

GI SPECIAL 6L14:



[Thanks to SSG N (ret'd) who sent this in.]

**“It Is Only A Matter Of
Time
Before The American
Occupation Withers Into
Dust”**

**[A U.S. National Guard Officer
Reports Direct From Afghanistan]**

**“We Teamed Up With Well-Known
Criminals And Local Thugs To
Distribute Aid In The Very Village
They Had Been Terrorizing, And That
Was The Face Of American Charity”
“Supplies Are Constantly Unavailable”**



Aside from the day to day security operations and the non-existent hunt for Osama bin Laden, coalition forces here are squarely concentrated on building up the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, both of which are tasks that are badly planned, poorly supported, and incompetently managed.

Dec 14 2008, By Anonymous, Iraq Veterans Against The War

Whether or not you support the war in Afghanistan one thing is clear--it's not being won.

I am an officer in the National Guard currently coming towards the end of my tour in Afghanistan.

Over the past year I have had the unique opportunity of serving as a mentor at the Kabul Military Training Center and as a member of an Embedded Tactical Trainer team working in western Afghanistan.

Having worked at both the nation's primary military training facility and downrange with Afghan troops in the field, I've gained a unique perspective on the American occupation here.

The main effort in Afghanistan is the mentoring mission.

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National Army and Afghan National Police, both of which are tasks that are badly planned, poorly supported, and incompetently managed.

The hope is that by helping to empower local security forces, we put Afghanistan firmly on a path towards empowerment, self-determination, and democracy.

The result is largely the opposite.

**The Mentoring Problem:
“Ground Truth From Mentors Is Largely Ignored By High Ranking Soldiers
Or Sugar-Coated To The Point Of Absurdity By Intermediary Yes-Men”**

The single highest priority in Afghanistan is building up the ANA and ANP.

Afghans are being trained at a furious pace to build up the internal security forces.

As the body-count was used to gauge success in Vietnam, so the size of the Afghan military and police force is used to gauge progress here. What this amounts to is a no-holds barred push to get as many Afghans as possible into uniform.

This process begins for the ANA at the KMTC.

There, standards simply do not exist.

There are only training schedules and graduations. Courses there have little logistical support, a rampant problem faced by both Afghan and American units all across the country, and the quality of the training takes a back seat to building the numbers.

Afghan commanders refuse to fail any students except in the most extreme cases, and commonly graduate people who have missed nearly a third to even half the course. Many Afghan soldiers leave KMTC grossly unqualified to do their jobs, assuming, that is, that their jobs have any standards for qualification at all.

Those kinds of things might be written in an official manual somewhere, but it's hardly understood or put into practice. A mentor might try and get such things put into place, but the effort is futile as long as there is pressure from higher, both Afghan and American chains, to pump out as many soldiers as fast as possible.

Ground truth from mentors is largely ignored by high ranking soldiers or sugar-coated to the point of absurdity by intermediary yes-men.

As in many areas of the military, there's a professional interest in keeping everything as rose-colored as possible, and the higher the rank, the more rose-colored everything becomes.

Furthermore, almost all of the Afghan instructors at the KMTC are career instructors. Virtually none of them have ever held a line position, or held one recently (recently being since the American occupation began). Everything they're teaching is largely theoretical and not from any real experience working in the field or in any actual units. At best,

they're just repeating what they were taught anecdotally by an American mentor at the start of the war.

After leaving the KMTC, soldiers are sent downrange to units that have ETT teams assigned to them.

With the rapid buildup of graduates and new units, the near exponential growth of the military and police force has already surpassed the American capacity to provide mentoring teams. The American military is desperately trying to assemble ANA and ANP mentoring teams on the fly, plucking them at random from units to fill vacancies.

This is how my entire team was selected during mid-tour—a random group of people from all over Kabul, Air Force, Navy, and Army, pulled from their previous assignments, thrown together, and expected to do a job that none of us were trained in any capacity to do.

We are expected, by virtue of time-in-grade and membership in the US military, to be able to train a foreign force in military operations, a mission that is normally reserved for Army Special Forces.

Considering programs like stop-loss, where the purpose is supposedly to prevent disruptions in momentum and institutional memory, this random rearranging of troops from well-established jobs in familiar units to fill mentoring positions with complete strangers seems not only ironic, but completely counter-productive.

You're lucky enough if you had any mentorship training (Fort Riley has some pre-mobilization mentorship training from what I've heard), as having none is the norm (Fort Bragg has absolutely zero mentorship training, but soldiers are routinely pulled from there to become mentors), but there are often times when you're tasked to mentor someone in a field that is completely outside your realm of experience.

Routinely mentors are assigned to Afghan counterparts who not only outrank them, but who also work in a position they have no experience in themselves, in a foreign system that has different SOPs and rules.

One extreme example was a Sergeant with no legal experience tasked to mentor an Afghan Captain who was a JAG officer.

Even if the job that your counterpart is doing is relatively simple (which is only true of lower ranking jobs), such pairings are largely irresponsible, extremely short-sighted, and render the entire concept of mentorship irrelevant.

