

“Mass Casualties”: The Dark Underbelly of Occupation, an Army Medic’s Account

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“Look around,” the drill sergeant said. “In a few years, or even a few months, several of you will be dead. Some of you will be severely wounded or so badly mutilated that your own mother can’t stand the sight of you. And for the real unlucky ones, you will come home so emotionally disfigured that you wish you had died over there.”

“It was Week 7 of basic training ... eighteen years old and I was preparing myself to die,” said Michael Anthony in “Mass Casualties: A Young Medic’s True Story of Death, Deception and Dishonor in Iraq.” The book is more than a simple memoir about a difficult experience. It is an insider’s scathing testimony of an ongoing illegal and unethical military action in a distant, once-sovereign state, by the US. Perhaps, this fresh account will raise some outcry over an issue that has all but dropped out of the American public’s radar.

Following the family legacy of military service, Anthony enlisted in the military at 17. The image he had nurtured of the idealism of military life, however, ran aground upon his arrival in Iraq, where he served as a medic in an operating room (OR) at a US military base.

“Mass Casualties” is a collection of Anthony’s personal journal entries from his time in Iraq. It includes his introspections on and insights into the inherently irrational and meaningless nature of military life. The rawness of the narrative reveals how the occupation broke down the young soldier’s spirit and almost desensitized him into believing “my job isn’t to feel.”

The late historian and Author Howard Zinn held the book in high regard. “Michael Anthony’s memoir is not about the politics of Iraq. Instead it takes us deep inside the war, inside and outside the operation room, the barracks, the talk of the soldiers, the feeling of the situation ... unique and powerful,” Zinn wrote.

The young author makes no attempt to shield the reader from the reality of war. In one instance, he gives a graphic description of working on an Iraqi patient who had received shrapnel from proximity to a suicide bomber. The shrapnel embedded in the patient’s body happened to be bone fragments of the suicide bomber.

“I’ve got a belly full of bacon and eggs and I’m about to have my arms elbow deep in someone’s stomach,” he wrote of his first days there, “In the OR we only do three surgeries at a time because that’s the number of beds we have. Even worse is that in one of our rooms we have two OR beds placed only a few feet apart. This means we’ll often have two surgeries going on at the same time in the same room. Not the most sterile setup in the world, but we’re short on staff and short on space, just not short on patients.”

Here is an account that chronicles the impact of war on the individual psyche as well as the collective consciousness of those that participate in it. We are shown the swift process of dehumanization that all soldiers undergo on the ground, to the extent that the lines distinguishing “friend” from enemy get blurred.

After hearing about a woman in his unit being “gang-banged” by three Marines at his base the soldier writes: “I wish I could just forget everything and go back to thinking that everyone in the military is an American hero. I wish I still had someone to look up to, although I know it’s impossible. None of it seems to make sense, and I can’t understand how people can do what they do.”

The author’s morale, like that of his peers, plummets within weeks of his arrival in Iraq. Nothing had prepared him for the melting of backgrounds and personalities that the Army is. His associates in the battle field are not easy people: “What an outfit: people in their thirties, married with children, all of them having affairs. One was a heroine addict; the other has slept with eleven men in the past three months. One guy tried to kill himself and another kidnapped a drug dealer. Alcoholics, chain smokers, compulsive gamblers – who am I to judge?”

The reader is exposed to the factors leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a serious condition that has been affecting veterans and active duty soldiers alike, in epidemic proportions since the beginning of the occupation.

Anthony writes of a suicide prevention class he and his fellow-soldiers are required to attend:

... they also tell us that people who are suicidal usually become depressed from big changes happening in their lives. They say that depressed people become withdrawn and will not enjoy everyday activities. They’ll sleep a lot. I couldn’t help but laugh when I heard this ... because I looked around the room and everyone fit the criteria. We’ve all had a huge change in our lives coming to Iraq. Everyone here is withdrawn and sleeps as much as possible, and our everyday activities consist of running for our lives and working on near-death patients. Who wouldn’t be depressed and want to spend time alone? We work long hours at unpredictable times, and we see the same people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. What I never understood from these classes is how are we supposed to spot the real suicidal people when everyone has suicidal symptoms?

There is a suicide attempt in his unit, but the higher-ups opt not to write it up because nobody wants the hassle of doing the paperwork.

Matters inevitably worsen under abusive commanders. While he is resigned to the binding contract that “... says that all my decisions are to be made by somebody else who is my superior,” he does not feel particularly comfortable about it. “I’ve seen him yell at a female soldier while she sobbed uncontrollably. This is the guy who’s supposed to be, I mean is, our leader in Iraq.”

When Anthony’s unit is moved from Mosul to Al-Anbar province in central Iraq to set up a new hospital, the unit commander leads the men to believe that he would be working at another hospital for a month, but actually he was back in the US taking a class at a war college because he needed the course in order to be promoted. The medic finds it

unconscionable: “I start to feel nauseous – we are in the middle of fighting a war and our leader has given himself a month-long VACATION.”

As the book progresses, the shift in Anthony’s stance from his original reverence of the military to a defined mistrust of it, becomes evident. So much so that he said, “All it took for me to respect someone in the military was for that person to refuse a direct order.”

The irony is not lost on the reader who sees the young soldier getting apprehensive about returning to civilian life and autonomous decision making, as his year of service draws to a close.

