

US soldier in WikiLeaks massacre video: “I relive this every day”

Bill Van Auken
28 April 2010

Iraq war veteran Ethan McCord, who is seen running with an Iraqi child in his arms in the video posted by WikiLeaks of a July 2007 massacre of civilians in Baghdad, talked to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of this and similar experiences in Iraq.

The video, which records the shocking deaths of at least 12 individuals, including two Iraqi journalists employed by Reuters, has been viewed more than 6 million times on the Internet.

McCord, together with another former member of the company, Josh Stieber, have addressed an open “Letter of Reconciliation” to the Iraqi people taking responsibility for their role in this incident and other acts of violence. Both soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2007 and left the Army last year.

In the letter, McCord and Stieber said, “...we acknowledge our part in the deaths and injuries of your loved ones.” They insisted that “the acts depicted in this video are everyday occurrences of this war: this is the nature of how US-led wars are carried out in this region.”

The night before speaking to the WSWS, Ethan McCord had learned that the widow of one of the dozen men killed—the father of the two children he tried to rescue—had forgiven him and Stieber for their role in the incident.

Ahlam Abdelhussein Tuman, 33, told the *Times* of London: “I can accept their apology, because they saved my children and if it were not for them, maybe my two little children would be dead.”

Her husband, Saleh Mutashar Tuman, had arrived on the scene of the carnage caused by a US Apache helicopter firing into a crowd and attempted to aid the wounded. The helicopter opened fire again, killing him and at least one wounded man and wounding his two children, who were sitting in his van.

The widow urged the two former soldiers to continue to speak out. “I would like the American people and the whole world to understand what happened here in Iraq. We lost our country and our lives were destroyed.”

Can you explain why you and Josh Stieber wrote the “Letter of Reconciliation” to the Iraqi people?

We originally wanted it to go to the family members of those involved that day in the WikiLeaks video. Then in turn we wanted it to be more along the lines of to all Iraqi people as well. We wanted the Iraqi people to know that not everybody sees them as being dehumanized and that there are plenty of Americans and other people who care for them as human beings and wish for them to live long and happy lives and don’t agree with the war and the policies behind it.

I just found out last night that the letter was shown to the family, the children and the mother as well. She has forgiven myself and Josh and is very happy to see the work that Josh and I are doing. There was a London *Times* reporter who went there to see what they felt about the letter. And there is one comment from the mother that she could forgive me because if it wasn’t for me her children might be dead.

That must make you feel pretty good.

Definitely, but it doesn’t stop there for me or for Josh. We are definitely going to continue speaking out on this and do everything we can to have our voices heard about the policies, the rules of engagement and the war. As well, we are hoping to set up a trust fund for the children, as we know that they’ve had a pretty rough life afterward due to the injuries and whatnot. Hopefully, it will get them some medical care.

Could you describe the events of that day and what your platoon was doing?

It was much like many of the days in Iraq. The neighborhood we were in was pretty volatile; at least it was on the rise, with IED emplacements and with our platoons being shot at with RPGs and sniper fire. We didn’t know who was attacking us. It was never actually really clear, at least in my eyes, who the supposed “enemy” was.

We were conducting what were called knock-and-searches, where we would knock on the doors of the homes and search for documents pertaining to militias or any weapons they weren’t supposed to have or any bomb-making materials. We didn’t really find anything at all.

We were getting ready to wrap up at about one o’clock in the afternoon. We started to funnel into an alleyway and started to take small arms fire from rooftops from AK-47s. We didn’t know what was happening with the Apache helicopters. They were attached to us from another unit to watch over us for this mission, which was called “Ranger Dominance.”

We could hear them open fire, but those of us who were on the ground, outside of the vehicles, had no idea what was taking place. We couldn’t hear the radio chatter and we were pretty caught up in our own situation.

When that situation was neutralized, we were told to walk up onto the scene. I was one of about six soldiers who were dismounted to first arrive on the scene.

What did you see when you got there?

It was pretty much absolute carnage. I had never seen anybody shot by a 30-millimeter round before, and frankly don’t ever want to see that again. It almost seemed unreal, like something out of a bad B-horror movie. When these rounds hit you they kind of explode—people with their heads half-off, their insides hanging out of their bodies, limbs missing. I did see two RPGs on the scene as well as a few AK-47s.

But then I heard the cries of a child. They weren’t necessarily cries of agony, but more like the cries of a small child who was scared out of her mind. So I ran up to the van where the cries were coming from. You can actually see in the scenes from the video where another soldier and I come up to the driver and the passenger sides of the van.

