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## Sniper team tells of pressure from above

Members of a U.S. Army unit in Iraq accused in murder trials say they felt pushed to notch more 'kills.'

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By Ned Parker

BAGHDAD — Here they were, hardened combat soldiers, grounded on a military base far from the palm groves, canals and marshes where they once prowled.

But at least for a moment this week, they were still the Painted Demons, the elite sniper unit that struck fear in the so-called triangle of death south of Baghdad. That couldn't be taken away: not by breaking them up, as the Army had done, and not even by the murder trials of three of their members at Camp Victory.

They surrounded Sgt. Evan Vela, whose preliminary hearing on murder charges began Sunday morning. Vela, a stocky 23-year-old, bear-hugged them, smiling and laughing. He looked nothing like the man who had broken down on the witness stand days before, at the trial of a fellow sniper.

Then, he had spoken in barely audible tones about firing two bullets at point-blank range into an Iraqi detainee's head, allegedly on the orders of Staff Sgt. Michael A. Hensley, the leader of the Painted Demons.

Interviews and court transcripts portray a 13-man sniper unit that felt under pressure to produce a high body count, a Vietnam-era measure that the Pentagon officially has disavowed in this war. They describe a sniper unit whose margins of right and wrong were blurred: by Hensley, if you believe Army prosecutors; by the Army, if you believe the accused.

The main line of defense for Vela and Hensley is a shocking one: In their zeal to get more "kills" out of snipers, officers of the 1st Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, allegedly pushed a program of leaving weaponry as "bait," and allowing snipers to kill anyone who came to pick the items up.

That, defense attorneys say, led to loose rules of engagement that the Army now says amounted to murder. The Pentagon has rebutted the allegations about "baiting," and is treating the three prosecutions as isolated cases of rogue soldiers.

"I don't know how far up the chain this baiting program goes right now. I know the government is trying to dummy this down to the lowest level possible," said Vela's attorney, James Culp.

"Our government is asking our soldiers and Marines to make morally bruising decisions under the most horrific conditions imaginable," Culp added. "When the government doesn't like the results, they isolate and vilify the soldier while hiding behind security clearances, classifications and unreasonable expectations."

When Hensley joined the Army scouts in March, his reputation preceded him: He had been a sniper in Afghanistan. He won an Army sniper competition in 2002.

He is 6-foot-3, muscular, and arrived with a shaven head and tattoos of dragons and other symbols. Soldiers explained that you either loved or hated Hensley. There was no in-between. In his soldiers' words, "the guy was 100% Army." No one else came close. If his men carried 100 pounds on their back, he'd carry 200. That was Sgt. Hensley.

"You know, we'd be in a canal and you'd just look at him trudging through this awful terrain, and you're just like, 'God. The dude is nuts. What's wrong with that guy?' " Spc. Joshua Michaud said at the initial hearing for Hensley in July.

### **The 'Painted Demons'**

The Iraqi police started to call the snipers the "Painted Demons" because of the way Hensley used camouflage makeup to draw tiger stripes down his face. "He's the kind of guy that they make movies about. You know, he's the guy who -- he's just really good at his job, there's no way around it," Michaud added.

But the men acknowledged in their testimony that they saw a dark side to Hensley. Just after Christmas, his former roommate at Ft. Richardson, Alaska, died in a bomb blast south of Baghdad. Then a few months later, his fiancée committed suicide. If he grieved, he didn't show it. He told his men he would deal with it when they all left Iraq. Right now, he said, he wanted to keep them alive.

There was a moral question hovering over the sniper team before Hensley arrived, members said. If they had been authorized to bait an area with bomb-making materials and other props, then lie in wait to kill anyone who fell for the trap, couldn't they also lay the props down after they killed someone? Sgt. 1st Class Steve Kipling, Hensley's predecessor, had broached the question, Sgt. Anthony Murphy recalled. "He said, 'Should we, or what do you think? Should we make the body look -- basically, should we make it look more 'guilty'?' "

The answer in the U.S. military's code of conduct is unequivocal: no. But commanders seemed unhappy with the snipers' performance, and there was pressure to produce results, members said. "They were upset with scouts and snipers up until about [the] March time frame," Murphy said in court testimony in July. "It just kind of felt like, 'What are you guys doing wrong out there? What's wrong?' "

The directions to the snipers in the swamps seemed to be that it was OK to interpret rules of engagement liberally, particularly about using deadly force when under threat, soldiers said. "We needed to find a way so that we could get the bad guys the right way and still maintain the right military things to do," Michaud said. "But if we push this a little bit more, you know: 'Hey, did you feel threatened?' Bottom line: 'Yeah, I felt threatened.' Then it's OK."

### **Heightened scrutiny**

Under Hensley, the sniper unit's kill rate increased. Only one sniper kill had been recorded in the 5 1/2 months before his arrival. On Hensley's first mission, the section shot five Iraqis dead. Soldiers attributed the success to his training and drills. He also enjoyed a close relationship with the sergeant major, one of the top enlisted officers in the battalion, soldiers said. Defense attorneys allege that the baiting practice came from the sergeant major and the battalion commander, if not from higher authorities.

But the rising kill rate brought greater scrutiny. After two specialists in the sniper unit were caught sleeping on watch, they alerted Army officials to what they suspected was the baiting program.

The sniper unit was investigated for three incidents. Hensley is accused of shooting an unarmed man April 14 and of ordering Spc. Jorge G. Sandoval Jr. on April 27 to kill a man who was cutting grass with a scythe. Both Hensley and Vela face charges in the May 11 shooting of the Iraqi man who had stumbled upon their sniper position.

Murder charges against Sandoval were dropped last week. He was convicted of poor conduct, for planting detonation cord on the body of the man with the scythe. The members of the unit -- and they still consider themselves a unit -- are angry over what has happened to them. They blame those outside their ranks.

Sgt. Richard Hand, who was on the May 11 mission in which Vela said he shot the Iraqi, lashed out at the prosecutors and the Army command during his testimony in July. He criticized officers for not understanding life on the sniper teams, which survive by their wits in the Iraqi countryside.

"If you've never been outside the wire, you really have no basis -- you don't have a basis to judge what I do or what I don't do. You've never been in a life-or-death situation, where you've had to count on the guy to your left and right," Hand said.

"People who stay back here, in my opinion, are not mentally in the game. They've never been out there."