

“I feel that there has been an enormous betrayal of truth and principle”

An interview with the mother and widow of a former Iraqi contractor

Rick Kelly
10 March 2005

Tim Eysselinck worked for RONCO Consulting Corp. in Iraq between August 2003 and February 2004. He headed a de-mining team that was responsible for the clearance of land mines, cluster bombs and other ordnance.

Tim developed post-traumatic stress disorder, and his experiences in Iraq left him disillusioned with the war that he had previously supported. On April 21, 2004, he committed suicide at his home in Windhoek, Namibia, two months after he had resigned from RONCO. He was 40 years old.

On January 6, the World Socialist Web Site interviewed Tim Eysselinck's mother, writer and academic Janet Burroway, who lives in Florida. On February 2, the WSWS spoke with Tim's widow, Birgitt Eysselinck, who lives in Namibia.

World Socialist Web Site: I understand that Tim was attracted to the military from an early age.

Janet Burroway: Yes, he was intensely patriotic. I kept trying to explain it to myself. His dad and I had been liberals. My parents were not. My dad was really a Taft republican. He believed in pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. He had a powerful work ethic. It seems to me that Tim, I don't know if was in his DNA or he picked it up somehow, but it was part of his rebellion from his liberal father and me.

It struck me as funny, because my brother and I had rebelled to the left. Out in the demonstrations, with the kids in the strollers—we were '60s kids. We were a little older, but that's where our sympathies lay.

Tim studied history at the University of Florida, where he joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps, which helped put him through college. Then he was in the army for four years as a captain. He was mainly stationed in Hawaii. He was fiercely proud of being in the army.

He later worked for [security company] Wackenhut in Cameroon. From there he joined the army reserve, which had a great effect on his life. He volunteered for everything he could volunteer for as a reservist. He went at one point to Congo, and later to Bosnia. He then went to Namibia in 1997, where he was running the office part of a de-mining operation, the field part of which was run by RONCO.

WSWS: And he later went to Iraq with RONCO.

JB: Yes, there were 90 Iraqis on his team and I think eight or nine Americans, or coalition—I think there may have been an Australian among them.

I used to say to him that I feel very lucky that since you and I have this political difference, what you are doing is essentially a soldier's job, but it's one of which I can 100 percent approve. He smiled at that. He understood that it was a piece of luck for me. We had always trod this ground carefully, the political ground. We understood pretty well that

there were areas in my thinking that were alien to him, and areas in his that were alien to me, and we were able to acknowledge that...and I think we loved each other very much.

But I knew that if Tim had been told to put mines in the ground he would have put them in with as much alacrity as he took them out. He felt that he was doing something for the US government, and that's what he wanted to do. Over the years “my country right or wrong” was just a theme—and then it wasn't.

A couple of days after 9/11 we were on the phone, and he said, “I just think that Bush is doing a fabulous job.” I didn't answer. We didn't really have a political discussion for two years after that. Why spoil a beautiful relationship?

It was a year ago yesterday that I last saw Tim alive. In the couple of days he was home he let me know he'd changed. He was intensely angry at the Bush and Bremer regimes. I was absolutely *bouleversé* [knocked over]. My brother said that Tim was someone who thought that with ideals and a gun you could fix things.

WSWS: How did his experiences in Iraq change his views on the war and the Bush administration?

JB: What he experienced had a shattering effect on him. There was absolutely no hint of the depression to come. But the anger was palpable. It was shattering to him, to come to feel that the war was wrong.

At the time, I was so happy to hear that he had seen something of what I felt about the war that I didn't stop to think about how deeply wounding that would be to him. He said that he was disgusted with the Bush regime, and that Bremer had screwed it all up with the Iraqis. I know that he later said to someone in Namibia that there was murder and killing going on that should not be, but he didn't say that to me.

Had I known that it was my last chance to talk to him about it in person I would have pressed him, but I deliberately did not. One of the things he had always praised me for was that I let him be himself. I thought that this was a big change for him, and I didn't want to alienate him.

WSWS: The fate of private contractors in Iraq is another area in which the US authorities are suppressing as much information as they can.

JB: This is a point of bitterness for me. I don't think that he is counted among the dead of this war, and I know that he is. And I also think we don't count Iraqi lives as being as valuable as the Americans.

I feel that there has been an enormous betrayal of truth and principle. And that Tim and I, and Birgitt, are caught up in this particular historical moment—that we have been betrayed.

This is where the anger comes in. I have spent my life, and my son did too, believing that whatever else, means must be consonant with ends. And that's not what we're seeing our country do now. And I think that

one place where we connected is the anger and disappointment at that.

He was always, almost glibly, willing to die for his country, and even saw himself as going heroically into battle. But that's not what happened to him. He said at one point to a friend in Namibia that he was ashamed to be an American. I'll say that any day of the week, but for Tim to say it represents such a huge turnaround.