The push to build the ANA and ANP as fast as possible results in a series of consequences that ultimately greatly endangers American lives, shatters the military's ability to do any long-range planning, and completely contradicts any effort to stabilize Afghanistan with a professional military force (that is if having such a military would have that effect at all).

It's one thing to have to adapt to combat losses, but to have to constantly degrade units to build up others and then rearrange all the necessary logistics to satisfy those changes and support both, is an entirely different sort of obstacle.

People arrive in Afghanistan with no idea what their job will be (which is what happened to me), or they have an idea and then it gets changed as they step off the tarmac at Kabul International Airport (which is what happened to my Team Chief).

And then once they have their job, even if it's one that's important to daily operations, at any moment the word can come down for them to get pulled off and sent out on an ETT team (which happened to myself and several others on my team).

Groundhog's Day:

“Our Hopes In Achieving Victory Here Lie In Attaining Figures Closer To What The Russians Managed To Build When They Lost The War”

When the Russians occupied this country, they had a force of roughly 100,000 Russians and 150,000 Afghan troops organized into a standing military.

We have roughly half those numbers in both fields and our hopes in achieving victory here lie in attaining figures closer to what the Russians managed to build when they lost the war.

Our strategy in Afghanistan, though operationally and tactically of a different character, is basically identical to the Russian one.

In fact, I often talk with my Afghan counterparts who were in the military during the 1980's, about what it was like to have Russian mentors. Mostly they say it was the same, but some of the tactics were different. We even occupy that same buildings and facilities that the Russians built up during their occupation.

Not only is building the military so quickly a major problem in itself, but even if we could do it effectively and competently, I doubt it would do much good in the end.

Imaginary Army:

“We Teamed Up With Well-Known Criminals And Local Thugs To Distribute Aid In The Very Village They Had Been Terrorizing, And That Was The Face Of American Charity”

The ANA is a broken force. It can barely hold itself together, let alone conduct missions without US support.

This situation is in large degree caused by the push to build up numbers in the Afghan military and police force so rapidly.

There are certainly some units that are cohesive and smoothly functioning (relative to the broken logistics support in this country). I've met mentors who came from teams where their counterparts routinely conducted successful missions, though it's almost always with coalition support, either logistical or tactical. However, I feel that such units are rare (aberrations that succeed despite the system, not because of it) and do not accurately represent the general result of our failing efforts here.

And even then, their success is largely deceptive, as at best, they are puppet units held up by American strings.

AWOL soldiers are rampant in this country. It's common for ANA soldiers to be gone for weeks at a time without anyone knowing where they went.

Another routine practice is for Afghans to join the military for awhile, save up money, and then go to Iran or Pakistan and start a new life there. I just recently lost a Lieutenant in the staff I was mentoring that way.

It's very likely as well that a certain percentage of those deserters were Taliban infiltrators. It's accepted that they regularly make their way through courses at the KMTC.

The AWOL rate also exacerbates the problem of understaffing units in general. Most of the positions in my ANA battalion are vacant and are unlikely to be filled any time soon.

Corruption is widespread as well.

In my battalion, for instance, the commander himself is extorting a local shop keeper, and his staff routinely steal from him.

One the base where I stay, some ANA from a different brigade recently robbed some of the Afghan civilian contractors that work here at gun point as they tried to go home at the end of the day.

In Kabul, on one humanitarian aid mission we were on, we handed out school supplies to children, and in an attempt to lend validity to the ANA, we allowed them to distribute the supplies. As it turns out, we received intelligence reports that that very same group of ANA have been extorting money from the villagers under threat of violence and general destruction of property.

In essence, we teamed up with well-known criminals and local thugs to distribute aid in the very village they had been terrorizing, and that was the face of American charity.

Such corruption only gets worse with the Afghan police, who are paid significantly less.

Supplies Are Constantly Unavailable

Logistics is virtually non-existent.

Supplies are constantly unavailable.

My ANA unit can't get any large trucks to conduct logistics runs because there aren't any available to give. Most of what the unit is authorized to have and needs to do missions effectively just isn't there.

Part of this is related to the rapid growth of the Afghan security forces outpacing our ability to support all the new units logistically. Once again, we just can't catch up. And, in examining the situation in a larger sense, the war in Iraq is depriving this theater of support and supplies.

The American military might be set up to fight two conventional wars on two different fronts (though with recent structural changes, I don't know if this is actually still the case), but it is certainly not structured to fight two long-term counterinsurgencies.

It's very doubtful, from seeing how counterinsurgency is handled and generally viewed with contempt here, that it is even designed to fight one.

Counterinsurgency: "A False Democracy Run By Ex-Mujahedeen Warlords"

One of the main failures in America's counterinsurgency campaign lies in its ability to keep the Afghan population secure.

I think back to David Galula and his book "Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice" where he says the "counterinsurgent can't achieve much if the population is not, and does not feel, protected against the insurgent."

Not only is the American military impotent in its ability to provide meaningful security to the population at large (American soldiers actually LIVING in local areas and villages with close relationships with its civilian inhabitants), but it actively contributes in making them less secure by contributing to civilian deaths either directly with American firepower, or indirectly through supporting corrupt segments of the ANA and ANP.

But it's not always an issue of corruption. Even when things go exactly the way they're supposed to, the population is left destabilized.

