

Veteran drives through crowd in Times Square: The war comes home

By Eric London
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On Thursday, a 26-year-old military veteran named Richard Rojas drove his Honda Accord through a crowded sidewalk in New York City's Times Square, killing an 18-year-old Michigan woman and wounding 22. Rojas says he was on Phenacylidine (PCP) and that he intended to kill passers-by.

After crashing through the crowd, Rojas ran around screaming and waving his arms. He evidently told police that god told him to commit this horrible act. He had previously reported hearing voices in his head. He allegedly told police, "You were supposed to shoot me!"

At a press conference following the incident, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced, "There is no indication that this was an act of terrorism."

By this, de Blasio meant that Rojas had no association with an organized terrorist group. But, in a larger sense, this tragedy is the product of the terror wreaked by US imperialism across the world, poisoning social relations domestically and breaking the minds of countless young enlisted people.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Rojas' childhood friend, Hansel Guerrero, explained that Rojas joined the Navy as "a journey out of the New York life." Guerrero and Rojas lived in the same apartment building on Walton Avenue in the working-class neighborhood of Mount Eden, in New York's Bronx borough.

Guerrero told the *Times*: "People go and they serve their country and they come back crazy and nobody helps them."

Rojas, whose mother is Dominican, worked in auto shops and dreamed of graduating from college. He joined the Navy in 2011, working as an electrician's mate until he was dishonorably discharged in 2014. It is not clear whether he served in a combat zone. While

stationed at a Naval base in Jacksonville, Florida, Rojas was arrested in 2012 for threatening violence against police. In 2013, the Navy locked him up for two months in a military jail, though it has not been reported why.

Rojas' friends explained that he wasn't the same upon returning from the Navy. On April 15, 2015, he was convicted for driving while intoxicated.

Reuters spoke with another of Rojas' friends, Harrison Ramos: "Rojas returned from his Navy service with a drinking problem and had posted 'crazy stuff' on social media," the news service reported.

Ramos told Reuters: "Don't make him out to be a terrorist or something. He served his country and when he came back, nobody helped him. He went through a real rough time. That's my friend, and it hurts."

"He finally came home, and it was hard for him to find a job," Ramos added. "He was having a lot of bad nightmares. He was talking crazy. He was acting strange."

The *Times* reported: "His mind was clouded with conspiracy theories. His dreams of opening his own clothing business had wilted. He lashed out at friends who challenged him; some thought his grasp of reality slipped and that he needed psychiatric help.

"During a string of arrests in recent years, Mr. Rojas once threatened to kill police officers, and last week accused a notary of trying to steal his identity and grabbed his neck, the authorities said."

The sentiments expressed by Rojas' friends are commonplace in a country where hundreds of thousands of veterans have been broken by the weight of a quarter century of war. There are many young people in the US who know a veteran who "came back crazy" with "nobody to help them," as Rojas' friends put it. Some counties have even set up special court

programs for veterans convicted of crimes.

Last month, a 23-year-old Army veteran in North Carolina strapped her service dog to a tree and shot it five times before posting a video of the execution to Facebook. The dog was intended to help her with her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the episode calls to mind the first line of Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, a series of short stories about returning veterans and the ongoing wars: "We shot dogs."

On May 16, 24-year-old Edwin Fuentes was shot to death by police following a stand-off in Tustin, California. Fuentes was an Afghanistan veteran who suffered from PTSD. His neighbor, another veteran, told the *OC Register* that Fuentes "was having problems and he wanted other vets to talk to."

A 2016 study from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) revealed that 20 veterans kill themselves every day—over 116,000 since 2001, roughly the size of the population of Michigan's state capital, Lansing.

A survey of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans also revealed that a majority of veterans have contemplated suicide. A 2017 VA report found that female veterans are two to five times more likely to kill themselves than civilian women, in part due to the prevalence of rape and sexual abuse within the military.

The reactionary climate of nationalism and brutality engendered by the US military has transformed the social composition of the country.

The US Defense Department is the country's largest employer, with 3.2 million employees, military and civilian. As the strike force of corporate America, the military exerts an immense power over all of the "official" institutions of American capitalism.

It's reactionary culture, of idealizing violence and justifying its crimes in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan through hyper-nationalism, permeates into broader sections of society, altering not only the personal lives of millions of veterans, but also the social psychology of the country as a whole. No American is unfamiliar with the nauseating displays of militarism in everyday life: the bomber fly-overs before sporting events, Marine Corps recruiters in high schools, the use of tanks and assault rifles by local police.

In the words of Shakespeare's Edward IV: "They shall have wars and pay for their presumption." The personal breakdown of individuals like Richard Rojas

exemplifies the breakdown of American society under the weight of US imperialism and capitalism.

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