

By Libby Liberal

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It's been a week since I heard Ethan McCord, Iraq soldier whistleblower, speak at a World Can't Wait event on the lower west side of Manhattan. I want to process my strong thoughts and feelings in a blog before further time goes by.

I had seen a screening of Wikileaks' "Collateral Murder" before, but this time it was narrated by one of the soldiers who had been there in Baghdad on the ground in 2003. Who knew the players and who had been the one American Samaritan who had rushed to save two child victims immediately after.

An Iraqi Samaritan who had stopped to help the Iraqi victims before Ethan McCord was on the scene, had been shot and killed by McCord's fellow soldiers. In fact, in the Collateral Murder video the viewers get to hear the gunners in the Apache helicopter and their game-addict-hopped-up pleading for the radio go-ahead to perpetrate more killing on obvious civilians. The go-ahead is given.

The "rules of engagement" in Iraq? The rules of engagement, says McCord, were that there were no rules of engagement. Or, if you were an American soldier, you better damn well engage or you had two enemies, the "official" enemy as well as your commanding officers and even fellow soldiers who did not want you messaging morality in the midst of the surreal amorality and bloodshed. That kind of messaging could get you killed by your own side.

There was one policy he recalled, a deadly rule of engagement. If an IED suddenly went off, ambushing the soldiers, the SOP was immediate 360-degree machine gun rotational fire on the part of the soldiers. That meant that anyone in the vicinity, men, women, children, even in a crowded marketplace, whatever, were doomed by the raining of gunfire. 360 degree merciless barrages of bullets. Such bloodshed, collateral damage, was deemed justified.

McCord said that he did bond with some fellow soldiers who felt as morally repelled as he by the wanton killing. They became adept at shooting upwards he disclosed, at rooftops, so as not to kill when ordered to shoot in hair-trigger response.

McCord spoke of the dehumanizing training he had endured in bootcamp. The point of it was to overcome a human being's reluctance to kill another human being. There was a kind of bonding ritual with the officers the young mostly 18 and 19 year olds experienced. They really ate up the attention of their new surrogate father figures he stressed. Many were hungry for paternal approval that was perhaps missing in their home lives. They were sponges to the hyper-masculinized, misogynistic, desensitization exercises.

They were all trained to kill the Iraqis without hesitation he emphasized, reciting one horrifying little ditty -- I can't remember the words exactly now -- but something about Iraqis in a marketplace to shop, and GIs with machetes to chop. You get the idea. Man, woman, child. At one point McCord looked out at our small audience and said quietly, "We are trained to be able to kill you, too." I shuddered.

McCord, in response to 9/11, joined the navy but eventually requested a lateral transfer. He wanted to be part of the army elite, the guys who risk more and kick in the doors of insurgents, etc. He still glamorized the idea of defending his country. He said he was a political conservative at that point. He came from an extended family with those who had served in the military. McCord said he didn't reckon on the dehumanizing training and environment he would be plunged into.

Perhaps being 26 and having two kids of his own enabled him to break the enthrallment of military group-think and race to the injured children on the front seat of the ambushed truck during that Collateral Murder Wikileaks' episode. What stunned him, along with the horrifying wounding and/or killing of the victims and the two small children, was that he was the only one who was emotionally awake enough to run to them and try to save their lives.

He tried to send first the 4 year old girl, and then, later, upon discovering the 7 year old boy was still alive, him, too, to the military services hospital. He was told to leave the "f\*cking kids" alone and do security duty. They would be taken care of by the local facilities, which meant more time and risk for the suddenly fatherless kids. His compassion was invalidated, regarded as a violation of appropriate military behavior.

McCord was haunted by the trauma of the war, and that particular incident with the ambushed Iraqis and the profoundly wounded kids. The callousness of his fellow soldiers and superiors. He remembers being locked in anger. "I was angry at everyone," he recalls. Especially angry at and hating himself. He says he still has some of that. Even after his discharge. "Maybe, hopefully, one day I won't be so angry."

McCord knew he needed psychological help for his trauma. He approached a superior and told him about the emotional hell he was going through. He was told, "Get the sand out of your vagina!" In other words, "suck it up" and stop acting like a woman!!!

McCord, along with the psychological trauma, had endured a spinal injury and TBI (traumatic brain injury). McCord was offered psychotropic drugs which he refused. He said he didn't want to be a zombie. He said the drugs encouraged the psychically and physically wounded troops to kill with even more numbed-out impunity. Upon returning home he didn't want to be numbed out relating to his family.

McCord lives in Kansas now, discharged without benefits. While visiting New York City last week he visited an alternate high school with Debra Sweet and some World Can't Wait peace advocates. He wanted to de-glamorize the war for any teens eager to enlist. He spoke about a new recruitment tactic employed in small towns. The army recruiters erect a large billboard and post the picture of one of the town's young soldiers serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. The younger kids in town see the billboard and the spotlighting of someone like them and crave that opportunity for respect and local fame, too. They become eager to enlist. To be treated as a hero, too. He said he told the kids that war isn't X-box fantasy. It is real and it is traumatizing.

Unit cohesion is what it is all about over there, he explained. The bonding among the soldiers themselves is the firmest framework for morale. McCord said they are there mainly fighting for each other. Watching each other's backs. They go over there with a fantasy patriotism, but that kind of sentimentalized patriotism ends quickly and cruelly.

McCord keeps hoping he will be invited to testify before Congress about the atrocities being perpetrated by a strained U.S. military. Until then, a part of his recovery process is speaking out about the horrors of war, the war crimes perpetrated on a daily basis. As for the U.S. supposed new operation to leave Iraq, McCord assured the audience it was all more of the same SOP,

with more combat troops being shipped over there. Just the name of the operation had been changed for political spin advantage.

McCord said he is now lobbying for the end of re-deployment of traumatized soldiers, soldiers with TBI, PTSD and sexual trauma. You would think that would be a given.

McCord also confided a painful and dangerous reality. Some of the same buddies he risked his life for and with and who risked their lives for him have actually communicated death threats for his whistleblowing to him and his family. I knew poignant as his story was that Wednesday night, it did not cover the scope of challenges his speaking truth to power undoubtedly entailed and still entails.

“I wish every soldier was a whistleblower,” McCord said wistfully. He also said movingly that he could do without a lot of things in Iraq. Clean clothes. A daily shower. But the one thing he could not do without while over there? His humanity! He did not surrender that.