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Stress builds — as does hatred of the Iraqis

With death on their minds constantly, soldiers must face worst nightmares

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By day, Pfc. Steven Green and his fellow soldiers patrolled on foot, searching for explosives.

"You feel like every step, you might get blown up," one of Green's comrades, Pfc. Justin Watt, later said. "You're just walking a death walk."

At night, they slept three to four hours, they said, their dreams broken by sand fleas and the heat — and fears of being attacked.

Spc. James Barker said trying to sleep was "like your worst childhood nightmare, like the boogie man is in your closet."

For entertainment, the soldiers watched a video on Barker's laptop called "[Squishy Head](#)," which showed dismembered Iraqis set against a driving rap beat and lyrics that shouted: "Here is something you can't understand — I want to just kill a man."

Death was very much a part of their lives.

In the six months ending in March 2006, 38 soldiers were killed in Green's 1st Battalion, including five in his 30-man platoon.

"I was going to get a [memorial tattoo](#) on my arms of all the guys" who were killed, but there was not enough room for it," Watt later said.

One night in February 2006, over a mess-tent dinner of turkey cutlets, Green talked about the war with Andrew Tilghman, an embedded reporter for Stars and Stripes who later wrote about their encounter in The Washington Post.

"I thought killing somebody would be this life-changing experience," Green said, according to Tilghman's account. "And then I did it, and I was like, 'All right, whatever.'"

"I came over here because I wanted to kill people," Green told Tilghman. Now "I just want to go home alive. I don't give a ---- about the whole Iraq thing. I don't care."

Tilghman didn't think much at the time about Green's pronouncements, he wrote. He'd spent much of his time with grunts like him — "mostly young, immature small-town kids who sign up for a job as killers, lured by some gut-level desire for excitement and adventure."

Tilghman said he thought Green "was just one of the exceptions, who wasn't afraid to say what he really thought."

MORE BLOWS

Fire, longer tours increase the stress

Morale in Bravo Company nosedived further on Feb. 5, 2006, when an electrical fire broke out at their barracks in an abandoned potato-processing factory.

No one was hurt, but the fire destroyed letters, photographs, journals — everything the soldiers brought from home — as well as [mementos from their fallen comrades](#).

"Everything was gone," said the company commander, Capt. John Goodwin, who lost his wedding ring.

Then their new platoon commander, Sgt. Jeffery Fenlason, decided to extend checkpoint tours from seven to 21 days, so they could better get to know Iraqi elders and other locals, he later recalled.

At the checkpoint manned by Green and five others, conditions were primitive. There was no running water. Their latrine was a folding lawn chair with a hole in it.

Fenlason would later acknowledge that he assigned Spc. Paul Cortez, Barker and Green to the same checkpoint, with no supervising officer, despite considering all three to be discipline problems who were "[wallowing in self pity](#)" over fellow soldiers' deaths.

And Goodwin later conceded that extending the tours at the poorly fortified checkpoints, which he had approved, was a mistake.

Cortez said he often cried himself to sleep at night.

"We were [left out there to die](#)," he said.

GREEN'S Cohorts

Three soldiers had troubles in the past

Barker, 23, was on his second tour of Iraq and had once been a gang member, he testified later.

He had dropped out of high school in Fresno, Calif., got a girl pregnant and worked as a [go-kart attendant](#) at an amusement park, the Fresno Bee reported.

He drank and began using drugs, including meth and cocaine, he told a defense psychiatrist who testified at his court-martial.

A former neighbor, Malyn Rose, who sometimes baby-sat for Barker as a child, said in an interview that he came from a strong, working-class family. His father died when he was 15, but his mother sold bread and pastries from the back of a small truck.

Rose said "Bunky," as he was called, tended to be picked on because he was small for his age. He stopped growing at 5-feet-6, though his Army squad leader later said he was a fearless soldier who saved his life.

Cortez, also 23, came from Barstow, Calif., where he moved every few months from apartments to motel rooms with his mother, an admitted methamphetamine addict who once gave his video games to a drug dealer to pay a debt, he testified at his court-martial.

His father was an alcoholic who left the family shortly after Cortez was born, and later was found dead in a park, his mother told The Barstow Desert Dispatch.

Cortez was [expelled from two high schools](#), his mother said, but at 15 joined a Pentecostal church, where he met a middle-class couple who took him in and raised him. He graduated from high school and seemed to be getting on the right track, they later said.

