

US Marines charged in Haditha massacre of Iraqi civilians

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Four US Marines were charged Thursday with multiple counts of murder in connection with the massacre of 24 Iraqi civilians in the town of Haditha on November 19, 2005. Military officials also charged four officers with dereliction of duty and other counts relating to the cover-up of the rampage. The killings in the predominately Sunni town, 200 kilometers northwest of Baghdad, were carried out after a roadside bomb struck a convoy, claiming the life of one marine.

Four enlisted men from the Kilo Company of the First Marine Regiment's Third Battalion were charged with unpremeditated murder. Squad leader Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich, 26, of Meriden, Connecticut was charged with 13 counts of murder relating to the deaths of 18 people. Three other marines—Sgt. Sanick De La Cruz, 24 of Chicago; Lance Corporal Justin Sharratt, 22 of Carbondale, Pennsylvania; and Lance Corporal Stephen Tatum, 25 of Edmund, Oklahoma—also face homicide charges.

These charges will be followed by an Article 32 hearing—similar to a civilian grand jury investigation—after which an investigating officer makes a recommendation and commanders decide whether to proceed to courts martial. The four marines face possible life sentences if found guilty. The four officers being charged—a lieutenant colonel, two captains and a lieutenant—face lesser sentences ranging from ten years to six months in prison. The latter officers helped to conceal the killings, which the marines initially claimed had been caused by a bomb blast and a subsequent firefight with Iraqi insurgents.

The official whitewash continued until *Time* magazine presented military officials with video footage taken by an Iraqi journalism student showing the grisly aftermath of the massacre and the statements of surviving witnesses, who said the marines went house-to-house, systematically executing innocent men, women and children during a killing spree that lasted up to five hours. President Bush

remained silent on the killings—which revived memories of the Vietnam War's infamous 1968 My Lai massacre—for more than six months after the incident, and two months after *Time* magazine published a detailed exposure.

According to the charges, the first deaths occurred when Sgt. Wuterich and Sgt. Sanick De La Cruz, 24 of Chicago, stopped a taxi some 100 yards away from the stalled convoy and ordered the driver and the four passengers, all college students, out of the vehicle. The two marines have been charged with murdering the five men on the spot. Wuterich is also being charged with falsely telling an investigator that the men from the taxi fired at the convoy, and with urging Sgt. De La Cruz to report that Iraqi Army soldiers at the scene had killed the men.

Wuterich and several other marines then attacked a home nearby killing several members of the family inside. According to the charges Wuterich, who is implicated in killing six people in the house, told his unit to “shoot first and ask questions later.” Lance Corporal Stephen Tatum, 25 of Edmund, Oklahoma, is being charged with negligent homicide in the deaths of four people in the first house, including an elderly man in a wheel chair.

Squad members then proceeded to a second home where Wuterich is charged with killing six more people—two adults and four children, including three who were 4, 6 and 11 years old—and Tatum is charged with killing a 15-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl. At least two hours later, squad members attacked a third house, where Wuterich is charged with killing one person and Lance Corporal Justin Sharratt, 22 of Carbondale, Pennsylvania, is charged with killing three brothers who came to the home to find out what was happening.

Nine-year-old Eman Waleed and her younger brother Abdul Rahman survived the attack, as the adults shielded the small children with their bodies. Hours after the massacre, Iraqi soldiers found Eman and Abdul under a

pile of corpses, wounded but alive. The older child recalled the marines shouting, breaking down doors, and murdering her terrified grandparents as they emerged in their bedclothes. Witnesses interviewed by the *Washington Post* last May testified that victims pleaded for their lives, insisting that they were not insurgents, moments before they were shot.

The cover-up of this crime began immediately after the killings. Photographs taken by a marine intelligence officer after incident revealed that the many of the victims had been shot at close range, in the head and chest, execution-style. Video taken by a US aerial drone immediately after the bomb attack on the convoy showed no evidence of a “firefight.” Nevertheless military officials maintained the lie that 15 people had been killed in the initial blast, and that the rest were caught in a crossfire between the marines and insurgents. Wuterich was even recommended for an award for heroism because his actions supposedly prevented further injury or death to marines and civilians.

Lt. Col. Jeffrey Chessani, the marines’ battalion commander—who is being charged with one count of violating an order and two counts of dereliction—told investigators that he believed the marines’ actions followed a complex attack meant to draw them into firing on civilian houses, according to a transcript cited by the *Post*. “I thought it was very sad, very unfortunate, but at the time I did not suspect any wrongdoing from my marines. I saw it as a combat action.”

Neal Puckett, one of Wuterich’s civilian attorneys, told the newspaper that the allegations do not contradict his client’s versions of events. “It’s what happens in wartime,” he said, “You intend to kill the people you’re shooting at.” Wuterich and his men “did everything they were supposed to that day to protect themselves.”

The prosecution of the eight Marines and officers for the Haditha massacre brings to a total of 64 the number of US soldiers charged in connection with the deaths of Iraqi civilians since the war began in March 2003. Eighteen have been sentenced to prison time, including a 90-year term for an Army soldier who later admitted his role in raping an Iraqi teenager and murdering her and her family.

These prosecutions, however, are largely a matter of damage control. They are aimed at concealing the fact that such wanton brutality is the evitable byproduct of the colonial-style counter-insurgency campaign the US military is carrying out to crush popular resistance to the US occupation.

While those who executed 24 people should be punished for their crimes, they are victims as well. Sent to Iraq on the basis of lies, with little or no knowledge about the population they have been instructed to subjugate, they are forced to kill and witness the deaths and maiming of other American troops. This makes such monstrous acts inevitable.

Such atrocities as those carried out in Haditha flow from far greater crimes. Those responsible for the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq—Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and the Democratic Party leaders and war propagandists in the media who paved the way for it—have never been held accountable for their war crimes. If the murder of 24 innocents in Haditha warrants the prosecution of eight soldiers and officers, then why haven’t the leading architects of the war against Iraq been prosecuted for the deaths of an estimated 650,000 Iraqis who have perished as a result of it?

Since launching its “war of choice” nearly four years ago the Bush administration bears responsibility for the deaths of far more Iraqis than the number who died during a quarter of a century of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Yet the US occupation authorities have placed the former Iraqi president on trial for war crimes, while Bush and his co-conspirators have never been held responsible for far greater acts of mass murder.

In the face of popular opposition to the continuation of the war by the American people—expressed in the November elections as well as subsequent opinion polls—both the Bush administration and the incoming Democratic Party congressional majority are determined to continue the war and escalate the violence against the Iraqi people.

At the same time, they are preparing future wars against Iran and countries as yet unnamed in the continuing drive by America’s ruling corporate elite to assert global hegemony by means of military force. This makes further Hadithas and even bloodier massacres inevitable.



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