

# Cop used military “rules of engagement” in 2012 Cleveland killing

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26 May 2015

Michael Brelo, the Cleveland police officer acquitted by a judge Saturday of shooting two people at point-blank range while standing on the hood of their car, had previously told investigators that he reverted to his military training during the incident.

In an interview with police investigators after the shooting, Brelo told a police lieutenant that the November 2012 chase and shooting “was like being back in a war,” according to testimony at the trial.

An article in *Cleveland Magazine* recounted the questioning. Asked if he remembered jumping on the hood of the car, Brelo said, “No, sir. It’s possible, because I was so terrified that I was going to get ran over. But I don’t recall that, sir.” Asked if he feared for his safety and that of the other officers, Brelo said, “The most I’ve ever been in my life, sir, even with Iraq. I thought we were going to be rammed, and I thought we were going to get shot and be killed.”

“Just before the interview ended,” the magazine continued, “Brelo added a possible explanation for why he might have been on the Malibu’s hood. ‘In Marine Corps training, they always teach you to elevate, and if a target is threatening you, you go through the target,’ Brelo said. ‘In my training, you were supposed to push through the target.’”

According to a former Marine reservist and retired Los Angeles sheriff’s commander interviewed by *Cleveland Magazine*, the “push through the target” reference comes from military ambush training. “In an ambush, you can expect an overwhelming and immediate violent response, as violent as they could possibly make it,” Sid Heal told the magazine.

Brelo was one of more than thirteen officers who shot more than 130 rounds into a car driven by Timothy Russell, 43, with passenger Malissa Williams, 30, on November 29, 2012. More than a third of those shots

were fired by Brelo, who jumped onto the hood of the victims’ car and shot them 15 times through the windshield.

The image of the bullet-riddled Chevy Malibu and the lifeless corpses of Russell and Williams cannot but recall similar scenes from Iraq and Afghanistan, where US soldiers at checkpoints fired mercilessly at vehicles whose civilian occupants had allegedly failed to obey orders to stop. The similarity is no mere coincidence.

Encouraged by the Obama administration, police forces throughout the United States are increasingly hiring ex-soldiers trained in the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia and deploying them to repress workers and impoverished youth in the United States. This complements the administration’s multibillion-dollar program to transfer armored vehicles and other military hardware to local police departments.

Brelo was a US Marine reservist in Iraq for seven months in 2004-05 before joining the Cleveland police force in 2007. In Iraq, he served in the 3rd Battalion, which was deployed to the so-called Sunni Triangle in western Anbar Province, according to *Cleveland Magazine*. He joined a rifle platoon at a small forward operating base outside of the city of Hit, which came under rocket and mortar fire three or four times a day.

Some 15-20 percent of the Cleveland Police Department is made up of military veterans, the police union president said.

A 2009 survey commissioned by the International Association of Police Chiefs and the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance found that military veterans employed by local police departments often “had low tolerance for citizens’ complaints,” “had reduced empathy for others,” had “different rules of engagement and standard operating procedures,” and needed to “adjust” driving behavior to domestic streets

and “language to civilian environments.”

Although many ex-soldiers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), police departments are actively recruiting Iraq and Afghan war veterans because “the leadership and decision-making skills learned in the military may be exactly what a police agency is seeking,” according to *Police* magazine.

Some 20 percent of returning soldiers are seeking civilian law enforcement jobs, and some actually go into the military with the long-term goal of becoming cops, according to a spokesman for the Georgia-based nonprofit Hire Heroes USA.

*Police* magazine continued, “if you compare the decision-making responsibility that is required of a 19- to 20-year-old serving in Iraq or Afghan with the decisions being made by a college student, the contrast is extreme. The soldier has led a squad from point A to point B and had to decide the safest way to get there. The college student has had to complete a class assignment in time to attend a frat party on Friday night. Some departments have recognized this and taken a more global approach to the candidate’s qualifications to be a police officer.”

According to the *San Jose Mercury News*, the government’s supposed concern over soldiers adjusting to a “civilian environment... didn’t stop Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), an office of the Department of Justice (DOJ), from offering 220 cities \$114.6 million in incentive grants to hire post-9/11 veterans to fill 800 law enforcement positions.”

The DOJ survey noted: “One of the greatest performance challenges may be overcoming the mental shift from battlefield to Main Street. The ability to make this shift leads to many of the other transition challenges highlighted during the interviews, such as interfacing with civilians.”

One former soldier turned cop said, “When we entered a building or room [in the military], we yelled ‘down’ and shot anyone who didn’t, but not in SWAT. You have to make a judgment call.”

As the horrific murder of Russell and Williams demonstrated, police departments are employing “rules of engagement” long reserved for foreign enemies against a restive population in the United States, which the ruling elite and its armed forces see as the domestic enemy.



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