

# Details emerge of Fort Lauderdale shooter's experience in military

Genevieve Leigh  
10 January 2017

The suspected gunman in the Fort Lauderdale shooting, 26-year-old Esteban Santiago, was charged on Saturday with performing an act of violence at an international airport, killing five people and injuring six more. The charges brought forth allow a maximum penalty, upon conviction, of death or imprisonment for life.

On Monday, Santiago was ordered held without bond until a detention hearing next week. He was advised of the charges against him by US Magistrate Alicia Valle and was appointed a federal public defender. A bond hearing was scheduled for January 17 and an arraignment, during which Santiago will formally enter a plea for the charges against him, was set for January 23.

Santiago confessed to opening fire on a crowd in the baggage claim area of the Fort Lauderdale airport shortly after being detained on Friday afternoon. Once in custody, Santiago told investigators that he had planned the attack, purchasing a one-way ticket to the Fort Lauderdale airport from Anchorage, Alaska via Minneapolis-St. Paul, with a 9mm semi-automatic handgun as his only piece of checked luggage.

As details emerge concerning Santiago's personal history, as well as his experiences serving in the US military, the media and political establishment continue to postulate on the cause of the latest shooting spree. These pundits fail in every attempt, many deliberately, to understand the deadly effects which the US military's unrestrained brutality abroad over the last 15 years, has had on every facet of American life, and most directly on those forced to carry out the bloody campaigns.

The facts of Santiago's life which have emerged suggest an impoverished adolescent brutalized by the inhumanity of war. Despite his own efforts, and those

of his friends and family to seek help, and even to notify the FBI of his condition, Santiago failed to receive the necessary treatment, if such exists, to reverse the damaging experiences of his life.

Santiago was born in New Jersey but moved with his family to the impoverished US territory of Puerto Rico when he was two years old. He is the youngest of six children and spent his childhood in Penuelas, Puerto Rico, which is a small town of about 14,000 residents. Only about 18 percent of Penuelas residents have an education above a high school degree, and 60 percent of the population lives in poverty, with a median household income of only \$14,300.

Santiago joined the Puerto Rico National Guard on December 14, 2007, when he was only 17 years old. Reports from those who knew him as a child depict a highly intelligent, kind and quiet adolescent, who joined the military as a way of moving out of his small, poor town. One former neighbor commented to the Associated Press in shock: "He was very peaceful, very educated, very serious."

According to Guard spokesman Maj. Paul Dahlen, Santiago was deployed to Iraq in 2010 and spent close to a year with an engineering battalion. While in Iraq, Santiago was part of a team clearing roads of improvised explosive devices.

Santiago received numerous medals and commendations during his time in Iraq including the Iraq Campaign Medal, Meritorious Unit Commendation and the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal. While the extent of his participation in direct combat is still undetermined, some of his awards, such as the Iraq Campaign Medal and his Combat Action badge, are combat related honors. Additionally, his mother told reporters that her son witnessed a roadside bomb in Taji, Iraq, just north of Baghdad,

which killed two of his fellow 130th Engineer Company soldiers.

Details and reports from friends and family continue to emerge regarding the toll that his time in the military took on Santiago's mental state.

A grade school classmate of Santiago's, and fellow member of the National Guard, Rosemarie Zapata, reported to the *New York Times* that it was Santiago who convinced her to join the Puerto Rico National Guard, before he was deployed to Iraq. When she saw him again after his deployment in a Walgreens parking lot, she said "he was very different," adding, "He told me: 'You would never want to go to Iraq. I saw horrible things, horrible.' He was very different. He was sad."

One uncle, Hernan Rivera, told the *Record*, "Only thing I could tell you was when he came out of Iraq, he wasn't feeling too good." Friends and family continue to repeat similar sentiments to local and national media outlets.

After returning from Iraq, Santiago served in the Army Reserves and the Alaska National Guard in Anchorage before being discharged for "unsatisfactory performance," according to Lt. Col. Candis Olmstead. Olmstead, a spokeswoman for the Guard, would not elaborate on the specifics of his discharge, but the Pentagon reports that he went AWOL several times and was first demoted, and then discharged.

Consistent with these reports, Santiago voluntarily turned himself over to the FBI in November 2016, just a little over a month before the deadly shooting, claiming that the CIA was controlling his mind and was forcing him to watch Islamic State videos. The FBI agents then notified the police, who took him in for psychiatric help. The hospital released him and ceased treatment after only four days.

Friday's shooting marks the fourth time in the United States since 2013 that an individual previously known to the FBI has gone on to carry out a violent attack of some kind. This list includes the Pulse nightclub shooting, also in Florida, which killed over 50 people, and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, killing three.

While Santiago may have confessed to the killings in Fort Lauderdale, the ultimate responsibility for the crime lies not with the mentally unstable war veteran; nor is it the outcome some abstract "evil" entity

haunting any single individual, as Governor Rick Scott of Florida has claimed. In fact, Santiago is in many ways himself a victim of US imperialism. The blood of these people, along with all of the tens of thousands killed in the wars abroad, and those who suffer here at home, lies in the hands of the American ruling class.

The truly guilty parties of these crimes are George W. Bush; Dick Cheney; the country's current commander-in-chief, Barack Obama, the first in US history to oversee two full terms with the country at war; as well as the military leaders, the intelligence community, and the members of both political parties who initiated and continue the criminal wars in the Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen and beyond; as well as the corrupt media outlets who prop them up.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**