A soldier's story

Fugitive GI speaks to WSWS on Iraq war

Jeff Riley
15 November 2005

Two years ago, after witnessing first-hand the atrocities carried out by the US military in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Private First Class Joshua Key decided to desert the US Army rather than face redeployment in the criminal war.

Key is now in Canada with his wife and four young children, having joined a growing number of US soldiers who have fled there seeking refugee status.

He spoke to the WSWS in Toronto shortly before moving with his family to Gabriola Island, British Columbia, where they are currently living.

When he returned to Fort Carson, Colorado on a two-week leave at the end of November 2003, Joshua Key had already made the decision that he was not going to return to the war in Iraq. After seven months in the country, he did not want to participate in what he described as crimes against the Iraqi people, who regarded the American military as an unwanted and illegal occupation force.

He fled the base with his wife and three young children in what would be 14 months of hiding out from the Army and law enforcement before fleeing to Canada.

Born in 1978 in Guthrie, Oklahoma, Joshua Key grew up on a ranch and dreamed of becoming a welder, but didn't have the money to go through school to gain his certification. He met his future wife Brandi at the age of 18, and together they had two children with one more on the way when he met an Army recruiter in February 2002. The recruiters promised him that he would be assigned as bridge-builder in a non-deployable unit and assured him that he would never see combat.

Key would later realize that the recruiters knew exactly what to say to him, appealing to his lack of job security and health care for himself and his family. Taking their assurances—that they would never send the father of three small children into combat and that he could acquire the skills needed for his trade—at face value, he felt joining the Army was a sound decision.

Key went off to boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri by the end of May 2002, and after nine weeks he was stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado with the 43rd Company of Combat Engineers in a rapid deployment unit. By the time he arrived, troops were already being prepared to ship out to Kuwait in preparation for the invasion of Iraq.

"I immediately had the feeling that I was going to go despite all of their promises. As soon as they started to deploy large numbers of troops to Kuwait, I was one of the first to leave my base. I ended up in Iraq one month after the invasion in April of 2003," Key recalled.

"I was with the 43rd Combat Engineer Company 2/3 ARC [Armed Cavalry Regiment]. We were an asset to the Army because they could put us anywhere they wanted. Our main objective, at least what we thought it was when we first arrived, was to clear mines and explosives. But after we got there, that wasn't the case at all. We were never trained in how to raid houses and do traffic control points, or how to institute curfews throughout cities and make it work, but that's what we were doing. When we arrived we expected the war to be over because that's the way they made it sound. They told us that we were going to Ramadi, a city of 300,000 Iraqis. I think there was only one platoon of the 82nd Airborne there, and we were going in to keep control of the city."

Key explained that they were all told that the Iraqi people would welcome the American troops with open arms, one of the central themes of the Bush administration's prewar propaganda. Like the WMDs, it quickly proved a lie.

"When we first arrived it was difficult to tell much from the expressions on the Iraqi people's faces—many people were coming out of their houses just sort of standing there as we would drive by," Key recalled.

"But then we learned that when Saddam was in power, if his military rolled through the city, if everyone didn't come out and run and cheer, his people would go into their houses and give them a reality check. It was mandatory for people to come out and cheer and clap. So it got to the point where we knew that's just what the people are used to doing out of obligation. So if they came out as we rolled through town, it was more because they didn't want anything to happen to them or their homes. It's what you would call habit—minus the clapping and cheering. You actually saw anger in their faces."

The anger of the Iraqi people was fueled by widespread and seemingly indiscriminate raids of their homes, routinely executed with force and violence. The so-called intelligence that led to targeting certain homes, Key said, was almost invariably groundless.

"You know, it [the intelligence] never panned out," Key said. "It could be something as simple as a wedding—where it's a tradition for Iraqi people to fire guns in the air when someone gets married—they've been doing that for God knows how many years. So suddenly you have a QRF [Quick Reaction Force] that moves in and starts raiding the home; and your commander gets mad because there's nothing there and cordons off an entire neighborhood and starts raiding every house."

"But usually you raid a house in the middle of the night or early in the morning, almost always in the dark," Key continued. "Most of the time we would pull up in civilian vehicles. You drive up to an address. If the door was made out of wood we would simply kick it in. Most of the time we would put C-4 explosives in and just blow the door right off. You run in there and people are running around and crying—let's face it, it's pretty traumatic to have the door blown off your home with C-4 in the middle of the night—and there's usually about six or seven of us doing the raiding."

"You just clear room after room forcing everyone down to the ground at gunpoint." Key added. "Then you zip-cuff the males and throw them out the door. They say that we only do that to the males that are over a certain age, but it generally happens to every male in the house no matter how old. Thirteen and fourteen year-old-boys are taken and zip-cuffed and thrown out to a squad waiting out front. They get thrown into the back of a five-ton truck and who knows what happens to them from there.

