

Winter Soldier 2008: A Marine Mom's Eyewitness Account of the Testimony

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I. I have spent the past seven-plus years as an activist against the policies of George W. Bush and his regime. Already, my son has completed 2 tours of duty as a U.S. Marine, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. So my life has been forever altered by the events of the past 7 years. Still, when I initially made plans to attend the Iraq Veterans Against the War ([IVAW](#))'s Winter Soldier event, I intended to cover it from the perspective of an independent journalist.

However, after spending almost four days within the halls of the National Labor College in Silver Spring, Maryland, meeting new members of IVAW, as well as many old friends from Veterans For Peace, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Military Families Speak Out and other anti-war groups, and listening to the testimony of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, I realized I can no longer be an objective reporter. So I decided to write this story from the perspective of a Marine mom; one who is adamantly opposed to the so called "war on terror", the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and any other wars that this government is cooking up.

On Friday, Day 2, testimony began at 9 AM with a panel about the "Rules of Engagement". Speakers from the Army and Marine Corps. — people that I have known for the last few years — recounted the atrocities that they not only witnessed but participated in. Anyone who is interested can listen online at www.ivaw.org/wintersoldier. But about halfway into that panel, I lost my objectivity. The stories they were telling about the rules of engagement they learned while training at boot camp, or on a military base "back home", were the same as what I had heard from my son. I broke down sobbing. The photographs they were showing on the five viewing screens of bloodied bodies torn apart by close gunfire, 50-calibre Machine guns, rocket launchers, and every other damn weapon our great military industrial complex has created, were all too familiar to me. When my son returned home from both war zones, he was so eager to share his stories and pictures.

I could not fathom that my son, whom I raised to be a Catholic, whom I took to Sunday school, who received Communion and Confirmation, had not only been a participant in such horrors, but had pictures to prove it. I immediately told him that I would not listen to his stories or look at those pictures. He could speak with his father. My response may seem too many as being hard on my son, who only wanted to unload what he was feeling on his mother. But I couldn't come to terms with it then — or now.

Watching and listening to the testimony made me very ill. Here were these young men and women, handsomely dressed, some wearing medals, talking about how they shot civilians who were holding nothing more threatening than a cell phone, groceries, a shovel, a white

flag, or a pair of binoculars. Anyone deemed suspicious by the particular soldier or Marine on watch was fair game, subject to the orders, "Take 'em out!" The Rules of Engagement, as stated by Garrett Rapenhagen were "a joke and disgrace, and ever changing."

I knew that. I had heard it back home from my son. He told me he had to survive; he had to protect his buddies, so that they could all come home alive. They didn't know who the enemy was, so they would just "blast them away." The Marines are taught that. They shoot and don't even ask questions. Their motto is "Kill 'em all and let God sort them out!"

Camilo Mejia, who is the chair of IVAW, spoke about how soldiers were trained that dehumanizing the enemy is necessary to survival, and how they are taught to think of Iraqis as "hajjis". In fact, all of the panel members said Iraqi citizens were repeatedly referred to as hajjis. I know that word all too well; I have heard my son talk about it, as well as other anti-Iraqi slurs such as "towel head," and "sand nigger." The expression "if you feel threatened, use your weapon" was also a familiar phrase to me. So, too, was the slogan, "Do what you need to do." That meant that you use your rifle anytime, and you can crush whoever you want with your vehicle in the street.

Members on the panel recounted how, when they were bored, they blew up dogs and other animals to keep themselves entertained. All too well I had heard these stories, which gave me the creeps more than anything else. I also heard the testimony of former Cpl. Matt Childers, who said that after American soldiers had already beaten and starved detainees in their custody, one of them removed a hat from one of the detainees' heads and smeared it with his own feces, before feeding it to one of the prisoners who was so hungry that he actually attempted to eat it.

One other Marine, whom I happened to interview personally — which produced a conversation I hope to describe more fully in a future article — was Bryan Casler. Casler was part of the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003. He described Marines taking their MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) which were in plastic bags, and defecating in them before tossing them out to Iraqi children on the side of the road. Those who picked them up would think they were food and attempt to eat the contents. Casler also said soldiers would urinate in bottles and throw them at children. They would also remove the chemical packets that were within the MREs (which helped heat the food) and hand them to children to eat. He said that when they went into Babylon, the marines would drive vehicles into mosques and historic ruins, and break off pieces to take home with them.

