

Mark of Cain: Behind the British Army's "detainee abuse scandal"

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Mark of Cain, directed by Marc Munden, written by Tony Marchant

Many of the events depicted in *Mark of Cain* are based on the testimony of serving soldiers in Iraq. The central story concerns events that continue to cast a long shadow over the US and British occupation of that country.

Two young, working-class soldiers, Mark Tate and Wayne Gulliver, are serving in the British Army in Iraq, a few months after the March 2003, US-led invasion. Their platoon is struggling with the post-invasion security situation in the south of the country. When their popular company captain is killed by a mortar attack during fighting with insurgents, despondency and despair affects the inexperienced group of young men.

Acting on orders, they round up several suspects in house-to-house searches. That night, as the suspects are incarcerated at the camp, the command leadership gives the signal to exact revenge. Urged on by their Corporal, Gant, the men enter the cells and abuse the trussed up detainees. While the prisoners are held down, they are jumped on, kicked and beaten. Other soldiers pose the naked detainees in sexually humiliating positions and film them.

At first Tate is reluctant to get involved. He tells Gulliver that this is not part of his job description. Gulliver appeals to Tate's sense of loyalty to the platoon. When this fails he argues that Tate will become a pariah if he does not take part and no one will "watch his back" next time they are out on patrol. Tate acquiesces. A Major tells them that "feelings are running high" at the camp and that what is taking place is "understandable."

Returning to England after their tour, the two men respond in different ways. At first Gulliver is full of stories of his front line exploits with which to thrill his friends. But Tate finds it increasingly difficult to put his disturbing experiences in Iraq behind him, slowly retreating into himself.

Pictures of the events in Iraq, found on Gulliver's mobile phone by his girlfriend, are sent to the British police and the "detainee abuse scandal" hits the news headlines. Gulliver and Tate are catapulted overnight into national infamy.

The army claims the two men are "rotten apples" who were acting alone. The military top brass closes ranks, and the Royal Military Police sentence Gulliver and Tate to face a court-martial. Cpl Gant is fined. Tate, wracked with guilt, rapidly falls apart. Gulliver is determined to remain loyal to his army. Only when Tate takes his own life does he decide to reveal all in court, implicating all those involved in the prisoner abuse up the chain of command.

When Gulliver is returned to his cell, he is beaten by his fellow soldiers.

Mark of Cain is a powerful drama. Screenwriter Tony Marchant has

done a considerable amount of research in order to portray accurately one of the most disturbing events in the occupation of Iraq. Marchant talked to dozens of soldiers and to their families to get "as wide a picture as possible of what it is like to serve in Iraq."

The events depicted through the characters of Tate and Gulliver do not hinge on any one set of circumstances; however, one case in particular did strongly influence the story; that of Fusilier Gary Bartlam.

On May 28, 2003, the 18-year-old Bartlam, on leave, walked into a photo developers' shop in his home town of Tamworth, Staffordshire, and handed over a roll of film for processing. After the pictures were developed, staff became concerned and called the police. One photograph showed an Iraqi detainee, bound and gagged, suspended from the forks of a forklift truck. Others showed naked Iraqi detainees simulating sexual acts, as well as a soldier standing on a bound prisoner.

As a result of Bartlam's photographs, he and three other members of the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers were found guilty of abuse at Camp Breadbasket, Basra, by a court-martial in Osnabruck, Germany. Bartlam pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to 18 months and dishonourably discharged. The others pleaded not guilty, and were sentenced to between five months and two years.

During the making of the film, a question that continually concerned Marchant was why these young men acted in the way they did. He explains:

"What would make a young soldier—little more than a kid—blithely walk into a photo shop and hand over this film, as if there were nothing wrong with it? Indeed, what would make him take the photos in the first place?"

"Some relatives suggested that the boys were simply following orders, that they were scapegoats. But during the court martial, the Army's senior legal adviser in Iraq, Lt Col Nicholas Mercer, told the court that soldiers were taught to report any abuse they witnessed. He said that they were taught to have 'moral courage.' 'Moral courage' is a laudable sentiment, but how easy would it be for a soldier to disobey an order that he thought morally wrong? There is certainly a feeling among the rank and file that it is better to be loyal than to have moral courage."

This conflict between the notion of "moral courage" and the pressure on the soldiers to place loyalty to their regiment above all else is central to the story.

Because of Marchant's empathy for the serving soldier—even those guilty of war crimes—and a desire to be impartial, he initially decided not to make a strictly "anti-army" or even "anti-war" film, but he was led to become more critical by what he found in his research.