[Pfc. Jesse Spielman's father](#) had never been part of his life, and his birth mother suffered from severe mental illness, his grandmother, Nancy Hess, testified at his court-martial.

Hess, who raised him and later adopted him, did not answer calls and letters seeking comment for this story.

Spielman's commanders said he was a good soldier. He immediately shot and killed the informant who had killed Sgts. Kenith Casica and Travis Nelson in December 2005, probably saving the lives of other soldiers, the commanding officers said.

But one of Spielman's friends, Spc. Nicholas Lake, testified later that, like Green and Cortez, Spielman hated most Iraqis — even children, thinking if they weren't insurgents already, they would grow up to be.

Just the day before the rape and murders, Lake said, Spielman and Cortez "[beat the crap](#)" out of some Iraqis who had fired shots at them on patrol. Spielman screamed, "I ---- hate you," as he kicked them in the face, Lake said.

PLANNING ATTACK

Whiskey drinking, long duty set stage

By March 12, 2006, Green, Cortez, Barker and Spielman had spent 12 days straight at the checkpoint 25 miles south of Baghdad.

Their squad leader was on leave, and not a single officer had stopped at their post.

They started to play cards around 10:30 that morning, they later recalled, pouring themselves mixed drinks — [Iraqi whiskey combined with Rip It](#), an Army-issued, carbonated high-energy drink.

Though forbidden from consuming alcohol anywhere in the country, out of respect for their hosts' Muslim faith, the soldiers drank about every other day, to take the edge off, they testified.

At one point that morning, Barker testified, he and Green stepped out to hit some golf balls and Green brought up the idea of raping an Iraqi girl and killing her family.

At first, Barker said, he didn't take Green seriously because he had talked about the same thing so many times before.

"He had asked me what I thought about it" and "at a couple of points, I told him that he was crazy," Barker recalled. But "without much discussion, things just set in motion."

Barker said he proposed the location — a house only a short walk from the checkpoint.

He and Green had been to the house before on a routine patrol, he said, and he'd seen 14-year-old Abeer Kassem Al-Janabi, who lived there with her family, and who he thought might be in her early 20s. He knew they would find only one adult male at home.

Barker ran the idea past Cortez, who was scheduled to be promoted to sergeant in a few weeks and was the senior soldier at the post. "I told him that it was up to him," Barker said.

Cortez signed on — with one condition, he later admitted: If they were going to rape the girl, he would get to go first.

As a military prosecutor later acerbically observed: "[Rank indeed has its privileges.](#)"

SHOTS AND SCREAMS

14-year-old repeatedly raped as relatives die

Stripping off their uniforms, the soldiers put on civilian clothes, trying to remove any sign they were U.S. soldiers.

Cortez and Barker covered their faces with Army-issued cold-weather masks so that only their eyes and noses were visible.

Pfc. Bryan Howard had been told to stay behind; Cortez gave him a walkie-talkie and instructed him to sound a warning if any officer approached.

Then Green, Barker, Cortez and Spielman — who later claimed he didn't know the mission's goal — set off through a field, according to the soldiers' trial testimony. Heavily armed, they stopped only so Barker could cut a security fence with his Army-issued Gerber knife.

They found 35-year-old Kassem Hamza Al-Janabi, and his 6-year-old daughter, Hadeel, standing in the yard, according to a detailed account Cortez and Barker gave when they pleaded guilty at their courts-martial.

Green and Spielman herded them and the mother, Fakhriya, 43, into a bedroom.

Cortez and Barker dragged 14-year-old Abeer, whose name is Arabic for "fragrance of flowers," into the living room and threw her to the floor. Barker held her down so that Cortez could, as promised, go first.

As Cortez forced Abeer's legs apart and pulled down her clothes, a shot rang out from the bedroom, according to the Cortez and Barker account. Abeer cried and screamed for help.

According to that same account, Spielman guarded the bedroom door as Green allegedly first shot Kassem, using a shotgun he had brought along, then used an AK-47 that the family kept to protect itself to kill Fakhriya and Hadeel.

Then Green [took his turn raping](#) Abeer before he grabbed the AK-47 again and fired two to three shots into her head, the other defendants said.

To destroy evidence of the rape, Barker grabbed an oil lamp from the kitchen and poured kerosene over Abeer's body. Spielman pulled out a cigarette lighter, and the soldiers set her body on fire.

Abeer's brothers, Mohammad, 13, and Ahmad, 11, found the bodies later that day.