I now regret that I didn't bring up the subject of Bush and the war when I spoke with him on the telephone after I last saw him. But I didn't want to sound like, "I told you so." I talked about my life and asked him about his and did not introduce anything political.

WSWS: What are your thoughts on the current political situation?

JB: The presidential election was a dilemma for me. My husband said that he was going to vote for the Green Party, and I said, "Don't do it, don't do it, we've got to get this guy out of here."

I have been feeling for about two or three years a kind of dismay. It has come to seem to me, fundamentally, that democracy and capitalism can't coexist, because ultimately if the bottom line is the bottom line then you can buy an election. And that's what we're seeing played out.

You will understand that I was very glad to see the last of 2004—when I look at that year, it seems to me that the personal calamity is the biggest that I have ever faced, and then the global calamity with the tsunami is the biggest we've faced. Who needs a war?

What's going to happen? How can it be saved? How can the Iraqis be saved? I am glad that Kerry is not having to deal with this, because there's certainly nothing that he could have done.

WSWS: But Kerry and the Democratic Party were just as committed to the war as was Bush. The essential political task facing working people is to break from the Democrats and Republicans and build their own independent political party. Like you, many people were drawn into supporting Kerry as the "lesser evil," but this has proved to be a failed political perspective.

JB: I agree absolutely. The Democrats feinted to the center, and the center pulled to the right. What I hoped for was that the Democrats could counter the simplistic reasoning and rhetoric—all that "right or wrong," "with us or against us," "dead or alive." But Kerry just made complexity as fuddled as the voters thought it was.

When corporate corruption becomes too obvious, then the GOP trumps up a hot-button "moral" issue as a distraction. What you end up with is a language of statesmanship that is all, all lies: no child left behind, freedom in the Middle East, compassionate conservatism, family values, ownership society. Ownership society! A euphemism for institutionalizing greed, just as "collateral damage" and "soft target" are euphemisms for killing people. When do we start telling and hearing the truth?

WSWS: How are you dealing with your grief now?

JB: It changes all the time. I was thinking about this in terms of the tsunami and the Bonsai Pipeline where Tim was stationed in Hawaii when he was in the army.

What occurred to me is that something like this is not like a tsunami; it's like the Bonsai coastline. It comes at you in waves, and it does it for much longer than you expect. It doesn't overwhelm you and then recede gradually. Christmas week I astounded myself by being fine. Tim loved Christmas more than anybody I ever knew, and I was thinking about him all the time, but I got caught up in my own routine of celebration and we went to parties and we had presents and had a fine time.

And then this anniversary of his having been here for the last time—it's just really hard. So, the answer to your question is, I'm doing fine. I'm not suicidal and I'm working every day...and I love him very much.

WSWS: Why did Tim go to Iraq?

Birgitt Eysselinck: I met Tim in 1998 when I was a national information officer with the United Nations. He then worked in Ethiopia for two years, after which he was offered a post in Washington, in the headquarters of the company [RONCO]. There was a little disagreement about the

relocation costs. The company, making mega-profits, wanted to offer him only the plane tickets for the family to America—but no other relocation costs. He was very unhappy about that, because he found out how much profit they were making. So there was a disagreement about that. And a little bit of a stand-off.

And then they offered him Iraq, and he looked forward to it because he was heading the biggest project they had. The situation was calm in Iraq. It was just after the major combat was over, so there were no snipers and insurgents, etcetera. So I agreed, but only for the start-up. He only wanted to get it running, because he had always told RONCO that he wanted a family posting. They knew that very well.

We discussed the invasion very often. I was completely against that war. I thought it was based on a lie. I remember in Ethiopia we discussed it, together with other friends. And when we were saying that it was all lies, that they wanted the oil, he said, "The Pentagon doesn't lie; they wouldn't send our soldiers in there if it's not true." He was totally convinced that they would find the weapons of mass destruction.

WSWS: And then he discovered that it was all a lie.

BE: Yes. There was a cartoon published in a Namibian newspaper here, after they caught Saddam. They were looking in his mouth and saying: "So Saddam, where are the weapons of mass destruction?" That was published in December when he came back for Christmas. And he thought it was funny. But when my sister asked him what he thought of it when he came back from Iraq, he was very rude to her. He said to her, "I still don't get it," and walked off. It was strange because he wasn't like that. He was never discourteous or brusque, or anything like that. He just walked away. So yes, it definitely had an effect.

He said to a friend of mine that he was disillusioned with the war and that he was ashamed of being an American. And that was about two weeks before he put a bullet in his brain.

He had called me almost every evening from Iraq. There was often rocket fire in the Green Zone. I even heard it over the phone. He told me about two particular incidents. He said that once they had a near-fatal car accident, involving a coalition SUV. And he said that if they had turned as they had intended to they would have been dead, because their car would have been smashed. The SUV came past them at high speed.

