

The Soldier's Tale

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Global Research, June 26, 2018

[Truthdig](#) 24 June 2018

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*The troops live under
The cannon's thunder
From Sind to Cooch Behar
Moving from place to place
When they come face to face
With a different breed of fellow
Whose skins are black or yellow
They quick as winking chop him into
Beefsteak tartar*

—“The Cannon Song” from “The Threepenny Opera”

The soldier's tale is as old as war. It is told and then forgotten. There are always young men and women ardent for glory, seduced by the power to inflict violence and naive enough to die for the merchants of death. The soldier's tale is the same, war after war, generation after generation. It is Spenser Rapone's turn now. The second lieutenant was given an “other than honorable” discharge June 18 after an Army investigation determined that he “went online to promote a socialist revolution and disparage high-ranking officers” and thereby had engaged in “conduct unbecoming an officer.” Rapone laid bare the lie, although the lie often seems unassailable. We must honor those like him who have the moral courage to speak the truth about war, even if the tidal waves of patriotic propaganda that flood the culture overwhelm the voices of the just.

Rapone enlisted in the Army in 2010. He attended basic training at Fort Benning, Ga. He graduated from airborne school in February 2011 and became an Army Ranger. He watched as those around him swiftly fetishized their weapons.

“The rifle is the reification of what it means to be infantrymen,” he said when I reached him by phone in Watertown, N.Y. “You're taught that the rifle is an extension of you. It is your life. You have to carry it at all times. The rifle made us warriors dedicated to destroying the enemy in close personal combat. At first, it was almost gleeful. We were a bunch of 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds. We had this instrument of death in our hands. We had power. We could do what 99 percent of our countrymen could not. The weapon changes you. You want to prove yourself. You want to be tested in combat. You want to deliver death. It draws you in, as much as life in the Army sucks. You start executing tactical maneuvers and battle drills. You get a certain high. It's seductive. The military beats empathy out of you. It makes you callous.”

He was disturbed by what was happening around him and to him.

"When you get to RASP [the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program], you're told you not only have to understand Ranger culture and history, you have to adopt what's called an airborne Ranger in the sky," he said. "They make you go online and look at Rangers who were killed in action. You have to learn about this person and print out a copy of their obituary. It's really unsettling, the whole process. This was a class leader acting on behalf of the cadre, he said something to the effect of 'I'll give you a hint, don't pick Pat Tillman.' "

Rapone began to read about Pat Tillman, the professional football player who joined the Rangers and was killed in 2004 in Afghanistan by friendly fire, a fact that senior military officials, including Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who at the time was the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, covered up and replaced with a fictitious Hollywood version of death in combat with the enemy. Rapone watched the 2010 documentary "[The Tillman Story](#)" and would later read the 2006 [Truthdig essay "After Pat's Birthday](#)," written by Pat's brother Kevin, who was in the Rangers with Pat. Pat Tillman, who had been in contact with [Noam Chomsky](#), had become a critic of the war. In addition to lying to the Tillman family about Pat's death, the Army did not return, and probably destroyed, Pat's papers and diary.

"Pat Tillman showed me I could resist the indoctrination," he said. "I did not have to let the military dehumanize me and turn me into something monstrous. When I learned how his death was covered up to sell the war, it was shocking. The military wasn't interested in preserving freedom or democracy. It was only interested in protecting the profits of those in power and expanding the U.S. hegemony. I was not a Hollywood freedom fighter. I was a cog in the imperialist machine. I preyed on the poorest, most exploited people on the planet."

"We were told to 'shoot, move, and communicate,' " he said of his Ranger training. "This became our entire existence. We did not need to understand why or the larger implications. These things did not concern us."

By July 2011 he was in Khost province in Afghanistan. He was 19 years old. He was an assistant machine gunner on an Mk-48, an 18-pound weapon that is mounted on a tripod and has a fire rate of 500 to 625 rounds per minute. He carried the spare barrel, along with the ammunition, which he fed into the gun. When his fellow Rangers cleared dwellings at night he set up a blocking position. He watched as the Rangers separated terrified men, women and children, treating them "as if they were animals." The Rangers spoke of the Afghans as subhumans, dismissing them as "[hajjis](#)" and "ragheads."

"A lot of the guys would say, 'I want to go out every night and kill people,' " he told me. "The Rangers are about hyper-masculinity, misogyny, racism, and a hatred of other cultures."

His platoon sergeant had the [hammer of Thor](#), a popular symbol among white supremacists, tattooed on his arm. The sergeant told new Rangers that if they saw something that upset them and wanted to speak out about it they were "in the wrong fucking place."

Rapone left the Rangers to attend West Point in 2012. Maybe, as an officer, he could make a difference, infuse some humanity into his squads of killers. But he had his doubts.

"When I started West Point in July 2012 I encountered a lot of similar themes I noticed in the Ranger regiment," he said. "Officers and NCOs relished the idea of being able to kill people with impunity. It's [Rudyard Kipling](#). It's the young British soldier mentality we've seen for hundreds of years. Its hyper-masculine. Even female cadets have to assimilate themselves. Any display of femininity is considered weakness. This is combined with the structural racism. They still honor [Confederate Gen.] Robert E. Lee at West Point. There's a barracks named after him. There's a portrait of him in the library in his Confederate uniform. In the bottom right of the portrait, in the background, is a slave."

Rapone watched with growing anger as black cadets were kicked out for infractions that did not lead to the expulsion of white cadets.

He majored in history. But he read outside of the curriculum, including authors such as [Howard Zinn](#) and [Stan Goff](#), a former Special Forces master sergeant who had been in Vietnam, Haiti, Panama, Colombia and Somalia and who wrote "Hideous Dream: A Soldier's Memoir of the U.S. Invasion of Haiti."