Back at the post, Green and Cortez bragged about what they had done, Howard later said.

But Cortez told the men never to speak about what happened again.

COVER-UP BEGINS

Evidence destroyed; Green admonished

The first Army reports suggested the murders might be the work of insurgents, or possibly the result of a tribal or family dispute.

Assigned to investigate, Sgt. Anthony Yribe took Cortez and Spielman to the al-Janabis' home, unaware of their roles in the crime. Inside the house, Yribe recalled later, Spielman was calm, but Cortez was "dry heaving."

In the bedroom, Yribe spotted a shell from a shotgun, a weapon that only Army soldiers used in Iraq. Yribe told Cortez about it and then let him secretly remove and destroy the shell, Yribe later admitted.

On the way back to the checkpoint, Yribe said, he ran into Green, who appeared to be waiting for him. Yribe said Green confessed to the crime and claimed to have pulled it off alone. "I did that shit," Yribe said Green told him.

Yribe later said he didn't believe a soldier could have pulled off the offenses alone, but instead of reporting Green — or his suspicions that others were involved — Yribe told Green he must leave the Army.

"Get out of the Army," Yribe later recalled telling Green, "or I'll get you out."

STRESS INQUIRY

Doctor recommends discharging Green

Eight days after the murders, Green reported to an Army combat-stress counselor, his second since being sent to Iraq, telling her that Yribe had ordered him to do so.

Dr. Elizabeth Bowler, a psychiatrist, wrote down the reason for the visit was "anger, dreams, emotions over dead friends."

Green was asked on a form whether he felt "guilty" and whether he was thinking of harming or killing others. He circled "yes" to both. Asked to describe his mood, he said, "It's good a lot ... then it flips to where I don't care and I want to kill all the *Hajji*" — Army slang for Iraqis.

Green didn't talk with Bowler about the rape and murders.

She wrote in her report that his potential to harm others was "low" and that he exhibited "no traits that would indicate dangerously erratic or homicidal moods." She also said he did not have a "severe mental disorder."

But she concluded that he was suffering from an "anti-social personality disorder" — a "long-standing disorder of character, behavior and adaptability that is of such severity as to preclude military service," and she recommended he be discharged.

On May 16, 2006, after serving one year, three months and a week, Green was honorably discharged from the Army.

Capt. Goodwin wrote that the personality disorder interfered with Green's "ability to perform your duties and be a productive soldier" and that "this type of continued poor performance can no longer be

tolerated by this unit or the U.S. Army."

CASE BREAKS

Soldier decides some things must be told

For more than three months, the rape and murders went unsolved.

Then in June 2006, Pfc. Watt ran into Howard — the private who'd been left at the checkpoint to stand guard the day of the murders — at a coffee shop at the Army's Camp Striker in Baghdad.

In fits and starts, Howard told how his friends had carried out a plan "to rape this chick" and kill her family, Watt testified in Howard's court-martial.

That night, Watt, 23, of Tucson, Ariz., lay in his cot, torn over whether to turn in his colleagues, according to interviews with USA Today and The Courier-Journal. He called his father, an Army veteran, back home in the United States.

"If you knew something bad about your brothers, would you come forward?" Watt asked his father.

Only if what happened was truly heinous, Rick Watt replied.

Justin Watt decided to come forward.

"There's a difference between ... being a soldier and being a killer," he testified at Howard's court-martial.

On June 25, 2006, military police arrested Barker, Cortez, Spielman and Howard, all of whom were still in Iraq. All were charged with rape, murder and other offenses.

Green was picked up June 29 at his mother's house in Nebo, N.C., east of Asheville.

He was later indicted on charges of conspiracy to commit murder; conspiracy to commit aggravated sexual assault; four counts of premeditated murder; four counts of felony murder; aggravated sexual assault; aggravated sexual abuse with children; four counts of using a firearm during a crime of violence; and obstruction of justice.

The day he was picked up, he had just returned from a funeral in Arlington, Va., for one of two soldiers from Bravo Company who had been kidnapped by insurgents that same month, then tortured, their bodies mutilated and booby-trapped.

"Knew you guys were coming," Green told the deputy marshals who took him into custody, according to court records. "Guess I'm looking at spending the rest of my life in jail."

TOMORROW: Soldiers say their hatred for Iraqis explains — but doesn't excuse — what they did. Green's lawyers prepare a defense.

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