He also said that another time they were driving behind, or with, a military convoy that just started shooting into the civilian houses. And he said, "Then they try to deny it when civilians are killed." And he said they don't have to pay compensation, and he said it with sort of a smirk, like he was saying: "typical."

They were shot on at the site. There were improvised explosive devices placed alongside the roads that they were using, the sites where they were working. One of his colleagues was crippled by a blast—these are all things now that they are trying to pretend didn't happen. And on Tim's last flight out of Baghdad he said that he thought he was going to die after he heard explosions. These turned out to be defensive flares, and the plane hadn't been hit as he imagined, but it was extremely stressful for him.

The other thing one has to look at in relation to his illness is contamination. There are hundreds of pictures of bombs and fuses in Taji West, which was an ammunition-storage place of Saddam Hussein. Tim took pictures—close ups, with the serial numbers visible. In some of the pictures, he's holding fuses and things in his hands. And they're not wearing any protective gear. I have a picture—with bare hands they're doing this work.

The US military subcontracted this work to a private company. They're trying to privatize their war, to fight it on the cheap.

They should at least write a certification that if somebody comes out of a war zone they need to be debriefed. You can't just let them back to an unsuspecting family and society, back in Namibia. We weren't prepared for this. We don't even know what post-traumatic stress disorder is. If I had a clue about what it was, I would have sent him to a doctor

immediately, because he had the signs.

WSWS: What were the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?

BE: There were changes. The biggest change was his sleeplessness. And he had this uncharacteristic hyper-vigilance—locking the doors, making sure both safety gates are closed. At the end, he was watching the news quite obsessively and writing to his men almost every second day, which I only discovered afterwards. He was asking how they are. When the Palestine Hotel blew up, he writes, “Are you OK?” You know, this type of thing: “I watched the news with trepidation, I hope you take care.” He obviously had soldiers’ guilt, or survivors’ guilt, whatever you call it. You know, feeling he’s letting them down.

He said to me, “You get me professional help,” just five minutes before he shot himself. He knew something was wrong. Three weeks before, he woke up and said to me, “Something is wrong with me, I’m feeling down.” But what was I to do with that statement? Feeling down? I also blame myself in a way, because I don’t have any knowledge of depression, I know nothing about the subject. I mean this was a clear and obvious symptom. And then he said it again a week later—that he couldn’t sleep.

WSWS: I understand that RONCO has refused to pay you any compensation for Tim’s death, and that you have had to begin legal action in order to qualify for public money under the US Defense Base Act.

BE: This company has the attitude.... They’ve just washed their hands and walked away.

[RONCO issued a statement to the World Socialist Web Site that read, in part, “RONCO has an outstanding benefits program for its employees and their families. At the time of his death, Mr. Eysselinck WAS NOT an employee and thus, his family was not eligible for the benefits.... While, extremely sad and regrettable, the fact of the matter is that it is impossible to ascribe rational motives to irrational acts.”]

Janet wrote a letter to the company’s president attaching the psychiatrist’s report that said his death was clearly a result of the work, and she wanted to know about outstanding leave money, profit sharing, etcetera.

[A Namibian psychiatrist posthumously diagnosed Tim with post-traumatic stress disorder after assessing statements from family and friends, his correspondence, and other documents.]

They only then got going and realized they owed him over US\$3000 in outstanding leave money. Their whole attitude was that this is nothing to do with us any longer. They did refer me, to give them some credit, to my lawyer who’s handling the DBA [Defense Base Act] claim. But if this is successful, then the American taxpayer will end up paying for it—not them, out of their outrageous profits that they make.

That’s not even the point—the point is that they should have debriefed their people. They can’t send people into a war and then not take care of them properly. I sent a happy, healthy man to Iraq. We had no problems, no marital problems, no family problems, no money problems—no problems. So evidently, this was caused by the war and what happened there.

WSWS: What do you think about the international political situation?

BE: I cannot support anything that goes against the most basic tenets of justice—and that is innocent until proven guilty. They went in there based on a lie, and you cannot make that a precedent in the world where the mightiest power can just go into a country on a false pretext. No matter what they achieve afterwards. That is my attitude and that will stay my attitude.

What I think is really terrible about the Bush administration is the way they treat their soldiers. Essentially, Tim was a soldier and that’s why they offered him that position. One in six of their soldiers coming back have this problem of post-traumatic stress disorder, but they do nothing. They didn’t even attend Tim’s funeral. The embassy didn’t even send somebody to the funeral.

This whole attitude about people being used as commodities and then thrown away once you’ve used them—this mentality of war in general—I have a big problem with that. If I look at what’s happening in my case, but also in other cases, I find this disdain for human beings. As long as they can continue making profits they’re happy.



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