The soldier I was with, as soon as he saw the children, turned around, started vomiting and ran. He didn’t want any part of that scene with the children anymore.

What I saw when I looked inside the van was a small girl, about three or four years old. She had a belly wound and glass in her hair and eyes. Next to her was a boy about seven or eight years old who had a wound to the right side of the head. He was laying half on the floorboard and half on the

bench. I presumed he was dead; he wasn't moving.

Next to him was who I presumed was the father. He was hunched over sideways, almost in a protective way, trying to protect his children. And you could tell that he had taken a 30-millimeter round to the chest. I pretty much knew that he was deceased.

I grabbed the little girl and yelled for a medic. Me and the medic ran into the houses behind where the van crashed to check whether there were any other wounds. I was trying to take as much glass out of her eyes as I could. We dressed the wound and then the medic ran the girl to the Bradley. You can hear in the video where he says, "there's nothing else I can do here; we need to evacuate the child."

I then went back outside and went to the van. I don't know why. I thought both of them were dead, but something told me to go back. That's when I saw the boy move with what appeared to be a labored breath. So I stated screaming, "The boy's alive." I grabbed him and cradled him in my arms and kept telling him, "Don't die, don't die." He opened his eyes, looked up at me. I told him, "It's OK, I have you." His eyes rolled back into his head, and I kept telling him, "It's OK, I've got you." I ran up to the Bradley and placed him inside.

My platoon leader was standing there at the time, and he yelled at me for doing what I did. He told me to "stop worrying about these motherfucking kids and start worrying about pulling security." So after that I went up and pulled security on a rooftop.

Did you face further repercussions for what you did that day?

After coming back to the FOB [forward operating base], nobody really talked about what had happened that day. Everybody went to their rooms; they were tired. Some of them went to make phone calls. And I was in my room because I had to clean the blood off of my IBA [body armor] and my uniform—the blood from these children. And I was having a flood of emotions and having a real hard time dealing with having seen children this way, as I'm sure most caring human beings would.

So I went to see a staff sergeant who was in my chain of command and told him I needed to see mental health about what was going on in my head. He told me to "quit being a pussy" and to "suck it up and be a soldier." He told me that if I wanted to go to mental health, there would be repercussions, one of them being labeled a "malingerer," which is actually a crime in the US Army.

For fear of that happening to me, I in turn went back to my room and tried to bottle up as much emotion as I could and pretty much just suck it up and drive on.

You had another nine months or more still to go in your tour then?

That's right. It was a pretty long time with having to deal with the emotions, not only of that, but of many other days. What happened then was not an isolated incident. Stuff like that happens on a daily basis in Iraq.

Are there other incidents that took place in the following months of your tour that bear this out?

Yes. Our rules of engagement were changing on an almost daily basis. But we had a pretty gung-ho commander, who decided that because we were getting hit by IEDs a lot, there would be a new battalion SOP [standard operating procedure].

He goes, "If someone in your line gets hit with an IED, 360 rotational fire. You kill every motherfucker on the street." Myself and Josh and a lot of other soldiers were just sitting there looking at each other like, "Are you kidding me? You want us to kill women and children on the street?"

And you couldn't just disobey orders to shoot, because they could just make your life hell in Iraq. So like with myself, I would shoot up into the roof of a building instead of down on the ground toward civilians. But I've seen it many times, where people are just walking down the street and an IED goes off and the troops open fire and kill them.

During this period were you conscious that you were suffering from post-traumatic stress?

Yes I knew, because I would be angry at everyone and everything and at myself even more. I would watch movies and listen to music as much as possible just to escape reality. I didn't really talk to many people.

The other problem I had is that before the incident shown in the WikiLeaks video, I was the gung-ho soldier. I thought I was going over there to do the greater good. I thought my job over there was to protect the Iraqi people and that this was a job with honor and courage and duty.

I was hit by an IED within two weeks of my being in Iraq. And I didn't understand why people were throwing rocks at us, why I was being shot at and why we're being blown up, when I have it in my head that I was here to help these people.

But the first real serious doubt, where I could no longer justify to myself being in Iraq or serving in the Army, was on that day in July 2007.

How did you come to join the military?

I had always wanted to be in the military, even as a child. My grandfather and my uncles were military. Then September 11 happened, and I decided it was my duty as an American to join the military, so that's what I did in 2002. I joined the Navy. In 2005, when the Army had what they called "Operation Blue to Green," pulling sailors and airmen into the Army with bigger bonuses, I made a lateral transfer.