Grappling with his own guilt, he has difficulty reconciling himself to the sentiments behind the care packages that come from home. “These people are sending us everything they have, and most of us don’t deserve it. They aren’t sending provisions to the heroes they think we are. It is going to us doing shit jobs and others who are criminals; people doing drugs, committing crimes, molesters, adulterers, people doing anything they can to only help themselves. The worst part about these old people sending me this package is they think they’re helping.”

Mindful of his own boyhood spent idolizing the Army and playing with GI Joes in the backyard, Anthony is filled with remorse: “Soon the letters from the third and fourth graders will start to come. Those are the most depressing of them all. Kids writing letters supporting something they know nothing about, only that they’re told to support their country and the war.”

If for nothing else, “Mass Casualties” gains immense importance in its honest portrayal of a young soldier’s vulnerability as he struggles hard to cope with his shattered illusion about the Army. It is not difficult to share his angst as he reflects, “I think about why I’m fighting this war and my eyes tear up. I think of all the people we’ve killed. I think of all the people’s families – mothers, fathers, siblings – and how they’ll never see them again ... I think about the war and I feel nothing. I think about life and death, mine and everyone else’s, and I feel nothing. I think about myself and I don’t care if I live or die. On these nights, mortars go off and I won’t get out of bed. I’ll lie in bed as the bombs go off. I tell myself it doesn’t matter if I live or die, nothing matters – I like it when I feel nothing.”

To “take the edge off” being in Iraq, he tries everything from heavy smoking to excessive pain medication and reported, “Here’s what my days are like, I wake up in the morning and smoke to get rid of my headache, then I walk to work, in a hundred and twenty degrees of heat, and then spend all day covered in blood. Then I go home, take some pills, and fall asleep.”

In a frank admission of his fears and lamenting the breaking of his spirit he said, “We’re warriors on the battlefield but cowards in our own minds and hearts.”

Anthony was back from Iraq and driving home from a lecture he had delivered on PTSD and suicidal veterans when he learned of the Fort Hood shootings [allegedly] by Nidal Hassan that left dozens dead and wounded.

He told Truthout that the incident came as no surprise to him and, “Stories like that reminded me that there’s absolutely nothing a soldier can do to not get deployed overseas. The Army has a policy that if a soldier says they’re suicidal or homicidal, they still get sent

overseas. Why? Because if every soldier who said they're suicidal or homicidal didn't get sent overseas then anyone who doesn't want to go would just say they're suicidal or homicidal. So the Army in turn just sends everyone, no matter what.

"I had a friend who didn't want to go to Iraq so he purposely failed five drug tests in a row (smoking pot and doing coke) he still got sent to Iraq. There was one guy in my unit who didn't want to go to Iraq, he told our commanders he was suicidal, they said he still had to go. The soldier then went and got a swastika tattooed on his shoulder, he told the commanders that he was racist and hated everyone except white people; commanders said he still had to go to Iraq. The next day he takes a bottle of pills and tries to kill himself – and I'm sure if he were physically capable of it, he still would have had to go to Iraq. There was a guy in my unit who was on anti-depressant medication; our commanders said they couldn't deploy him on that medication that he should stop taking it. The next day he tries to stab someone and is put in jail, he still went to Iraq with us. There are more and more of the same stories ... There's literally nothing you can do to not go to Iraq and I think that's why suicidal and homicidal patients aren't getting the care they need because before it's time to go overseas, you're going no matter what, and after you get back, the government doesn't care."

Rather than feeling happy or proud of his time deployed in Iraq, Anthony captures a feeling that must be all too common for returning troops who simply want out.

Recounting to Truthout one particular occasion when he realized that things had gone very wrong with him, Anthony said, "Everyone comes home changed. For me I noticed it my first week back. I went to visit my brother in San Diego and it was the end of October and for Halloween my brother and I went to this bar ... My only concern was chain-smoking and chain-drinking ... We go to this bar and I've just gotten back and I'm still in this mood like, "Nobody knows what it was like. Nobody knows where I just came from and went through." My brother and I go to this empty table and we start drinking beers and I'm chain smoking cigarettes, then three biker guys come up to us, they look at me and say, 'You guys are at our table' and as the guy says 'table' I turn around and blow my cigarette smoke in his face while saying, "Table was empty when we sat down, go find another one." It all went downhill from there. One of the guys put his hand on my hand (which was holding my beer) and pushes it away; another guy turns his back towards me and starts roughly leaning towards me as if to butt me out, and at this I get angry and in my head. I'm telling myself 'These guys have no idea where I just came from; these dumb bikers think they're so tough, I'd like to see them overseas' etc. And I'm getting madder and madder and we're saying things back and forth and finally I'm so angry, that I turn my empty beer bottle over and I lift it up to smash it over this guys head ... From there I just started laughing; I stubbed my cigarette out, flicked it at the guy and walked away. It wasn't until a few minutes later when I calmed down and grasped how crazy it was what I was about to do. Then I realized that maybe I didn't return home the way I [I was when I] left."

"Mass Casualties" is not the first and is not going to be the last indictment of the US occupation of Iraq. There have been films, reports, books, blogs and dozens of testimonies at Winter Soldier events that have exposed various ugly aspects of the occupation as witnessed and enforced by the "heroes" in uniform. Each tale comes with its share of guilt, despair and remorse at having been complicit in wanton destruction under an obviously false façade of patriotism.

Perhaps, this latest account in its unsophisticated and gut-level rejection of the lie that the US military has come to represent will make people sit up and take notice ... and action.

Bhaswati Sengupta contributed to this report.

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