

## Winter Soldiers Sound Off

By [Dahr Jamail](#)

Global Research, March 23, 2008

The Progressive, April 2008 23 March 2008

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Jason Moon suffers from persistent insomnia as he wrestles with memories of his time in Iraq. “While on our initial convoy into Iraq in early June 2003, we were given a direct order that if any children or civilians got in front of the vehicles in our convoy, we were not to stop, we were not to slow down, we were to keep driving,” says the former National Guard and Army Reserve member. “In the event an insurgent attacked us from behind human shields, we were supposed to count. If there were thirty or less civilians we were allowed to fire into the area. If there were over thirty, we were supposed to take fire and send it up the chain of command. These were the rules of engagement. I don’t know about you, but if you are getting shot at from a crowd of people, how fast are you going to count, and how accurately?”

Moon is taking part in Winter Soldier. This is public testimony organized by the Iraq Veterans Against the War about the human consequences of failed U.S. policy in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The group takes its name from the Winter Soldier testimony by Vietnam Vets, including John Kerry, in 1971, which played a part in turning public opinion against that war.

“We’ve heard from the politicians, from the generals, from the media—now it’s our turn,” said Kelly Dougherty, executive director of Iraq Veterans Against the War. Dougherty, who served in Iraq in 2003 as a military police officer, said, “It’s not going to be easy to hear what we have to say. It’s not going to be easy for us to tell it. But we believe that the only way this war is going to end is if the American people truly understand what we have done in their name.”

When I was reporting from Iraq for eight months on and off between November 2003 and February 2005, Iraqis told me of atrocities U.S. soldiers were committing. The accounts now from soldiers themselves confirm an awful picture.

“An Iraqi was once selling soda out of a motorcycle to soldiers in a waiting convoy,” says Moon. “In the side-car was his seven-to-eight-year-old child. When the man refused to go away, the MP on patrol put him to the ground with a gun to his head and started stripping his vehicle and searching it. They then took the child, picked it up into the air, and threw it full force onto the ground. I didn’t see the child get up.”

Moon says soldiers devised cruel tricks to play on Iraqi kids. “Whenever we arrived in an area, we did so along with support vehicles with the radios, tractor trailers, bulldozers, and graters,” he says. “So we would park those in a circle with yellow police tape around. Iraqis had to stand outside that tape as we stood inside the tape, armed and ready. That was our little base of operations. Soldiers would place a \$20 bill in the sand with a little bit showing

and walk over to the other side of the vehicles and wait for a kid to charge under the tape to try to get the bill, which was equal to an average monthly salary there. If some kid was stupid enough to take the bait they would chase him, trying to hit him with the end of their bayonet or the butt of their rifle.”

Moon says his section sergeant would rally the troops every day in the motor pool with, “I hope I get to kill me a haji today. I hope I get to shoot somebody today.”

Moon tells me of a soldier in his tent who used to boast of swerving intentionally to hit the kids that rushed to pick up the food tossed by patrol members and to run over the food so the kids couldn’t get it.

“It was a game,” Moon said. “When the soldier who had thrown the food asked him why he had done it he said, ‘Yeah, I want to hit one of them. I want to kill one of those kids.’ ”

Moon brought back a video that shows his sergeant declaring, “The difference between an insurgent and an Iraqi civilian is whether they are dead or alive.”

Moon explains the thinking: “If you kill a civilian he becomes an insurgent because you retroactively make that person a threat.”

Following a long family tradition, Cliff Hicks joined the military at seventeen in 2002 because “we had been attacked, so it seemed like the right time.”

He served from October 2003 to August 2004. He admits that he and other soldiers with him have been physically abusive towards Iraqi civilians.

“Hell yeah, that happened,” he says. “That was extremely common. My platoon leader, a lieutenant, broke the arm of an old man because he was being difficult.”

Hicks tells one story of how he himself beat up an Iraqi detainee.

“One night on a foot patrol in Baghdad, we found a thirty-year-old Iraqi who we were told had an attitude,” he says. “He acted like he wanted to fight with us, so we all jumped on him and beat the shit out of him. I zip-stripped him with plastic handcuffs behind his back, dragged him to a pole and tied him to it, guarding him while the rest of my platoon ran into his house to raid it. He was yelling and screaming and talking to the crowd. I’m eighteen years old and alone, guarding this guy in downtown Baghdad late at night. He’s talking to this massive crowd behind me. I couldn’t get him to shut up...so I just beat the shit out of him. The whole time it freaked me out: He’s a prisoner, totally defenseless, you’re not supposed to beat up prisoners, but for all I knew this guy was telling his friends to kill me.”

