EXONERATE LAST HADITHA MARINE

Last week, President Obama announced the withdrawal all US troops from Iraq at year’s end. Some hail it as the end of a war that should never have occurred. Others see it as a great strategic blunder, committed for political expediency, which will lead to civil conflict. While the decision to withdraw from Iraq is clearly a political one, it is just one of the many political decisions which affect wars and their outcomes. One unfortunate reality is that sometimes US military personnel get caught in the political crossfire. While the President’s decision will bring one chapter of the war to a close, there is another chapter which remains unfinished.

While the last of his brother and sisters-in-arms will have left Iraq before December 31st, one Marine will be held a political hostage to the Iraq War. His name is Staff Sergeant Frank Wuterich. SSgt Wuterich is the remaining hostage of a great wrong which occurred at the height of the war in Iraq and the political arguments over it; it is long past the time for this wrong to be righted, and this chapter ended.

In early 2006, a very obvious enemy propaganda ploy hit the press, falsely accusing US Marines of the murder of 24 Iraqi civilians at a town called Haditha in November 2005. The story was seized upon by the press, anti-war groups, and some of the most powerful members of Congress, led by Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and the late John Murtha. Six months before the investigation into the incident was completed and any charges were filed, John Murtha took to the airwaves and publicly accused the Marines of “cold-blooded murder.” In doing so, he effectively put the United States Congress “Stamp of Approval” on enemy propaganda, inspired the anti-war advocates, undermined support for the troops at home, and solidified the “truth” of the enemy’s side of the story on the Arab street.

It was politically impossible for the Department of Defense to dismiss the charges created by the heavily doctored video tapes (which the insurgents produced after moving the bodies and removing all evidence of insurgent activities) and the contradictory testimonies of the “eye witnesses” given to the Naval Criminal Investigation Service six months after the incident, especially after Nancy Pelosi became Speaker of the House and Murtha the Chairman of the House Appropriations Sub Committee for Defense.

However, the truth has a habit of coming out. As 2007 progressed into to 2008; seven of the eight Marines who were charged were not only found to be “not guilty,” they were fully exonerated. In the case of Lance Corporal Justin Sharratt, who happens to be from Murtha’s own district, he was found to have conducted himself to highest standards of the Marine Corps for a Marine in combat.

For some reason, however, SSgt Wuterich did not go to trial before the 2008 election, even though it was nearly two years after he was charged. In fact, he is not scheduled to go to trial until January 4, 2012, more than five years after the initial charges were levied against him and more than six years after the combat action for which all of his squad mates have now been commended.

As the old saying goes: “*justice delayed is justice denied*.” In SSgt Wuterich’s case, he has been denied the privilege of leading other Marines and eligibility for promotion for over five years because of the pending charges. He has spent the last five years of his life and career in a legal purgatory, largely because of the political vulnerability his exoneration would have caused for his most vocal accuser, Congressman John Murtha. But Murtha is gone now, and his former Chief of Staff, John Hugya has admitted that the continued prosecution of SSgt Wuterich is wrong, telling the Somerset, PA Daily American on October 20th that SSgt Wuterich “should be exonerated and pardoned if convicted.”

It is time for the President to order the Secretary of Defense to drop the charges against SSgt Wuterich and restore him to his rightful place as a combat leader with any back-dated promotions and pay raises he would have had, if not for the pending charges. It is time for Congressman Mark Critz to introduce a Congressional Resolution honoring the Haditha Marines for their bravery in combat and right the wrong inflicted on them by his predecessor.

*Lt Col William T Russell is one of 55 endorsed Combat Veterans For Congress and a former Republican Congressional Candidate in the 12th Congressional District of Pennsylvania who ran against Rep Murtha despite the threats he received for doing so. He is an internationally published columnist and has been a featured guest on a number of national television and radio news shows. He is a retired Lieutenant Colonel from the US Army and has served in Desert Storm, the Iraq War, and the Balkans. He and his wife, Kasia, were both in the Pentagon on 9/11.*