



April 12, 2009

## Murders, rape in Iraq lead to Kentucky court

Former soldier's defense will be to put Army on trial for alleged negligence

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[Standing guard at a remote checkpoint](#) in Iraq's Triangle of Death south of Baghdad, Pfc. Steven Green watched as an informant walked up, shook his sergeant's hand and then shot him and another sergeant dead.

Green and his fellow soldiers, from the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky., [were devastated](#) by the attack on Dec. 10, 2005.

They'd looked up to both men. Sgt. Kenith "Sica" Casica, 32, was Green's team leader; Staff Sgt. Travis Nelson, 41, was the squad leader and its oldest soldier. His men called him Old Man River.

At a memorial service a few days later, Green, a [wiry 20-year-old Texan](#) three months into his first combat tour, eulogized Casica as "[probably the kindest man in Bravo Company](#), and one of the best men I've ever known."

Eleven days later, Army records show, Green told a combat-stress counselor that he wanted to avenge his comrades' deaths by killing Iraqi civilians. The counselor, a psychiatric nurse-practitioner, diagnosed him with "[homicidal ideations](#)" and prescribed a mood-regulating drug.

But she cleared him to return to combat, according to Army records, with no formal plan to keep him from acting on his thoughts.

Three months later, according to court records, Green and three comrades, [buzzed on black-market Iraqi whiskey](#), slipped away from their post near Yusufiyah, cut through a security fence and marched through a field a few hundred yards to a home they knew from patrols.

There, as Pfc. Jesse Spielman stood guard, Spcs. Paul Cortez and James Barker took turns raping 14-year-old Abeer Kassem Al-Janabi, while Green, in a bedroom next door, allegedly executed the girl's mother, father and 6-year-old sister.

[Abeer screamed in terror](#) as she was sexually assaulted and heard her family members being shot one by one, according to Army and court records. Then Green allegedly raped Abeer and shot her in the head, those same records show.

To destroy evidence of the rape, Spielman and the other soldiers burned Abeer's body, reducing its upper half to ashes. Then they tossed one of the murder weapons — an AK-47 the family owned — into a canal and returned to their checkpoint, where they burned their own bloody clothes and threw some chicken wings on the grill for dinner.

The slayings triggered international outrage after the U.S. soldiers' involvement was made known.

Green allegedly told an Army investigator that he shot all four victims, but evidence disclosed in the courts-martial of his co-defendants and in internal Army documents raise troubling questions about the Army's responsibility for one of the worst atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers in Iraq:

- First, its recruiters allowed Green to enlist in 2005, a month after he got out of jail on an alcohol-possession charge, under what is known as a "[morals waiver](#)," which allows some applicants to be taken despite criminal convictions. Recruiters also overlooked numerous red flags in his tumultuous family background — including drug and alcohol abuse that began in the eighth grade.

As Spielman's defense lawyer later put it, "Steve Green was a bad hire."

- Next, Army officers — from noncommissioned officers to top commanders — ignored daily tirades in which Green said he hated all Iraqis and wanted to kill them.

Green's threats were so widely known that his colonel — with 7,000 men under his command — once sought out Green to personally remind him that civilians were off limits.

Green asked, "[Why can't we just kill them all?](#)" according to Col. Todd Ebel' testimony later.

- Finally, commanders deployed Green and a half-dozen other soldiers on an extended tour, at a remote check post, with no supervising officers, knowing the unit was undermanned and demoralized by extreme combat stress, triggered by its leaders' violent deaths.

It was nearly a year before the so-called surge, when then-President George W. Bush bolstered troop strength in Iraq by putting 20,000 additional soldiers on the ground in and around Baghdad.

Grief-stricken, angry and exhausted, Green and his comrades began turning against the Iraqis they had been sent to help, Barker, Cortez and Spielman testified later.

"When I think about my last deployment, I see only darkness in my heart," Barker said. "I had killed several persons in combat. I had seen friends that I loved executed and blown up. In the end, though I was never killed, I can see that part of me had died. To live there, to survive there, I became angry and mean."

## TROUBLED PAST

### Family problems and crimes marked youth

Steven Dale Green grew up in Midland, Texas — Bush's adopted hometown.

