Marine found guilty of murder in Iraq killing

by Rick Rogers

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. - Marine Sgt. Lawrence G. Hutchins III was found guilty of unpremeditated murder Thursday and faces a sentence of life in prison without parole for orchestrating and supervising the kidnapping and execution of an Iraqi man in April 2006. Hutchins, 23, is the first Marine to be convicted of a wartime murder since the Vietnam War.

The jury also found him guilty of larceny, making a false official statement and conspiracy to commit murder, larceny and obstruction of justice.

It acquitted him of kidnapping, obstruction of justice, assault and housebreaking, as well as one other count of making a false official statement.

"This is the most important trial in the Hamdaniya case," Lt. Col. John Baker, the lead prosecutor, said shortly before the verdict was delivered.

"I'm nervous," he said, particularly because of the prosecution's previous failures to win a murder conviction against the other Hamdaniya defendants.

Before rising out of his chair to hear the verdict, Hutchins took a sip of soda. He stood at attention, stared straight ahead and showed no emotion as the jury foreman announced "guilty" or "not guilty" to each count.

Standing behind him were his brother, his wife, Reyna, and his 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Kylie.

Two weeks ago, Hutchins told a newspaper near his hometown of Plymouth, Mass., that he expected to do well in his trial and would be acquitted of all charges lodged against him.

Jurors deliberated for 10 hours before rendering their verdict, which some saw as reflecting the U.S. military's indifference to the killing of Iraqi civilians and others saw as sympathy for troops who became increasingly frustrated by high-stress urban combat.

Like Hutchins, the jurors were all Iraq war veterans.

They began hearing testimony from Hutchins' friends and family members Thursday afternoon, and are expected to start deliberating his sentence the next day.

Hutchins, six other Camp Pendleton Marines and a Navy corpsman took the Iraqi man from his bed, dragged him to a roadside hole, bound his hands and feet and shot him repeatedly on April 26, 2006, in the rural town of Hamdaniya.

Then they tried to disguise the crime as a firefight between U.S. troops and an insurgent who was discovered trying to plant a bomb.

The defendants have long acknowledged that the abduction and execution took place. But they said a variety of reasons compelled them to kill, including post-traumatic stress disorder and pressure from commanders to get tougher with insurgents.

Hutchins' hopes might largely rest on convincing jurors that forces beyond his control prompted the Hamdaniya incident. His attorneys also plan to portray him as a caring, family oriented man and a highly responsible Marine.

Even before the verdict was announced, Hutchins' attorneys practiced showing photos of Hutchins on a big screen facing the jury box. The strategy is commonly used in efforts to humanize the convicted.

Besides the visual display and expected testimony of Hutchins' supporters, Hutchins is expected to take the stand on his own behalf.

Appealing for sympathy from the jurors could knock years off Hutchins' prison sentence.

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