Some of the soldiers' testimony was characterized by defiant anger. At the end of his testimony, former Marine Mike Totten ripped up the commendation he had received from General Petraeus, and threw it on the floor in front of him, to a huge applause. One day earlier, former Marine Jon Turner had taken a chest full of medals and thrown them into the audience. "I don't work for you anymore!" Turner said. At the end of his heart-wrenching account of the atrocities he had witnessed or committed, Turner begged the Iraqi people for forgiveness.

All too well I know these stories, and have known them for years. So I kept crying and asking myself how these young men and women wound up in this position. How someone who joined the military out of a sense of "patriotism" wound up doing such horrible and heinous things that would make a mother sick to her stomach. How do we let our children do this? Casler, like my son, joined right out of high school. Many others do the same. And many

don't have to be recruited; they join voluntarily, out of a desire to serve their country. Many feel that doing so is what makes heroes.

So I spent three days listening to heart-wrenching, gut-wrenching stories, and continuously asked myself the same question: "Why?" More specifically, why do these soldiers and Marines, who represent a critical new breed of resisters, still feel so tied to the military that many of them espouse some variation of the sentiment, "I am proud of my service in the military. I am not proud of what I did." For someone like me, I can clearly see that statement making sense. But then I had to ask myself why I thought it made sense.

How could you be proud to be in the military, and yet not like what you participated in while in the military? I have often asked my son this question. He says, "I love the Marine Corps. , but hate the government." What a deep statement - one that conjures up very mixed, confusing emotions. So I have to examine not only the statements of love, but of loathing for war. War is a dirty business, forever has been and forever will be. So why do we encourage our citizens to think otherwise?

II. I had to get more to the root of my feelings about these questions. So, after spending time at this event, I went to downtown Washington, D.C. to visit monuments built to honor soldiers who fought in past wars. I had to make sense of how we keep making the same mistakes. We send an entire generation off to a foreign land to kill people. My father fought in WWII, and was in the Battle of Okinawa, where he was severely wounded. He was fortunate to come home and repair physically, but never mentally. He hated the Marine Corps. He never spoke about that war, but I always knew he was angry.

The first memorial I visited was that one, where my father's picture is stored in a digital bank and you can enter the name and information surfaces on a computer screen. There he was, in his Pacific Alphas (green wool uniform), with all his medals, smiling at the age of 27, when he was first drafted. The roiling emotions took over my entire body. I grew up seeing that photo, and loving my father for what he did to "protect" our freedom. Next to the monument are the infamous words "Freedom isn't Free," carved into the granite wall. My father eventually died from liver failure, which was caused by Hepatitis C, which he contracted on the battlefield through a blood transfusion from a Japanese soldier that they had taken prisoner.

So why do we do this as a country? I walked around to the Korean monument where they had life-size statues of a platoon on patrol, and faces carved into another granite wall hailing the suffering and sacrifice of those soldiers. For what? I asked myself. I saw bus loads of visitors from all over the U.S. taking pictures with the statues, wreaths in the background, and against the granite walls, smiling and awestruck at our "heroes." A guide was repeating that freedom isn't free and how our military is the most honorable and the best in the world. We should be proud of them, the guide said. Small children with their own cameras were taking photos and looking in wonderment at the soldiers standing in formation, their battle-hardened faces carved into metal.

I asked myself why these kids were there. How could this be such an attraction? So this is where it starts, I thought. Taking kids on bus trips to the nation's capitol and looking at war monuments. They are being indoctrinated from the inception of their lives that America is brave and wonderful because of its military.

I started thinking what wars the U.S. had launched against other nations that actually

served the interests of humanity. I thought about Hitler's concentration camps in World War II, in which more than 6 million Jews were murdered in the cruelest ways imaginable. The U.S. had helped to liberate the concentration camps, defeat the Nazis, and free Europe from the death grip of a madman. That would seem to be a worthy cause, and an argument why we do need a military.

But was the real motive of the Americans in World War II to stop the genocide against Jewish people? It took this nation awhile to enter that war, and it did so only after the attack on Pearl Harbor, which led to my father-at age 27, the parent of a young son-being drafted. Then we dropped two atomic weapons on innocent Japanese civilians, incinerating hundreds of thousands instantly, and causing still hundreds of thousands more deaths in years to come due to radiation exposure.