"People are detained for a very long time before they ever see their families again, and I can say that I never saw anyone returned and I

definitely never returned anyone back to their home myself. There are tens of thousands sitting in jails for no reason whatsoever. Farming families that depend on the men of the house to survive are ripped apart, with the women left alone to fend for themselves."

The violence directed against US troops in the Iraq began to escalate dramatically after the first several months of the invasion as a direct result of the actions of the American forces against the people of the country.

Key explained: "There was not a lot of violence at first. I got to Iraq on the 27th of April, 2003. We were in Ramadi, and for the first month there was hardly anything. Every now and then you'd have small arms fire, but you weren't getting mortar attacks and RPGs right and left, I mean it was real calm. And then you start bringing in inexperienced soldiers into the mix—they just move people around all the time so it's never clear what we're doing. Everyone has the same objective, to raid homes, patrol and do traffic control points, and Iraqi civilians were getting shot up during all of it."

He continued, "Then you start getting people that are real jumpy. When we got into the country we were told that if you feel threatened, you shoot, and a lot of us did just that. We all heard stories from some of the other platoons about soldiers just shooting down people during raids or in the streets in neighborhoods, because someone may have thrown a rock. Well the commanders say if you can't tell the difference between a rock and a grenade, go ahead and shoot. Me personally, I can tell the difference and I was just not okay with that. I mean, come on, if you can't handle a rock being thrown at you in a situation like this, then there is something just not right. It has only made the Iraqi people hate us that much more."

Checkpoints, or traffic control points, where there have been numerous innocent civilians killed, became another focus of the military's violence against the Iraqi population. Key recalled a checkpoint that he was part of where American soldiers just stood waving their hands in the air trying to get people to stop. He explained how he had to pull a young wounded boy from a car that was shot up by his squad for failing to stop when signaled.

"They just opened fire on the car because that's what we're told to do," Key explained. "Rather than think for a second, 'Hey, they don't know what the hell we are saying here and it looks like a man and a child—let's just hold off until they get up here,' they just open fire on them. And then you have to pull the bodies out of the car and take the injured off to the hospital, and you know they are just innocent people."

Joshua Key discussed the war in Iraq with his wife Brandi in depth on the eve of his deployment. There was the bitterness over the recruiters' deception, but they tried their best to rationalize what was happening. Digesting the news reports on the war, they concluded that there were in fact terrorists and weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Brandi supported his going to war, telling Joshua to get back in one piece as soon as possible. Joshua went, but his opinion of the war changed almost as soon as he got to Iraq.

"Even in the first month I felt that we shouldn't be there, and my only concern—and the concern of most of the guys I knew—was when do we get to go home," Key explained. "And then it got to the point where we were being attacked every day—and we were being mortar attacked throughout the night. We were in hell, and we couldn't even sleep.

"And then people you know start getting hurt, and there were even some who were shooting themselves in the foot just to come home. So then you're asking yourself, 'What's going on here?' Obviously they don't have weapons of mass destruction or they would have used them on us—we all felt that way."

Key continued, "They have all these people searching for this stuff—they can't find it. And all we're hearing about is how highly guarded the oil fields are, and that this is really the main concern for America. And then you start getting demonstrations by the Iraqi people and they send you in there to calm them down, and when you get there, they're all pissed off with the US government.

"But they're pissed off at you because you are actually the government to them, when you are actually just a soldier doing what you're told. And they're asking you, 'Why the hell are you guys still here? Why are you monopolizing our Benzine [gas]? Why are you here?' I mean, I'd like to tell them the truth: 'We're here to take your oil, take all of your natural resources;' and 'How long are you going to be here for? Well, we're gonna be here forever.' You're not supposed to say that of course, but that's what I wanted to say all the time."

Key summed up the rapid transformation of his views on the war—and those of other soldiers.

"At first it didn't matter if I was going to die or not because we were dying for a purpose—you're dying because your country is at war and we had to take care of Saddam Hussein," he said. "He was a dictator and you're thinking of it all as sort of a Hitler situation. But then it sinks in—the lies, and you start getting mad—your friends are getting hurt and then you start thinking, 'Man, if I die for this, what did I die for?'

"And everybody's asking the same thing, 'If I die here, what the hell did I die for?' Well, we died for the greed of President Bush. We died so his friends' companies can thrive over in the Middle East. And it got to the point that I realized I wasn't going to die for that, and I wasn't going to sit in prison for it either."

"Most of the Joes felt that way," Key continued, "at least those with a conscience—most of the guys like myself with ranks up to E-5, and after that it becomes all political. For the officers it's a life deal, but even some of them felt that way.

"At one point I had a squad leader who was a Staff Sergeant who was getting ready to be promoted to Sergeant First Class. He'd been in the military for 16 years, and he told me 'When I get home, I'm not going to do this shit again, I'm getting out as fast as possible because I don't know what we're doing here.' I think that demoralized us all."

