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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Joe Piette

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Aaron Bushnell's act sparks memories of mass resistance in U.S. military

The author, a veteran of the U.S. military who was sent to fight in Vietnam in the late 1960s, spoke at a March 3 vigil in Philadelphia organized following the sacrifice by active-duty Air Force member Aaron Bushnell a few days earlier. This article is based on Piette's talk.



Veteran Joe Piette speaking at Clark Park, Philadelphia vigil for Aaron Bushnell, March 3, 2024. Photo: Credit: Samantha Rise

Aaron Bushnell was a member of the U.S. Air Force. So was I over 50 years ago. I was drafted in 1966 and eventually sent to Vietnam to help make blood money for the U.S. imperialists from the deaths of millions of people in Southeast Asia.

Aaron Bushnell, rather than participate in the U.S./Israeli genocide in Gaza, took the extreme act of self-immolating last Sunday, Feb. 25 at 1 p.m. before the Washington, D.C., embassy of the U.S./British settler-colonial project in Palestine.

Bushnell was one of a small number of members of the U.S. military in the last decade who I'm aware of who publicly conducted an act of opposition to a U.S. imperialist war. As an isolated individual deeply opposed to what he was being told to do, Bushnell did what he felt he had to do to oppose the U.S./Israeli genocidal war in Gaza.

We hope his act will persuade more people to follow him, not to commit self-immolation, but follow him in rejecting the status quo and finding powerful ways to oppose U.S. imperialist wars of terror.

It was different when I was in the Air Force. By the late 1960s, at a time when the U.S. was still drafting men into the armed forces, a majority of active duty people were opposed to the U.S. war in Vietnam and acted in many ways to put a stop to it.

Some went over to the Vietnamese side. Some deserted to Europe or Canada. Many joined antiwar GI groups, such as the American Servicemen's Union, which alone had tens of thousands of members. Many simply refused to fight, and if an officer was stupid enough to threaten someone for refusing, he might be fragged. That a commissioned or non-commissioned officer was fragged meant he was killed or wounded when a GI rolled a fragmentation grenade in their tent while they slept. Between 1969 and 1972, the Pentagon recorded nearly 1,000 fraggings.

Read John Catalinotto's book "Turn the Guns Around" or watch David Zeiger's "Sir, No Sir" on Netflix if you want to know more about opposition within the military.

Vietnamese won in 1975

The Pentagon reacted to the threatened collapse of its chain of command in Vietnam and the growing resistance in the U.S. by withdrawing troops down from its 1969 maximum of 550,000 and turning the fighting over to a puppet army of Vietnamese recruits. This was called "Vietnamization" of the war. In early 1973, the U.S. government ended the draft.

The puppet army collapsed in 1975, and the Vietnamese people won the war against the U.S. imperialists in 1975 when Saigon was liberated. Yes — applaud!

After that loss, the U.S. war department known as the Pentagon replaced the draft with an all-volunteer armed forces.

How is the U.S. able to wage its constant wars and occupations around the world in over 750 military bases in over 80 countries through a voluntary armed forces?

Outsourcing the war

There's an economic draft, which explains why Aaron Bushnell joined the U.S. Air Force. In addition, many military chores and skills are now done by private contractors instead of troops. Besides the approximately 1.4 million active-duty servicemembers and 813,000 reservists, there are 762,000 federal civilian full-time equivalent employees and approximately 600,000 full-time contractors. This makes a total of almost 4 million people, all under the direction of the Department of Defense of war at a cost of close to \$1 trillion — over \$1 trillion if you count the costs of past wars, interest and foreign military assistance.

But I want to talk about how U.S. troops are motivated to kill people.

Killing another human being is not natural. It's just not normal. Killing someone messes up your mind — that's why it often leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — a common affliction for war veterans — and many addictions and suicides.

The generals and capitalist politicians don't give a f**k though about the suffering of the GIs. They only care about having an effective, aggressive armed forces capable of defeating and occupying any country unwilling to be exploited for big business profits.

The Pentagon relies on racism, sexism, classism and other discriminatory practices to create a contrast between **us**, the GI from the U.S., and **them** (the people of whatever country is being targeted) to get its troops to follow orders to kill. Heavy propaganda, constant repetitive instructions and other mind-manipulating training methods create soldiers willing to follow orders and kill.

This indoctrination aims to create the reaction of “just tell me who the enemy is, and I'll go after him with any weapons you provide.” But indoctrination only goes so far. That's what the generals learned in Vietnam that persuaded them to change to a professional military.

Armed bodies of oppressors

Esprit de corps is very important for leaders in a professional military. Esprit de corps is a phrase from the French that literally translates to “spirit of the body.” The dictionary defines it as “the common spirit existing in the members of a group, inspiring enthusiasm, devotion and strong regard for the honor of the group.”

These bodies are what Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin and other communists and revolutionaries referred to when they talked about the bourgeois state and its police and standing army — the special bodies of armed men (or of any gender today) placed above society and alienating themselves from it as required to protect and fight for the wealthy rulers at the top of capitalist society.

Once you're in uniform, esprit de corps means your fellow troops are people (Black, Brown or white) you spend every day with, train with, go out drinking with. They're your family, your comrades, people you're willing to protect and die for. If the group feels threatened, the group as a whole, heavily armed, will defend itself.

That extreme group dynamic, as a tool of the rich and powerful, creates a lean and mean fighting machine that when dropped in hostile locations can lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people (most often people of color) and calamities like at Wounded Knee in the United States, My Lai in Vietnam and the Flour Massacre a few days ago in Gaza.

Esprit de corps leads to the idea that if troops (or cops) feel threatened, they can strike back at the enemy in their defense at will. How many people of color have been killed by cops — the cops backed by the U.S. Supreme Court — with the excuse that “I was justified, because I felt threatened.”

That's also what the Israeli Occupation Forces stormtroopers said — “We felt threatened” — about why they massacred the starving crowd of Palestinians Feb. 29.

The U.S. military loves to give out awards — medals of honor, Purple Hearts, Bronze stars and so on. Almost all of them are awarded to soldiers for protecting each other. Countless movies have been made on how so-called brave soldiers defended their outnumbered fellow troops against the evil enemy. Every one of those movies is imperialist propaganda.

The people we should feel solidarity with are not the media-created innocent U.S. troops defending themselves but the people defending their countries against U.S. imperialism.

Oppressed peoples have the right to resist

Don't the Vietnamese, Iraqis, Cubans, Palestinians, Africans — in Sudan, in the Congo, in Niger — people in Korea, the Philippines, people all over the world have a right to defend themselves against imperialist occupation and exploitation?

I hope Bushnell's act reverberates within the military and makes other soldiers, sailors, marines and air force members start to question their deployment orders. I hope it breaks down some of the esprit de corps.

The U.S. government is the enemy of the world's people. The U.S. never, never, never, never sends its military anywhere for the good of the workers in any country. The troops are sent there for the benefit of the corporations who rule the U.S. It is **never** a force for good.

As Aaron Bushnell said — before he couldn't say anything anymore — “Free Palestine!”
To that, I would like to add: Free the workers anywhere in the world where capitalism and imperialism exploit and oppress them.

Power to the People, from Palestine to Philadelphia!

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