His parents divorced when he was 4, and his mother remarried four years later, according to Army records and press accounts.

His father was an alcoholic, he told the Army stress counselor in December 2005, according to her notes. He also told her that as an eighth-grader, he witnessed two murder-suicides. Records provide no additional details, and Green's family members declined to be interviewed.

The Associated Press has reported that Green's mother served six months in jail for drunken driving in 2000. And when he enlisted in the Army in 2005, records show, he listed his mother's address as unknown.

Green attended schools in Midland in second, third, fourth, eighth, and 10th grades before dropping out, according to the Midland Independent School District.

He told the Army he graduated from a Christian academy in Odessa, Texas, but state records show he got a high school equivalency diploma in November 2003.

As a teenager, he was convicted of misdemeanors, including possession of drug paraphernalia and being a minor in possession of tobacco, for which he was fined \$350. The month before he enlisted, he served four days in jail for being a minor in possession of alcohol.

But he was allowed to enlist in February 2005 after the Army waived its normal standards.

Green was one of 5,344 soldiers enlisted in 2005 through morals waivers for misdemeanor or felony convictions, Army records show. That was about 6 percent of the total soldiers recruited that year and about twice the rate in 2001, before the war in Iraq.

But after basic training in Fort Benning, Ga., and before shipping out to Iraq in October 2005, Green seemed to have "found direction in his life, something important and something that he really wanted to do," his uncle, Dr. Greg Simolke of Marion, N.C., later told The Washington Post. "He thought it was a good thing to be serving his country."

Green eventually would regret his decision.

"Joining the Army," he told the deputy marshals who arrested him eight months later, "was the worst decision I ever made."

## **VIOLENCE ROUTINE**

### **'Killing people is like squashing an ant'**

Even by Iraqi standards, the Triangle of Death, so dubbed by coalition forces for its lawlessness, was dangerous territory.

A land of date palms and eucalyptus trees intersected by canals fed by the Euphrates River, it was uneasily shared by Sunnis and Shiites, and, according to press accounts, [criminals, thugs and insurgents](#) who offered bounties for killing police and foreigners. with executions in the streets.

Army commanders made taming the region a priority, and Green's unit was assigned to guard Traffic Check Point 2, an intersection where enemy combatants blended easily with civilians, and everyone had to be viewed as a threat.

Killing became routine, Green told Stars and Stripes reporter Andrew Tilghman, who later wrote about the encounter in The Washington Post.

"Over here, killing people is [like squashing an ant](#)," Green said. "I mean, you kill somebody and it's like, 'All right, let's go get some pizza.'"

Though soldiers rarely engaged in face-to-face combat, they would later testify that rocket attacks came nearly every day, and small-arms fire was so common that officers stopped calling it in.

During the day, Green and other troops from Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, swept fields on foot for improvised explosive devices. They called the exercises "[death marches](#)."

Three weeks after Green arrived in Iraq, three Bravo Company soldiers — Spc. Joshua Munger, 22, of Maysville, Mo.; Pfc. Tyler R. MacKenzie, 20, of Evans, Colo.; and Spc. Benjamin Smith, 21, of Hudson, Wis.; — were killed when a makeshift bomb exploded near their Humvee, according to Army

records and news accounts.

Green and his platoon also patrolled nearby villages to root out terrorists and their weapons. On Dec. 9, 2005, Green was pictured in an Army Military News story headlined, "Coalition forces keep streets of Iraq safe."

"The searches are thorough, yet the soldiers still respect people's rights and property," the story said. Sgt. Casica was quoted as saying, "We want the citizens to realize that we are here to help them."

It was the next day when an Iraqi citizen, known as an informant friendly to Americans, walked up to Traffic Check Point 2 and, after exchanging small talk, shot Casica in the throat and Nelson in the head.

Green threw Casica on the [hood of a Humvee](#), then flung his body across the fallen soldier, struggling to keep him alive during their frantic ride to the base, other soldiers would later testify. They got there too late.

At the memorial service, his voice breaking with emotion, Green recalled how Casica, born in the Philippines, loved to give candy to Iraqi children and to civilians, who often thought he was one of their own because of his darker skin.

