

## Open Letter to Our Troops

Stan Goff (05/04)

In 1994, I was running an A-Detachment in 3rd Special Forces, ODA-354 to be precise, a team that specialized in free-fall parachute infiltration and special (strategic) reconnaissance. 3rd Special Forces Group's area of operation encompassed sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, and our team was specifically designated for the Dominican Republic and Haiti. So we had two language requirements on the team, Spanish and French (even though most Haitians actually speak Haitian Kreyol).

I had a communications sergeant on my team named Ali Tehrani. His father was an expatriate Iranian who'd married a German, and Ali had been raised in extremely comfortable circumstances in Europe, where his father and the society around him pushed him to fluency in English, German, Spanish, and French. Ali also spoke decent Italian. He was the most fluent French-speaker on the battalion, and a year before we were sent to Haiti with the 1994 invasion, Ali had been sent to the camps constructed by the United States military in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for the purpose of detaining tens of thousands of Haitians who were trying to escape the brutal repression and grinding poverty of Haiti in ramshackle boats. Ali was needed there because of his language fluency.

Ali was typical of many of the "non-white" members of Special Forces in two respects. He was demonstrably patriotic -- compelled, it seemed, to prove his devotion to the American security state -- and he adopted the prevailing attitude within much of Special Operations of Negrophobia -- a kind of institutional disdain for Black troops that served to bloc other "non-whites" with whites in SF. It's a peculiar mechanism of white supremacy where there is not a master-race mentality so much as a deficient-race ideology from which all others could self-exclude. This -- along with an anabolic version of masculinity -- served as one form of social glue in SF culture, though there were a few exceptions.

Ali's Negrophobia wasn't virulent like that I had witnessed in other SF troops. In fact, he was willing to grant exceptions among individual Black soldiers fairly easily. It was more part of his obsessive desire to fit in.

Ali had spent six months "working the camps" at Guantanamo in 1993.

When we received word of our mission to invade Haiti in 1994, he reacted violently. His revulsion toward Haitians was visceral and white-hot. Given that my own team's mission might depend on both Ali's language capabilities ("my" language was Spanish) and on our ability to establish rapport with local Haitians, Ali's outburst sent up a warning flare in front of me, and I made time to sit down with him for a long talk.

Ali was, aside from his passive racism and the simmering rage that one could always sense just below his surface, a very intelligent and sensitive man. I always suspected that he may have suffered either physical or psychological abuse as a child.

When we talked, we fairly quickly concluded together that his aversion to Haitians had something to do with the role he had been thrown into against the Haitians at the camps, the role of jail-boss, and he agreed to keep that in mind and to subordinate his conditioned reflexes on the matter to mental time-outs in order to assure that he would behave appropriately while we were on the mission in Haiti, which he did... most of the time.

But the point I'm getting to is this. The antagonism that Ali experienced as an individual toward Haitians was structured by the institutional antagonism built into the jailer-and-jailed relationship. Ali had internalized the external reality that he was a prison guard and they were

the prisoners. His job was to dominate, to bend Haitians to his will, and every exercise of human agency by the Haitians threatened that. Their very humanity -- that combination of independent consciousness and will -- was structured by the prison-camp phenomenon to be an enemy force in relation to Ali and the other prison-keepers.

In 1971, Stanford University Professor of Psychology Phillip Zimbardo designed an experiment that would come to be known as the Stanford Prison Experiment. Subjects were recruited and paid a modest stipend, whereupon they were separated into "prisoners" and "guards," and placed in a mock prison built in a Stanford basement. The prisoners were stripped, deloused, shackled, and placed in prison clothes, while the guards were given authoritative uniforms, sunglasses, and batons. Long story short -- within two days there was a near prison riot, psychosomatic illness began to break out, white middle-class kids in the role of guards became rapidly and progressively more sadistic and arbitrary, and the two-week experiment had to be abandoned after only six days... before someone was badly hurt or killed.