A typical scenario would be something like the following:

A village elder, or someone with authority in the village, is visited one night by a band of ten to twenty Taliban that ask for food and shelter. The next day, a paid informant living in the village tips off the Americans or the ANA or ANP, raids are conducted, searches go on, and the village elder along with several other adult men who are charged with giving aid to the Taliban, are arrested.

Not only is the village now missing its elder, several heads of families, and important workers, but humanitarian assistance is now denied to them as well to prevent more supplies from possibly falling into the hands of the insurgency, to act as punishment for their collusion, and serve as an example to other villages.

Even if somehow, corruption could be completely fixed in the Afghan security forces, a characteristic that is deeply affected by factors in realms far outside the control of the military, such as the country's pervasive poverty, the general approach towards

stabilizing the country militarily is one that is disconnected from the realities of the average rural Afghan.

Virtually all texts on counterinsurgency, to include the US Army's doctrine, sees counterinsurgency as a conflict which is primarily political in nature—military operations are not the primary front, and to a large effect, are a supplementary effort in achieving decisive political goals.

Little is being done in ameliorating the political situation in this country, a false democracy run by ex-Mujahedeen warlords who are not much better than their Taliban counterparts, and yet most of the American attention and effort is placed on military operations, which even if hypothetically conducted in an ideal and perfect manner, would still come up short in stabilizing the region if the government remains corrupt or ideologically dictatorial and the people still abused by it.

The Women: “We Have Not Liberated The Women Of Afghanistan”

One of the most reliable measures of Afghanistan's instability and the American occupation's failure here is the Afghan woman.

The Burqa, or Chadri as it is actually called in Afghanistan, is a common sight here, even in cities supposedly as secure and “free” as Kabul. One of the propaganda campaigns used to sell the war here was the pseudo-feminist goal of “freeing” the women here from the rampant misogyny of the Taliban. The Chadri became a symbol war-supporters rallied around to push the support for the invasion. But seven years later, the Chadri is alive and well in all parts of the country.

From talking to Afghans and doing research on the subject, I've learned that women continue to wear Chadri's primarily because of one of four reasons:

- 1) Women continue to be threatened by their husbands, brothers, and male relatives, to be beaten, burned, or raped if they do not wear the Chadri. These men aren't Taliban, but men who continue to harbor extreme misogynist ideologies.
- 2) Women are cautious of the country's insecurity and general instability and wear the Chadri as a proactive preventative measure. In other words, they do not feel safe.
- 3) Women are forced to wear it by Taliban who actively control the area.
- 4) Women are forced to wear it as a matter of law in areas controlled by the Karzai government. Official government agents have made it mandatory for women to wear Chadri's in certain parts of the country.

The argument might be mistakenly made that wearing such an article of clothing is part of Afghanistan's Islamic culture, but that is simply not the case. The Chadri is a very specific form of clothing infused with intense symbolism. Women here who are interested in covering their bodies for religious and cultural reasons can choose to wear long black robes or something similar, as many women here do. But unless under threat

of some sort, it's highly unlikely that there are women here who would actually volunteer to wear the Chadri given it's current, modern meaning (it used to be a symbol of the upper-class) and its generally restrictive nature.

The more Chadri's there are, the less secure the population is. It's a rough measure, but undeniably an important one. And they're everywhere.

For anyone interested more interested in the plight of women here, visit the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan's (RAWA's) website and read their news archives. It makes one thing glaringly clear:

We have not liberated the women of Afghanistan.

Not The Good War

Even though some might make the justification that the war in Afghanistan is "just" by virtue of there being a clear mandate to be here, something that I completely disagree with, the fact is is that there is no search for Osama bin Laden, he has most certainly long ago fled the country, and the Taliban have only grown in numbers since the initial invasion, making the country much less secure from the influence of terrorist organizations.

Yes, we may overwhelmingly dominate the insurgents militarily (at least in our limited sectors of influence), they may scatter to the winds where ever we go, but we cannot protect the population at large, the government we support is corrupt, and our strategy is counter-productive and disconnected from the situation faced by everyday Afghan citizens.

The military effort is not at the front of the conflict. Bigger questions loom in the horizon that far exceed the limited paradigm of winning and losing.

If we could put more troops on the ground, if we could bring in more logistics, if we could fix the ANA and ANP, if we could in essence, win the war, the question still remains, is it right? Is it moral? Is victory alone proof of ethics?

Who wins by our ambiguous terms of success? The Afghan people who are being slaughtered by all sides? Those Americans hungry for revenge? The puppet Afghan government that does the bidding of its American masters? Or the working class of our nation suffering in a shattered economy?

It is only a matter of time before the American occupation withers into dust, soldiers rotting away in fortified palaces of Hesco barriers and concertina wire occasionally running futile kinetic missions that do little more than change numbers on a PowerPoint presentation somewhere, all while an economic crisis rages in the homeland.

How long will we follow in Russia's footsteps? How long will it be before a withdrawal becomes a retreat?

DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND OR RELATIVE IN THE MILITARY?

Forward GI Special along, or send us the address if you wish and we'll send it regularly. Whether in Iraq or stuck on a base in the USA, this is extra important for your service friend, too often cut off from access to encouraging news of growing resistance to the wars, inside the armed services and at home. Send email requests to address up top or write to: The Military Project, Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657. Phone: 917.677.8057

30,000 More U.S. Troops To Afghanistan? “More Troops ... That Means There Will Be More Targets For The Taliban”

12/21/08 AFP

The Taliban has dismissed US plans to send as many as 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, warning that the US-led coalition would be defeated as the Russians were in the 1980s.

“Every day they change their speech to hide their defeat,” Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi said.

“They now want to send more troops to Afghanistan... The Russians also sent that many troops but were badly defeated,” he said, referring to the doomed decade-long war waged by the Soviets there.

“When the US increases its troop levels to that of the Russians, they will also be cruelly defeated,” warned Ahmadi, the main spokesman for the Taliban who claims to speak on behalf of its fugitive leader Mullah Mohammad Omar.

“More troops ... that means there will be more targets for the Taliban,” he said.

Notes From A Lost War:

“The Man Suspected Of Having Orchestrated The Attack, Maulavi Ghulam Dastagir Had Been

Personally Released By President Hamid Karzai”

**“Reached By Telephone Late
Saturday, Mr. Dastagir Laughed
When Asked Whether He Had Been
Involved In The Ambush”**

**“Definitely!” “I Am A Jihadist, I Will
Continue My Jihad,” He Declared. “My
Morale Is Very High”**

In the past three years, the size of the Taliban presence in Badghis, a mountainous and sparsely populated province on the border with Turkmenistan, has multiplied from almost nothing to a force that numbers in the high hundreds, if not more, and that has cowed local officials and has come to dominate large areas of territory, provincial officials said.

December 20, 2008 By KIRK SEMPLE, New York Times [Excerpts]

KABUL, Afghanistan — It was one of the most humiliating attacks the Afghan security forces had ever suffered. On Nov. 27, Taliban insurgents ambushed a supply convoy in the northwest province of Badghis, killing nine Afghan soldiers and five police officers, wounding 27 men, capturing 20 others, destroying at least 19 vehicles and stealing five, Afghan officials said.

The Afghan authorities quickly learned that the man suspected of having orchestrated the attack, Maulavi Ghulam Dastagir, had only weeks before been in police custody on charges of aiding the Taliban.

Mr. Dastagir had been personally released by President Hamid Karzai after assurances from a delegation of tribal elders that he would live a peaceful life, officials said this month.

The ambush, and the presidential pardon that allowed the insurgent to go free, have become the subject of a governmental inquest and the source of profound embarrassment for the Afghan government.

“This is an important subject for everybody because we haven’t had these sorts of casualties before,” said Gen. Zaher Azimi, the spokesman for the Ministry of Defense.

The spokesman said it was not yet certain whether Mr. Dastagir had led the ambush, though General Azimi, the Defense Ministry spokesman, said the evidence indicated that he “played the main role.”

Reached by telephone late Saturday, Mr. Dastagir laughed when asked whether he had been involved in the ambush.

“Definitely!” he exclaimed, and laughed again. “I am a jihadist, I will continue my jihad,” he declared. “My morale is very high.”

The Taliban insurgency, which is based in Afghanistan’s southern and southeastern provinces, along the border with Pakistan, has steadily expanded to other parts of the country, particularly in the west and northwest.

In the past three years, the size of the Taliban presence in Badghis, a mountainous and sparsely populated province on the border with Turkmenistan, has multiplied from almost nothing to a force that numbers in the high hundreds, if not more, and that has cowed local officials and has come to dominate large areas of territory, provincial officials said.

This growth, residents and local officials say, has been relatively unchecked by Afghan and international security forces.

The insurgency has also become increasingly tenacious in the neighboring provinces of Herat and Faryab.

In the telephone interview on Saturday, Mr. Dastagir, who said he was speaking from Badghis, vowed to solidify the Taliban’s foothold in those provinces and press the insurgency’s campaign farther.

“We will infiltrate the other provinces in the north,” he said.

“The Afghan and foreign security forces don’t have a strategy for security in Badghis,” said Qari Dawlat Khan, the leader of the provincial council.

The autopsy of the ambush also revealed flaws in military planning and intelligence gathering, including fundamental problems in the command of the unit that been attacked, the Afghan National Army’s 207th Corps, Afghan officials said.

Before the Badghis ambush, the unit had suffered significant losses in several insurgent attacks in the past two years in Badghis and the western provinces of Farah and Herat, and the performance of the unit’s commander was under review, officials said.

The convoy’s mission was to carry supplies for the police from Qala-i-Nau, the provincial capital, to Balamorghab, a Taliban stronghold about 70 miles away along poor roads, officials said.

On Nov. 26, about 200 Afghan soldiers and police officers set out from Qala-i-Nau, spent the night in the village of Mangan, near the border, then resumed driving early the next morning.

As the road passed through a gorge near Balamorghab, insurgents hiding on the bluffs above opened fire with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades, officials said. The initial volleys blew up an oil tank-truck that was positioned toward the head of the convoy, blocking the road and dividing the forward vehicles in the convoy from the others.

The ensuing battle lasted several hours, ending only after four helicopters, two from the Afghan Army and two from the international forces, arrived with Afghan commandos to help repel the insurgents.

General Azimi, the Defense Ministry spokesman, said the attack was “totally unexpected,” in part because the commanders had taken the tribal elders at their word and believed that the local Taliban fighters would not initiate any attacks after the release of Mr. Dastagir.

A high-level official in the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, informed Parliament last week that intelligence officials had warned military and police officials of a possible Taliban ambush in late-November, Mr. Safi said.

Mohammad Yaqub, a lawmaker from Badghis, who was not in the delegation that visited Mr. Karzai, said it was commonly believed that there were several hundred, and possibly thousands, of Taliban fighters in the province.

The convoy, he said, “was like handing food to the enemy.”

MORE

Resistance Action: “The Night Time Explosions Have Recently Increased In Herat, And Have Caused Panic And Worries Among People There”

16 December 2008 By VOA News & Dec 21 By SEBASTIAN ABBOT, Associated Press
Writer & Quqnoos

In southern Afghanistan, Taliban fighters killed two Afghan police officers in an attack Monday in Helmand province.

Taliban militants killed two Afghan nationals in northwest Pakistan for acting as spies for U.S. forces fighting the resurgent militant group across the border in Afghanistan, a police official said Sunday. Police found the bullet-ridden bodies Sunday in an abandoned village in North Waziristan, part of Pakistan’s tribal area along the border with Afghanistan. A note signed by the Taliban and found with the bodies said the two

brothers from the Afghan city of Khost near the Pakistani border were killed because they were U.S. spies.

Grenade explodes in front of Herat Mayor House. The explosion that took place Saturday evening broke the windows of Mayor and neighboring houses, but had no human casualties, police spokesperson said. Meanwhile, the Al-Fatah anti government group took the responsibility. According to Al-Fatah, the bomb was aimed to target the house of one employee of the Attorney General. The night time explosions have recently increased in Herat, and have caused panic and worries among people there.

**IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESISTANCE
END THE OCCUPATIONS**

**OCCUPATION ISN'T LIBERATION
ALL TROOPS HOME NOW!**

**BEEN ON THE JOB TOO LONG:
COME ON HOME, NOW**



US soldiers in Afghanistan in November 2008. (AFP/File/David Furst)

10,000 Demand Pakistan Cut Supply Line To U.S. Occupation Forces In Afghanistan: “We Will No Longer Let Arms And Ammunition Pass Through”



Pakistanis demonstrate against U. S. government at a rally in Peshawar, Pakistan, Dec. 18, 2008. More than 10,000 protested against allowing U.S. forces to ship supplies through Pakistan into Afghanistan. (AP Photo/Mohammad Sajjad)

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, Military Project, who sent this in.]

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (AP)

Thousands of anti-government protesters demanded Thursday that Pakistan shut the route along which supplies are ferried to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, adding to the growing pressure on Islamabad's beleaguered leadership.

The demonstration by more than 10,000 people in the northwestern city of Peshawar also focused on a recent series of U.S. missile strikes against Taliban targets in Pakistan's tribal areas along the Afghan border and Pakistani military offensives against Islamic insurgents in the area.

Leaders of the demonstration drew links between the missile attacks and the supply line, saying the equipment was being used for attacks on Pakistani soil and vowing to shut down the convoys.

"We will no longer let arms and ammunition pass through ... and reach the hands of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan," Sirajul Haq, the provincial head of hardline Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, told the crowd.

“They are using the same against our innocent brothers, sisters and children.”

Thursday’s rally appeared to be the largest against Western use of the route since Pakistan’s civilian government took office in March and one of the largest anti-government protests so far.

Banner-toting demonstrators chanted “Down with America” and “Jihad is the only solution of America” as they marched along a key road in Peshawar, led by party leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed.

“If America continues atrocities against Muslims, it will also not be able to live in peace,” Express television showed Ahmad saying.

TROOP NEWS

**“I Have Guys Who’ll Throw Me
A Peace Sign On The Sly”**

**“Porter Is Eight Months Into His
Second Iraq Deployment, Engaged
In A War That He, Like Many Other
Soldiers And Veterans, No Longer
Believes In”**

**“You’re Sent On These Missions That
Don’t Make Any Sense, You’re
Patrolling These Roads That You
Don’t Care About, And The People On
That Road Really Don’t Want You
There”**

“I Really Felt Betrayed, Because We Were Not Doing What I And The Rest Of The Country Were Told We Were Supposed To Be Doing, And That’s Helping The People”



December 19, 2008 By Richard Whittaker, Austin Chronicle

Eight years ago, Casey Porter and his father started rebuilding a '68 Chevrolet Camaro. It was a junker with no paint and no engine, and getting it roadworthy was a family project.

But for the last four years, progress has been slow. That's how long Porter's been in the Army. For 21 months, he's been "stop-lossed," the U.S. Army's way of keeping soldiers enlisted beyond their original contract.

Now Porter is eight months into his second Iraq deployment, engaged in a war that he, like many other soldiers and veterans, no longer believes in.

So now he has a new project: making films about the reality of life in Iraq for U.S. military personnel.

These aren't rough clips of gory attacks that spark online controversy, and they're definitely not gung-ho recruitment ads. Nor are they the 30-second casualty reports or the congressional committee coverage that too often pass for "war reporting."

It's one soldier talking to other soldiers about his or her experiences, then using the Internet to let everyone else know what's going on.

Using a \$150 off-the-shelf camcorder, a laptop, some editing software, and a YouTube account, Porter has created short documentaries to show to his viewers the raw,

unvarnished truth. “There might be music, and I might have some flair in my videos, but they’re not getting a government-sanctioned version,” he said.

That doesn’t mean Porter’s footage, of life in a war zone, is not brutal. He shows acts of kindness as well, such as sharing rations with children. But there are the roadside bombs and the body parts, the badly maintained military facilities and the wrecked streets, the sandstorms and the fireballs. It’s nothing that hasn’t been talked about – but to see it, five years into the occupation, makes quite a remarkable impact.

Some of Porter’s tales are heartrending. In “The Story of Two Dogs,” the fate of a pair of puppies his unit adopted is a savage indictment of the linear military mindset.

In the simpler “Miller’s Story,” a comrade explains what it’s like to survive a mortar attack.

Porter’s latest, “Deployment Game: Living FOBulous,” was shot inside the post exchange – imagine a Best Buy crossed with a Wal-Mart and a car dealership, then add incoming mortar rounds – at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad. (“FOB” is Army lingo for “forward operating base,” a secure camp away from the main base.)

For Porter, it’s all part of the way troops are being misused.

As one soldier tells him in “Deconstructed”: “It’s going to take a lot of stuff to fix this bruise we’ve put on the whole earth.”

Porter doesn’t look like a returning warrior, and he didn’t plan to be one.

From age 11, when he first saw Terminator 2, he wanted to make films, but as an adult he tired of surviving on nickel-and-dime jobs. The Army was a change and a challenge. “I think, for a man in American society, we question, ‘What can we handle?’” he said. “I had some misgivings about the war, but I didn’t question whether I believed in the fight. I put it on the back burner, like most Americans. But almost immediately I realized, in basic training, I had made a mistake.”

When he was deployed to Iraq for his first tour in December 2005, his disenchantment worsened.

“There’s no reconstruction going on at the level they show you,” he explained. “The soldier’s mission is to survive. Not to win the fight, not to fight the enemy that is the main threat to the United States, but to simply survive.

“You’re sent on these missions that don’t make any sense, you’re patrolling these roads that you don’t care about, and the people on that road really don’t want you there.”

He was away from the Camaro, but as an Army mechanic, he was still fixing vehicles. First it was tanks, then the new mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, designed to survive improvised explosive devices – Iraq’s infamous IEDs. Being the unit film geek also paid off, as his first sergeant made him the company photographer. “What I basically ended up photographing was funeral services,” he says, “and stuff from outside the wire.”

During his first tour, from December 2005 to November 2006, he took footage with no real goal in mind, but when he returned to Texas in November 2006, the filming quickly became part of his anti-war protest.

He joined Iraq Veterans Against the War and found he could use the footage he had gathered.

“I came back and realized that filmmaking was still in my blood, something I never should have walked away from,” he explained. Through IVAW, he started showing his documentaries at colleges. “I would talk, show a film, talk, show a film, and then there would be these Q&As. What I realized was that these films – while they were (posted) online – in person, they had a strong emotional impact.”

Part of what frustrated him was the media coverage, which he knew was misleading or just wrong.

Too often, Porter explained: “There’s a guy reporting live from the streets of Baghdad, and it’s total bullshit. He’s completely inside the Green Zone.”

Not that anyone who doesn’t know Baghdad intimately would know that.

“There’s a big disconnect between the military service and civilian populations, and that works to the advantage of the military and the government, because they can pack so much bullshit in that big gap.”

Showing protest movies in Austin and filming them in Iraq are two quite different things.

Porter knew he was at risk of being stop-lossed: After his first tour, he’d been transferred out of his unit to one more likely to be deployed.

His contract, expiring January 2007, got extended, and under the lesser-known “stop-movement” program, he couldn’t transfer out to another unit less likely to be deployed. Then last December he got confirmation: His second Iraq tour would start in March 2008.

This time, Porter was ready, and his decision was simple. “No wife, no kids, no debt. So you know what? I’ll make films about what I see.”

Making his movies, like being a member of IVAW, is completely legal under Army regulations: He has a civilian lawyer to review the films and posts them with all the necessary disclaimers.

The problem for Porter is that some military personnel and most Iraqi civilians are nervous about talking on camera. It’s too risky, for their lives or their careers or both. “I need to expose people to what they’re not seeing,” he said, “but my only concerns are soldiers’ safety and the Iraqis’ safety.” The most important thing, he finds, is letting people know what he’s doing, so they have the chance to back out. “You may get someone on camera who just thinks you’re doing it for yourself, and that Iraqi is having to explain to somebody why he’s on YouTube with the Americans,” he said.

Yet while some people are cautious about being on camera, the finished films are popular with the troops.

