

Maryland Reservist killed by police after refusing deployment to Iraq

By a reporter
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A 29-year-old ex-soldier who had served 12 months in Afghanistan, upset over orders to deploy to Iraq, was shot to death December 26 after a night-long standoff at a house in Maryland. James E. Dean was notified earlier this month to report to Fort Benning, Georgia, on January 14, 2007, for service in Iraq.

On the evening of Christmas Day, Dean barricaded himself inside his father's home in rural Leonardstown, about 50 miles southwest of Washington, D.C., near the Chesapeake Bay. Although armed with several weapons, he took no hostages and was apparently a danger only to himself, threatening to commit suicide rather than report for military duty.

Dean had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder after he returned from Afghanistan in 2005, where he had won awards for service, good conduct and marksmanship as a sergeant leading an infantry unit. He was reportedly suffering from depression and had become dependent on anti-depressant medication.

Since his discharge from the military, Dean had been seeing a Veterans Affairs psychologist and struggling with his combat-related problems, while making progress in his personal life. He got a job as a heating and cooling installer and mechanic and was well regarded by his co-workers. In July 2005, he met his future wife Muriel, marrying her four months ago. This Christmas would have been their first as a married couple.

The letter recalling him to military service—he still had an Army Reserve commitment—apparently sent Dean over the edge. He had already stopped seeing his psychologist, his wife said, and after the letter, began drinking heavily and flying into rages. He told her he was going crazy, she told the *Washington Post*, and that no one knew how bad war was. His last words as he left the house on Christmas were “The next time you see me, it's going to be in a body bag.”

Dean's family called the police out of concern that he might kill himself, but the police response was a military-style siege that ended in the young man's death. Tactical units from the Maryland State Police and St. Mary's, Calvert and Charles county sheriffs' offices all converged on the house, surrounding it and claiming that Dean had fired several shots at police cars, although no officers were injured.

After 14 hours, at about noon on Tuesday, December 26, the police were preparing to use tear gas to force him out, when Dean emerged at the front door and was shot dead. St. Mary's County Sheriff Tim Cameron said that Dean had pointed his gun at a police officer, and that a deputy sheriff had fired once, killing him.

Cameron said that police spent most of the night trying to negotiate with Dean but he refused to surrender and broke off communication. “We threw a phone in the window and he threw it back out,” the sheriff said. “He was asked to come out and refused repeatedly,” Cameron told the press.

There was no independent confirmation of the sheriff's account, and family members challenged many of the details provided by the authorities. The police cut off Dean's cell phone service when he was trying to call his grandmother's house, and they had refused to allow family members, including his parents and grandparents, to speak with him.

The official investigation is certain to be a whitewash, since it will be conducted by the St. Mary's County Bureau of Criminal Investigation, consisting of officers from the same department that participated in the siege and shooting.

One of Dean's neighbors told the *Post* that the prospect of returning to war had sent him into a “spiral of depression.” Wanda Matthews, who lives next door to the home where Dean died, described him as a “very good boy.”

“His dad told me that he didn’t want to go to war,” Matthews said. “He had already been out there and didn’t want to go again.”

The media reporting on this incident—which in effect imposed a summary death sentence for refusing military service in Iraq—was notably muted. The *Washington Post* buried the item on the inside pages of its Metro section, and the *Associated Press* ran a brief item that was buried even more deeply in the *New York Times* and other newspapers across the country. The national television networks said nothing at all.

A second article in the *Post* on December 29 suggests that the police knew very well who they were dealing with—an ex-soldier with medals for marksmanship—and made a deliberate decision to shoot first and ask questions later. The newspaper reported, citing Cameron’s account, that police “couldn’t take any chances with a soldier who had won a medal for shooting Afghan insurgents.”

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