"I realized we are the muscle for those with wealth and status," Rapone said. "I also realized I was a socialist. It was jarring."

His outspokenness and criticism saw him reprimanded.

"I almost got kicked out my senior year at West Point," he said. "At that point, I was a socialist. When you study political economy, when you study critical theory, it informs your analysis and your work. It started off as an academic position. But I thought there has to be more to this. There has to be some kind of an action to back up my theories."

He was derided as the "communist cadet." He sought out those at the military academy who suffered from discrimination there, including people of color, women and Muslims. He joined the Muslim Cadet Association, although he is not Muslim.

"I wanted to help Muslim cadets find a platform," he said. "I wanted them to know they were not forgotten. At West Point, there weren't too many people who understood or appreciated Islam or how the U.S. has ripped Islamic countries to shreds."

He helped organize an effort to provide Muslims at the academy with a proper prayer space, something that led him into heated arguments with senior administrative officials.

One professor confronted him:

"I've been watching you for the past three, four years—you think you can do whatever you want."

"Yes, sir," Rapone answered, a response that resulted in his being written up for speaking back to an officer.

The professor examined his social media accounts and found Rapone was posting articles

from socialist publications and criticizing U.S. policy on Syrian refugees. The teacher sent a file on Rapone to the Criminal Investigations Division and G2, or military intelligence. Rapone was interrogated by senior officers. He was issued a “punishment tour” lasting 100 hours. He was forced to walk back and forth in the central square at West Point in his full dress uniform each week until the required hours were fulfilled.

“It looked like something out of a [Monty Python](#) sketch,” he said.

He was stripped of his privileges for 60 days. His spring break was canceled. He spent spring break doing landscaping and other menial tasks to “pay off” his punishment debt. He was required to train cadets who had not passed a required event.

“At West Point, they’ll maintain that hazing doesn’t exist,” he said, “at least the kind that was around in the ’50s or ’60s. But it’s still hazing. You’re considered a plebe when you first get to West Point. You take out upper classmen’s trash every night. You’re not allowed to talk when you’re outside as a plebe. You have to keep your hands balled up and walk in position of attention. If you’re caught talking to a classmate, you’ll get in trouble. The worst part is that those who move on from their plebe year enforce the same dehumanizing behavior, which they despised, on the new plebes.”

He had experienced hazing in the Rangers, too. New Rangers were forced to fight each other and do numerous push-ups or were hogtied and their stomachs were smacked repeatedly.

“The hazing weeds out people who won’t embrace it,” he said. “To resist total assimilation, a lot of people create an ironic detachment. But this ironic detachment is really another form of assimilation. It runs pretty deep. There was a guy in a leadership position who tried to kill himself when I was overseas. There were cadets who committed suicide when I was at West Point and others who tried to commit suicide. I spent eight years in the Army. Suicide was a very tangible reality. A lot of suicides were the result of the combination of hazing and military culture, which in a sense is a form of hazing. Your drill instructor can’t beat the shit out of you the way he used to, but the military still has methods to torture you emotionally.”

When he graduated from West Point he was sent back to Fort Benning, where he had been a young recruit six years earlier.



“Every other Friday a basic training class graduates,” he said. “I would see

these buzzed-cut teenaged boys, who had barely progressed out of puberty, being sent into the meat grinder. It was unsettling. I was being trained to lead these guys, to tell them the mission we were doing was just and right. I could not in good conscience do that. I searched for an opening. I looked for ways to leave or speak out. When the whole national anthem thing was starting up with [Colin Kaepernick](#) (image on the right), putting his skin in the game, risking himself to fight against systemic racism, I thought I could at least do my part.”

He posted a picture of himself in uniform with the hashtag #VeteransForKaepernick.

“Everything snowballed from there,” he said. “Colin Kaepernick, for me, was linked to Pat Tillman. He too was willing to risk himself and his status to speak truth to power.”

His public support of Kaepernick—along with his social media posts of photos of himself at his 2016 graduation at West Point wearing a [Che Guevara](#) T-shirt under his uniform and holding up his fist as he showed the words “Communism will win” on the inside of his cap—led to an investigation. Afterward, the Army’s 10th Mountain Division accepted his resignation.

“The United States is almost religious about its patriotism,” he said. “Military personnel are seen as infallible. You have someone like [Secretary of Defense] [James Mattis](#), who is a bona fide war criminal. He dropped bombs on a wedding ceremony in Iraq. He’s responsible for overseeing many different massacres in Iraq. Or [general and former national security adviser] [H.R. McMaster](#). These people can’t do any wrong because they’ve served. This reverence for the military is priming the population to accept military rule and a form of fascism or protofascism. That’s why I felt even more compelled to get out.”

“The public doesn’t understand how regressive and toxic military culture is,” he went on. “The military’s inherent function is the abuse and degradation of other people. It is designed to be a vehicle of destruction. It’s fundamental to the system. Without that, it would collapse. You can’t convert the military into a humanitarian force even when you use the military in humanitarian ways, such as in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. The military trains soldiers to see other human beings, particularly brown and black human beings, as an imminent threat.”

“Of course, the military prides itself on being apolitical, which is oxymoronic,” he said. “The military is the political muscle of the state. There are few things more dangerous than a soldier who thinks he or she doesn’t have a political function.”

“I want to implore other soldiers and military personnel, there’s more to being a soldier than knowing how to fire a weapon,” Rapone said. “You can take a lot of what you’ve learned into society and actually help. At West Point, they say they teach you to be a leader of character. They talk to you about moral fortitude. But what do we see in the military? I was blindly following orders. I was inflicting violence on the poorest people on earth. How is there any morality in that?”

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