US soldier commits suicide in Indiana movie theater

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A National Guard soldier home on a 15-day leave from the war in Afghanistan committed suicide in a Muncie, Indiana, movie theater October 12. Jacob W. Sexton, a 21-year-old from rural Farmland, Indiana, shot himself in the head, approximately 20 minutes into the violent comedy *Zombieland*, with friends and siblings sitting around him. The suicide underscores once again the psychological damage done to soldiers charged with carrying out the brutal colonial occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sexton's death came as a shock to his family and military cohorts, who told the Muncie *Star Press* they had not seen any symptoms of suicidal behavior or post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet the young man's behavior before the film showing revealed that the war's violence was on his mind. When asked by the theater manager for identification proving the group was of age to see the movie, Sexton reportedly snapped at him, "I shot 18 people and you want to see my identification?"

Sexton's father, Jeffrey Sexton, told the Associated Press, "We just need to watch these boys and the girls coming back home. Something's just not right. Too much is happening."

Like many active-duty military members, Sexton had served multiple tours in both Middle East occupations. After serving one tour of duty in Iraq, where he drove Humvees, he volunteered for another tour in Afghanistan. There he was a member of Alpha Company, Second Battalion, in the 151st Infantry Regiment, a unit that responds to attacks on military installations and convoys in the Kabul area.

According to the *Star Press*, Sexton was in a firefight his first week in Afghanistan and witnessed others during his time there. The area around Kabul is the scene of intense fighting that has resulted in high coalition casualties and untold numbers of deaths and injuries of Afghans. Sexton doubtless experienced the constant threat of violence in Iraq, as well, where Humvee drivers are at constant risk of injury and death from IEDs planted in the road.

As the bloody wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have continued, the military has seen its suicide rate spike to its highest level since the Vietnam War. In 2008 there were a record 140 suicides in the Army, according to an August report in the *Army Times*. There were also 42 suicides among Marines. In the six months between January 1 and July 31, 96 active-duty suicides were reported among Army soldiers—a pace that would eclipse the 2008 record total.

The suicide rate in the military is roughly 20.2 per 100,000 soldiers, higher than the rate of 19.5 per 100,000 calculated for the civilian population. However, the problem is more widespread. These numbers do not include failed suicide attempts among soldiers, estimated at 10 times the number of suicides. Nor do the active-duty rates account for the thousands of non-active duty and former service members who have committed suicide in the past few years.

Psychological damage is widespread. A 2008 Rand Corporation report found that 300,000 soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, a rate of 1 in 5. However, a recent study published in *Management Science* found that the rate of PTSD among Iraq war veterans is closer to 1 in 3.

The psychological trauma of war does not always result in self-directed violence. A recent CBS investigation found that more than 25,000 spouses or domestic partners have been the victims of domestic violence over the past decade, and nearly 90 have been murdered. A 2006 article in the *Journal of Marital and*

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Family Therapy found that soldiers with PTSD were 80 percent more likely to have committed a violent act against a partner in the previous year.

The murder rate amongst returning veterans is also higher than the general population. In one case, 10 members of a single military unit based at Fort Carson, Colorado, were charged with murder, attempted murder, or manslaughter from 2006 through fall 2008, a rate 114 times the average for Colorado Springs. The WSWS noted, “Brutal imperialist war, which involves the suppression of an entire population, creates the conditions in which young men and women commit horrendous acts.” (See “What imperialist war produces: Iraq veterans charged with murder and other crimes”)

These acts have profound consequences. Witnessing and perpetrating horror after horror, it is inevitable that a number of these young people, trained to kill, will unleash their anguish on themselves and others.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become deeply unpopular in the US; the brutality with which they are being prosecuted more and more evident. Working class youth are pressed into service by lack of jobs and opportunities for education, to be consumed, both physically and psychologically in wars that benefit only the predatory aims of the US ruling class.

There will undoubtedly be many more tragedies like the one in Muncie. The *Washington Post* reported on Tuesday that President Obama sent another 13,000 "support" troops to Afghanistan unannounced. This comes in addition to the 21,000 soldiers deployed since the escalation he announced in March, and the administration is currently debating proposals for as many 80,000 more.

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