The experiment seemed to support the truism that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." But that conclusion serves as a description, not an explanation. It describes what happens to the individual, but it fails to account for the role of rationalization that legitimates the domination, and it completely fails to account for institutional support of that domination.

When one uses the term "systemic," she is saying that the source of this abuse is not individual moral failure, but a predictable expression of the system and its structures.

The abuses of detainees, by US troops, by CACI International and Titan Corporation mercenaries, and by the CIA in Iraq, is "systemic."

But in the same way that the system found an expression in the thoughts and emotions of Ali Tehrani, in the same way that the structure of domination and subjection pushed him to rationalize away his shared humanity with his Haitian captives, we can now see in the leering grins of the Abu Ghraib prison guards, who are regular people -- like the experimental subjects in the Stanford Prison Experiment -- who quickly learned to behave as sadistic torturers. The military has admitted that 60% of these detainees are neither combatants nor threats.

As this is written, the US military is about to release hundreds of detainees who fall in that category, and there will be more horror stories coming, because it was systemic.

People were not only humiliated and forced to pose in degrading positions with each other naked. They were forced to masturbate in front of taunting guards. Some were sodomized with foreign objects. It appears that some were also beaten to death during interrogation -- one whose body was put on ice for a day then carted away the next on a litter with a faked intravenous infusion in the arm.

Now the cover stories are being spun out like webs.

We are being asked to believe that:

- (1) The only abuse that occurred against anyone detained by American forces in Iraq was photographed and reported.
- (2) No abuses occurred anywhere that were not photographed or reported.
- (3) The one percent of US troops who are the "bad apples" all happen to serve together in

the same unit... the unit that is the only one guilty, and that happened to get caught because of the photographs.

(4) The aggressive investigation now being proclaimed by everyone from George W. Bush to CENTCOM, about abuses that were already on record in the military (an internal investigation had already been launched in February by Major General Antonio M. Taguba, but was kept from the public), would have happened had the photographs and story not been aired on national television.

(5) The military was not attempting to cover up their own investigation, and that they would have informed the public of these abuses even had Seymour Hersh not put the whole miserable episode into print.

(6) The military did not cover anything up in the two weeks between the time CBS warned them that they were going to air an expose and when they actually did air it.

(7) No one in the chain of command above Brigadier General Janis Karpinski is responsible for the failure to halt these abuses, even though Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez was informed of the investigation of these abuses, complete with sworn statements and photographs, by General Taguba last February.

Other abuses and violations of the Geneva Conventions and Laws of Warfare are already on record, some with videos available on the web, such as:

(1) Shooting people who are clearly not armed and who are engaged in no threatening behavior.

(2) Shooting into ambulances.

(3) Shooting wounded people who are not armed.

(4) Shooting wounded people who are obviously no longer capable of fighting.

(5) Shooting into crowds.

There has never been a Stanford Military Occupation Experiment to complement the Stanford Prison Experiment, unless we just count the military occupations themselves. There is a structured, systemic antagonism between an occupying military and the people whose land they occupy. And there will be no investigations of any of it, because there never are, unless and until the American public is confronted with them.

The National Command Authority and its cheerleaders cannot say out loud... this is what we are doing, and it can't get done unless we dehumanize the occupied. This reality, this system, will express itself in the thoughts and emotions of you, the troops who carry it out, because this military occupation is in a sense making a prison of Iraq and making you, the troops, its turnkeys.

It will only be those exceptional individuals among you in the military who refuse to surrender their humanity -- no matter how little you may understand the big picture -- and who will witness. You who do break with the system and witness are very important people, important to history, because your refusal to surrender your own moral integrity to the system may lead to our collective salvation by ending this felonious occupation. The troops who filed reports about the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison were such exceptions.

So were Tom Glen and Ron Ridenhour.

