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IRAQ: Transition of Power

SPECIAL REPORT

New details of Haditha killings emerge

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This Time magazine image taken from video shows what appears to be a morgue after the Haditha killings.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- A military report reveals previously undisclosed details, a newspaper reports
- Post: After bombing, witnesses say, squad leader shot civilians pulled from taxi
- Defense attorneys: Clients responded to perceived threat with legitimate force

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- A Marine squad that had just endured casualties from a roadside bombing ordered five unarmed Iraqi civilians out of a taxi, and the squad leader shot them, eyewitnesses say in a new report obtained by The Washington Post.

The report by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, which reveals previously undisclosed details about the incident, says a white taxi happened upon the scene shortly after the explosion. Witnesses told investigators the Marines' squad leader, Staff Sgt. Frank D. Wuterich, ordered the passengers out of the car.

The Post, in its Saturday editions, said naval investigators found that the defenseless Iraqis were then shot one by one by Wuterich as they stood next to the vehicle and about 10 feet from Wuterich.

Another Marine allegedly fired shots into the victims' bodies as they lay on the ground.

"They didn't even try to run away," according to one witness, a young Iraqi soldier working with the Marine squad. "We were afraid from Marines and we saw them behaving like crazy. They were yelling and screaming."

Four Marines have been charged in the deaths of 24 civilians, including women and children, that occurred immediately after a bombing in Haditha on November 19, 2005, killed one Marine and injured two others. In addition, four officers who were not there during the killings but were accused of failures in investigating and reporting the deaths have been charged.

The killings have led to the biggest U.S. criminal case involving civilian deaths to come out of the Iraq war.

After the taxi passengers were shot, the report found, the Marines raided nearby houses, firing indiscriminately, using both grenades and guns, in a bloody, door-to-door sweep, killing 14 unarmed inhabitants, in just 10 minutes.

One 13-year-old girl was the lone survivor in the second house, losing five family members, including her mother and 3-year-old sister and 5-year-old brother.

"He fired and killed everybody. The American fired and killed everybody," Safah Yunis Salem told investigators.

The four Marines charged last month with murder for the Haditha deaths are: Wuterich; Sgt. Sanick P. Dela Cruz; Lance Cpl. Justin L. Sharratt; and Lance Cpl. Stephen B. Tatum. They all face a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Defense attorneys have disputed the idea that the shootings were in revenge for the roadside bombing, saying their clients were doing what they had been trained to do: responding to a perceived threat with legitimate force.

Navy investigators interviewed hundreds of witnesses, including Marines, Iraqi soldiers and civilians. The Post said the report is sometimes fragmented and contains conflicting testimony of the events that day.

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