**Sample 1:**

What goes through the mind of a soldier when he or she is thinking about abusing an unarmed captive whom he believes to be a terrorist or insurgent? What is the experience like for a soldier who abuses a captive? Is it the same if he regards the captive as only a member of a resentful, occupied population? And when years later he recounts and reflects on the abuse he committed, does he view his actions with satisfaction or chagrin? Is his daily existence in the relative tranquility of his homeland peaceful or is he troubled by his wartime experiences? In short, what was he thinking then, and what is he thinking now?

These questions lie at the heart of this book. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, American soldiers and intelligence operatives were sent to the far corners of the Earth to hunt down and kill or capture those responsible for the outrages of the Twin Towers or who were deemed to pose a threat to the United States. Suspects were plucked from battles in Afghanistan and Iraq and in clandestine operations in countries whose local governments looked the other way. Captives were spirited to locations around the world where they were questioned by Americans or their allies. Reports of torture, sexual humiliation, and killings came to light, none more spectacular than the revelations of the abuses in Saddam Hussein’s former prison, the infamous Abu Ghraib.

Although the American government was quick to dismiss the military police guards at Abu Ghraib as “rogue” soldiers, the soldiers’ defenders pointed to a system and situation that ensured that abuse would be all but inevitable. The world was left to conclude that either abnormal individuals all happened to be lumped together to run amok, or that the barrel into which honorable soldiers were cast had been rotten all along and perforce produced bad apples. In any case, the Abu Ghraib scandal, and stories of detainees being water-boarded, chained in stress positions, or dying suspicious deaths in American custody pointed to the possibility that abusive violence was part of established institutional practices. It was also possible that such methods had been used not only in detention centers like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo but even by regular troops during the wide-ranging field operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Journalist Joshua Phillips wrote about abuse in Iraq and Afghanistan perpetrated by combat units that left some American soldiers riven with guilt and shame and may have resulted in suicides among the returning veterans.

This book is the result of the Detainee Interaction Study (DIS) conducted in 2011–2012 to understand the experiences of American military and intelligence operatives who were faced with the choice to abuse captives in the Counter-Terrorism (CT) and Counter Insurgency (COIN) campaigns after September 11, 2001. Specifically, efforts were made to find and interview veterans of military and civilian US forces who had first-hand experience with captured insurgents and reputed terrorists in the so-called Global War on Terrorism.

Thirteen military veterans and one civilian intelligence operative agreed to be interviewed after being promised anonymity. Most did not engage in the perverse behavior revealed in the Abu Ghraib photographs.. The study reveals, however, that some of the fourteen abused detainees in ways even more atrocious than did the Abu Ghraib military police guards. All had the choice to commit, eschew, or oppose abusive violence (AV). The military personnel all served in Iraq, where they had most of their experience with abusive violence. [[1]](#footnote-1) They all had opportunities to witness abusive violence against both detainees and the general populace.

The study defined abusive violence as *violence directed at people that is not necessary for immediate self-defense*. This definition covers violence and the threat of violence against non-combatants, detainees and members of the public; it was not intended to include normal combat operations. The definition did not seem to confuse the study participants, some of whom did participate in traditional combat during the invasion of Iraq or while under attack in convoys, patrols, or raids.

The study used three primary questions to elicit the experiences of Americans who chose to commit abusive violence: Why did using abusive violence make sense at the time to participants? How did abusers choose the methods of abuse , and how did they learn about methods from which to choose? How do veterans now view the abusive violence they observed or perpetrated?

**Sample 2:**

Richard Miller describes an incident that represented the crossing of a threshold for him, when abuse went beyond the pale. He also describes how the abuse affected him and his men. One month after he arrived in Iraq, Miller fully acted upon his anger toward Muslims, transforming himself into a torturer and murderer who doubted his own sanity.

*How did that incident start?*

We were out doing knock and searches, and …we were in a barber shop and there were a couple of men in there and this one man just kept like looking at us, like mean mugging us, and so I sent our interpreter over who punched the guy in the face and we grabbed the guy and we brought him, we took him into our vehicle and we were beatin’ the hell out of him inside of our vehicle and inside our Humvee and then we took him to the COP, to the dungeon to interrogate him, and at this point, three members of our, of our company had already been killed by roadside bombs, and so…through the anger, one of my good friends was already killed, and in anger I started to interrogate this, this member myself along with my platoon sergeant, er, my squad leader.