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch wrote in 1979 about US leadership during the occupation of Vietnam:

Success in our society has to be ratified by publicity... all politics becomes a form of spectacle. It is well known that Madison Avenue packages politicians and markets them as if they were cereals or deodorants; but the art of public relations penetrates more deeply into political life... The modern prince [an apt turn of phrase for the current member of the Bush political dynasty] ... confuses successful completion of the task at hand with the impression he makes or hopes to make on others. Thus American officials blundered into the war in Vietnam... More concerned with the trappings than with the reality of power, they convinced themselves that failure to intervene would damage American 'credibility...' [They] fret about their ability to rise to crisis, to project an image of decisiveness, to give a convincing performance of executive power... Public relations and propaganda have exalted the image and the pseudo-event.

What these images of the Abu Ghraib humiliation and torture have done in the United States is collide with the "exalted image and the pseudo-event" of the Bush propaganda apparatus, just as the images of the My Lai massacre did in 1969. That collision between the reality and the real image of war startles civilians here in the La-La Land of wide screen TV and suburban SUV's, and it shakes them out of their opiated shopper dream-state.

My Lai is what General Colin Powell was remembering when he implemented "the Powell Doctrine" for the military, which includes a co-opted press and a vigorous attempt to keep things like flag-draped coffins off of those wide screen TVs.

Most of you don't remember My Lai.

On March 16, 1968, units of the Americal Division, to which Powell was assigned as a staff officer in Chu Lai, entered a Vietnamese village called My Lai and spent four hours raping women, burning houses, then finally massacring men, women, and children -- including infants who dying women tried to shield with their own bullet-riddled bodies. The massacre was stopped by a Georgia-born helicopter pilot named Hugh Clowers Thompson who landed his chopper between the few surviving Vietnamese and the blood-intoxicated soldiers, and ordered his door gunners to open fire on the Americans if they failed to stand down.

A few weeks later, General Creighton Abrams, then commanding general in Vietnam, received a letter from a young Specialist-4 in the Americal Division named Tom Glen:

The average GI's attitude toward and treatment of the Vietnamese people all too often is a complete denial of all our country is attempting to accomplish in the realm of human relations... Far beyond merely dismissing the Vietnamese as 'slopes' or 'gooks,' in both deed and thought, too many American soldiers seem to discount their very humanity; and with this attitude inflict upon the Vietnamese citizenry humiliations, both psychological and physical, that can have only a debilitating effect upon efforts to unify the people in loyalty to the Saigon government, particularly when such acts are carried out at unit levels and thereby acquire the aspect of sanctioned policy... [American soldiers attack Vietnamese] for mere pleasure, fire indiscriminately into Vietnamese homes and without provocation or justification shoot at the people themselves... Fired with an emotionalism that belies unconscionable hatred, and armed with a vocabulary consisting of 'You VC,' soldiers commonly 'interrogate' by means of torture that has been presented as the particular habit of the enemy. Severe beatings and torture at knife point are usual means of questioning captives or of convincing a suspect that he is, indeed, a Viet Cong... It would indeed be terrible to find it necessary to believe that an

American soldier that harbors such racial intolerance and disregard for justice and human feeling is a prototype of all American national character; yet the frequency of such soldiers lends credulity to such beliefs... What has been outlined here I have seen not only in my own unit, but also in others we have worked with, and I fear it is universal. If this is indeed the case, it is a problem which cannot be overlooked, but can through a more firm implementation of the codes of MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) and the Geneva Conventions, perhaps be eradicated.

Glen's letter was forwarded from Abrams' office to the Americal Division and ended up with Major Colin Powell in Chu Lai.

Powell never followed up by questioning Glen, and instead ended his "investigation" of Glen's allegations after accepting uncritically the claim by Glen's commander that Glen hadn't been close enough to "the front" (whatever that was supposed to be in Vietnam) to have any knowledge of such alleged abuses. Powell then began his career as a damage-control expert in the military by writing a letter, dated December 13, 1968, in which he said, ""There may be isolated cases of mistreatment of civilians and POWs... [but] this by no means reflects the general attitude throughout the Division... In direct refutation of this [Glen's] portrayal is the fact that relations between Americal soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent." He went on to impugn Glen's account for having been brought to light only reluctantly and lacking sufficient detail.

