

US troops charged with murders, cover-ups in Iraq

Alex Lantier
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Recent weeks have seen a spate of investigations and trials of US troops for murdering Iraqi civilians. The circumstances in which the investigations have been carried out—typically months after the events in question, which came to light only due to the intervention of enlisted men or outside journalists, and after cover-ups orchestrated by US officials—suggest that most such cases go unreported.

On June 30, two US soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division, based in Fort Richardson, Alaska, were charged with premeditated murder of three Iraqis near Iskandariya, a town 25 miles south of Baghdad in the so-called “Triangle of Death” region. According to military spokesmen, Staff Sergeant Michael Hensley was placed in military confinement in Kuwait. Specialist Jorge G. Sandoval was arrested at home in Laredo, Texas and transported to Kuwait three days later.

Hensley is also charged with obstruction of justice and “wrongfully placing weapons with the remains of the deceased Iraqis”—that is, attempting to cover up murder by portraying the victims as gunmen.

According to the military spokesman, the investigation began after fellow soldiers in their unit reported the alleged crimes to military authorities.

On July 2, Sergeant Evan Vela, of the same unit as Hensley and Sandoval, was also detained and charged with one count of premeditated murder, planting a weapon with the deceased, obstruction of justice, and making a false statement. All the alleged murders by soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division near Iskandariyah reportedly took place between April and June of 2007.

In a separate case, Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) agents are investigating possible war crimes by at least ten Marines of Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Regiment, who fought in the brutal

invasion and razing of Fallujah in November 2004. The victims were unarmed Iraqi prisoners captured by the Marine unit. Three enlisted Marines reportedly face murder charges and four officers are charged with failing to investigate the killings.

The battalion to which these Marines belonged, the “Three-One,” was highly decorated for its combat experience in Fallujah after November 2004. President Bush personally singled it out for praise.

Significantly, the case went unreported for over a year. In spring 2006, Ryan Weemer, a former corporal in Kilo Company who returned to civilian life, unsuccessfully interviewed for the US Secret Service. Weemer reportedly divulged details of the incident after Secret Service interviewers asked him if he had ever been involved in a wrongful killing. The Secret Service contacted the NCIS, which began an investigation.

The investigation became public knowledge only on July 1, when military journalist and Vietnam veteran Nathaniel Helms posted an account of the case on defendourMarines.com, a web site that defends US Marines charged with crimes in Iraq. The *Los Angeles Times* then contacted military sources, who confirmed that Helms’s account describes an ongoing investigation.

The *Times*’ account of the murders confirms the *World Socialist Web Site*’s judgment at the time that the Marines attacking Fallujah were under orders to shoot everything that moved and take no prisoners. The Marines had captured several inhabitants and radioed their superiors. They were instructed to leave the house and go assist other Marines trapped in a firefight. When the Marines replied that they were holding prisoners, the response was, “They’re still alive?” As Helms told the *Times*, “That was taken to mean, ‘Whack [i.e. Kill]

those dudes.’ So they whacked them and moved on.” Minutes later, the house and most of the evidence was destroyed by a US air strike.

This killing would not be the only murder of unarmed prisoners that took place at Fallujah—in November 2004, video footage showing a Marine executing a wounded prisoner was widely circulated on international television.

Especially in the Fallujah case, it is clear that the crimes that were committed were largely the result of direct orders and aggressive rules of engagement set by soldiers’ superiors. That the officer corps condones the basic lawlessness of the US occupation is further demonstrated by new revelations of the November 2005 massacre by Marines—also of the “Three-One” unit—of 24 civilians in Haditha.

Investigations show that Marine Corps officers instructed their men to cover up the incident and lie about it to investigators. In the incident, a roadside bomb killed a Marine while he was on patrol in Haditha, and the patrol responded by breaking into several homes in Haditha, killing or wounding everyone inside.

On May 30, Staff Sergeant Justin Laughner testified that Lieutenant Andrew Grayson ordered him to delete from his computer pictures of the massacre that Laughner took at the scene, a few hours after it occurred. Laughner did not delete the pictures from his digital camera, however, and they became key elements of the case against four officers and three enlisted Marines. Laughner added that he felt Grayson’s order constituted obstruction of justice.

The order came as Grayson and Laughner were preparing an intelligence report on the Haditha massacre three months after it occurred. Their statement reiterated the official Marine Corps position—that all the Iraqis killed in Haditha had been killed in the crossfire of a gunfight started by insurgents. Laughner also lied under orders to investigators about never having taken pictures of the interiors of the houses where Marines massacred men, women and children.

Several trials of US servicemen accused of crimes in Iraq are now heading towards their conclusions.

One case concerns seven Marines and a US Navy corpsman who, in 2006, kidnapped a disabled Iraqi man in Hamdania from his bed, murdered him, and

arranged his body to make it appear that he was preparing to plant a bomb. Four Marines and the corpsman have pleaded guilty; the three remaining Marines now face court-martial.

US Justice Department officials recently announced they would seek the death penalty against Pfc. Steven Green, the ringleader of the March 2006 gang rape-slaying in Mahmudiyah. Green and three fellow soldiers stalked a 14-year old girl, Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi, reportedly selected because there was only one man in her family and they believed her family would therefore be an easy target. They burst into the family’s house, Green shot the girl’s family, and then the soldiers repeatedly raped her, shot her and burned her body.

These trials have been initiated in spite of the best efforts by the US military, with the complicity of the American media, to suppress any reporting of atrocities carried out by US soldiers. Presently, the US is engaged in ongoing operations in Baqubah, the provincial capital of the Diyala Province, which bears many similarities to earlier missions in Fallujah. There can be no doubt that similar atrocities occur on a regular basis, but do not get past the wall of silence and official cover-up.

All of these actions are ultimately a product of the policy of colonial invasion and counterinsurgency against an overwhelmingly hostile population opposed to foreign occupation. Those who bear ultimate responsibility are those that ordered and directed the invasion of Iraq, including top military and Bush administration officials. So far, none of these individuals have been called to account.



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