

Former US Marine sharpshooter murders four in Florida, including mother, baby and grandmother

Jacob Crosse
6 September 2021

Early Sunday morning in Lakeland, Florida, a veteran US Marine sharpshooter with multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan massacred a family, killing four people, including a 3-month-old baby while in his mother's arms. The former Marine turned private mercenary used multiple firearms and engaged in a ferocious firefight with police and SWAT units from inside the home where the killings occurred that only ended when the shooter, identified as 33-year-old Bryan Riley, surrendered to police.

While in police custody, Riley, a resident of nearby Brandon, Florida, apparently showed no remorse and gave no motive for his actions, reportedly telling detectives, "You know why I did this." Police also claimed that Riley said he was high on methamphetamine and a "survivalist" following the horrific and apparently unprovoked mass murder.

The Marine veteran, who according to his girlfriend suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, is facing over a dozen charges, including four counts of first-degree murder and is being held without bond after appearing in court Monday morning.

The ghastly slaying is at least the 481st mass shooting in the United States in 2021 per the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), which defines a mass shooting as an incident in which four or more people are shot and/or killed in a single event at the same general time and location, not including the shooter. According to the GVA, at least 30,398 people in the US have succumbed to gun violence in the US this year, with slightly more than half of those deaths, 16,434, attributed to suicide via gun.

The victims in Sunday's massacre were 40-year-old father Justice Gleason, along with his 33-year-old wife, a mother of three, their three-month-old baby and the 64-year-old grandmother. The family's 11-year-old daughter is in critical condition at Tampa General Hospital after being shot at least seven times. The family dog was also shot and killed, according to Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd.

What few details that have been revealed are deeply

distressing. Police claim the incident began on Saturday night, when Riley, for reasons not yet known, drove approximately 30 miles east from Brandon, a suburb of Tampa, to Lakeland and parked his vehicle on N Socrum Loop Road, near the family's residence.

According to Riley's girlfriend, Riley made contact with Gleason as he was mowing his lawn and told him that God had sent him there to find a child named Amber in order to prevent her from committing suicide. Gleason and his unidentified 33-year-old wife told Riley no one lived in their house by that name and to leave before they called the police. Riley's girlfriend recounted to detectives that Riley told them "Look, you don't need to call the cops because I'm the cops for God."

The couple still called police; however, by the time they arrived Riley was gone, returning to his home in Brandon. Roughly nine hours later Riley returned to the residence.

At around 4:30 a.m., Pasco County Lieutenant Duane Thompkins, apparently in a stroke of luck, happened to hear gunfire coming from the area. As Thompkins made his way towards the sound of the bullets, multiple 911 calls were received shortly thereafter describing an active shooter situation in Lakeland.

According to police accounts, once officers arrived at the home, they discovered Riley's truck on fire along with "glow sticks" that had been placed on the street and the front lawn, apparently directing the officers towards the front of the house. Police claim they saw a figure dressed in camouflage, without a weapon, run into the house as they attempted to make contact.

Once Riley was inside the house, County Sheriff Judd told reporters that police heard a volley of gunfire followed by "a woman scream and baby whimper." Police were unable to enter the front door which was apparently barricaded. Three police officers attempted to gain entry through the back when they were confronted by Riley, who was wearing a bulletproof vest, helmet and kneepads and was heavily

armed.

A brief shootout ensued as police attempted to retreat out the back door they had just entered. The shootout prompted a hail of gunfire from police outside the home. Judd surmised that “at least dozens if not hundreds of rounds [were] fired.” Photos released by the Polk County Sheriff’s office show the home riddled with bullets and broken glass.

After a pause in the shooting, a police helicopter deployed overhead reported seeing Riley exit the house with his hands up. He had apparently suffered a single gunshot wound and was transported to Lakeland Regional Hospital. Judd reported at least two weapons were recovered; however, there may have been a third weapon. While at the hospital, police claim that Riley attempted to reach for an officer’s gun and had to be restrained and sedated.

According to Riley’s LinkedIn profile, he was stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina with the 1st battalion 6th Marines and the 1st Battalion 9th Marines from January 2007 through March 2011. While stationed at Camp Lejeune, Riley was deployed to Ramadi, Iraq in 2008 and to Marjah, Afghanistan from 2009-2010.

Riley indicated on his profile that he worked in 2013 as a “Guard Team Supervisor” for Academi, formerly known as Blackwater, the private security and military contractor founded by former Navy Seal and billionaire war criminal Erik Prince. Since August 2017, Riley claims to have worked as a “Protection Specialist” for Griffin Defense providing “close protection” in Mexico, Nigeria, Paris and Peru and as an “Executive Protection Agent” for ESS Global Corporation, where he performed similar functions.

Multiple social media photos posted by Riley feature him brandishing military grade weapons and gear. No doubt Sunday morning was not the first time Riley had witnessed, or perhaps participated in, the wanton slaughter of men, women and children.

In a press conference on Sunday, Judd alternately characterized Riley as a “war hero” who “fought for his country” as well as “evil in the flesh” and a “rabid animal.”

Judd lamented the fact that his deputies were not presented with the proper circumstances to commit an extrajudicial execution Sunday morning, telling reporters: “It would have been nice if he would have come out with a gun and then we’d have been able to read a newspaper through him. But when someone chooses to give up, we take them into custody peacefully. If he’d have given us the opportunity, we’d have shot him up alive. But he didn’t because he’s a coward.”

The response by Judd is indicative of the deeply sick society that produces a figure such as Riley. While the exact reason Riley decided to drive some 30 miles away to massacre a family he apparently did not know, may never be

known, the social causes that lead to such frequent and, at this point, routine, acts of homicidal sociopathic violence in the US are well known.

Capitalism has produced a severely unequal society in the United States in which the vast majority of the population are a missed paycheck or an unexpected hospital visit away from homelessness. Meanwhile, the ruling class, through their two bourgeois parties, maintain a stranglehold over all of society’s wealth and resources, usurping the bulk of it for themselves.

Divorced from concerns of the working class, Democrats and Republicans, speaking for hedge fund managers, the CIA, Department of Defense and multinational corporations, focus their efforts on reversing America’s declining global economic position through unending war abroad, ruthless class exploitation at home, and unlimited cash infusions and bailouts for Wall Street.

Sunday’s terrible shooting, like the many others that preceded it and will follow, is apparently domestic blowback from the crimes of American imperialism abroad. Over 20 years of neocolonial wars overseas combined with mass deindustrialization has created an entire layer of society that is severely damaged.

While all the details of Riley’s life are unknown as of this writing, for many young workers and students, the only chance of escaping crushing poverty and to afford a college education is to join the US military. In this brutal institution, young people are trained, and paid, to kill people they do not know without hesitation or mercy, in the interest of maintaining US global hegemony. Highly trained assassins, such as Riley, are coveted by private military and security contractors, eager to gobble up US government funding and cash from predatory corporations seeking to “muscle” out their competition and suppress working-class opposition.

The American government’s official policy, from local police departments to the highest levels of the Pentagon, is to resolve every dispute with overwhelming and lethal violence. The corporate media, as seen in hand-wringing op-eds in the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* lamenting US withdrawal and defeat in Afghanistan, play a leading role in encouraging the antisocial atmosphere that pervades all aspects of US society, facilitating the unending carnage.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact