



(Photograph by Lance W Clayton, Wonderful Machine)

Former soldier Justin Watt sits on a park bench 8 March 2013 in Salt Lake City. Watt exposed the gang-rape and murder of a 14-year-old Iraqi girl together with the murder of her family by members of his unit. The crimes occurred 12 March 2006 near Mahmudiyah, Iraq.

# Lessons from Yusufiyah From Black Hearts to Moral Education

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On 16 June 2006, Pvt. Justin P. Watt sat on a green cot in a dusty tent on Forward Operating Base Mahmudiyah. As he sat there in the middle of Baghdad, Iraq, inhaling the dust, he felt certain of two things: insurgents were torturing two missing members of his squad, and he was going to die.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing, though, prepared him for the conversation he was about to have with his team leader, Sgt. Tony Yribe. As they talked about the ongoing search for their two squad members, Yribe told Watt that a member of their platoon, Pvt. Steven Green, had single-handedly murdered four members of an Iraqi family a few months earlier.<sup>2</sup> Watt questioned how an inept and physically diminutive soldier could carry out such an act alone, and Yribe replied, “[The] less you know about it ... the better. Just forget I said anything.”<sup>3</sup> But Watt could not forget about it.

For the next few days, he obsessed over Yribe’s revelation. He became certain he had to report the war crime. When he did report it, he subjected himself

to a storm of criticism and threats. However, instead of withering under pressure that might have crushed other people, he stood strong behind his conviction that he had done the right thing. After leaving the service in January 2009, Watt received numerous threats to his life. Critics called him a snitch and asked how he could have turned in his “band of brothers.” He answered with a rhetorical question: “How could I live with myself?”<sup>4</sup>

Spurred, perhaps, by Jim Frederick’s 2011 book *Black Hearts: One Platoon’s Descent into Madness in Iraq’s Triangle of Death*, the Army is attempting to learn from the 2006 massacre at Yusufiyah so that similar tragedies can be prevented.<sup>5</sup> From the story of Watt, this article offers key lessons about how the Army can teach its soldiers the moral obligations they have to other human beings, and the choices for which soldiers must be accountable. It tells not only of Watt’s moral courage and imagination but also of how he applied *moral agency*—making ethical decisions and taking ethical actions based on right and wrong. Watt’s decision to report the crime would help wronged people whom he

had never met obtain justice, and it would lead to four of his platoon members going to prison.

## The Challenge of Service: Welcome to the Meat Grinder

After a bad breakup with a girlfriend, Watt followed his father's example by joining the Army.<sup>6</sup> Because he received high scores on his military aptitude examinations, he could have chosen any occupational specialty. Influenced by Stephen Ambrose's book *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*, which portrays infantry soldiers' heroic exploits in World War II, Watt volunteered to be an infantryman in the 101st Airborne Division.<sup>7</sup>

Walking out of the recruiter's office with a cool \$20,000 for signing his enlistment contract, Watt finally felt his life had direction, and he looked forward to the challenges ahead. Though he knew he was going to combat in Afghanistan or Iraq, Watt thought the Army's training would prepare him for the challenges of war, as did the training given those brave men who confronted Hitler's military. However, Watt would realize less than a year from his enlistment that nothing could have adequately prepared him for the events that unfolded in Iraq's "Triangle of Death." Frederick puts the deployment of Watt's unit in perspective:

The Triangle of Death was a meat grinder, churning out daily doses of carnage. During their yearlong deployment, soldiers from the battalion either found or got hit by nearly nine hundred roadside IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. They were shelled or mortared almost every day and took fire from rifles, machine guns, or rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) nearly every other day. Twenty-one men from the battalion were killed. ... More than 40 percent of the battalion were treated for mental or emotional anxiety while in-country and many have since been diagnosed.<sup>8</sup>

One statistic gives an even better understanding of Watt's situation. After one year, "51 of Bravo company's

approximately 135 soldiers had been killed, wounded, or moved to another unit."<sup>9</sup> Almost halfway into their deployment and after the death of their first platoon leader, the casualties in Watt's platoon were so numerous that his platoon sergeant at one point declared the unit "combat ineffective."<sup>10</sup>

## The Circumstances Surrounding the Attack

Watt's belief that he was going to die in Iraq turned out to be wrong. On 16 June 2006, he was right, however, that insurgents were torturing the two missing members of his platoon, Pfc. Thomas Tucker and Pfc. Kristian Menchaca. On 19 June, the unit found their mutilated bodies near a power plant. After examining the bloody remains for IEDs, the soldiers returned them to their base near Baghdad.<sup>11</sup>

However, apart from agonizing over the two kidnapped members of his platoon, Watt also found himself in a severe moral dilemma—he had to report a war crime that he was sure at least one of his friends had committed in March, or he had to "just forget about it." Watt's deliberations consumed him for days until he concluded that he was morally obligated to report the crime. His internal critical reflections and resulting actions bring to light a person properly employing moral agency.

On 12 March 2006, three months before Menchaca and Tucker were abducted, four soldiers from Watt's platoon—Spc. Paul Cortez, Spc. James Barker, Pvt. Steven Green, and Pfc. Jesse Spielman—had already concocted a plan to attack a certain Iraqi family's home in the local vicinity,

in part, to exact vengeance for other comrades killed by insurgents they believed were supported by locals. Sitting at a traffic control point (TCP) in the middle of Yusufiyah, a small farming town on the southern outskirts of Baghdad, the four soldiers sat around playing cards and getting drunk from alcohol they had confiscated from the local Iraqis. As the night wore on, their intoxication reached the level of six or eight beers each. Bored from card playing, and drunk, Cortez mulled over their plan with the other three soldiers (Barker, Green, and

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Spielman) and then declared that the time had come to put it into action. They intended to find an “Iraqi girl who lived nearby and they were going to go out and ... [rape] her.”<sup>12</sup>

Giving scant information to Pfc. Bryan Howard (a new soldier in the unit) about their plans and leaving him with another soldier at the TCP, Barker, Cortez, and Spielman took off their uniform tops, while Green kept his entire uniform on, and all four covered their faces.<sup>13</sup>

The men grabbed their weapons, traveled a few hundred meters from their checkpoint, broke into an Iraqi family’s home, separated its members, and began to gang-rape their fourteen-year-old daughter, Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi, in a bedroom at the back of the house. Her parents, father Qassim Hamza Raheem and mother Fakhriyah Taha Muhasen, were cordoned off in the front part of the home. They must have heard Abeer’s screams. But with guns pointed at their heads, they were helpless to stop the rape. In addition to gang-raping and murdering Abeer, the soldiers murdered her parents and her six-year-old sister Hadeel Qassim Hamza Al-Janabi.<sup>14</sup> They then desecrated Abeer’s body, burning it to create the appearance of an insurgent attack, and they tried to burn the house down to destroy any remaining evidence.

In an act of supreme cynicism, several hours after the attack, two of the four perpetrators—Cortez and Spielman—returned to the house as members of a patrol lead by Yribe, ostensibly to investigate the crime scene. However, when returning to the checkpoint later to drop off Cortez and Spielman, Green nonchalantly confessed to Yribe, “That was me. I did it. I killed that family.”<sup>15</sup>

Yribe later stated he found the situation puzzling: finding a shotgun shell in the home where the murders took place (a shell of the type used by his unit) and seeing Cortez in tears, pleading to go to Combat Stress (to seek mental health care).<sup>16</sup> However, rather than reporting the crime for further investigation, Yribe initially did nothing. He simply told Green, “I am done with you. You are dead to me. You get yourself out of this Army, or I will get you out myself.”<sup>17</sup>

## The Moral Deliberation of a Good Soldier

While Yribe clearly failed in his duties as a non-commissioned officer, Watt, a young soldier one year

removed from basic training, could not forget about Yribe’s revelation or take his advice to “just let God sort it out.” Watt could not stop himself from thinking about the Iraqi family, and, unlike Yribe, Watt could not forget about Green’s confession. “I could’ve never thought

that anyone can do that ... I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like, hearing everyone screaming,” was Watt’s response when asked if he could have predicted the events of 12 March 2006.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, Watt had suspicions that there was more to the story than Green’s simple confession. Watt felt Green’s account of the night’s events, by itself, did not add up. Although he could imagine that Green was of a sort that *could* murder a family in cold blood, he could not imagine how it was physically possible for one man to kill four people without anyone at the TCP noticing.

“I was on radio guard, and I had logs of gun shots. It just made no [tactical] sense,” Watt later recounted.<sup>19</sup> Watt remembered the exact night of the incident and used his practical reasoning and imagination to figure out that it was nearly impossible for Green, the runt of the platoon, to murder four people by himself under the known circumstances. He tried to imagine how it could have been possible for only Green to enter a home less than two hundred meters from the checkpoint, hold four people hostage, rape one of them, kill them all one by one, and then return to the checkpoint without anyone hearing screams or shots only meters from the TCP. To Watt, it was not plausible that only one soldier—particularly Green—was involved in this scenario.

While deliberating on the circumstances, Watt exercised great personal courage by not submitting to Yribe’s instruction that he simply forget about Green’s confession. Watt recognized he had a moral duty to help ensure justice would be done. He would not allow someone of higher rank—even someone he highly respected—to

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deter him from his personal and professional obligation to pursue the matter to an honorable conclusion.

As Watt's unit mourned the deaths of Tucker and Menchaca, he grew more anxious about Yribe's revelations. To assure himself that he was correct in his suspicions, he felt he had to get confirmation of more of the incident's details. So, around 19 June, he came across Howard, who had been at the checkpoint on 12 March with four of the soldiers responsible for the murders.<sup>20</sup> To gain his confidence, Watt convinced Howard that he knew all about the incident. From Howard, Watt received confirmation of his suspicions. "Howard filled in many of the missing pieces about Cortez and Barker ... about how he still didn't really believe them until they returned, with the blood-stained clothes."<sup>21</sup> While Watt was still uncertain about all the details of the event, he was sure that he would not be morally justified to keep it a secret. He started to think about the Iraqi family and, as a man, he thought about it from the Iraqi father's perspective. Watt explains,

Just imagine if it was you. You're at home with your wife and this happens. What that dude [the father] went through. What he was feeling. That had to have been the worst thing to have to watch that happen ... the rape of your daughter and watching them get killed.<sup>22</sup>

Watt reflected on Howard's revelations, desperately trying to make sense of his own feelings and experiences so he would not lose his mind. He thought about the horrific scene as it must have unfolded, and he put himself vicariously in the Iraqi father's position: helpless, listening to the desperate cries of his daughter. In empathizing with another person in this manner, Watt maintained his personhood. He acted in accordance with his moral convictions and professional ethical standards.

Asked whether it was a black-and-white case to report the crime once he confirmed the whole story, Watt straightforwardly admitted,

The truth of the matter was that I was going to die. For me, the difference was dying rightly and righteously without anything on my conscience. It was black and white for me. But, I was scared to death ... I was thinking about the honor of what we were doing ... If you saw our Purple Heart ceremony when we came home, you wouldn't

believe it! We were taking a lot of casualties, but we were doing a lot of good work. I had to think about the people we lost. [If I didn't report it], every person we protected, every school supply we handed out, ... all that would have been for *nothing*.<sup>23</sup>

Like many soldiers in war, Watt took a fatalistic approach to life and to his decision to report the crime. However, he maintained an authentic sense of who he was as a person. That is, he kept intact his true values, commitments to others, and desires to come back from combat as a morally whole person. Watt thought about his fellow soldiers who had died throughout the deployment, and he simply asked himself, "What would they think if it came out later that these murders had happened and no one (especially, those that knew) said anything about it?"<sup>24</sup> Watt would not have been able to face the families of the dead, or his own family, including his father, who had been a combat engineer in Vietnam. Nor would he have been able to look at himself in the mirror. Watt would have had no answers for his inaction. If he did not report the crime, he came to believe his life would become one of lasting regret, denial, compartmentalization, or fragmentation. The consequences of failing to act morally would have been a life not worth living.

## Considerations for the Army Profession

The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) uses a quote from Sir John Hackett to clarify the Army's professional military ethic: "What a bad man cannot be is a good soldier."<sup>25</sup> While, historically, as judged by Western standards of moral conduct, there have been "bad" or immoral men who have been good or competent soldiers, Hackett's definition of good is a normative one: a bad man cannot be a moral soldier. Recent findings in moral psychology support CAPE's claim; researchers suggest people who "display moral courage often perceive themselves to be 'strongly linked to others through a shared humanity' and feel a sense of responsibility that is not limited to intimates."<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, people who stand idly by doing nothing to prevent or stop wrongs done to others do not often feel moved by this universal connection. This research brings up a question: how can the Army train its soldiers to make ethical decisions and take ethical actions based on right and wrong? A study of the case

of Watt suggests two approaches the Army can incorporate into an effective moral education program.

First, the Army should improve soldiers' communication skills by training them to use language to express feelings, values, needs, and desires that otherwise might seem inexpressible, in verbal (group) discourse and in each soldier's inner dialogue. In conjunction, before, during, and after deployments, the Army's moral education program should encourage discussion about moral issues (a dialectical method) to allow soldiers to question, reinforce, and improve their ability to conduct dialogue. A repeating training and education process would lead to soldiers knowing how to express their values to others while reaffirming them to themselves. An affirmation of values reinforces the professional ethic and enables soldiers to resist the pressures of misplaced loyalties—like the one Yribe attempted to impose on Watt.<sup>27</sup>

The civilian world offers examples of this type of moral education. For example, following the Rodney King beating in 1992, which led to widespread race riots in Southern California and elsewhere, California's Department of Justice developed a program to teach police officers how they could intervene when they feared a fellow officer was about to use too much force.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the Army should design a moral education program to educate and train its soldiers about when they should intervene or report if another soldier violates, or is about to violate, the laws of armed conflict and the professional ethic. The Army has taken the right steps to address some of these issues by requiring all soldiers, as part of their annual training, to complete law of war training with an officer of the Judge Advocate General's Corps, and ethics training by an Army chaplain. However, the Army must recognize that expertise and responsibility for moral education should not be relegated to a select few but are the responsibility of Army leaders who have the proper experience, education, and motivations.

Karl Marlantes, a Vietnam veteran, recommends changing the common social practice among warfighters of not expressing and processing painful emotions

openly. His ideas could point the Army in the right direction. Marlantes writes,

During combat tours, time must be carved out in which to reflect. I wish that after each action the skipper could have drawn us all together, just us. In ten or fifteen minutes of solemn time, we could have asked forgiveness and said good-bye to lost friends.<sup>29</sup>

Such an approach recognizes the value of reflection for developing soldier resilience, and for coping with the



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act of killing or the deaths of comrades. Regular periods of collective and private reflection could be used to reaffirm that it is acceptable for soldiers to kill an enemy combatant under proper conditions and rules of engagement, and, further, that this very act of killing does not mean they are terrible people.<sup>30</sup>

Second, the Army should promote mentorship and coaching, using moral exemplars to develop soldiers' reasoning skills. This will show them that it is possible to be moral agents.

Using exemplars like Watt, the Army can help soldiers improve their ability to recognize those within their formations who are good and bad examples of the professional ethic. However, the Army should be cautious about elevating super-meritorious acts as the paradigm for right action, which confuses valor for morality.<sup>31</sup>

Watt recognized that not reporting the crimes of his fellow platoon members would have been a grave wrong, one almost as harmful as committing the crime itself. He weighed the consequences of his options by using his moral imagination to determine the right action, an action that would transcend individual loyalties and the wants of his guilty platoon members. In contrast to a choice that might have been expedient in the short term, Watt felt an obligation to respond in a manner consistent with the Army's professional military ethic.