*How was he dressed?*

He was dressed in a—in the white, ah…"man dress,” they called it, and he had a—he was an older gentleman, probably in his 40’s and…gray hair, um…a bit of the gray, graybeard going on, like gray stubble, but…ah…so we took him to the dungeon.

Miller’s account demonstrates how he reacted when Iraqis the continuing force of his reaction to anything less than cowed submission by the Iraqi people. Fueled by rage over his comrade’s deaths, his habitual physical abuse of Iraqis became more extreme.

As Miller had mentioned, the initial beating took place in the squad’s vehicle:

*Was he restrained?*

No, he wasn’t; this one wasn’t restrained. He was actually…

*From point of capture all the way down there he…?*

Right, he just—he was just covered up like this the whole time because we were striking him.

*Did he receive any injuries when he was being beaten only?*

Couple of his teeth were knocked out…and a lot of blood.

*How many people participated in the beating?*

Three.

*What was the interpreter doing during that?*

Sitting in the vehicle…laughing. Once you look back, you could see that the interpreter was laughing kind of nervously, but laughing, like just trying to be a part of it without trying to be a part of it.

The team returned to the COP:

*Okay, so you’re downstairs?*

Right.

*In the dungeon, and who took the lead in the questioning*?

Me.

*How did it start?*

I was with the interpreter and I started asking him…to… “Tell me where the militia is, where’s militia?” and he kept saying, “I don’t know Mister, I don’t know…” and I said, “No, you’re a liar; you’re a fuckin’ liar, tell me where the militia is.” And then I was like “[militia name], you know, it was [militia name], are you [militia name]?” and he was like, “No, I’m not [militia name] …” I was like, “No, you’re [militia name] aren’t you?” At this point, I was just, I was just frustrated; I was pissed off. Nobody ever seemed to know anything, and I took out my SOG knife and I started cutting his face.

*Where?*

On the cheek right here, started slicing down his cheek, and ah…

*When you did that, what did you hear?*

I heard him screaming and ah…

*What else did you hear?*

Laughing.

*Who was laughing?*

The—my men behind me…and also myself.

*What were you saying?*

I don’t recall saying anything; and I don’t recall laughing, but I can hear myself laughing. That’s when I started, I guess you could say, "peeling off skin from his face"…seeing how deep I can go and what’s underneath the skin.

*And what did you find?*

More and more blood.

Richard’s frustration-venting abuse began during an interrogation, but it quickly descended into the same kind of blood-letting that took place in the back of Chris Alexander’s Humvee. The difference is that the frustration, anger, and vengeance that Richard vented in the dungeon was in no way fueled by the aftermath a battle in which the soldier’s life and limb were threatened. Richard’s rage had gone too far; consequently, it was not possible for the detainee to be turned in to the MPs.

Miller described the course of action selected:

*And then what happened?*

Um…kept questioning him, he was unable to talk anymore, and…think through shock, part of his face was just hanging down. You could see inside of his mouth, here…because there was no skin there, and…I knew that we would get in trouble for doing this if we were to take him to any kind of MP station or whatnot, so I instructed my team to…get ready to go out and talked to my squad leader and he was like, “Yeah, take him out.” So, we took him out…

*When…you use the term “take him out” what—did that have a single or a dual meaning?*

It had a dual meaning; it meant for us to take him out of the COP and then “take him out” because this guy can go and tell on us, and…so we drove him approximately two miles away from our COP, we dismounted, walked up next to a, we called it “[deleted]’s Gorge” because it was where somebody had fallen into a gorge. It was just a huge [unintelligible] and ah…fired a round into the back of his head and he dropped.

*Did you have one of your men shoot him?*

No, I shot him myself.

*Did you use your personal weapon for that?*

Yes.

*Were you at all concerned about ballistics?*

No.

*When you say “he dropped”, what do you mean?*

He dropped into the gorge; he was still standing and I walked up behind him with my M4. I just fired one shot into the…bottom part of his head.

*Was he still blindfolded?*

Yep. (sigh)

*At that point, had—were his hands restrained?*

No, his hands were not restrained.

*What did you hear after you fired?*

Um…all I heard was the ringing from the shot in my ears.

*What was visible in front of you?*

It was dark at this point, it was—like you could see lights in homes, and that was about it.

*How many of you had taken a ride out there?*

Five. It was a full vehicle.

