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Atrocities in Iraq: 'I killed innocent people for our government'

By **Paul Rockwell** -- Special to The Bee
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"We forget what war is about, what it does to those who wage it and those who suffer from it. Those who hate war the most, I have often found, are veterans who know it."

- **Chris Hedges, New York Times reporter and author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning"**

For nearly 12 years, Staff Sgt. Jimmy Massey was a hard-core, some say gung-ho, Marine. For three years he trained fellow Marines in one of the most grueling indoctrination rituals in military life - Marine boot camp.

The Iraq war changed Massey. The brutality, the sheer carnage of the U.S. invasion, touched his conscience and transformed him forever. He was honorably discharged with full severance last Dec. 31 and is now back in his hometown, Waynsville, N.C.

When I talked with Massey last week, he expressed his remorse at the civilian loss of life in incidents in which he himself was involved.

Q: You spent 12 years in the Marines. When were you sent to Iraq?

A: I went to Kuwait around Jan. 17. I was in Iraq from the get-go. And I was involved in the initial invasion.

Q: What does the public need to know about your experiences as a Marine?

A: The cause of the Iraqi revolt against the American occupation. What they need to know is we killed a lot of innocent people. I think at first the Iraqis had the understanding that casualties are a part of war. But over the course of time, the occupation hurt the Iraqis. And I didn't see any humanitarian support.

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Q: What experiences turned you against the war and made you leave the Marines?

A: I was in charge of a platoon that consists of machine gunners and missile men. Our job was to go into certain areas of the towns and secure the roadways. There was this one particular incident - and there's many more - the one that really pushed me over the edge. It involved a car with Iraqi civilians. From all the intelligence reports we were getting, the cars were loaded down with suicide bombs or material. That's the rhetoric we received from intelligence. They came upon our checkpoint. We fired some warning shots. They didn't slow down. So we lit them up.

Q: Lit up? You mean you fired machine guns?

A: Right. Every car that we lit up we were expecting ammunition to go off. But we never heard any. Well, this particular vehicle we didn't destroy completely, and one gentleman looked up at me and said: "Why did you kill my brother? We didn't do anything wrong." That hit me like a ton of bricks.

Q: He spoke English?

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Baghdad was being bombed. The civilians were trying to get out, right?

A: Yes. They received pamphlets, propaganda we dropped on them. It said, "Just throw up your hands, lay down weapons." That's what they were doing, but we were still lighting them up. They weren't in uniform. We never found any weapons.

Q: You got to see the bodies and casualties?

A: Yeah, firsthand. I helped throw them in a ditch.

Q: Over what period did all this take place?

A: During the invasion of Baghdad.

'We lit him up pretty good'

Q: How many times were you involved in checkpoint "light-ups"?

A: Five times. There was [the city of] Rekha. The gentleman was driving a stolen work utility van. He didn't stop. With us being trigger happy, we didn't really give this guy much of a chance. We lit him up pretty good. Then we inspected the back of the van. We found nothing. No explosives.

Q: The reports said the cars were loaded with explosives. In all the incidents did you find that to be the case?

A: Never. Not once. There were no secondary explosions. As a matter of fact, we lit up a rally after we heard a stray gunshot.

Q: A demonstration? Where?

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A: On the outskirts of Baghdad. Near a military compound. There were demonstrators at the end of the street. They were young and they had no weapons. And when we rolled onto the scene, there was already a tank that was parked on the side of the road. If the Iraqis wanted to do something, they could have blown up the tank. But they didn't. They were only holding a demonstration. Down at the end of the road, we saw some RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) lined up against the wall. That put us at ease because we thought: "Wow, if they were going to blow us up, they would have done it."

Q: Were the protest signs in English or Arabic?

A: Both.

Q: Who gave the order to wipe the demonstrators out?

A: Higher command. We were told to be on the lookout for the civilians because a lot of the Fedayeen and the Republican Guards had tossed away uniforms and put on civilian clothes and were mounting terrorist attacks on American soldiers. The intelligence reports that were given to us were basically known by every member of the chain of command. The rank structure that was implemented in Iraq by the chain of command was evident to every Marine in Iraq. The order to shoot the demonstrators, I believe, came from senior government officials, including intelligence communities within the military and the U.S. government.

Q: What kind of firepower was employed?

A: M-16s, 50-cal. machine guns.

Q: You fired into six or ten kids? Were they all taken out?

A: Oh, yeah. Well, I had a "mercy" on one guy. When we rolled up, he was hiding behind a concrete pillar. I saw him and raised my weapon up, and he put up his hands. He ran off. I told everybody, "Don't shoot." Half of his foot was trailing behind him. So he was running with half of his foot cut off.

Q: After you lit up the demonstration, how long before the next incident?

A: Probably about one or two hours. This is another thing, too. I am so glad I am talking with you, because I suppressed all of this.

Q: Well, I appreciate you giving me the information, as hard as it must be to recall the painful details.

A: That's all right. It's kind of therapy for me. Because it's something that I had repressed for a long time.

Q: And the incident?

A: There was an incident with one of the cars. We shot an individual with his hands up. He got out of the car. He was badly shot. We lit him up. I don't know who started shooting first. One of the Marines came running over to where we were and said: "You all just shot a guy with his hands up." Man, I forgot about this.

Depleted uranium and cluster bombs

Q: You mention machine guns. What can you tell me about cluster bombs, or depleted uranium?

A: Depleted uranium. I know what it does. It's basically like leaving plutonium rods around. I'm 32 years old. I have 80 percent of my lung capacity. I ache all the time. I don't feel like a healthy 32-year-old.

Q: Were you in the vicinity of of depleted uranium?

A: Oh, yeah. It's everywhere. DU is everywhere on the battlefield. If you hit a tank, there's dust.

Q: Did you breath any dust?

A: Yeah.

Q: And if DU is affecting you or our troops, it's impacting Iraqi civilians.

A: Oh, yeah. They got a big wasteland problem.

Q: Do Marines have any precautions about dealing with DU?

A: Not that I know of. Well, if a tank gets hit, crews are detained for a little while to make sure there are no signs or symptoms. American tanks have depleted uranium on the sides, and the projectiles have DU in them. If an enemy vehicle gets hit, the area gets contaminated. Dead rounds are in the ground. The civilian populace is just now starting to learn about it. Hell, I didn't even know about DU until two years ago. You know how I found out about it? I read an article in Rolling Stone magazine. I just started inquiring about it, and I said "Holy s---!"

Q: Cluster bombs are also controversial. U.N. commissions have called for a ban. Were you acquainted with cluster bombs?

A: I had one of my Marines in my battalion who lost his leg from an ICBM.

Q: What's an ICBM?

A: A multi-purpose cluster bomb.

Q: What happened?

A: He stepped on it. We didn't get to training about clusters until about a month before I left.

Q: What kind of training?

A: They told us what they looked like, and not to step on them.

Q: Were you in any areas where they were dropped?

A: Oh, yeah. They were everywhere.

Q: Dropped from the air?

A: From the air as well as artillery.

Q: Are they dropped far away from cities, or inside the cities?

A: They are used everywhere. Now if you talked to a Marine artillery officer, he would give you the runaround, the politically correct answer. But for an average grunt, they're everywhere.

Q: Including inside the towns and cities?

A: Yes, if you were going into a city, you knew there were going to be ICBMs.

Q: Cluster bombs are anti-personnel weapons. They are not precise. They don't injure buildings, or hurt tanks. Only people and living things. There are a lot of undetonated duds and they go off after the battles are over.

A: Once the round leaves the tube, the cluster bomb has a mind of its own. There's always human error. I'm going to tell you: The armed forces are in a tight spot over there. It's starting to leak out about the civilian casualties that are taking place. The Iraqis know. I keep hearing reports from my Marine buddies inside that there were 200-something civilians killed in Fallujah. The military is scrambling right now to keep the raps on that. My understanding is Fallujah is just littered with civilian bodies.

Embedded reporters

Q: How are the embedded reporters responding?

A: I had embedded reporters in my unit, not my platoon. One we had was a South African reporter. He was scared s---less. We had an incident where one of them wanted to go home.

Q: Why?

A: It was when we started going into Baghdad. When he started seeing the civilian casualties, he started wiggling out a little bit. It didn't start until we got on the outskirts of Baghdad and started taking civilian casualties.

Q: I would like to go back to the first incident, when the survivor asked why did you kill his brother. Was that the incident that pushed you over the edge, as you put it?

A: Oh, yeah. Later on I found out that was a typical day. I talked with my commanding officer after the incident. He came up to me and says: "Are you OK?" I said: "No, today is not a good day. We killed a bunch of civilians." He goes: "No, today was a good day." And when he said that, I said "Oh, my goodness, what the hell am I into?"

Q: Your feelings changed during the invasion. What was your state of mind before the invasion?

A: I was like every other troop. My president told me they got weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam threatened the free world, that he had all this might and could reach us anywhere. I just bought into the whole thing.

Q: What changed you?

A: The civilian casualties taking place. That was what made the difference. That was when I changed.

Q: Did the revelations that the government fabricated the evidence for war affect the troops?

A: Yes. I killed innocent people for our government. For what? What did I do? Where is the good coming out of it? I feel like I've had a hand in some sort of evil lie at the hands of our government. I just feel embarrassed, ashamed about it.

Showdown with superiors

Q: I understand that all the incidents - killing civilians at checkpoints, itchy fingers at the rally - weigh on you. What happened with your commanding officers? How did you deal with them?

A: There was an incident. It was right after the fall of Baghdad, when we went back down south. On the outskirts of Karbala, we had a morning meeting on the battle plan. I was not in a good mindset. All these things were going through my head - about what we were doing over there. About some of the things my troops were asking. I was holding it all inside. My lieutenant and I got into a conversation. The conversation was striking me wrong. And I lashed out. I looked at him and told him: "You know, I honestly feel that what we're doing is wrong over here. We're committing genocide."

He asked me something and I said that with the killing of civilians and the depleted uranium we're leaving over here, we're not going to have to worry about terrorists. He didn't like that. He got up and stormed off. And I knew right then and there that my career was over. I was talking to my commanding officer.

Q: What happened then?

A: After I talked to the top commander, I was kind of scurried away. I was basically put on house arrest. I didn't talk to other troops. I didn't want to hurt them. I didn't want to jeopardize them.

I want to help people. I felt strongly about it. I had to say something. When I was sent back to stateside, I went in front of the sergeant major. He's in charge of 3,500-plus Marines. "Sir," I told him, "I don't want your money. I don't want your benefits. What you did was wrong."


It was just a personal conviction with me. I've had an impeccable career. I chose to get out. And you know who I blame? I blame the president of the U. S. It's not the grunt. I blame the president because he said they had weapons of mass destruction. It was a lie.

About the Writer


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