Accounts differ on Haditha slayings

by Steve Liewer

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. - Prosecutors and defense attorneys Tuesday sketched sharply contrasting versions of what happened Nov. 19, 2005, the day Lance Cpl. Justin Sharratt killed three brothers in Haditha, Iraq.

The accounts emerged during the second day of a pretrial hearing at Camp Pendleton to help decide whether Sharratt should face court-martial.

"One scenario describes what appears to be a proper application of force," Lt. Col. Paul Ware, the Marine lawyer presiding over the hearing, said during questioning of a witness. "The other, taken at face value, amounts to an execution."

Sharratt is charged with three counts of unpremeditated murder for shooting Jasib, Kahtan, and Jamal Aiad Ahmed. The leader of his squad, Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich, allegedly executed a fourth Ahmed brother.

Wuterich attended Tuesday's hearing, as did Sharratt's parents, Darryl and Theresa Sharratt of Canonsburg, Pa.

The Ahmeds were among two dozen Iraqis killed during the Haditha incident. In all, the deaths took place over several hours after a roadside bomb struck a convoy carrying members of Wuterich's platoon, killing one Marine and wounding two others.

Sharratt, Wuterich and a third enlisted Marine from Camp Pendleton could be sentenced to life in prison for their actions that day. In addition, four officers are accused of not properly investigating the killings.

Tuesday's witnesses included Mark Platt and Nayda Mannle, special agents for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. The agents interviewed the Ahmed brothers' wives and children in late March and early April 2006.

Through a translator, the Iraqis told Platt and Mannle how several Marines came to their two-house compound, separated four men from the women and children, marched the men into a bedroom and killed them.

Defense attorneys Tuesday pointed to statements from Sharratt and two other Marines indicating that they had heard small-arms fire from one of the Ahmed houses. When the Marines burst into the bedroom in question, according to the statements, they found several men pointing rifles at them and had no choice but to shoot first.

During his time on the stand, Platt described finding blood stains in the doorway, on the walls and on furniture inside the bedroom. He also testified about seeing bullet fragments that seemed to come from U.S. military weapons.

Mannle said the Ahmed family members' accounts seemed consistent and truthful.

Sharratt's attorneys hammered at what they viewed as omissions and shortcomings by the naval investigators. During cross-examination, Mannle acknowledged that Sharratt had passed a polygraph exam concerning whether any of the Ahmed brothers pointed a rifle at him.

She also said time constraints prompted by the extreme danger to foreigners in Haditha prevented her from separating the Ahmed family members before questioning them, which is standard procedure in crime investigations.

In addition, Mannle confirmed that Marines seized several AK-47 rifles and a suitcase allegedly containing Jordanian passports from the Ahmed compound the day of the killings. She said her agency wasn't able to track down these items, which might have linked the Ahmed brothers to insurgent activity.

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