This was, of course, horseshit. Abuses were systemic.

Glen had only heard through rumors about My Lai. It was another GI, Ron Ridenhour, an infantryman who was not willing to surrender his humanity to occupier-racism, who finally pieced together, on his own initiative, the story of the My Lai massacre, and brought it to public light. When the photographs of the massacre were combined with Ridenhour's account, and the American public was confronted with the reality of an entire unit participating in a systematic massacre of civilians, it marked a turning point in the loss of political support in the United States for continued military occupation of Vietnam.

Powell himself admitted war crimes in his memoir, *My American Journey*, where he wrote, "I recall a phrase we used in the field, MAM, for military-age male... If a helo spotted a peasant in black pajamas who looked remotely suspicious, a possible MAM, the pilot would circle and fire in front of him. If he moved, his movement was judged evidence of hostile intent, and the next burst was not in front, but at him." Powell would also come to the defense of Brigadier General John Donaldson who had the door gunners on his own helicopter shoot Vietnamese for sport. Donaldson was exonerated, naturally, in a military investigation.

Powell not only developed as a skilled cover-up artist, he would eventually incorporate this ability to manage public perception about war as a key element in the "Powell Doctrine," which he imposed on the military and the press. He never forgot My Lai, and he has always believed that exposure of My Lai and other atrocities were responsible for the US defeat in Vietnam.

Donald Rumsfeld shares these beliefs with Colin Powell. They are both wrong. The two phenomena that collide with this Powell-Rumsfeld orientation were and are (1) the decision of their 'enemy' never to quit, and (2) the inevitability that someone who is part of the occupation force will be confronted with these contradictions between "the exalted image and the pseudo-event" and the real character of war -- and that this someone will expose it in an attempt to rescue his or her own humanity.

The war in Vietnam was lost by the French then the Americans because they didn't belong

there, and the resistance endeavored to do whatever was necessary to make that point. This is also the situation in Iraq

So I'll leave to others the analysis of whether the troops facing courts martial are scapegoats (they are, and they are also probably guilty as hell), and whether or not the military is letting the officers off with reprimands and walking papers to prevent the fire spreading (which it is). I'll just emphasize that the war in Iraq cannot be won. Not because of the inability of US troops to fight, but because we don't belong there. And since that's the case (which I firmly believe it is) every life -- Iraqi, American, or otherwise -- that is lost or ruined... is wasted.

All this talk of whether Military Intelligence or the mercenaries working for CACI International or the CIA or the MP commanders were responsible is diversionary bullshit so we won't see how Iraq itself has become the Stanford Military Occupation Experiment.

Because if we conclude that the problem is systemic, then the only thing to do to stop this is to walk away. And the Bush administration sent troops there for the purpose not of building democracies, but of building permanent military bases in the heart of oil country, and if they walk away, they can't rightly build bases, can they?

So we can either blithely obey and support our new Neros, or we can continue to cling to the absurd notion that the vandal can rebuild the house they just ravaged, or we can do what we might to make them walk away. Troops that come forward will play a key role in this moral imperative.

Every troop that comes forward with accounts of the inhumanity of this war -- while jeopardizing his or her career -- is serving to hasten an end to this criminal enterprise of the Military-Petroleum Complex. These troop/witnesses will serve to hasten an end to the suffering of Iraqi families and the suffering of the families of the occupying forces. They will serve to prevent more torture, more humiliation, more suspicion and hatred, and more lives being thrown away on this imperial folly.

Every troop who keeps his secrets, who faithfully serves the system and never bears witness, can travel for the rest of his life.

She can go to Rio de Janeiro.

He can go to Bangladesh.

She can go to Lagos, or Montreal, or Tokyo, or Moscow, or Antarctica.

But no matter where he goes, there he'll be -- alone with the growing weight of his own silence on his head, wrapping himself in his own rationalizations, and restlessly turning away from the faces that look back at him in the mirrors of his memory.