Recruit’s death highlights brutality of Marine training

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On February 8, US Marine recruit Jason Tharp, 19, from Sutton, West Virginia, died during a training exercise at the Parris Island, South Carolina, Marine base. Under normal circumstances, the tragic drowning of the teenager during the Combat Water Survival Training phase of boot camp might have remained a family tragedy recorded only in military statistics. However, video footage taken February 7 by a local television station turned up documenting physical abuse of the young recruit by his drill instructor. Picked up from local NBC affiliate WIS-TV in South Carolina, the clip aired on the “Today” show on February 18, provoking an outcry and demands for an investigation by his family.

No less than three investigations were swiftly announced by the Marine Corps into the circumstances of the death and the relation, if any, to the abusive treatment of the previous day. Pending the outcome of the investigations, the Tharp family says it may sue the Marine Corps for the wrongful death of their son. But because of the Feres Doctrine, a 1950 US Supreme Court decision that prevents soldiers and families from successfully suing the military for active-duty injuries or deaths, they are unlikely to win the justice they seek.

The Marines are busily engaged in damage control, attempting to place the focus on the technicality of whether the drill sergeant physically touched Tharp while abusing him.

The videotape shows Tharp being grabbed by his uniform and “forearmed” by the instructor in the presence of four other recruits, an instance of abuse that, if anything, seems mild given the reputation of Marine boot camp. The brutal treatment of recruits is hardly a secret. It is, in fact, something the Marine Corps promotes as necessary to forge young people into “the few and the proud” and has already been the subject of such films as *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).

The case of Jason Tharp is poignantly typical. His birthplace of Sutton, West Virginia, is like so many that are home to members of the US armed forces. The town has a population of just over 5,000, with a median annual household income of barely $24,000, well below the national average of $42,000. Only 69.8 percent graduate from high school, and not even 7 percent earn a four-year college degree. For young people like Jason Tharp, the option of joining the military to become “one of the few and the proud” is one of the few available, *period*, regardless to what extent they embrace ideals of military conduct or patriotism.

Only recently graduated from high school in 2004, Tharp left his job at the Wendy’s fast-food chain in December to join the Marines to earn money for college. He was in his fifth week of the 13-week training course but regretted his decision. In desperate letters to his family, he begged them to help him get out. He complained of being sick, along with other recruits who he said were suffering from pneumonia and coughing blood. “I told him [the drill instructor] I couldn’t cut it.... I still don’t think I belong here, and I think I should go home and get a grant.”

Ironically, in December 2004, the same month that Tharp enlisted, the Pell Grants that he is most likely referring to, which are a primary source of financial aid for working- and middle-class youth, were targeted for cuts by the Bush administration. The already inadequate grants are to be reduced to $4,050 a year and the eligibility requirements changed, eliminating 80,000 deserving students.

Nor was Tharp alone in panicking at having found himself in a situation over his head, with no way out. Relentlessly humiliating recruits for showing signs of

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fear and weakness is an essential part of the training process. They are expected to get over being "wusses" to such an extent that actual symptoms of life-threatening physical or emotional distress are disregarded by their superiors.

Justin Haase, another 18-year-old, died of acute bacterial meningitis at Parris Island in October 2001 for lack of treatment, even after it was clear that his collapse during an obstacle course had nothing to do with cowardice.

In response to Jason Tharp's death, some commentators have asked how he and his family could have been so unaware of the nature of Marine service and how unsuited a sensitive boy hoping to study art would be for its grueling training. His father's comment upon seeing the video was "I don't know how they could treat my son the way we saw him. He never hurt nobody. He'd do anything asked him. It's just not right." He and Jason's mother, like many other parents in towns like Sutton, see their children go off to join the military with reservations, but with a degree of hope that it may provide a future for them that otherwise seems out of reach.

But many young men and woman like Jason Tharp are invariably unprepared for the degree of brutality fostered at places like Parris Island. Such training is designed with the express purpose of rendering recruits capable of razing cities to the ground with overwhelming force, killing innocent civilians, "softening up" detainees and policing a population opposed to US occupation.

The pressure on the military to turn recruits into killing machines has increased, as has its difficulty in meeting recruitment goals. The army has recently had to raise its enlistment bonus 40 percent to $10,000, more than twice the amount of a Pell Grant.

Recognizing the limits to which the human spirit can be forced to carry out indiscriminate acts of homicidal brutality under the guise of fighting to spread "freedom and democracy," and the increasing resistance this will provoke, the army reportedly plans to spend $127 billion on developing robot soldiers, representing the biggest military contract in US history, driving the already record-large military budget up by another 20 percent (*New York Times*, February 16, 2005). The military hopes to deploy robots, capable of firing 1,000 rounds of ammunition a minute, as early as this April in Iraq.

However, robot soldiers that can be directed from a safe distance by laptops to do the killing, as if it were a computerized game, are just another high-tech weapon in the military's impressive arsenal. The military will never be able to entirely eliminate its dependence on youth like Jason Tharp, whose tragic inability to "cut it" may have represented, albeit in an inarticulate manner, his revulsion at the dehumanizing and brutalizing treatment that he was being trained not only to endure, but to inflict.

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