Well, mostly. “Lifers, they’re upset about it,” he explained. “Their whole career in the Army is spent in preparation (for) the mission, a mission, any mission. They say, ‘How dare you question it?’ and I say, ‘Well, why shouldn’t I?’”

But among those on short contracts, he said, “I have guys who’ll throw me a peace sign on the sly.”

He also doesn’t buy the line that it’s bad for troop morale – because it’s the troops that help him make the films. “When they see the footage they’ve given me, they see it edited and color-treated, they feel a part of something.”

Casey Porter’s videos can be viewed at www.youtube.com/user/caseyjporter



Casey Porter: Photo by Sandy Carson

Honoring The Contract

Porter is not the only Central Texas veteran speaking out.

Los Angeles native turned Austin resident Ronn Cantu volunteered for the Army on March 9, 1998, for four years. His contract expired just after the 9/11 attacks. Since there was no stop-loss then, he was out.

But he started to reconsider his future on Feb. 5, 2003: The day Secretary of State Colin Powell made his now-infamous presentation on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to the United Nations Security Council. “I remember watching ... and buying into it hook, line, and sinker,” said Cantu. His good memories of the Army helped: “In 1998, in the quote-

unquote peacetime, I couldn't take 10 steps without someone pulling over and offering me a ride to where I needed to go. There was a lot of camaraderie, a lot of esprit de corps and high morale."



Ronn Cantu: Photo by Sandy Carson

So he re-enlisted as a sergeant.

Almost immediately, he knew something was wrong. The camaraderie was gone, the quality of recruits was dropping, and then in 2004, he was deployed to Iraq.

"Some of us joked we were only there to test our armor, but none of us could understand why our brothers and sisters were dying," he said.

"I really felt betrayed, because we were not doing what I and the rest of the country were told we were supposed to be doing, and that's helping the people."

After his first tour, he returned to Fort Hood. With his unit broken up, he had no one to talk to who had shared his experiences, until finally he found Iraq Veterans Against the War.

Then he heard he was going back to Iraq.

Like Porter, he tried to make it as palatable as possible, switching from infantry to interrogation.

After his second deployment, while publicly criticizing the war, Cantu faced possibly the strangest moment of his military career. "They made me a staff sergeant. No board, no questions asked, just, 'Here's your extra rank, here's your extra money, but by the way ... you don't get anyone below you.'" Automatic promotions above one-stripe privates, he said, are "a sign of how much the military is breaking down and losing leadership."

While Porter and many others have made clear their opposition to the war, they still have a job to do.

Porter explained: "I'm honoring the contract. I work hard; I don't do shortcuts. One person in the anti-war community suggested I do sabotage. Absolutely not. I'm doing this, obviously for the Iraqis but for the other soldiers, because they're the ones in the wringer."

That attitude doesn't surprise Cantu.

"Nobody holds their hand up to take that oath thinking they're going to go to jail for something they don't believe in."

That's something that radical anti-war activists don't understand, he said.

"The people that tell you to go AWOL aren't offering you a job at the same time."

In April, Cantu also applied for conscientious objector status. "I had taken a human life, and this is not how human beings are supposed to be treating each other," he said. In August, he told his battalion executive officer that he would rather go to jail than do a third tour in Iraq.

On Nov. 6, with 13 months left on his contract, he was honorably discharged. "I think they didn't want to look bad, punishing a staff sergeant with 10 years experience who's been there twice before with no bad marks on his record," he said.

What makes him suspicious is that three other active members of IVAW's Fort Hood branch also got their walking papers early in the last month – effectively breaking up the branch.

Like Cantu, Porter's been promoted out of harm's way.

"I'm a sergeant now," he explained. But again, Porter feels the promotion works to the Army's advantage, as it moved him away from his friends and comrades. Now he spends his days watching the radio.

"They used this to boot me out of the unit," he said, "and they won't give me any soldiers to lead. But that's OK, because they come up to talk to me."

Porter's leave was up on Dec. 10. He's got another seven months left in the Army.

"I'm not really worried about getting stop-lossed again," he said. "I'm worried about being on the active ready reserve list, of being out for a year and getting called back."

As much as he looks forward to being back home, he knows how hard it can be, maybe even harder than just staying in.

"There's a term, 'suck it up, and drive on,'" he said. "When I'm home, I try to readjust to civilian life. Like today, I'm in a really good mood, because it's my first day back. But when I was back last time, it was, well, wait a minute, you've got to get back to real life again, and there's that adjustment."

But there's one thing waiting for him when he leaves the Army.

While he was on this current deployment, his father finished the Camaro. When he last saw it, the hood and the grill were off, and the chrome wasn't finished. Now it sits off Sixth Street, its metallic paint iridescent in the sun.

As he hits the ignition switch, it rumbles to life, and Casey grins.



U.S. soldier in Beijia village Iraq, Feb. 4, 2008. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

**“A Devastating Effect On An
Already Disintegrating Morale”
“Many Of The Other First Sergeants
And Sergeants Major Had No Clue
About Fair Punishments” “Most Of
Them Would Not Even Speak On
Behalf Of Their Men”**

“I Was Disgusted By Other Units That Would ‘Max’ Out Their Soldiers For Relatively Minor Offences”

Letters To The Editor
Army Times
12.22.08

I have served in the Army since 1986. During that time, I have suited up for three wars. Two of those wars nearly saw me slain.

