

# Military trial begins for Marine charged in Iraq massacre

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Today's opening of the trial of a US Marine in connection with the 2005 massacre of 24 Iraqi civilians in Haditha casts a stark light on the criminal character of the nine-year war and occupation carried out under the Bush and Obama administrations.

Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich, 31, goes before a war crimes court martial at the Marine base at Camp Pendleton, California. He faces nine counts of voluntary manslaughter together with charges of aggravated assault, reckless endangerment, dereliction of duty and obstruction of justice.

His is the last case brought in connection with the massacre, one of the most notorious atrocities of the Iraq war. Charges against six other Marines implicated in the Haditha killings or their cover-up were dropped, while a seventh Marine was acquitted.

The charges stem from the November 19, 2005 killings carried out by a squad of Marines in the city of Haditha in Iraq's western Anbar Province. The killings took place after the convoy in which the Marines were riding was struck by a roadside bomb, leaving one Marine dead and two wounded.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, Wuterich, according to a Marine investigation, ordered four teenagers and the driver of a passing taxi cab out of the vehicle and shot them dead. According to another Marine, Sergeant Sanick De la Cruz, who participated in the shooting and testified in exchange for immunity, the five were killed as they attempted to surrender. Wuterich has claimed he shot them as they sought to flee, something allowed under the US military occupation's rules of engagement. De la Cruz admitted to shooting at the five victims after they were dead and then urinating on their bodies.

In what turned into a three-hour killing spree, Wuterich, the squad leader, led his men in a room-to-room sweep of three houses, throwing grenades and firing assault rifles. They killed 19 more civilians, including 10 women and children, one of them just three years old, as well as a 76-year-old man confined to a wheelchair.

Included in the evidence to be introduced in the Camp Pendleton courtroom are horrific photographs of the

mangled corpses of women and children in their nightclothes in rooms sprayed with blood.

In a CBS "60 Minutes" interview, which the prosecution successfully petitioned to introduce as evidence, Wuterich recounted that he had told the men of his squad to "shoot first and ask questions later" as they began their assault on the two houses in Haditha.

Angry Iraqi survivors of the massacre have insisted that it was not provoked by any gunfire and was carried out by the Marines as revenge for the roadside bombing. In the course of the sweep, just one AK-47 rifle was recovered, of the kind normally kept in Iraq for household defense, with no evidence that it had been fired.

While the killings sparked protests in Haditha, the US military put out the story that the roadside bomb had killed 15 of the victims and that nine others were "insurgents" killed by the Marines in a supposed gun battle. Doctors at the Iraqi hospital where the victims' bodies were brought, however, said they showed no sign of injuries from a bomb blast, but rather bullet wounds from being shot at point-blank range.

Only after *Time* magazine moved to publish an article on the massacre did the military pursue its own investigation.

Army Maj. Gen. Eldon Bargewell, who issued a report in 2007 following an investigation of the Haditha massacre, found that the military's prevailing attitude was that Iraqi "deaths are just the cost of doing business, and that the Marines need to get 'the job done' no matter what it takes." In an understatement, he added that these conceptions "had the potential to desensitize the Marines to concern for the Iraqi populace and portray them all as the enemy even if they are noncombatants."

Documents recording interviews with military personnel on the Haditha massacre were recovered by the *New York Times* last month as they were being burned at a dump where they had been brought by an Iraqi contractor. They confirmed Bargewell's conclusion. Included in them was a statement by Maj. Gen. Steve Johnson, commander of US forces in Anbar province, who dismissed the Haditha

massacre, saying “it happened all the time ... it was just the cost of doing business on that particular engagement.”

What Bargewell and Johnson described was the inevitable character of a dirty colonial war, in which an entire conquered people is seen as the enemy and occupying troops are in fear of being attacked at any moment.

In an interview Wednesday on the opening of the trial of Marine Sgt. Frank Wuterich in connection with the 2005 massacre of 24 Iraqi civilians in Haditha, Jose Vasquez, a US Army veteran and executive director of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Obviously this was a tragic event. But given the multiple deployments of a lot of the troops and what they faced in Iraq, it is not surprising that some of these folks snapped.”

He pointed out that “Winter Soldier” hearings held by the IVAW in 2008 had heard testimony of US troops’ involvement in similar atrocities throughout the war and rules of engagement set by the military command that made them inevitable.

“This was the outcome of military policy,” said Vasquez. “You had a combination of military force being used in occupying a civilian population in which there was always animosity, together with an attitude toward the Iraqi people coming down from the highest command that was racist in nature.” Under these conditions, he added, troops were “asked to go on missions with no idea as to their purpose, often just going out on patrol in order to draw fire.”

The IVAW leader expressed little confidence in that the military justice system would hold anyone accountable for the crimes at Haditha. “In a situation where the military is responsible for prosecuting itself,” he said, “it is in the interest of the career officers to sweep as much as possible under the rug. It is not surprising that the only ones even charged are the lowest ranking enlisted men. Officers generally get off scot-free and at worst are pushed into retirement.”

As with the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib prison, no high-ranking officers have been brought to trial in connection with the Haditha massacre. All charges were dropped against the Marine battalion commander who sought to prevent any investigation of the killings. He was allowed to retire, retaining full rank and benefits. Charges were dropped against other officers charged with obstruction of justice, including the destruction of evidence, as well as making false statements to hinder an investigation into the killings.

Most observers believe it unlikely that Wuterich will be

convicted, in part because of the six-year delay in bringing the case to trial. While, based on the charges, the Marine sergeant could face life in prison, given the record of similar trials a lenient sentence is expected if he is found guilty.

Amid all the Obama administration’s claims about the US military’s “remarkable achievements” in Iraq, together with the saccharine news accounts of soldiers coming home for the holidays, the opening of the Haditha court martial, its likely results notwithstanding, provides a reminder of the criminal and savage character of the war of aggression launched by Washington in 2003.

The Haditha massacre represented the largest civilian death toll in a single operation by ground troops in Iraq, but countless other civilians lost their lives to air strikes, checkpoint shootings and house raids carried out over the course of nine years of occupation. The effect of this sustained assault was near genocidal in character, with demographic studies conducted in 2007 concluding that by that time over a million Iraqi lives had been lost as a result of the US war. Another 4.7 million people were turned into refugees, and, by 2007, fully 35 percent of Iraqi children (some five million) have lost one or both parents.

The opening of the Haditha trial at Camp Pendleton underscores the fact that none of those most responsible for these historic crimes have ever been held to account. The Bush administration launched an unprovoked war of aggression, justified with lies about non-existent “weapons of mass destruction” and supposed ties between Baghdad and terrorists, with the aim of asserting US hegemony over Iraq and its vast oil and gas reserves.

The Obama administration continued the Iraq war and occupation until it was compelled to pull out US troops after failing to renegotiate a withdrawal deadline agreed to by the Bush White House in 2008. It aims to continue the pursuit of US dominance with the deployment of thousands of military contractors, CIA agents and clandestine special forces units inside Iraq, as well as tens of thousands of US troops on the country’s borders.



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