

What imperialist war produces

Iraq veterans charged with murder and other crimes

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The atrocities US troops are committing in Iraq and Afghanistan, the inevitable product of neo-colonial war and occupation, are transforming a section of returning veterans into a genuine menace to society.

Recent reports, for example, reveal that 10 members of one unit alone, based at the US Army's Fort Carson—near Colorado Springs, Colorado—have been charged with murder, attempted murder or manslaughter since 2006.

The murder rate among the 3,500 members of what is now the 4th Infantry Division's 4th Brigade Combat Team from the fall of 2007 to the fall of 2008 was 114 times the average for Colorado Springs.

The Associated Press notes, "Some brigade soldiers also have been involved in brawls, beatings, rapes, DUIs [driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs], drug deals, domestic violence, shootings, stabbings, kidnapping and suicides."

The victims of Iraq war veterans from Fort Carson include a 19-year-old woman, raped and killed; an 18-year-old woman and her 19-year-old boyfriend, riddled with bullets, for no reason, as they were putting up signs advertising a yard sale; two fellow soldiers shot to death, one in a robbery, the other in a fight over a perceived insult; a taxi driver murdered in Pueblo, Colorado; a small-time drug dealer, first assaulted with a stun gun and then shot and killed; an infant killed by his father; a friend of a veteran murdered by the latter with a poker; the wife of another veteran, who then killed himself.

A genuinely damaged, even psychopathic layer, taught by the military to kill and abuse, has been let loose in American society, with untold consequences. If the Persian Gulf War, a skirmish by comparison, helped produce mass murderer Timothy McVeigh, what kind of havoc will the current unending wars create? All the official lies about the "wonderful" work "our men and women in uniform" are doing, and doing in the name of "the American people," can't conceal the ugly and quite horrifying truth.

One social worker in Colorado Springs, Sister Kateri Koverman, who has counseled people in war zones for almost four decades, comments, "We have a public disaster here, and no one really knows how to deal with it."

The US Army issued a report on the homicides associated with Fort Carson in mid-July, which—while refusing to recognize the

obvious, that deployment in Iraq generated the wave of crimes—acknowledged "a possible association between increasing levels of combat exposure and risk for negative behavioral outcomes." The investigation indicated that "combat intensity/exposure...may have increased the risk for violent behaviors."

Army officials seized on the study's inconclusiveness to argue, in the words of its surgeon general, Eric Schoomaker, "We don't know direct causation yet."

Published interviews with a number of those charged about their experiences in Iraq and subsequently, however, leave no doubt. Brutal imperialist war, which involves the suppression of an entire population, creates the conditions in which young men and women commit horrendous acts. As the *Denver Post* notes, "More than half of the charged or convicted soldiers said they had seen war crimes during their deployments that included the killings of civilians."

The responsibility for those war crimes lies with the military high command, the White House and the American ruling elite in general. Were there the slightest democratic inclination within the mass media or the political establishment, demands for trials on crimes against humanity would dominate US political life. As it is, there is essentially silence.

The *Gazette of Colorado Springs* has published a lengthy two-part series, by Dave Philipps (see parts one and two), based on interviews with soldiers and their families, that is very valuable. It documents the horrors of the US occupation of Iraq, along with the callousness and indifference of the Pentagon to those they toss into the hell of combat.

Of the 10 charged with murder, attempted murder or manslaughter, Philipps writes: "Almost all those soldiers were kids, too young to buy a beer, when they volunteered for one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. Almost none had serious criminal backgrounds. Many were awarded medals for good conduct.

"But in the vicious confusion of battle in Iraq and with no clear enemy, many said training went out the window. Slaughter became a part of life.... Soldiers say the torture and killing of Iraqi civilians lurked in the ranks. And when these soldiers came home to Colorado Springs suffering the emotional wounds of combat, soldiers say, some were ignored, some were neglected, some were

thrown away and some were punished.”

The newspaper interviewed Kenneth Eastridge, now serving 10 years for accessory to murder. Eastridge noted that the Army “trains you to be this way. In bayonet training, the sergeant would yell, ‘What makes the grass grow?’ and we would yell, ‘Blood! Blood! Blood!’ as we stabbed the dummy. The Army pounds it into your head until it is instinct: Kill everybody, kill everybody. And you do. Then they just think you can just come home and turn it off.”