Moral exemplars like him can help soldiers improve their emotional responses and respect themselves in new ways. That is, exemplars can convince young soldiers that it is possible to do what the profession requires of them when they are soldiers at home or fighting in the heat of battle. For example, the Army, on CAPE's initiative, has taken the right steps in allowing

Watt to talk to soldiers about his experiences. Watt's insights and actions, which embody the Army's professional values, will help other soldiers realize that it is possible to act autonomously and morally, irrespective

of one's rank and position. More important, by using dialogue and moral exemplars, the profession demonstrates that it practices what it preaches: mission first, people always. ■

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## Notes

1. Justin P. Watt, personal interview with the author, 14 March 2013. This article is dedicated to the memories of Rick Watt and Jim Frederick, who both passed away in 2014. Without these two transformative figures in Justin's life, I would not be able to share these lessons from Yusufiyah. Rick taught Justin his morals, and Jim gave Justin a voice and ear when no one wanted to talk and listen.
2. Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010), 305–6. Most news sources have identified this incident as occurring in Mahmudiyah, the closest major town in the area, but the location of the murders was Yusufiyah.
3. Ibid.
4. Watt, personal interview.
5. Frederick, *Black Hearts*.
6. Watt, personal interview.
7. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 6 September 2001).
8. Frederick, *Black Hearts*, xvi–xvii.
9. Ibid., xvii.
10. Ibid., 166. My West Point class graduated about 900 members in 2004, less than a quarter of the new officers commissioned in the Army that year. Of my three classmates who were in Watt's battalion, two were killed and one was severely injured during the deployment. These facts speak of the type and frequency of violence that Watt's unit faced in Baghdad from 2005 to 2006.
11. Ibid., 314.
12. Ibid., 260–61.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 258–70.
15. Ibid., 269.
16. Ibid., 268. It was very rare for insurgents in Iraq to use shotguns. Shotguns are almost exclusively used by American soldiers. Also, "Combat Stress" was a term used by soldiers for the trained psychologists typically located in major forward operating bases to help soldiers deal with the trauma of combat and other deployment-related issues.
17. Ibid., 270.
18. Watt, personal interview.
19. Ibid.

20. Frederick, *Black Hearts*, 312.
21. Ibid.
22. Watt, personal interview.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, *An Army White Paper: The Profession of Arms* (8 December 2010), accessed 28 July 2015, <http://cape.army.mil/repository/ProArms/Profession-White%20Paper%208%20Dec%202010.pdf>.
26. David Bornstein, "Where Does Moral Courage Come From?" *New York Times* online, 18 December 2014, accessed 28 July 2015, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/18/where-does-moral-courage-come-from/?\\_r=4](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/18/where-does-moral-courage-come-from/?_r=4).
27. I want to acknowledge the Army's commendable efforts to implement the Ready and Resilient Campaign and the Master Resilience Training program. These initiatives reflect an institution that aims to address the issues I have presented in this essay, but the Army still needs to develop a more coherent strategy that aligns its institutional requirements and empowers its leaders to better educate and train soldiers in order to meet the moral demands of the military experience.
28. Jason Marsh and Dacher Keltner, "We Are All Bystanders," Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley website, 1 September 2006, accessed 28 July 2015, [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/we\\_are\\_all\\_bystanders/](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/we_are_all_bystanders/).
29. Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011), 77.
30. To prepare soldiers for some of the emotional ill effects that killing will have, military leaders should talk about the moral permissibility of killing. This practice trains soldiers to reflect on their professional duty and the moral context in which they act.
31. Moral exemplars are people, military or civilian, who display personal courage by standing up for and acting upon honorable values. A personally courageous and moral soldier feels a need to respond to and for others because the soldier is accountable to them. This makes the soldier feel an obligation to act for the right reasons and in the right ways, maintaining the trust of those he or she is appointed to command or subordinated to follow.