

Jim Talib's Story**A Marine's Time in Iraq****INTERVIEW BY DEREK SEIDMAN***Where did you serve in Iraq?*

I was assigned to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, as a Corpsman with a Marine Rifle Company, from February to September of this year. I spent the spring and most of the summer based out of Camp Fallujah, Iraq (called F.O.B. St. Mere under the Army's control until the change of command took place) I was forward deployed in Iraq for nearly 7 months.

When and why did you enlist?

I originally enlisted in the Army National Guard back around 1993. A lot of the people in my family had been in, and I knew it was the only way for me to get money for college. The reserve GI Bill as well as the tuition waiver for state schools that is offered through the National Guard in New Jersey was an offer that was hard to refuse. When I joined I don't think I, or anybody at the time, would have imagined that we would be involved in an occupation where nearly half of the deployed force was reservists and national guard (OIF3 rotation will be 43%). So I figured, for one weekend a month, it's not a bad deal.

I also wanted to get out of my neighborhood, and make a little money, so the chance to go away for training and

travel while getting paid was a plus.

In the winter of 2002, I transferred from the Army National Guard into the Navy Reserves, where I am still serving as a Corpsman. I switched over to get out of my former position as an 'Infantryman' because I could not do that job anymore. I had grown too much personally and politically in the time since I had first enlisted, I could not see myself carrying a rifle and being an occupier. I did not want to guard checkpoints, search homes and shoot at people. My plan did not work out. Since I was an EMT and had been through the Army's Medic course as well, I was able to come into the Navy as a Hospital Corpsman. But, perhaps because of my Infantry background and other training, I was immediately assigned to work with the Marines. In the end, I found myself not in a hospital somewhere, but on the frontlines of an occupation doing exactly what I had tried to avoid.

What types of things were you told to do that we're not hearing about here?

It was a pretty miserable and complicated experience, some days were more agonizing than others. As a Corpsman I was able to avoid many situations that my Marines either relished or did not refuse.

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I did last week along with seven other members of Voices in the Wilderness, Camilo Mejia can only be seen by a small group of approved visitors. Neither is it possible to write to him without prior approval from the military. For the time being, he is under wraps, quarantined like a deadly virus.

From the point of view of a military that depends on a compliant corps, Mejia is in fact dangerous. For soldiers, who presently have so much to lose by their participation in the military – life, limb, relationships, mental health – his willingness to look war in the face and to examine its distortions could well be infectious.

His ultimate decision to choose a path of humaneness and sanity make him a lively example to the thousands of women and men currently active in the US military or in the

military reserves and whose minds are prone to the same kind of reflection.

While Camilo Mejia is clearly an example to people who wish to say no to this war, perhaps he can also be an example to soldiers returning from Iraq. Like Mejia, these soldiers have to contend with their participation in this brutal occupation. For some, confronting their experiences is a matter of life and death. For others, it is part of trying to save a marriage, and Mejia's words and actions since returning from Iraq point a way that leads from distortion and dissolution to clarity and wholeness. CP

David Smith Ferri lives in Ukiah, California. He recently returned from a five day vigil organized by Voices in the Wilderness.

I was witness to the detention and mistreatment of civilians, there were several incidents of people in my Battalion shooting civilians, but things like that shouldn't really surprise anyone with all the detailed coverage of Abu Ghuraib and the recent incursions into Fallujah. Some of it was investigated, but most of the time it was just ignored. That kind of stuff was just so common, though not always as sensational or as well documented as the abuse at Abu Ghuraib. On one of my trips to drop off a detainee at the jail, the Senior Interrogator told us not to bring them in any more. 'Just shoot them' he said, I was stunned, I couldn't believe he actually said it. He was not joking around, he was giving us a directive. A few days later a group of Humvees from another unit passed by one of our machine gun positions, and they had the bodies of two dead Iraqi's strapped to their hoods like a couple of deer. One of the bodies had exposed brain matter that had begun to cook onto the hood of the vehicle, it was a gruesome, medieval display. So much of what I experienced seemed out of control, I saw so little respect for the living and almost none for the dead, and there was almost no accountability.