Eastridge refers, of course, to the same notorious sound-off that Timothy McVeigh participated in during his military training in 1988. (See “Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh: the making of a mass murderer,” 19 April 2001.)

The members of the Fort Carson unit landed in Ramadi, a center of the insurgency, in 2004. As one soldier told Philipps, “There was a massive amount of hate for us in the city.”

One of the unit’s jobs each day was to bag the bodies of Iraqi victims of sectarian violence, which had been encouraged and unleashed by the US invasion.

Daniel Freeman, a member of unit, told the *Gazette*, “Toward the end, we were so mad and tired and frustrated.... You came too close, we lit you up. You didn’t stop, we ran your car over with the Bradley.” The newspaper continues: “If soldiers were hit by an IED [improvised explosive device], they would aim machine guns and grenade launchers in every direction, [one of the convicted soldiers, Anthony] Marquez said, and ‘just light the whole area up. If anyone was around, that was their fault. We smoked ‘em.’

Other soldiers said they shot random cars, killing civilians.”

Another unit member explains, “Taxi drivers got shot for no reason. Guys got kidnapped and taken to the bridge and interrogated and dropped off.”

Eastridge told the *Gazette* about one incident in 2007 in which he was ordered to guard a street while the rest of his platoon searched a house. Philipps writes: “Families were out playing soccer and barbecuing. Eastridge said he just started shooting. He pumped a long burst of rounds into a big palm tree where a few old men had gathered in the shade.

“People started running. They piled into their cars and sped away. There was a no-driving rule in effect in the neighborhood, so, Eastridge said, he put his cross hairs on every car that moved.... Orders came over the radio to cease fire, he said, but he kept yelling, ‘Negative! Negative!’ Eastridge said he shot more than 1,700 rounds. When asked how many people he killed, he said, ‘Not that many. Maybe a dozen.’ “

Eastridge told the journalist that he was eventually court-martialed for “sex and drugs,” but not for “Things that can never be told, but that everybody knew about and approved of—basically war crimes.” Of his crimes committed back in the US, he explained, “I had no job training.... All I know how to do is kill people.”

Some of the most gruesome episodes are described in a December 2007 letter from PFC John Needham, addressed to Army officials at Fort Carson. Its subject line reads: “Formal Notification of War Atrocities and Crimes Committed by Personnel, B Company, 2-12, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division.”

The name of the individual cited as responsible for some of the worst crimes has been blacked out by the *Gazette*, but he seems to be a staff sergeant. Needham says that the latter, in June 2007, “caused an Iraqi male to be stopped, questioned, detained, and killed. We had no evidence that the Iraqi was an insurgent or terrorist.... I observed X dismembering the body and parading of it [sic] while it was tied to the hood of a Humvee around the Muhalla neighborhood while the interpreter blared out warnings in Arabic over the loud speaker. I have a photo that shows X removing the victim’s brains.”

Needham recounts another incident in which “an Iraqi male...was detained and questioned then with his hands tied behind his back, X skinned his face.”

And: “X shot a young Iraqi teenager who was about 16 years old. The shooting was unprovoked and the Iraqi posed no threat to the unit. He was merely riding his bicycle past an ambush site. When I arrived on the scene I observed X along with Y dismember the boy’s body.”

Needham explained in his desperate letter: “I suffer from PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and depression. I had no way to stop the ugly actions of my unit. When I refused to participate they began to abuse and harass me.”

Needham had already attempted suicide, in September 2007. His family “basically kidnapped” the young man late that same year when the Army attempted to send him back to Iraq, and had him committed to Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. He was discharged from the military in July 2007, suffering from serious mental disorders.

In September 2008, authorities allege, Needham beat an ex-girlfriend to death. He is awaiting trial on suspicion of murder.

His father, Michael Needham, told the Colorado Springs newspaper, “I know the Army would like to say it is not responsible for this, that it didn’t train them to do this. But that is bullshit.... They trained them to kill, then when they didn’t have enough men for the surge, they pushed these guys until they broke, then threw them away.”

The unit Needham and the others belonged to is now deployed in Afghanistan, near the Khyber Pass.



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