*What was the conversation on the way out there?*

There wasn’t any; we didn’t…it was like the…you just knew what to do, you didn’t have to discuss it, you didn’t want to discuss it.

*What was the mood like on the way back?*

Jovial, clappin’ and joking; talking about going to get something to eat.

*Did anyone…*

A: Talking about pussy, stuff like that.

*Did any—anyone refer to the shooting?*

No.

*When you got back, what’d you guys do?*

Went and got something to eat, laid down and watched our own personal movies or played video games on our own personal PlayStation portables.

*Did you say anything to your…squad leader about…?*

I just gave him the OK sign.

*How long were you out?*

No longer than fifteen minutes.

**Sample 3:**

The experiences of soldiers who participated in the study offer insight into the circumstances that can influence the attitudes and actions of soldiers and intelligence operatives who find themselves with the power to abuse those they regard as the “Other,” whether detained persons or captive populations. What their experiences tell us is that some Americans in those circumstances, indoctrinated to believe that the people under their power were vicious enemies who were less than human, and whose superiors countenanced or encouraged abuse, succumbed to frustration, fear, and anger. Their experiences also tell us is that some others, subject to the same pressures, did not succumb but instead found the courage to directly confront the abusers, to divert their comrades from abuse, and to extricate themselves from situations where abuse would occur.

The accounts provide first-hand evidence of the petty cruelties and gross atrocities that were committed when participants and their comrades were not properly restrained . They also tell the stories of abusers who turned away from the worst behavior. The adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely bears re-considering, for as some abusers demonstrated, even when power remains absolute, the capacity of “monsters” to hear the small, clear voice of their own humanity remains intact. A way back can be found if circumstances permit. Some “monsters” do not find the way out in time to prevent soul-crushing disorders. Even those who do not descend to such depths are scarred by abusive violence.

The soldiers interviewed for the study speak of young adults gone to war for many reasons; some noble, others not. Nearly all of the professional interrogators and combat soldiers speak of being ill-prepared for, and inept at, questioning the persons they were sent to seize or who were thrust upon them. The fact that virtually no one knew how to effectively interrogate, and the immense pressure they felt to accomplish a mission they believed required “breaking” people, meant that the temptation to employ force and inflict pain was difficult to resist.

Few of the study participants who admitted that they committed abuse now view their actions as justified. They may have believed at the time that they had little choice other than to terrorize those under their power, but only one now clings to that view.

As a citizen of a democracy that claims to honor the sanctity of rights inalienable, I believe that the nation has a responsibility to the sons and daughters it sent across the globe, and to those at the receiving end of our global power, to ensure that our soldiers always know that there are choices other than abusive violence, and that they are neither called upon, nor permitted, to abuse in America’s name. It was for those reasons that I undertook this study. The images from Abu Ghraib convinced me that some Americans had come to the conclusion that it made sense to violently abuse helpless detainees.

I also have heard the voices that add to the tortured logic that can lead to abuse.

After having interviewed the fourteen participants, I am now no less offended by the conduct exposed by the Abu Ghraib revelations than when I first learned of it. Some of the acts recounted within this study are far worse than what happened in that prison. The time I spent with the participants has helped me to understand the path traveled by some who became “monsters” and the suffering they endure. I wish to make plain that to understand is not to excuse, and that none of the participants seeks to be excused. Each abuser bears the weight of every act he chose to carry out. Their victims’ suffering dwarfs any guilt that they may feel. It would be a mistake, however, to think that violent abuse leaves anyone unscathed. Louis Sanders’ words convey much of what was learned in this study:

What causes, I think, a lot of the problems, especially, you know, all the problems which also affects the detainee situation, that we are separate from the other, you know, that there is some kind of super-disconnect. That what we do to other people really doesn’t affect us, which allows us to do these things to other people. But whether we like it or not or want to accept it or not, what we do to others we—you know, we do to ourselves, and there’s no way that you can go to war and or you know objectify somebody, detain them, torture them, mistreat them and think you’re going to walk away clean…it’s not going to happen.

Citizens of nations engaged in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency struggles probably suffer from the same belief in that “super-disconnect.” Neither they, nor their governments can “walk away clean” if they do not confront the conditions, circumstances, and attitudes that foster violent abuse, including torture, by soldiers and intelligence operatives to whom they have entrusted so much power.

1. The civilian intelligence operative only worked with a single high-value detainee outside the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)