Was that heroic? No, it was malicious and vengeful, and meant nothing to the security of our shores. People died at Pearl Harbor, the damage was done, so now it was time to pay back the Japanese one-thousand fold.

III. Our military might equals imperialism. Solidifying the U.S. position atop the imperialist ladder was the real motivation for American entry into World War II, and in fact it has essentially been the motivating factor for every war waged against other countries by this nation's military. So when I asked myself what wars the U.S. had waged against other nations with the genuine motivation of serving humanity, the answer I arrived at is: None.

We train our soldiers and Marines to kill, and to be merciless. They have the best weapons that our money can buy, and are trained to use them on the enemy, whether they are innocent civilians or someone who is actually threatening their lives directly. It is indiscriminate killing at the behest of a government that is seeking to terrify the world into submission to American empire.

Indeed, the history of the U.S. Armed Forces is littered with war crimes in pursuit of a domestic and global "manifest destiny" to achieve greater lands and resources. Keep in mind that the United States as we know it today would not exist were it not for the military's systematic decimation of first Native Americans, and then Mexicans, in the most unspeakable ways imaginable. During the Sand Creek Massacre in 1864, the U.S. Cavalry murdered hundreds of Native Americans — many of them women and children — in what is today Colorado.

Or consider a recent [article](#) in the New Yorker, entitled, "The Water Cure: Debating Torture and Counterinsurgency - A Century Ago."

After helping free The Philippines from Spanish colonialism, the American conquerors unleashed their wrath on those whom they were supposedly liberating (sound familiar?) As the dawn of the 20th century approached, American troops slaughtered civilians, burned down entire villages, and -yes- waterboarded prisoners.

In 1950, during the Korean War, American soldiers murdered hundreds of Korean civilians — again, many of them women and children — under the bridge at No Gun Ri. The Associated Press won a Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for [its series of articles](#) exposing this crime against humanity; the pieces centered on interviews with former U.S. veterans who had carried out the slaughter.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. forces murdered more than one million Indochinese civilians, employing in the process horrific chemical weapons such as napalm and Agent Orange, which burnt the skin of its victims. During the first Winter Soldier hearings, Vietnam Veterans testified about routinely murdering, disemboweling, and raping Vietnamese civilians, throwing bound prisoners out of helicopters to their deaths, and torching villages.

In fact, the final day of Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan marked the 40th anniversary of one of the most infamous war crimes in U.S. history. On March 16, 1968, U.S. troops entered the village of [My Lai and murdered](#) hundreds of men, women, and children — young and old — raping some of the women and bayoneting elderly men.

The systematic crimes against humanity that are mentioned above represent only a small percentage of the atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers under the direct leadership of their Commander-in-Chiefs, and they do not even touch on the countless instances of war-crimes-by-proxy carried out throughout the globe by the CIA, and by various puppet regimes installed by the U.S. government.

Without question, the veterans who spoke out against the horrors the U.S. military is inflicting upon the Iraqi people are to be commended for providing tremendously critical exposure at time when the atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers in the Middle East has been rendered “off the table” by the mainstream media and political establishment. These veterans must be praised, as well, for demanding an immediate end to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and occupations; their resistance can play a huge role in bringing these nightmares to an end.

However, denouncing these occupations in isolation from the history of repeated war crimes carried out by the U.S. military no more makes sense than examining one murder committed by a serial killer in isolation from the rest of his murders. In order to both understand, and most powerfully resist, the current manifestations of U.S. war criminality in Iraq and Afghanistan — and in order to prevent future occurrences of crimes against humanity — we must realize that the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars are symptomatic of the historic role of the United States military as an institution.

During last weekend’s Winter Soldier hearings, soldiers repeatedly testified that the crimes against humanity they described were not isolated incidents; that they were the rule, not the exception, of the U.S. occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The further leap these veterans — and many others within the anti-war movement- must now make is to recognize that the occupations themselves, taken as whole, are hardly isolated incidents; they, too, represent the rule and not the exception of the U.S. military.

Elaine Brower is a member of [Military Families Speak Out](#) and is on the national steering committee of [World Can’t Wait](#).

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