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Collateral Damage or Civilian Massacre in Haditha?

Last November, U.S. Marines killed 15 Iraqi civilians in their homes. Was it self-defense, an accident or cold-blooded revenge? A Time

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Posted Sunday, Mar. 19, 2006

The incident seemed like so many others from this war, the kind of tragedy that has become numbingly routine amid the daily reports of violence in Iraq. On the morning of Nov. 19, 2005, a roadside bomb struck a humvee carrying Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, on a road near Haditha, a restive town in western Iraq. The bomb killed Lance Corporal Miguel (T.J.) Terrazas, 20, from El Paso, Texas. The next day a Marine communique from Camp Blue Diamond in Ramadi reported that Terrazas and 15 Iraqi civilians were killed by the blast and that "gunmen attacked the convoy with small-arms fire," prompting the Marines to return fire, killing eight insurgents and wounding one other. The Marines from Kilo Company held a memorial service for Terrazas at their camp in Haditha. They wrote messages like "T.J., you were a great friend. I'm going to miss seeing you around" on smooth stones and piled them in a funeral mound. And the war moved on.

But the details of what happened that morning in Haditha are more disturbing, disputed and horrific than the military initially reported. According to eyewitnesses and local officials interviewed over the past 10 weeks, the civilians who died in Haditha on Nov. 19 were killed not by a roadside bomb but by the Marines themselves, who went on a rampage in the village after the attack, killing 15 unarmed Iraqis in their homes, including seven women and three children. Human-rights activists say that if the accusations are true, the incident ranks as the worst case of deliberate killing of Iraqi civilians by U.S. service members since the war began.

In January, after Time presented military officials in Baghdad with the Iraqis' accounts of the Marines' actions, the U.S. opened its own investigation, interviewing 28 people, including the Marines, the families of the victims and local doctors. According to military officials, the inquiry acknowledged that, contrary to the military's initial report, the 15 civilians killed on Nov. 19 died at the hands of the Marines, not the insurgents. The military announced last week that the matter has been handed over to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (ncis), which will conduct a criminal investigation to determine whether the troops broke the laws of war by deliberately targeting civilians. Lieut. Colonel Michelle Martin-Hing, spokeswoman for the Multi-National Force-Iraq, told Time the involvement of the ncis does not mean that a crime occurred. And she says the fault for the civilian deaths lies squarely with the insurgents, who "placed noncombatants in the line of fire as the Marines responded to defend themselves."

Because the incident is officially under investigation, members of the Marine unit that was in Haditha on Nov. 19 are not allowed to speak with reporters. But the military's own reconstruction of events and the accounts of town residents interviewed by Time—including six whose family members were killed that day—paint a picture of a devastatingly violent response by a group of U.S. troops who had lost one of their own to a deadly insurgent attack and believed they were under fire. Time obtained a videotape that purports to show the aftermath of the Marines' assault and provides graphic documentation of its human toll. What happened in Haditha is a reminder of the horrors faced by civilians caught in the middle of war—and what war can do to the people who fight it.



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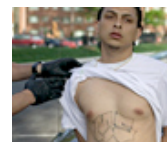
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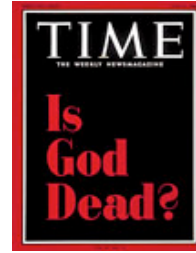
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