

Collateral Murder

[In April of this year, the organization WikiLeaks released a video, leaked from within the US military, showing an unprovoked Apache helicopter attack in Baghdad in 2007 that killed 12 Iraqis. The civilian victims included a news photographer and a man who had driven onto the scene, with his two small children, to try to help the wounded. Ethan McCord was a specialist in the Army unit involved in this brutal massacre. Now an antiwar vet, McCord has been speaking out against the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Chicago-based weekly 'Revolution' interviewed Ethan before he spoke at a recent New York City showing and webcast of the WikiLeaks video, known as Collateral Murder. A few days after the interview, WikiLeaks released nearly 400,000 US military documents from the Iraq war, revealing massive cover-ups of torture, thousands of previously unreported civilian deaths, and more. Excerpts :]

REVOLUTION: In the attack shown in the WikiLeaks video, you were part of the unit that was at the scene, on the ground. Give a picture of what happened that day.

ETHAN MCCORD: Prior to the Apaches engaging the civilians on the ground, I was with my unit, my company, and I was about five blocks away. And we were engaged in our own skirmish, a firefight if you will, and that's when I heard the Apaches open fire. It's a very distinct sound—it almost cuts the sky open. And we were told we needed to move to that position immediately. So me being one of the only dismounts that day—soldiers on foot, the rest were in vehicles—there were about six more of us, we ran to that location. When I came up on the scene, the first thing I remember seeing is a group of three men on the corner who had been completely disemboweled. One of the guys, the top of his head was completely off. I remember looking at this and it not seeming real. Maybe it was my own way of shutting it out, but it didn't seem real, looking at the bodies, they didn't seem human.

I remember I heard a scream, like a child crying. It was a cry not of pain, but like my own child waking up from a horrible nightmare, of fear. I noticed that it was coming from the minivan, and I ran to the minivan. Another private was with me, and he looked inside the van and turned around and vomited and ran away. I looked in the van, and what I saw was a little girl about four years old, sitting in the passenger seat. She had a wound to her stomach and she had glass in her hair and eyes. Next to her was a boy, about seven or eight, he was laying half on the floorboard, with his head resting on the bench seat of the van. Next to him on the driver's seat was who I presumed to be the father. He was leaned over, kind of in a protective manner over the children. Immediately, I knew that he was dead. He had taken a couple of those rounds to the chest.

The little boy looked dead—he had a severe wound to the right side of his head and wasn't moving. So I grabbed the little girl and I ran to the house behind the van where it had crashed. I took the little girl in there. I yelled for a medic, and the medic came. I took off my gloves and was pulling glass out of her eyes till she could blink. I was dressing the wounds and cleaning her up so that she could be taken care of. That's when the medic ran the little girl to the Bradley [an infantry fighting vehicle].

Then I went back outside to the van, and the boy made like a labored breathing move. So I started screaming out, "The boy's alive, the boy's alive!" I reached him and grabbed him and cradled him in my arms, started running towards the Bradley. He looked up at me for maybe two seconds at the very most. I told him, "It's okay, I have you, I have you," and I squeezed him tighter. And his eyes rolled back into his head, and my heart sank. I remember feeling like this boy just died in my arms. I squeezed him and was like, "Don't die, don't die, don't die." And I put him in the Bradley.

When I placed him in the Bradley, my platoon leader was there, and he yelled at me, saying I needed to "quit worrying about these.... kids and pull security." At the time, what I wanted to accomplish was done. I got the children into a vehicle that could take them to go receive help. So I went up to the rooftop and pulled security.

REVOLUTION: In the transcript of the conversations of the troops in the Apache that carried out the attack, one of the soldiers is heard saying, after it became clear their fire had hit children, "It's their fault for bringing their kids into a battle."

ETHAN MCCORD: You know, with soldiers, we're trained to kind of self-justify our actions, and I think that was a self-justification, a way of making him feel better at the time. Because you'll notice in the video, when he finds out that there are children who are wounded, he goes, "Oh, damn." And immediately he flips on that and goes, well, shouldn't have brought children into the battlefield. And the guy next to him is like, that's right. And that's a way of making yourself feel better for what you just did. We've always been trained to self-justify what we're doing. It's a coping mechanism to say it's their fault, not mine. I'm only doing my job type of thing.