Questioning the purpose of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, Key attests, was more prevalent within the ranks than anyone on the outside knew. Many were constantly asking—in some cases to their superiors—why they were there. This question was all too frequently driven home with incidents of devastating violence.

Key explained, "One of my [squad] sergeants got his leg blown off. I used to talk to him even before that happened, and even he couldn't give us a reason for us being there. All of us would ask him, 'What is the good of this?' After a combat situation, there are those that you become friends with, and those you don't, and he was one that you did. We became good friends, and you felt like you could talk with him. But to my platoon sergeants or platoon leaders, you could never ask anything like that because they were all 'Go Army', while the rest of us, the Joes as they call us, are sitting around saying, 'Why are we putting our lives in danger for this?'"

Key continued, "I always felt bad that I wasn't there during the incident when my sergeant lost his leg. I had just finished an eight-hour guard shift, and they were on patrol and then they got shot up with an RPG-17 that tore the legs off of three people in their APC [Armored Personnel Carrier]. And they later discovered it was actually one of the United States' own weapons that was given to them during the Iran/Iraq war."

"It's coming across the radio," Key continued, "so we're all waiting for them to get back and help them as much as we can, and then they get there and you actually have to sit there and pick up one of your friend's legs and set it beside them so it's with them when they get medivaced out. Our superiors then made us take their weapons and their vehicle that was totally blood-soaked and told us that we had to clean it all up. I'm like, 'You've got to be shitting me.' This was my friend, and that's all their blood, and they're telling you that you have to clean it all up so that someone else can use it."

After returning from Iraq, Key became aware that the administration and the media were portraying the war to the American public as a struggle

against foreign terrorists seeking to disrupt “democracy.”

“When I was in hiding I would watch the news trying to see what exactly was going on, I just wanted to keep on top of it,” Key recalled. “And every day, that’s all you would have. You know, ‘Two American soldiers die from terrorists,’ or ‘Ten wounded from terrorists.’ It was always terrorists—they never consider it just being people that are fighting for their country. It’s still a war to them and they are fighting against the invasion of their country.

“The American government just calls them all terrorists and that’s how they present it to the American public. Of course the American public is very much against the idea of terrorists ever since 9/11, so the government just focuses on that word, and that keeps the war going. They think that if they say that every American soldier that dies, that for all the boys and girls that are being killed, that they are being killed by terrorists, they can keep the American people behind it.”

Key continued, “Even when I was there you’re hearing all the time about insurgents coming in from Syria, ‘they’re coming in from Jordan, they’re coming in from everywhere,’ and there may be a few, but for the most part they are the farmers, they’re the people whose homes you invaded for no reason and took their family members off to jail and destroyed their lives, maybe killed their son or their father and they want you out of their country. They look at us as being guilty of war crimes and we are. We impose killing, we detain them, we torture them—we’re the ones that caused it all.”

As for the myth of Iraq’s connection to Al Qaeda, Key explained that he and other soldiers never bought into it.

Key recalled, “We were getting letters from back home saying that everyone is being told that Iraq was linked to Al Qaeda and we were all saying, ‘There’s no way that’s true.’ Saddam Hussein didn’t like terrorists, I mean he was not a good man himself, but he didn’t allow terrorists into his country. We knew that he was not a radical fundamentalist like Osama bin Laden—I mean there was no connection. But we had all pretty much figured that out right away and we couldn’t believe that the American people were standing behind us because they believed that we were fighting terrorists that were involved in September 11, and that was basically Bush’s reason for invading Iraq.”

In early 2003, back at Fort Carson in the weeks before leaving for Iraq, Key was told that he would be there no more six months. On the day before he left, the Army changed that to 18-24 months. That was the same time that the military implemented a Stop-Loss program, preventing soldiers who have served their full term in the military from retiring or leaving. In Iraq, as Key recalled, there was no sense of how long or how many tours they would have to serve there.

When he was given two weeks leave from Iraq in November 2003, Joshua and his wife and children climbed into a used car, left the base at Fort Carson and drove east. They decided to stay in Philadelphia, thinking that it was a big enough city to remain anonymous. Running out of cash, Key took a welding job, and his wife Brandi worked in a restaurant. For over a year, they moved every 30 days to a new motel so people wouldn’t ask questions, all the while fearing a knock on the door from law enforcement.

Key was a wanted man, and the FBI had already contacted his mother in Oklahoma, who hadn’t seen her son since before his deployment in 2003. Agents threatened her with being charged with aiding and abetting a criminal.

One day, Key logged onto the Internet and typed ‘Deserter—Need Help.’ He eventually made contact with the War Resisters League in Toronto and lawyer Jeffry House, who advised the couple to wait for their soon-expected fourth child to be born before heading north.

The Canadian government of Prime Minister Paul Martin rejected US soldier Jeremy Hinzman’s appeal for refugee status last March. The decision in this test case demonstrated Ottawa’s subservience to the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, while leaving soldiers like Joshua Key, who have turned against the Iraq war, to face an uncertain future.