Living under daily threat took a psychological toll. “Insane driving was even more common than beating people’s asses: 99 percent of the time you drive around in Iraq, and 99 percent of the way you get killed in Iraq is driving your vehicle into something that blows up,” Hicks says. “So you’re driving, scared to death, pissed off, you have a vehicle commander who’s looking at a map, yelling at a radio, being an asshole, and criticizing everything you do. He’s freaked out because he doesn’t want you to do anything stupid, and you don’t want to do anything stupid. Our tanks weigh seventy tons, our Humvees six tons, and we drove as fast as we possibly could.”

The temptation to misuse their powerful vehicles sometimes got the better of the soldiers. Iraqis “have these stands where they sell kebabs, motor oil, gas, and stuff, and one time we just got off the road and plowed through a whole row of these things,” he says. “We would just cruise through, make everybody run away. We would run over empty cars. I remember one time I saw a really shiny Mercedes. I asked my tank commander, ‘Sir, can I crush that car?’ He didn’t say yes, but he said, ‘I didn’t see anything.’ So I ran over the car.”

The language barrier also contributed to the abuse, Hicks says. “We didn’t have interpreters half the time when I was there,” he says. “We couldn’t communicate. They are not doing what you need them to do, so you freak out and beat the crap out of people all the time over there. It happened so much it’s not even worthy of note. People are just constantly getting their asses kicked over there, for no reason.”

What’s going on in Iraq seems to reflect what the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton calls “atrocities-producing situations.” He used this term first in his book *The Nazi Doctors*. In 2004, he wrote an article for *The Nation* applying his insights to the Iraq War and occupation. “Atrocities-producing situations,” he wrote, occur when a power structure sets up an environment where “ordinary people, men or women no better or worse than you or I, can regularly commit atrocities....This kind of atrocities-producing situation...surely occurs to some degrees in all wars, including World War II, our last ‘good war.’ But a counterinsurgency war in a hostile setting, especially when driven by profound ideological distortions, is particularly prone to sustained atrocities—all the more so when it becomes an occupation.”

Moon and Hicks testify to that. Their stories were vetted by Iraq Veterans Against the War, and the dates they served, and the units they served with, all checked out. While their service in Iraq was several years ago, other accounts from soldiers who have been there more recently bear out their experiences.

Hicks confirms reports of illegal detention of innocent Iraqis and willful destruction of their property. “You drive around Baghdad and most of these houses don’t have numbers, none of the streets are named, all the houses and streets look the same, and the interpreters, half the time they don’t even know where the hell they are,” he says. “So we’re always raiding the wrong house but you still have to bring in some prisoners. You can’t come back without prisoners. So we just rounded up any fighting-aged male we could find.”

One particular incident stands out in Hicks’s mind. “There was a tall apartment complex, the only spot from where people could see over our perimeter,” he recalls. “There would be laundry hanging off the balconies, and people hanging out on the roof for fresh air. The place was full of kids and families. On rare occasions, a fighter would get atop the building and shoot at our passing vehicles. They never really hit anybody. We just knew to be careful when we were over by that part of the wall, and nobody did shit about it until one day a lieutenant colonel was driving down and they shot at his vehicle and he got scared. So he jumped through a bunch of hoops and cut through some red tape and got a C-130 to come out the next night and all but leveled the place. Earlier that evening when I was returning from a patrol the apartment had been packed full of people.”

Looking back on his time in Iraq, Hicks sees a hopeless situation. “You go out on your first mission and all the Iraqis think you’re a loser, they ignore you, or flip you off, or draw their finger across their throat, yelling obscenities,” he says. “Even though some were nice to us,

you quickly lose any trust in them, and you lump them all together. The only way you can stay safe is to assume that outside the wire everybody wants to kill you. You don't want to be there. And it comes down to, 'Well fuck, I hate being here and I can't go home...So I wake up every fucking day and I think, 'The only reason I'm here is because you fucking people are forcing me to be here. I hate you fucking people, and you hate me, and that's just how it is.' And once you get to that place, it's over."

The original source of this article is The Progressive, April 2008  
Copyright © [Dahr Jamail](#), The Progressive, April 2008, 2008

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Dahr Jamail](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)  
[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)