle and charged, motioning as though he was going for another weapon. The officers continued to fire until Raya fell dead.

Much of the shooting was videotaped by a camera outside the store. A *Modesto Bee* article described it as showing Raya “shooting military style at the officers,” using “some of the same darting and dodging techniques we have seen in reports from Iraq.”

Ceres Police chief, Art De Werk, told the newspaper, “It was premeditated, planned, an ambush.... It was suicide by cop,” adding that the police believed that Raya's concern about returning to combat in Iraq provoked the incident. Stevenson is the first Ceres police officer ever killed in the line of duty.

This tragic event demonstrates the impact of US imperialism's neo-colonial invasion and occupation of Iraq on its most vulnerable participants. Considering the level of stress and brutality that young men and women are exposed to in Iraq, it is not surprising that they return home with an elevated propensity for violence. Relentless military attacks, the scorn of an Iraqi population that does not want them there, overextended tours and the deaths of friends all contribute to the psychological instability of returning troops.

Last March the Department of Defense released a mental health survey of troops in Iraq which found that almost three quarters of troops were experiencing low or very low levels of morale. Traditionally, the rate of suicides among enlisted men is much lower than that of the domestic male population. However, the rate of

suicide in the ranks—at last count, 24 in Iraq and 7 upon return to the US—is nearly a third higher than the Army’s historical average.

In a letter revealing the psychological strain felt by many US troops in Iraq, a soldier and father of two wrote his mother, “I haven’t killed anybody here and I hope to never kill anybody,” before taking his own life.

The Army and the Department of Veteran’s Affairs do not ask returning soldiers about the killing they have done, much less determine how it affected them psychologically. Soldiers returning from Iraq are merely required to fill out a four-page form called a DD-2796. The closest this form comes to an inquiry about the violence of war is the question: “Were you engaged in combat where you discharged a weapon?” If the soldier has fired his weapon, he simply checks a box.

The first Gulf War helped produce its share of damaged human beings. The most notorious of them, Timothy McVeigh, killed 168 people when he detonated a massive bomb in the parking garage of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995.

More recently, in October 2002, John Allen Muhammad, also a veteran of the first Gulf War, carried out a series of sniper attacks in the Washington DC area, killing five people. Like Raya, he used a familiar weapon—a .233 caliber rifle, the civilian equivalent of the M-16 he was trained to use in Iraq—and military tactics in carrying out the attacks.

Robert Lee Yates, Jr., is a Gulf War veteran turned mass murderer. A former helicopter pilot with 19 years of army experience, Yates has been convicted of murdering 15 women in the Spokane, Washington, area, and, like Muhammad, has been sentenced to death.



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