

Iraq veteran convicted in Colorado murder of fellow soldier

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On November 19, a Colorado jury found 25-year-old Iraq war veteran Louis Bressler guilty of conspiracy to commit murder. Bressler and two other former members of the Fort Carson-based 4th Brigade, 4th Division, Bruce Bastien and Kenneth Eastridge, were charged over the brutal killing of fellow veteran Kevin Shields in Colorado Springs on December 1, 2007.

The revelations since Shields's murder and the arrest of Bressler, Bastien and Eastridge are terrible. They point to the devastating impact that serving in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has had on the mental and physical well-being of young soldiers and which will plague American society for years to come.

The 4th Brigade was formed in December 2004 and its ranks included men who had already completed tours of Iraq or took part in the invasion. It was deployed at the beginning of 2006 and operated in the Baghdad area during some of the bloodiest fighting of the war. Its tour was extended from 12 to 15 months as part of the "surge".

Like so many veterans, he was not receiving treatment. His court-appointed lawyer told National Public Radio: "I think the military is sending kids over to fight a war, and then coming back and not giving them the right treatment in order to get them to relate back to real life, rather than life back in Iraq."

Shields had come back from Iraq with head injuries and possible brain trauma, which he sustained in a road side bomb attack. His family told the *New York Times* earlier this year that he had nightmares over the killing of Iraqi children in crossfire during an engagement with insurgents.

On his 24th birthday and shortly after receiving news his second child was on the way, Shields met at a bar with Bressler, Bastien and Eastridge, who he knew

from serving in the 4th Brigade. By the end of the night, he was dead from multiple gun shots to his head, neck and groin.

Eastridge alleged that in August 2007, Bressler and Bastien mugged and shot dead a young soldier, Robert James. A total of \$45 was stolen from his wallet. The two men will stand trial for James's death next month. Bressler is accused of pulling the trigger.

To avoid the charge of first-degree murder, Bastien pleaded guilty to accessory to murder in the case of Shields and was sentenced to 60 years' jail in September. He broke his plea bargain agreement, though, by refusing to testify against Bressler. In his initial police statements, Bastien had named Bressler as the man who shot Shields.

Eastridge also pleaded guilty to accessory to murder in the case of Shields, as well as to felony robbery in the case of Erica Ham. He was given a 10-year sentence on November 3 and did testify in court that Bressler was Shields's murderer.

According to the testimony presented at Bressler's trial, the men had spent a number of hours drinking heavily and smoking marijuana on the night of Shields's death. Eastridge claimed that they had discussed committing more robberies. Upon leaving a bar, Bressler and Shields had an altercation but all four got into a vehicle and drove off together.

The vehicle stopped at one point and the men got out. Eastridge testified that he saw Bressler fire multiple shots into Shields. The three men then attempted to hide the body.

Bressler's defense argued that Bastien was the actual killer. The jury clearly considered there was sufficient reasonable doubt over who pulled the trigger to find Bressler not guilty of first-degree murder.

The most significant aspect of the case is that the

brutality and disregard for life shown by the three Iraq veterans cannot be dismissed as an aberration. The *Denver Post* reported on November 16 that nine men who served in the 4th Brigade have been charged with murder or attempted murder in the Colorado area over past three years.

The problem is by no means confined to Fort Carson. In January, an investigation by the *New York Times* uncovered at least 121 cases in which veterans of Afghanistan or Iraq had been convicted of or charged with homicide. Since then, four female soldiers and marines have been brutally murdered at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina. In three cases, their military husbands have been charged. Serving soldiers or marines have also been charged for recent murders at military bases in California and Texas.

The *Denver Post* reported that the number of assault charges laid against service personnel in El Paso County, which covers Fort Carson, has increased from less than 10 in 2004 to 80 in 2007. The overall number of arrests—for generally minor offences—has increased from 162 in 2004 to 451 in 2007.

These figures only cover those incidents that led to actual police charges in one area, and do not include incidents involving veterans who have left active service. However, Paul Sullivan, the executive director of Veterans for Common Sense, told the *Denver Post*: “This is a pattern we’re starting to see around the country. This is a national problem. We consider it the tip of the iceberg of a social catastrophe caused by President Bush’s failure to plan for hundreds of thousands of physical and psychological casualties.”

Last week, US Veterans Affairs Secretary Doctor James Peake said that veterans’ suicide was a “chronic problem”. Some 18 veterans of US wars take their own lives each day, some 6,500 per year, with Afghanistan and Iraq vets making up an ever-growing proportion of the number.



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