That being said, I am no saint and in my career have been subject to two Article 15s. I deserved them both; I say that without reservation or regret. My punishment was both harsh and rewarding at the same time.

My NCO leadership used those lapses in reason to form me into a better man and leader. Some of my punishments never saw the desk of my commander and were handled internally with road marches or extra shifts.

I never lost a stripe or a dime of my money in either of my bouts with stupidity but paid dearly through the sweat off my brow.

While I was an infantry first sergeant in Iraq in 2004, not one of my 150 men got an Article 15.

I held many health and welfare sessions, dealt with missed movements and even fistfights.

I was disgusted by other units that would “max” out their soldiers for relatively minor offences that could have been handled in other ways.

Where were the lessons or mentorship an NCO is supposed to possess? What happened to the first sergeant who looked his commander in the eye and said, “I will handle this”?

This has a devastating effect on an already disintegrating morale.

Many of the other first sergeants and sergeants major had no clue about fair punishments.

Most of them would not even speak on behalf of their men.

Now, five years later, I am seeing the results of this lack of evenhandedness. Many soldiers volunteer to be deployed.

They repeatedly sign up for battle roster after battle roster and eventually get their wish.

Upon completion of their tour, they can't wait to "run" for the exit.

We as NCOs owe it to our Army and country to leave the Army better than we found it. That means leaving behind quality soldiers and leaders to run the place when we leave.

As a senior NCO and leader, I have had the displeasure of looking across the table at soldiers who were in the wrong. I always ask myself two questions: Is the soldier salvageable and is the Army a better place with that soldier? I then act accordingly to do what is necessary to maintain discipline and rehabilitate the wayward soldier. The purely administrative system that is in place now is failing the Army.

I have always operated on the assumption that if I had to put pen to paper on a soldier, I have given up and failed that soldier.

When rolling into harm's way and dealing with fear, terror and doubt, the words "I will write you up" just don't hold water.

Sgt. 1st Class Terrence S.M. Popp
Southfield, Mich.

OCCUPATION PALESTINE

Zionist Blockade Forces Palestinians To Eat Garbage



[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, who sent this in.]

[Thanks to JM, who sent this in.]

21 December 2008 Peter Beaumont, foreign affairs editor, The Observer [Excerpts]

Impoverished Palestinians on the Gaza Strip are being forced to scavenge for food on rubbish dumps to survive as Israel's economic blockade risks causing irreversible damage, according to international observers.

Figures released last week by the UN Relief and Works Agency reveal that the economic blockade imposed by Israel on Gaza in July last year has had a devastating impact on the local population.

The agency announced last week that it had been forced to stop distributing food rations to the 750,000 people in need and had also suspended cash distributions to 94,000 of the most disadvantaged who were unable to afford the high prices being asked for smuggled food.

"Things have been getting worse and worse," said Chris Gunness of the agency yesterday. "It is the first time we have been seeing people picking through the rubbish like this looking for things to eat. Things are particularly bad in Gaza City where the population is most dense.

Gunness also expressed concern about the state of Gaza's infrastructure, including its water and sewerage systems, which have not been maintained properly since Israel began blocking shipments of concrete into Gaza, warning of the risk of the spread of communicable diseases both inside and outside of Gaza.

"This is not a humanitarian crisis," he said. "This is a political crisis of choice with dire humanitarian consequences."

Also yesterday, a boat carrying a Qatari delegation, Lebanese activists and journalists from Israel and Lebanon sailed into Gaza City's small port in defiance of a border blockade. It was the fifth such boat trip since the summer. The two Qatari citizens aboard the Dignity are from the government-funded Qatar Authority for Charitable Activities.

"We are here to represent the Qatar government and people," said delegation member Aed al-Kahtani. "We will look into the needs of our brothers in Gaza, and find out what is the most appropriate way to bring in aid."

The arrival of the delegation reflects the growing anger in the Arab world over the Gaza siege, directed at Israel but also at Egypt, which has allowed the border crossings at the southern end of the Strip to remain sealed.

[To check out what life is like under a murderous military occupation by foreign terrorists, go to: www.rafahtoday.org The occupied nation is Palestine. The foreign terrorists call themselves "Israeli."]

DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK

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CLASS WAR REPORTS



Troops Invited:

Comments, arguments, articles, and letters from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email contact@militaryproject.org: Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Same address to unsubscribe. Phone: 917.677.8057

NEED SOME TRUTH? CHECK OUT TRAVELING SOLDIER

Telling the truth - about the occupations or the criminals running the government in Washington - is the first reason for Traveling Soldier. But we want to do more than tell the truth; we want to report on the resistance to Imperial wars inside the armed forces.

Our goal is for Traveling Soldier to become the thread that ties working-class people inside the armed services together. We want this newsletter to be a weapon to help you organize resistance within the armed forces.

If you like what you've read, we hope that you'll join with us in building a network of active duty organizers. <http://www.traveling-soldier.org/> And join with **Iraq Veterans Against the War to end the occupations and bring all troops home now!** (www.ivaw.org/)



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