How did the war and occupation take its toll on the city? What did you see?

My unit did not go into the 'city' during the brief spring offensive that began after the two U.S. contractors were hung from the bridge, we operated in the 'suburbs' and villages to the south and east of the city. Other than that short incursion, there weren't really many U.S. forces going into the city at all, it was considered a 'RED' zone and was to be avoided, until the incursions last month. What I did see of the surrounding areas was pretty much what I had expected, extreme poverty and a crippled infrastructure that was unable to provide for most peoples basic needs. Most of the destruction that I saw was due to U.S. attacks during the initial Gulf War and subsequent sanctions that lasted for a decade, during which there was continued air bombardment. Many of the facilities that were hit during the 90's included electrical plants, schools and water treatment facilities that were not legitimate targets. The Iraqi people are still suffering from the effect of such actions.

You said that you joined the military mainly for economic reasons. Was this the

case with a lot of your fellow soldiers ?

When I was in the National Guard it was certainly true that most of the people were there for the college money, and that's tragic since many working class kids trying to get an education are now forward deployed in Iraq, in combat, not in college. It was a little different with the Marines, certainly a few were lured by the G.I. Bill, but I found they were more likely to really believe in what we were doing and to want to be in combat. There were a few who had reservations before going over, and their numbers increased as they saw the terrible contradictions of this occupation, but most were not able to challenge the set of ideas that they had adopted in Boot Camp and via the media campaign in the lead up to the war. Some guys really believed that they were defending America and bringing democracy, they obeyed their orders without question and bought into Democratization, WMD and 9/11 connections as justification for this war, all of which have been proven to be false.

From your experiences, what can you tell us about the armed resistance to the occupation?

Well, it is certainly much better organized than at first suspected. Everyone, even the average American, seems to be unable to deny that now. The incursions into Fallujah over the last few weeks have uncovered a solid infrastructure, and they were able to rebound from the incursions with a well-coordinated series of attacks in other areas. And that's just the attacks that make the papers. There are numerous actions carried out by the insurgency on a nightly basis that do not make the news.

During our first two months in Iraq, our base was attacked nearly every night with indirect fire, often these attacks involved 120mm Rockets. Now, if you've never seen one of these, it's about 6ft. long and hard to conceal. The ability to acquire, store and transport these rockets, as well as the expertise to devise an improvised launch mechanism should help to illuminate the fact that we are not fighting a few angry Arab teenagers with sandals and an AK-47. They would hit us with as many as 4 or 5 of these at a time, as often as 3 or 4 times a night, and sometimes this would be coordinated with mortar fire as well. They hit us constantly, with near impunity. That's not the work of amateurs. And that's just one Forward Operating Base,

there are small bases all over Iraq, many of which get hit with greater frequency and ferocity than that. And don't forget about the Improvised Explosive Devices, or roadside bombs, which are all over the place. You hear about them only when they cause casualties, but there are many more that miss their mark or get detonated by the Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams. You could hear these 'controlled detonations' go off regularly throughout the day. It takes a serious logistical operation and technical training to manufacture and emplace so many I.E.D.s.

Regarding soldiers who were to be sent off to Iraq, you said that most were not able to challenge the set of ideas that they had been given in Boot Camp. How does this indoctrination at Boot Camp happen? What does it do to a new soldier?

In 'Boot Camp' as well as in Army Basic Training, which I went through, you are taught to obey orders, to act upon the orders of those in charge without thought or question. That's commonly understood, and that kind of training is necessary for a

remember that even if someone receives an order that is clearly 'illegal' according to the Geneva Convention, military law or their own personal or religious morality, it is very difficult to speak out or act against your orders. For one thing, you can and most likely will be punished under military law, even if you were doing the right thing. Although there is a formal justice system in the military, things are often settled at the lowest level, in many cases you will be judged and punished by your own Company Commander who usually has his own interest at heart. Besides that, in speaking out, you are dissenting and breaking out of the group, you are being an individual and turning against the team. This may seem like an insignificant point to most people, but when you have trained side by side with the same group of people, often for years, and having fought and faced death together, it is not insignificant. The people in your unit are in many cases all you have, they are all that keeps you going, so committing an act that will surely be seen as a betrayal is not something most are not willing to

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military force to be able to carry out its objectives, but this all becomes very problematic when you bring in the complications of an occupation and guerilla conflict. The presence of civilians in the battle space makes it difficult for someone trying to 'kill the enemy' to decide when to shoot and when not to shoot. It is not as clean and simple as you have been trained to think, and young inexperienced and freshly indoctrinated soldiers have to confront this first hand, often realizing the impropriety and consequences of their actions too late. Newer, younger soldiers are less likely to have the confidence and perspective to be disobey an improper order, such as to shoot civilians. It does not help that such directives often come from senior commanders, as we have heard lately coming out of the 'imbedded media' reports from Fallujah, but again that's nothing new. I do not blame the soldiers though, they are being thrown into the meat grinder, and they want to come home alive, I know I did. Also, you have to

do. There are no reliable mechanisms for protecting and investigating the cry of dissenters. And people are not trained in Boot Camp or Basic Training to be whistleblowers, they are taught to be team players, and that's most likely what they will do when confronted with such situations, though they may be plagued with guilt over their actions for the rest of their lives.

What made you decide to speak out against the war and the occupation? What have been your activities, and do you face any consequences from the military for speaking out?

I knew that our justifications for going to war were bogus even before I went, and I was clear about that with my family and friends, seeing the impact of the occupation first hand and experiencing some of the contradictions sealed it for me- I knew I had to speak out. But admittedly, it took me a few months really to make sense of things and collect my thoughts enough to talk to people about it, it was

tough at first. I started by going to anti-war vigils, with a sign that said 'Iraq War Veteran Against the War', and just standing there. It was great because it gave me a chance to be visible and send a message about how I felt, without having to talk to people about stuff, the first month or so I really didn't talk to anyone about it except close friends. Gradually I broke into going to more events and meeting more people who helped me build myself into what was going on in the area, as far as anti-war activities, I also joined veterans for peace. Lately I have been writing a lot about how I feel about the occupation and I have committed to give some presentations about the costs of war, my experiences and why we should continue to build the movement to end the occupation. As far as consequences, I have not suffered any yet. From what I understand, service members even while on 'active duty' can participate in any social and political activism they want, just not in uniform. I am now back in 'reserve status' so it's even less of an issue. Actually, I often wear the top part of my desert camo uniform to make it a bit clearer for people where I am coming from, it usually helps to deflate the arm-chair imperialists that drive by the vigil- and since I am not wearing the whole thing there's nothing the military can really do.

Are you in touch with other antiwar soldiers who feel the same need as you do to speak out? A serious movement against the war and occupation by soldiers who actually served in Iraq could be a hugely important factor in trying to end this thing. What do you think the potential is for a movement like this?

I have met several Iraq war veterans who are against the war, but not all of them are ready to talk about it with people who have not been there, and not all of them feel that they can really articulate their feelings yet. It's a process, and everyone goes through it in a different way. Some people are more prepared to come right back and challenge all the notions of loyalty and patriotism that they have been fed, even if they do disagree with the war, but it's hard to do that when you have participated in the occupation. As veterans we have a direct connection to this, the occupation in Iraq is part of our personal history and often it is a painful one that involves loss, disillusion and guilt. To work through all of that, and then challenge the

'common' notion of the patriot as someone who blindly supports their government isn't easy, but it is something that we have got to do. I feel we owe it to everyone that's died over there to speak the truth. I think that a serious movement against the occupation should certainly include veterans, the people who have seen things first hand, and we do bear some responsibility for having carried out our country's bad foreign policy. But I do not believe that the burden falls exclusively, or even predominately upon our shoulders. Last time I went to the Saturday vigil, one of the organizers came up and thanked me for attending. She then proceeded to tell me that I was, in effect, the crowning jewel of their vigil--I think there's some truth in this. I do believe that as Veterans, we lend a sort of credibility to the anti-war movement, but we should not have to be the vanguard. I think that there are many people in this country who 'disagree' with the war in Iraq, but seem to me to be far too comfortable, and who appear to be doing little if anything to stop it. I think there is tremendous potential, and perhaps we can serve as a catalyst of sorts, but it's the masses of comfortable, sheltered Americans that will decide whether they are willing to struggle or not.

How should activists against the war approach antiwar soldiers? What can we do to build healthy bridges, and how can the civilian antiwar movement make itself more welcoming to soldiers who feel like they want to do something about the war and occupation?

I think the real danger lies in people absolving themselves of responsibility, and looking to veterans for leadership and action, not of idealizing them. I feel it is crucial that people (non-veterans) take some personal responsibility for what's going on in Iraq, whether you voted for our current president or not, you are complicit in the administrations agenda by your silence and inaction. Every day that you do nothing is another day you have given them your consent to continue the occupation. Building bridges with service-members who oppose the war is important, and I encourage it, but it's not something that many people currently organizing such activities tend to be good at. I find that many people in the antiwar movement to be 'dogmatic' and way too forceful with pushing their own analysis and positions. This is a generalization of

course, but I don't think it's an unfair one, and it's an important point. You cannot beat people over the head with your politics, not if you want them to keep working with you, especially with people who may still have notions of patriotism and nationalism that you find 'jingoistic' and distasteful. If you find a service-member who is against the war, that's got to be enough of a commonality to start with, you have to give people time to grow into a deeper understanding.

To accept that your country has a brutal history and ongoing agenda of imperialism is not always easy, give service-members you encounter information about this, but most importantly give them the chance to adjust to these ideas and deal with the fact that they have also been an instrument in such a campaign- this can take a long time and it's something that many will never fully accept. Having an open and accessible organization is important, and be visible, make your presence known so that returning service-members can find you and get involved. I stumbled upon the local anti-war group by accident. And remember, particularly in your initial interactions with a veteran, not to intimidate them by asking them to talk publicly about their experiences or inquiring as to whether or not they 'saw a lot of combat' or 'shot anyone'. You may be talking to someone only weeks off of the battlefield, who needs time to process their experiences, and who might not return to work with you if prodded in this way.

I continue to return to work with my local anti-war coalition, week after week, and have committed to talk publicly against the war, and about my particular experiences. This is largely because they were accessible and undemanding, they were clear in their message against the occupation but in support of the troops, and they were genuine, unpretentious people. They have demonstrated their ability to be organized, consistent and reliable, and have been successful in getting many veterans to work with them. And, though movement building is a long and laborious process with varying local dynamics, I think people willing to organize and act against the occupation should certainly take some of this into consideration. CP

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The Marines or Jail: Take Your Pick, Young Man

BY RON JACOBS

If life is a poker game, Rube (name changed) was one of those players who was never dealt an exceptionally good hand but played well with what he had. A bluff here and the right bet there, if you know what I mean. He was arrested on his 17th birthday for smoking pot in some small town outside Albany, New York. The judge, in all his benevolence, gave him the choice of four years in juvenile detention or two in Vietnam with the Marines. Rube chose Vietnam.

That was the summer of 1967. After an accelerated six weeks of boot camp he found himself in the jungle forward of Danang. His was a standard soldier's story with just a bit of a twist. Fire, heat, blood, death. And dope. Rube would laugh every time he lit up a big pipe load of the red Vietnamese pot. Some sentence, he'd grin. Busted for pot in the States and being paid to smoke it in Vietnam. It wasn't until he got to Saigon for a little "rest and recreation" that he tried heroin and fell in love. Eighteen months and a hell of a habit later, his tour was over. What else could he do? He pulled an ace from the pile and requested another year in Nam. The killing machine was chewing up bodies at an increased rate and loved volunteers. He got his extension.

