

US/IRAQ: Rules of Engagement “Thrown Out the Window”

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SILVER SPRING, Maryland, Mar 15 (IPS) – Garret Reppenhagen received integral training about the Geneva Conventions and the Rules of Engagement during his deployment in Kosovo. But in Iraq, “Much of this was thrown out the window,” he says.

“The men I served with are professionals,” Reppenhagen told the audience at a panel of U.S. veterans speaking of their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, “They went to Iraq to defend the U.S. But we found rapidly we were killing Iraqis in horrible ways. But we had to in order to remain safe ourselves. The war is the atrocity.”

The event, which has drawn international media attention, was organised by Iraq Veterans Against the War. It aims to show that their stories of wrongdoing in both countries were not isolated incidents limited to a few “bad apples”, as the Pentagon claims, but were everyday occurrences.

The panel on the “Rules of Engagement” (ROE) during the first full day of the gathering, named “Winter Soldier” to honour a similar gathering 30 years ago of veterans of the Vietnam War, was held in front of a visibly moved audience of several hundred, including veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam. Winter soldiers, according to U.S. founding father Thomas Paine, are the people who stand up for the soul of their country, even in its darkest hours

Reppenhagen served in Iraq from February 2004-2005 in the city of Baquba, 40 kms northeast of Baghdad. He said his first experience in Iraq was being on a patrol that killed two Iraqi farmers as they worked in their field at night.

“I was told they were out in the fields farming because their pumps only operated with electricity, which meant they had to go out in the dark when there was electricity,” he explained, “I asked the sergeant, if he knew this, why did he fire on the men. He told me because the men were out after curfew. I was never given another ROE during my time in Iraq.”

Another veteran of the occupation of Iraq on the panel was Vincent Emmanuel. He served in the Marines near the northern Iraqi city of Al-Qaim during 2004-2005. Emmanuel explained that “taking potshots at cars that drove by” happened all the time and “these were not isolated incidents”.

Emmanuel continued: “We took fire while trying to blow up a bridge. Many of the attackers were part of the general population. This led to our squad shooting at everything and

anything in order to push through the town. I remember myself emptying magazines into the town, never identifying a target.”

As other panelists nodded in agreement, Emmanuel spoke of abusing prisoners who he knew were innocent, adding, “We took it upon ourselves to harass them, and took them to the desert to throw them out of our Humvees, while kicking and punching them when we threw them out.”

Two other soldiers testified about planting weapons or shovels on civilians they had accidentally shot, to justify the killings by implying the dead were fighters or people attempting to plant roadside bombs.

Jason Washburn was a corporal in the marines, and served three tours in Iraq, his last in Haditha from 2005-2006.

“We were encouraged to bring ‘drop weapons’ or shovels, in case we accidentally shot a civilian, we could drop the weapon on the body and pretend they were an insurgent,” he said, “By the third tour, if they were carrying a shovel or bag, we could shoot them. So we carried these tools and weapons in our vehicles, so we could toss them on civilians when we shot them. This was commonly encouraged.”

Washburn explained that his ROE changed “a lot”.

“The higher the threat level, the more viciously we were told to respond. We had towns that were deemed ‘free fire zones’. One time there was a mayor of a town near Haditha that got shot up. We were shown this as an example because there was a nice tight shot group on the windshield, and told that was a good job, that was what Marines were supposed to do. And that was the mayor of the town.”

Jason Wayne Lemue is a Marine who served three tours in Iraq.

“My commander told me, ‘Kill those who need to be killed, and save those who need to be saved’, that was our mission on our first tour,” he said of his first deployment during the invasion nearly five years ago.

Lemue continued, “After that the ROE changed, and carrying a shovel, or standing on a rooftop talking on a cell phone, or being out after curfew [meant the people] were to be killed. I can’t tell you how many people died because of this. By my third tour, we were told to just shoot people, and the officers would take care of us.”

John Michael Turner served two tours in the Marines as a machine gunner in Iraq. Visibly upset, he told the audience, “I was taught as a Marine to eat the apple to the core.” Turner then pulled his military metals off his shirt and threw them on the ground.

“Apr. 18, 2006 was the date of my first confirmed kill,” he said somberly. “He was innocent, I called him the fat man. He was walking back to his house and I killed him in front of his father and friend. My first shot made him scream and look into my eyes, so I looked at my friend and said, ‘Well, I can’t let that happen’, and shot him again. After my first kill I was congratulated.”

Turner explained one reason why establishment media reporting about the occupation in the U.S. has been largely sanitised. “Anytime we had embedded reporters, our actions

changed drastically," he explained. "We did everything by the books, and were very low key."

To conclude, an emotional Turner said, "I want to say I'm sorry for the hate and destruction that I and others have inflicted on innocent people. It is not okay, and this is happening, and until people hear what is going on this is going to continue. I am no longer the monster that I once was."

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