He is conscious that the film may be perceived as “sitting on the fence” on a number of issues, which he sought to clarify on its release:

“I am expecting criticism from both sides. The Army will argue that it is a serious distortion of the truth. Critics of the Army will insist that I have sought to excuse their brutality. I do believe that there is a dangerous culture of bullying in the Army. I do feel that soldiers have sometimes been ‘hung out to dry,’ and I do think the court martial process is dysfunctional. On that last point, at least, I feel vindicated by the ongoing overhaul of the system.

“The Army has boasted that it knows how to behave in occupied zones better than other nationalities because of its tradition of colonial policing and its policy of trying to win hearts and minds. Those claims have been severely undermined and whatever expectations we had at the outset of this adventure in Iraq, whatever hopes we had of making Iraq a better place, they’ve all come to nothing.”

This last point echoes the comments of a colonel at the start of the film, who tells his troops: “Let’s leave it [Iraq] a better place with us having been here.”

This character is loosely based on Col Tim Collins of the British Army, who delivered a speech to around 600 UK soldiers near the Iraqi border just prior to the March 2003 invasion.

“It is a big step to take another human life,” he said. “It is not to be done lightly. I know of men who have taken life needlessly in other conflicts. I can assure you they live with the mark of Cain upon them.”

The biblical reference in the film’s title is taken from this speech. Collins himself was later accused of war crimes. He was acquitted before he decided to leave the army.

Through the experiences of a small group of soldiers, the makers of *Mark of Cain* convincingly represent many key events in the early months of the occupation of Iraq.

After portraying the jocular banter and naïveté of the young army recruit on his first tour of duty—perhaps away from home for the first time—the film also makes a serious attempt at depicting the sudden, rude awaking of the new soldiers to the cold, brutal reality of war. When the company captain is killed in a mortar attack, the viewer, momentarily, sees the disorientation and terror through the eyes of the other soldiers. Gulliver experiences loss of hearing and blurred vision, before he is “re-adjusted” and sent back into the skirmish.

The film condemns the role of the army leadership, both in instigating the prisoner abuse and in scapegoating Tate and Gulliver. The brutal nature of the army is especially evident in the character of Cpl Gant. When Gulliver confronts Gant for not even attending Tate’s funeral, he knocks the court-martialed soldier to the ground, telling him that Tate killed himself because he was weak-willed and warning him not to cause trouble at the court-martial, as “loyalty is all you’ve got left now.”

Also worthy of mention alongside the performance of Shaun Dooley, who played Gant, is that of Gerard Kearns, who played Tate.

Tate cuts a lonely, tragic figure in the story. Eventually he is abandoned by everyone he knows save his own mother. When at base camp, although not religious, he goes to the army chaplain for guidance in desperation. When all he receives is the empty phrase “Look to your own conscience,” Tate turns away in disgust, pointedly retorting: “The Garden of Eden—that was supposed to be in Iraq, right?”

Mark of Cain had a curious television debut. Made by independent producer Red, it was originally scheduled to be screened April 5 on Channel 4, but was pulled just hours before its 9pm slot. The reason

given by the channel was the ongoing crisis over Iran’s seizure of 15 British sailors and marines.

Channel 4 said it had decided to postpone transmission as negotiations to release the British service personnel were still ongoing. The broadcaster rescheduled for May 17, saying the new time-slot was “subject to the diplomatic stand-off between Britain and Iran being satisfactorily resolved.”

Instead, the channel screened a repeat of *Challenger: Countdown to Disaster*.

The UK military, and government, was clearly nervous about the situation (the Ministry of Defence was previously refused access to the script) and may have leaned on the channel through its various journalistic and political mouthpieces. Major General Patrick Cordingley, who commanded Britain’s 7th Armoured Brigade or ‘Desert Rats’ in the 1991 Gulf War, also added his voice to those calling for the programme to be delayed.

“It’s the depiction of scenes of British troops mishandling Arabs, and therefore it will be seen as the general British approach to handling Arabs in the Middle East,” he told Radio 4’s “The World at One” on April 3.

After its delayed screening, *Mark of Cain* was put on general release.

The political and military elite in Britain are right to be unnerved by the appearance of *Mark of Cain*. The army high command are portrayed as having thrust young men into a foreign land and so brutalized them that they commit war crimes against the civilian population.

However, Marchant’s focus on the individual soldiers, in the end, actually operates against his answering his own question as to how such abuse could take place. In order to properly begin to answer that question, the focus would have to be broadened. It’s not possible to *fully* explain the actions of the war’s individual participants apart from an apprehension of the conflict as a whole: an illegal, colonial war waged for control of the oil reserves in Iraq, which requires lies and distortions as justification and turns the occupying soldiers into brutal oppressors of the local population.

Even though the film made fleeting references to the political situation—such as television footage of former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair meeting US President Bush—these appear cosmetic. By not treating the war more comprehensively, the films makes the events depicted appear episodic, rather than typical.



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