"He was one of the few people I know who genuinely cared about the future of Iraq and Iraqi people," Green said, according to an Army-produced video of the service, a copy of which was obtained by The Courier-Journal.

Capt. Primitivo Davis, a chaplain, told mourners that it was only natural that many would feel like avenging their "brothers' deaths."

"But never forget you are an American soldier," Davis told them. "American soldiers fight hard, but they fight fair. American soldiers kill, but they do not murder."

Less than a week later, however, Green told the combat-stress counselor that he was thinking of killing all Iraqis — and himself, according to Army records.

["It's ---- pointless,"](#) he said, according to the notes of Lt. Col. Karen Marrs, a psychiatric nurse practitioner.

She prescribed small doses of Seroquel — an anti-psychotic designed to treat the highs and lows of bipolar disorder — and told Green to get some sleep, records show.

She wrote that his risk of violence was "low," but provided no documentation for that assessment, according to a review conducted later by an Army psychiatric consultant.

The review also found that Marrs failed to devise a "safety plan" addressing "how soldier will keep from acting on his homicidal thoughts."

## **MORTAL BLOW**

### **Fatalities continue in the hard-hit unit**

Twelve days after the deaths of "Sica" and "Old Man River," Green's unit took another mortal blow.

During a routine bomb-clearing operation on Dec. 22, 2005, 1st Lt. Benjamin Britt stepped on an explosive that blew off his arms and legs, and threw his body into a canal. The blast also fatally

wounded a comrade, Spc. William Lopez-Feliciano.

"There was [nothing left of him](#)," Staff Sgt. Eric Lauzier later testified in the court-martial of Spc. Paul Cortez.

Lopez-Feliciano, 33, who was from Puerto Rico, had been in Iraq only seven weeks. Twenty-four-year old Britt — [Eagle Scout](#); valedictorian of his Wheeler, Texas, high school class; West Point graduate — had been platoon leader for six months.

"In two weeks, we had lost four soldiers, including two senior leaders and a team leader," Capt. John "Jack" Goodwin, Green's company commander, later testified. "You could see it in their faces. It was [extremely traumatic](#)."

Cortez, 23, on his second tour in Iraq, testified later that "losing Lt. Britt, it [just crushed me](#)."

[Goodwin was so traumatized](#) that he couldn't be counted on to take orders or give them to soldiers under his charge, his commander, Lt. Col. Thomas Kunk, later testified. Kunk said he had to order Goodwin to take four days of "Freedom Rest" — rest and recreation — in a [safe zone](#) in Baghdad.

Goodwin later said the platoon was so devastated by deaths and injuries that it was "combat ineffective" — unable to carry out its mission.

"You don't care anymore," Eric Lauzier, another one of the unit's sergeants, later recalled of that time. "You figure, I am going to die, screw it. I mean, what is the point?"

Even so, Green's behavior stood out, other soldiers would later testify.

Many soldiers hated Iraqis, "but not to the level he did," Goodwin later said of Green. "And that hatred continued to escalate."

Green's squad leader, Sgt. Anthony Yribe, later testified that Green talked about killing Iraqis "once a day," saying they were [just not people](#)."

But only one Army leader pulled Green from combat, and then only briefly.

Sgt. Robert Gallagher, appointed Green's platoon leader in January 2006, said later that he was so shocked by Green's attitude and appearance that he briefly kicked him out of the platoon and sent him to headquarters.

"He had his hat on crooked, he had some rips in his pants, one of which exposed his genitals, and he just had a real kind of [thuggish mentality](#)," Gallagher said.

"I just couldn't believe that I was the only one who saw it," Gallagher testified later in one of the military trials. "To me, it wasn't even a close call. ... He was a complete rogue."

Gallagher said he thought Green "probably had some level of mental breakdown," but he was "quickly assured" by other leaders that he was just a "troubled individual."

Green remained with the unit, Yribe said, because the Army was too short on men.

"I felt that Green standing in uniform, with a weapon, next to his comrades, was overall a better decision than not putting anybody out there," Gallagher said. "I mean, the game comes down to numbers."