I had pretty much had it in my head that I was going to make a career out of the military. But going to Iraq and dealing with the Army completely changed my outlook.

What was your reaction when you saw the WikiLeaks video?

Shock. I had dropped my children off at school one morning, came home and turned on MSNBC, and there I am running across the screen carrying a child.

I knew immediately it was me. I know the scene. It is burned into my head. I relive it almost every day. It was just a shock that it was up there, and it angered me. I was angry because it was in my face again.

I had actually started to get a little bit better before the tape was released. I wasn't thinking about it as often; it was getting a little bit easier to go to sleep. But then everything that I had buried and pushed away came bubbling back to the surface. And the nightmares began again, the anger, the feeling of being used. It all came back. It wasn't a good feeling; it was like a huge slap in the face.

Do you think that the way you were told to forget about the kids and suck it up is indicative of the general culture in the military?

Yes, there is such a stigma placed on soldiers seeking mental health. It's like you're showing a huge sign of weakness for needing to speak about things or for seeking help even for getting to sleep. There's fear of being chastised or being made fun of. So you end up self-medicating on alcohol. And as you probably know, alcohol is a depressant and just makes it worse.

I was self-medicating when I came home, and I was hospitalized in a mental institute by the Army because of my problems with PTSD and self-medication.

There were many times when I felt that I could no longer take what was going on in my head and the best thing for me to do would be to put a bullet in my head. But each time I thought about that, I would look at the pictures of my children and think back on that day and how the father of those children was taken away and how horrible it must be for them. And if I were to do that, I would be putting my children in the same position.

Do you think that the pressure to bury these problems is driven by a fear that if you are allowed to question your own experiences, it can call into question the nature of the war itself?

I was not able to talk about it, not able to get answers to like how I was feeling about this, why were we doing this, what are we doing here? It was just straight up, "You're going to do this, and you're going to shut up about it."

Soldiers aren't mindless drones. They have feelings. They have emotions. You can't just make them go out and do something without

telling them, this is why we're doing it. And the pressure just builds up.

You hear in the video the Apache helicopter crew saying some things that are pretty heart-wrenching and cold. I'm guilty of it too. We all are. It's kind of a coping mechanism. You feel bad at the time for what you did and you take those emotions and push them down. That's what the Army teaches you to do, just push them down. And in a sense it works. It helps you get through the hard times. But unfortunately, there's no outlet for that anymore, once you get out of the Army. When you get back home, there's no one to joke around with, nobody you can talk to about these instances.

What happens to that soldier? He's going to blow up. And when he blows up, more than likely it's going to be on his family, his close friends or on himself. So I think that's why soldiers end up killing themselves.

So a terrible price is being paid for this war in the US itself?

Yes, I feel that just as the Iraqis, the soldiers are victims of this war as well. Like we say in our letter to the Iraqis, the government is ignoring them and it is also ignoring us. Instead of people being upset at a few soldiers in a video who were doing what they were trained to do, I think people need to be more upset at the system that trained these soldiers. They are doing exactly what the Army wants them to do. Getting angry and calling these soldiers names and saying how callous and cold-hearted they are isn't going to change the system.

What do you think drives this system? Why are they sent to do this?

As far as the hidden agenda behind the war, I couldn't even begin to guess what that is. I do know that the system is being driven by some people with pretty low morals and values, and they attempt to instill those values in the soldiers.

But the people who are driving the system don't have to deal with the repercussions. It's the American people who have to deal with them. They're the ones who have to deal with all of these soldiers who come back from war, have no outlets and blow up.

I still live with this every day. When I close my eyes I see what happened that day and many other days like a slide show in my head. The smells come back to me. The cries of the children come back to me. The people driving this big war machine, they don't have to deal with this. They live in their \$36 million mansions and sleep well at night.

Were you hopeful that with the 2008 election these kinds of things would be brought to a halt. Were you disappointed that they have continued and escalated?

I am not part of any party. Was I hopeful? Yes. Was I surprised that we are still there? No. I'm not surprised at all. There's something else lying underneath there. It's not Republican or Democrat; it's money. There's something else lying underneath it where Republicans and Democrats together want to keep us in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I am hopeful that the video and our speaking out will help. There's the old adage that war is hell, but I don't think people really understand just what a hell war is. Until you see it first-hand, you don't really know what's going on. Like I said, this video shows you an every-day occurrence in Iraq, and I can only assume, in Afghanistan. So I hope people wake up and see the actual hells of war.

The video can be viewed below:



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact