

With Lt. Watada's Case, GI Resistance Grows

By Sarah Olson, TruthOut.org

Posted on August 17, 2006, Printed on August 20, 2006

<http://www.alternet.org/story/40431/>

Clifton Hicks was looking for a body. Specifically, the Army tank driver was fumbling about in the dark, looking for and failing to find the remains of the Iraqis who, moments before, had been firing on his tank. When Hicks's flashlight swept the ground around his feet, he realized he was standing in the remains of a man. Literally. His boots wedged between the rib cage and the pelvis, blood and human organs squishing out from beneath the soles of his shoes.

It's this experience and others like it that made Hicks question the war in Iraq. It also compelled him to support US Army First Lieutenant Ehren Watada -- the highest-ranking member of the military to publicly refuse to deploy to Iraq.

28-year-old Lieutenant Watada disobeyed deployment orders on June 22, several weeks after announcing his opposition to the war at a press conference. He is charged with six violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice: one count of missing troop movement, two counts of speaking contemptuously toward officials, and three counts of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. An Article 32 hearing is scheduled for Thursday, August 17, to decide whether to proceed with a general court-martial. If tried and convicted, Lieutenant Watada could face over seven years in prison.

GI resistance is a growing trend

The Army would like to depict Lieutenant Watada as a lone military voice of dissent: a renegade upon whom enlisted men and officers alike look with scorn and derision. But Clifton Hicks is joining a growing number of Iraq war combat veterans who support the lieutenant. And, he says, for every veteran who supports Lieutenant Watada publicly, there are possibly hundreds more who feel they cannot speak out.

Geoffrey Millard is a sergeant in the Army National Guard and has no problem speaking publicly or supporting Lieutenant Watada. He spent eight years in the military, and was in Iraq between 2004 and 2005. He says GI resistance is a growing trend. "American GIs are beginning to respect the Nuremberg principles. They are resisting orders; they are going to jail, going to Canada, and going AWOL. And they're talking about why they're doing it."

When he was ordered to deploy, Millard says he didn't know how to resist the war. "Lieutenant Watada hadn't come forward. I didn't know about Camilo Mejia." This, he says, is the importance of Lieutenant Watada's public opposition to the war. It shows military personnel who disagree with the Iraq war another path.

Millard says it's important that leaders like Lieutenant Watada are supported; the brutality and duration of the US occupation demand it. He remembers a day during his tour of duty when a soldier opened fire on a car, killing an entire family. During the evening briefing, the commanding colonel said, "If these fucking Hajjis would learn to drive, this shit wouldn't happen." This is one of countless examples Millard has of the dehumanization accompanying the Iraq war. "This person wiped out an entire bloodline, and the colonel implied it was the victims' fault, using language designed to offend and demean them."

Conditioned to hate

Army tank driver Clifton Hicks says the military presence in Iraq is clearly not making a difference for the Iraqi people. "We didn't care about Iraqis, because we were conditioned to hate them." He says he knows from experience that Lieutenant Watada's belief that the war is illegal and immoral is the correct position.

Hicks is haunted by his activity in Iraq. He talks about what he calls the "wedding party incident." His unit was on patrol when they heard shooting between US armed forces and what they thought were Iraqi insurgents. While Hicks prepared to go house to house in search of the enemy, what he discovered instead was a wedding. Some of the men had been shooting rifles into the air, as is customary during family parties and celebrations. Three people from the wedding were shot; a 6-year-old girl was killed. When the platoon sergeant called the command center to report the incident, "all they said to us was 'Charlie Mike,' a stupid Army acronym for continue mission."

No one spoke of the incident, and it was like it never happened. "What struck me most was just how callous we had become. I didn't even care myself. Sure some Iraqi kid had been killed; big deal. It's like seeing a dead dog on the side of the road." Hicks said he had no thoughts of shame or regret, no thoughts of the girl's mother or friends.

"We hated them and were happy to have killed one. For as long as I can remember I've been taught to fear and mistrust Arabs. That's how those kids on the news were able to rape the 14-year-old girl, shoot her in the face, and kill her whole family. They just didn't care, they still don't care, they couldn't make themselves care if they tried. Every soldier on the frontlines is capable of that or worse."

Hicks eventually filed for and received conscientious objector status. He wants the US to withdraw from Iraq immediately, and is convinced Lieutenant Watada is taking the only honorable and patriotic action available in the face of what he calls an unjust and illegal war. "The only way to be a patriot is to be against the war. Thomas Jefferson would pat me and Lieutenant Watada on the back."

Feeling guilt all the time

Indiscriminate violence is only one of the reasons Prentice Reid supports Lieutenant Watada. Reid was in the Army Infantry for one tour in Iraq, between March of 2002 and 2003. He was honorably discharged in May of 2005, and is now a student at Central Texas College near Ft. Hood, Texas. To Lieutenant Watada, he writes: "I only hope all of us can find the balls to stand up for truth when the time comes. You risked not only your reputation, but also potentially your freedom, for truth, and for this we all salute you, sir."

Reid says he questioned the war from the beginning, but his doubts deepened when he arrived in Iraq. "The entire war was a sham from the beginning," Reid says. "There were no WMDs. No connection to Osama bin Laden. I'm over there thinking we have an enemy, but this is contradicted every day by what I'm seeing as I drive around."

Reid was a truck driver in Iraq, and one of his responsibilities was to transport Iraqi prisoners to US-run prisons. "I would see how they were treated; there was so much abuse. There was no restroom for them, and they had to urinate and defecate on themselves." Reid says most were later released without charges having been filed against them.

"The longer we were there, the more things deteriorated. There was tighter security, more check points. Things were not rebuilt. I wish I had had the courage and the platform to speak out," Reid says. "I have insomnia. I have nightmares. I feel guilt all the time about what I contributed."

Reid says families and communities are destroyed due to the length of time troops are required to spend in Iraq, and their insufficient medical treatment when they return. He says he's put his own wife and daughter through hell. He doesn't want others to experience this type of trauma, and believes that leaders like Lieutenant Watada are taking an important and necessary step toward ending the war. He says that rather than feeling betrayed by Lieutenant Watada's actions, he feels encouraged and supported.

Lt. Watada speaks for me

An active duty Army specialist who has asked to use only his initials, DP, stationed at Ft. Stewart, Georgia, joined the Army in April of 2003. He was injured during training, but expects to join his unit in Afghanistan in February of 2007. At Ft. Stewart he's escorted war resisters to their court-martial and is generally sympathetic. But it's different for a lieutenant to make this kind of stand, he says. "To see an officer who recognizes that something is wrong and who would take that kind of heat: I really respect that."

When he joined the Army, DP believed in what was happening in Iraq. "When I learned there were no WMDs, I was pretty disappointed in the military intelligence, the analysts, and everyone who swore up and down that this was a necessary preemptive strike," he says. As the US armed forces mission in Iraq disappears, DP says new goals are put in place. The goal of finding weapons of mass destruction turned into the military overthrow of Saddam Hussein as the objective. After Hussein was detained, the military was to help stabilize Iraq. "Our mission isn't clear, and keeps shifting. I feel like a puppet."

Over the phone, you can hear DP talking to his son. He and his wife are also expecting twins. He says that while he doesn't support the Iraq war, protesting isn't an option for him. "I don't have the financial freedom to protest the war. Lieutenant Watada is speaking for me."

DP is the only member of his family with a paying job, and with twins on the way, he doesn't feel he can risk going to prison. But, DP says, the anti-war protests are important. "We in the military don't have free speech. If you've got a problem with the government you need to be able to tell them." DP says he got in trouble recently for talking about Lieutenant Watada. His commanding officers told him that as long as he was in the military and wearing the military uniform, he needed to keep a low profile, and not voice anti-government opinions.

Regretting participation

"It takes real courage to resist the war," says Cloy Richards, a former artillery cannoner for the Marines. "I was afraid to not go; afraid to say no. I took the easy way out and went to the war. It takes way more bravery to say no."

Corporal Richards did two tours of duty in Iraq, between March and October of 2003, and again between March and October of 2004. Like so many in the military, his initial support for the invasion began to disintegrate as the occupation lengthened and became more brutal.

"I was in the artillery unit. I saw a lot of civilian casualties," says Richards, who has seven nephews and one niece. "I love kids," he says. And his views of the Iraq war began to change as he saw Iraqi children die. He particularly remembers watching some kids play with unexploded ammunition. When it exploded, several of them were killed and several more were disfigured. "It was kind of like everything else over there. I just shoved it to the back of my mind somewhere and forgot about it." Except that Richards couldn't actually forget.

Richards has a hard time forgetting other experiences in Iraq as well. For example,

the first time he was ambushed, on March 25th, 2003. "My commanding officer lost his hand that day," Richards remembers. "But he wrapped cloth around the remaining portions of his arm and led us into battle."

By his second tour of duty, Richards says he didn't want to fight. The reason he's speaking out now, he says, is not because he has some kind of agenda. "It's just that I've been there. I've seen it. I feel sorry and am trying to make amends for all the bad things I've been a part of. I should have said no the second time, when my heart and my mind were telling me not to go."

This guilt is part of the reason Richards says it's so important for the people like Lieutenant Watada to take the lead. "As an officer, he lends more credibility to anti-war sentiments among the troops. The lieutenant is leading by example, and this is taken very seriously. An officer's example is what we are supposed to follow." It's only now, Richards says, that he's found an example that he wants to follow.

Listening to the troops

Geoffrey Millard, the 8-year Army National Guard veteran is quick to point out that not any single story is conclusive. Each member of the military has something to tell that folks back in the states can learn from. "Each of these stories means something," he says.

The experiences and the expertise of Iraq war veterans are missing from the media coverage of the Iraq war. "When we turn on the evening news, we don't ever hear about a GI's experience." This leads to a skewed and unrealistic impression of the war. Millard says that if the Iraq war veterans' opinions and experience were valued, the Army would be forced to uphold Lieutenant Watada as a hero, rather than attempt to put him in prison.

For now, there are dozens of members of the military who publicly support Lieutenant Watada. There are likely hundreds more who are watching anxiously in silence, waiting for an outcome in Lieutenant Watada's case. They all say they view him as a true war hero, and believe in his efforts to end the Iraq war. They say he is fighting for what they believe in, and for that they are grateful. In Army parlance, they might say Charlie Mike: continue mission.

Sarah Olson is an independent journalist and radio producer.

© 2006 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.
View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/40431/>