



LaVena Johnson: Raped and Murdered on a Military Base in Iraq

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Have you heard the story about LaVena Johnson?

LaVena Johnson, a high school honor student, decided to enlist in the Army to pay for college. On July 19, 2005, after serving eight weeks in Iraq, she was killed, eight days short of her 20th birthday.

Pvt. Johnson -- she was posthumously promoted to private first class -- was found dead on a military base in Balad, Iraq, in a tent belonging to military contractor KBR, a spinoff and former subsidiary of Halliburton, Dick Cheney's company. She was the first woman from Missouri to be killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The U.S. Army officially ruled her death a suicide, saying she shot herself in the head, case closed. But this is where the story begins.

Johnson's family knew something was wrong. They had talked to her on the phone a few days earlier, and she was in a great mood as usual, and was planning to come home for the holidays, earlier than expected.

Questions were raised when Johnson's family viewed her body. There were suspicious bruises, and while the military claimed that this right-handed soldier had shot herself in the head with an M-16 rifle, the gunshot wound was on the left side of her head.

But the truth began to make itself known when the family received the autopsy report and photos they had requested under the Freedom of Information Act:

The 5-foot tall, 100-pound woman had been struck in the face with a blunt instrument, probably a weapon. Her nose had been broken, and her teeth knocked back. There were bruises, teeth marks and scratches on the upper part of her body. Her back and right hand had been doused with a flammable liquid and set on fire. Her genital area was bruised and lacerated, and lye had been poured into her vagina. The debris found on her suggested her body had been dragged.

And despite all this mutilation, she was fully clothed when her body was found in the tent, with a blood trail leading to the tent.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, the Army has refused to investigate. Through an online petition, ColorofChange.org demanded an investigation by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Johnson's story is really several stories in one, and is about more than an individual Black woman who was raped and killed by her fellow soldiers. African Americans have fought in every war since the Revolutionary War, and often their country has been a far more formidable foe to them than the so-called enemy they were told to

fight.

Often, youth of color, lacking opportunities at home and in need of money, look to the military as a career option and a way to pay for school. But in light of all the death and destruction of the unjust and immoral war in Iraq, fewer of them took the bait this time, and opposition to the war among Black youth has posed a challenge for Army recruiters.

Perhaps these young people were channeling war resisters of a prior generation, such as Muhammad Ali, who once said, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong. ... They never called me nigger." That war was devastating to poor communities of all races, and the black community in particular, as their young men came home in the thousands in body bags, or maimed, traumatized, as dope fiends or completely insane.

It was this "cruel manipulation of the poor," as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called it, one that united people of different races "in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit."

Forty years later, we find ourselves in another unjust and senseless war. This "home invasion" of Iraq, as Philadelphia veteran journalist Reggie Bryant aptly characterized it. And Johnson is a symbol of this war, as a casualty who risks being swept under the rug.

We may never know how many crimes have been hidden in Iraq. War is good for that sort of thing and little else, concealing the rapes, murders, shooting of children, bombing and pillaging of homes, the money stealing, and other crimes that are committed -- including the crime that is war itself. People are taught to kill like animals, to dehumanize and humiliate others.

But the case of Johnson raises yet another issue: Violence against women is a problem in the U.S. military, and other slayings and suspicious deaths similar to Johnson's are being classified as suicides. And Johnson is not the only woman to die a suspicious death on the Balad military base.

Retired Army Reserve Col. Ann Wright said 1 in 3 women who join the military will be raped or sexually assaulted by servicemen. Of the 94 military women who died in Iraq or during Operation Iraqi Freedom, 36 died from injuries unrelated to combat. While a number of them were ruled as suicides and homicides, 15 deaths remain that smell suspicious. For example, eight women from Fort Hood, Texas, died of "non-combat-related injuries" at Camp Taji, three of whom were raped before their deaths. Camp Taji is an Army base about 10 miles northwest of Baghdad.

Also, a number of female employees of Halliburton/KBR have been sexually harassed, assaulted and gang raped in Iraq. Their employment contract calls for such cases to be decided through arbitration rather than in a court of law. Halliburton and KBR, these war profiteers awash with money, even wanted one alleged rape victim to pay for their costs to defend themselves in arbitration. Lord have mercy ...

It is clear that under President George W. Bush, no friend of justice, the cases of these brutalized and slain women could not see the light of day. But we are living in a new time, so it seems, and perhaps now is the time that the family of LaVena Johnson, and all those other nameless women killed by the military, will find the justice they deserve.

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