By the time his second tour was up, Rube was committed to a life with heroin. The Marines let him go in San Diego and Rube headed to the Bay Area. After six months in the Haight, he went east to New York City and the Lower East Side. He found a job at the Fillmore East rock club where he sold dope on the side to keep his supply steady.

After the club folded in 1971, Rube hopped trains back to California. He ended up in the Santa Barbara switching yards. While buying breakfast in town one morning he ran into some folks who would become his family. Camping on the beach and smoking a lot of weed, the endless summer really was. When the rains came, they pooled their cash and headed up to Berkeley. After trying their luck on Telegraph Avenue for a few months, his friends went back to Santa Barbara and Rube split for Alaska with a pouch full of

acid. Once in Fairbanks he hooked up with a buddy from Vietnam and sold it all. Then he headed into Denali forest for a few weeks. When the nights grew cold, Rube bought a ticket for California, stuck around for a couple of months and then headed to Oaxaca. By the time I met him, Rube had been following the same routine for a half dozen years. He had tried to live the so-called straight life while in love with a woman who grew tired of his nomadic life, but the nine to five routine just didn't sit with his nature. Last I heard, he was back in prison for heroin possession.

A couple of news items in the past couple weeks caught my attention. One was a brief article on the CNN website about a

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young man being given the choice of jail or the military by a judge whose court he was in. I don't remember the young man's offense or his decision, just the general story. The other item was also about the military and its need for young warm bodies to fit into its uniforms. The Boston Globe ran an article by staff writer Charlie Savage (11/29/04) that described military recruiters' tactics in two different high schools in Maryland and Virginia. Recruiters relentlessly target one of the schools, where the student body is composed of mostly working class youth. The other, a school with a more upscale enrollment, is virtually ignored, according to the article. The truthfulness of the article was somewhat amazing given its source, but only strengthened the argument made by Steve Earle in his song "Rich Man's War."

For those of us who grew up during the Vietnam War and draft, the first scenario is a familiar one. At least a couple of my buddies ended up in the military

because they were busted for drugs or some other violation of the law and were given the choice of prison or the marines. The second scenario isn't too far from the military's standard operating procedure either. Even during the military draft, the men who ended up doing most of the dying were from working class and poor backgrounds. There was even a plan built into the draft system known as "Channeling." The purpose of this plan was to justify the deferment of college bound young men, undergraduates and post graduate students as being in the larger national interest. Unmentioned was the fact that these men came from backgrounds that usually included higher incomes and better education. Indeed, their numbers also included most sons of members of Congress, the officer corps, and many civil servants, not to mention the sons of CEOs and their administrative cohorts. The other side of this plan was called "Project 100,000." Its purpose was to bring into the service via the draft those young men who scored the lowest on the Armed Forces Qualifying test (AFQT)—the test given to all men and women who wish to join the military. Although the Defense Department claimed that Project 100,000 was designed to give these young men a chance to benefit under the regimen of the military, the reality is that these men usually ended up on the frontlines before most everyone else.

According to the Globe article, the current recruiting methods reflect this class bias. In fact, so do the casualty figures coming out of Iraq. When I talk with my son and his friends, most of them feel untouched by the war on Iraq. Even if they oppose it, most of them have no human connection to the bloodshed being perpetrated in their name. The stories of veterans of previous war only mean so much. After all, they're from the history books. Perhaps as more Iraq war vets began to tell their stories, the reality of that war-ravaged landscape will become clearer to the young men and women of our country.

As it does become clearer, I certainly hope that they will refuse to allow themselves or their friends to participate in this war or any future ones. If the timing works out, the popularization of such a sentiment could well end the draft before it begins. I will certainly do my part. CP

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