REVOLUTION: There are those who say this was a bad thing that happened, but that it was a "tragic accident." What's your view on that kind of thinking?

ETHAN MCCORD: Well, the only thing special about this WikiLeaks video is the fact that everyday citizens get to see what happens in real war. Unfortunately, incidents like that happen more often than what you hope it would. I saw innocent women and children and even innocent men being slaughtered in Iraq, almost on a daily basis. I never one time when I was there saw a so-called "militia insurgent." I saw people protecting their homes. The thing I felt for them was that, if my land was attacked, and someone had just killed my son, you're damn right because you don't just go into an occupied country and expect for people to just sit back and take the slaughter of their family. It is systematic, because we're trained to dehumanize the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. That training is what you get in the WikiLeaks video.

We were actually given orders by our battalion commander for 360-degree rotational fire any time we were hit by an IED. And we were told to kill every person on the street, which included women and children and men—they didn't have to have a weapon. I watched it carried out many times. Myself and a bunch of others made sure to fire our weapons into rooftops of buildings, not at people. Because there was no way I was going to fire my weapon at an innocent person. I would fire my weapon at someone who was trying to shoot me, but not at an innocent person.

REVOLUTION: This was obviously a very traumatizing incident you were involved in that day in Baghdad. What happened in the days after that?

ETHAN MCCORD: I was unable to self-justify what I was doing in Iraq. I knew then that I was totally against the war in Iraq. And I still had to stay in Iraq. I still had to "do my job." But my job turned into only making sure that my soldiers didn't follow the illegal orders, didn't do anything illegal, and trying to make sure they would get home safely as well as myself. I met many Iraqis and became friends with them. I enjoyed their company, and I realized when I was there that I had more in common with the everyday Iraqi than I did with the people who sent me to war. It was quite a wake-up call for me that, these people who you've been trained to hate and to think of them as less than animals, and you get there and you realize, wow, these people are just like me. These children are doing nothing different than my children do at home.

REVOLUTION: How did you get from the place where you were at, right after the Collateral Murder incident, to now, where you are taking a stand against the wars, speaking out, and calling on others to oppose what the government is doing?

ETHAN MCCORD: In the military, speaking out is taboo, you can be charged with crimes for speaking out about stuff. I had tried to commit suicide. I was put into a mental hospital, and I was carrying around all this weight and all this guilt. And I didn't know what to do with it. It ruined my marriage, ruined my relationship with my children for a while, and it was ruining me as a person in general. I was becoming this angry, hateful person.

I started writing things down, and the writing seemed to help. Then I started speaking out. I tried speaking out even before the video came out, but nobody wanted to hear me. I was just another "crazy veteran" who was just telling these stories. I don't know if this makes sense, but I carry around a lot of weight. And every time I speak about it, it's kind of like taking some of that weight off and giving it to somebody else whom I'm speaking with and saying, okay, I don't care what you do with this information that I gave you and this weight, but I no longer carry it. So you can either carry it or give it to someone else, but it's taken off of me. So that's just my way of releasing a lot of the anger and guilt, is by speaking out.

REVOLUTION: One of the things you've done is write an open letter, along with another vet who was in your unit, to the survivors of that attack captured in the WikiLeaks video.

ETHAN MCCORD: Right, well, Josh Stieber and myself, we'd been talking, and we felt that a way for us to convey our sorrow for what happened, for the families, was to write a letter, a kind of a healing letter. It wasn't so much about us, but it was. It was kind of like a release for us as well to say, well, this is what we feel. We're deeply sorry for what happened to your family. Although we didn't pull the trigger, somehow we are responsible because we're part of the system. So we wrote up the letter.

Originally it was only for the family members of those involved in the WikiLeaks incident, but then we decided we were going to make it for everybody in Iraq. It's gotten a lot of good responses. That letter was actually taken to the widow of the husband and the mother of the children in Iraq. And the mother stated that she could forgive me. She gave me forgiveness because if it wasn't for me her children would be dead, nobody else would have pulled her children from the van. Which was a huge weight off my shoulders, so I was thankful for that. Forgiveness is a powerful thing.

And she also stated for me to continue speaking out. So it's not so much a quest for me, it's a quest for that family to speak out so that we can end these atrocities. □□□