

Iraq war veteran accused of killing four homeless men in Southern California

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Police in Anaheim, California arrested a suspect believed to be responsible for four grisly murders of homeless men in the surrounding area over the past four weeks. The accused, 23-year-old Itzcoatl Ocampo, is a psychologically troubled veteran of the war in Iraq. The incident brings into sharp relief the deepening social catastrophe faced by returning veterans, as well as the plight of the nation's burgeoning homeless population.

Ocampo is scheduled to be arraigned on February 17. He is currently being held without bail by the Orange County police.

According to friends and family, Ocampo seemed abnormally distant and troubled after returning from his tour of duty in early 2011. He had become deeply distressed after witnessing his best friend die in combat in Iraq. He had also become frustrated with his inability to obtain employment upon return. Ocampo's father is himself homeless, and is reportedly living in the abandoned cab of a freight truck he is attempting to repair.

The Ocampo family immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 1988 and has suffered a string of hardships over the past several years. The family's home was foreclosed upon in 2009 and Ocampo's father lost his job around the same time.

There are indications that the troubled young man wanted to be caught by police after the first killing on December 20 came to light. Ocampo reportedly made his way through police checkpoints in an indirect attempt to get arrested.

He also chose his last victim, 55-year-old John Berry, after the latter had been interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* in relation to the previous killings. Police apprehended Ocampo after he was chased several blocks by dozens of bystanders who had either

witnessed or soon after heard of the murder of Berry.

Berry had previously notified police that someone was stalking him. Police did not respond to Berry's call, claiming afterwards that they had received far too many leads and tips to follow all of them.

Ocampo has thus far been kept sequestered by the Orange County Sheriff's office. Randall Longwith, his defense attorney, has been rebuffed by the office multiple times in his attempts to visit, and was finally allowed to see his client for only 30 minutes last Friday. As of this writing, Ocampo's family has not been allowed to visit him.

The case highlights the plight of returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, many of whom are finding adaptation to civilian life extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, after psychological trauma associated with multiple tours of duty.

A steady procession of news headlines bears the news of this "collateral damage." On New Year's day, 24-year-old Iraq war veteran Benjamin Colton Barnes shot four individuals at a Seattle, Washington area party. Barnes then fled to Mt. Rainier National Park, where he was pulled over by Park Ranger Margaret Anderson for a routine traffic stop. Barnes shot and killed Anderson before fleeing his vehicle, and freezing to death in the wilderness.

Also on New Year's, a 25-year-old Navy pilot, John Robert Reeves, shot and killed three individuals in Coronado, California, one of whom was a co-student in the Navy's elite "Top Gun" program. Many of Reeves' closest friends were stunned by the news, recalling the airman as always upbeat and friendly. Subsequent research into Reeves' online blog postings revealed a deeply disturbed individual crying out for help.

"I might come across as a nice guy, but I

unintentionally screw people over on a regular basis,” Reeves had written in a final statement. “Whenever I try to do something nice to help people out, it goes horribly wrong, and everyone would have been better off if I just kept to myself.”

More than 10 years of dirty colonial wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and across the Middle East have placed the psychological health of literally hundreds of thousands of young veterans in jeopardy. Suicide rates in the armed forces have doubled over the past 10 years, with the official unemployment rate for young veterans at over 30 percent.

A survey conducted in late 2011 by the Pew Research Center found that nearly half of all returning veterans had a difficult to very difficult time reintegrating to civilian life. According to Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a group that assists returning veterans in their attempts to reintegrate into civilian life, 278 US Army veterans took their own lives in 2011. By way of comparison, 393 service members across all branches were actually killed in action during the same period.

The most accurate service-wide count of suicides would have to be provided by the Veterans Administration, but the government agency does not regularly release this information. The most recent count released is a horrifically high 6,000 members who took their lives in 2009. Even this figure may significantly understate the actual count, as approximately 47 percent of returning vets never register with the VA.

Despite the endless platitudes by the political establishment about “supporting the troops,” such figures, along with a continual string of tragedies such as those that occurred in California and Washington state, reveal the real attitude of the ruling elite toward an entire generation of young people. At least one of the homeless victims of the latest rampage in Orange County was a Vietnam war veteran.

In Orange County, the situation for homeless people has sharply deteriorated since the onset of the economic crisis, as it has throughout the rest of the country. Individuals regarded as clinically homeless rose to 2,500 in 2011. Despite steadily rising increases in the affected population, services for these individuals have steadily declined.

The last cold weather shelter for homeless individuals

in Southern Orange County, a small facility operated by the Capo Beach Calvary Church, closed its doors in February 2011. At the time of its closing, the church was legally allowed to accommodate only 10 homeless people at a time. The 10-bed limit had been implemented as part of zoning ordinances passed by the relatively affluent cities of San Juan Capistrano, Dana Point and Laguna Niguel.

In March 2010, the National Guard Armories of Fullerton and Santa Ana in Northern Orange County ended overnight services for the homeless. Had those services still been available, any one of the four victims of this latest tragedy might have found shelter there on the nights they were murdered.



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