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## Army Soldier Is Convicted In Attack on Fellow Troops

By Manuel Roig-Franzia  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Friday, April 22, 2005; Page A03

An Army sergeant who wanted to stop U.S. troops from killing his fellow Muslims was convicted by a military jury yesterday of murdering two colleagues and wounding 14 other soldiers in a chaotic grenade and rifle attack two days after the United States invaded Iraq.

Hasan Akbar, who turned 34 yesterday, faces the death penalty for the killings at Camp Pennsylvania in Kuwait, which prosecutors said were carefully planned to achieve "maximum carnage." The jury, which deliberated for 2 1/2 hours at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, N.C., before delivering its guilty verdicts on murder and attempted-murder charges, will reconvene Monday for a death-penalty hearing.

Both the prosecution and the defense said that Akbar -- who became a Muslim as an adult -- wanted to stop the soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division from killing Muslims. A defense lawyer argued that Akbar was mentally ill.

The accusation that Akbar was responsible for the attack struck an emotional chord in a military culture built around camaraderie and loyalty -- the "band of brothers" creed. Akbar is the first U.S. service member prosecuted on charges of murdering fellow troops in wartime since the Vietnam War era.

The attack jarred Camp Pennsylvania not long after 1 a.m. March 23, 2003, as members of the 101st Airborne Division, known as the "Screaming Eagles," were preparing to move from central Kuwait to Iraq. Grenades were rolled into several tents, setting off loud explosions, and shots were fired.

In the commotion, medics discovered that many of the wounded were members of the 1st Brigade's senior command staff. A search turned up an American soldier, who was taken into custody and later identified as Akbar.

Capt. Robert McGovern, the military prosecutor in the case, said Akbar acted with a "cool mind" in executing the attack with stolen grenades, according to the Associated Press.

Defense attorney Maj. Dan Brookhart tried to undermine that accusation by saying that Akbar is mentally ill and was confused on the night of the attacks, not suffering from "the blues" as an Army psychiatrist testified. "It doesn't make sense," Brookhart said, according to the Associated Press. "This guy doesn't have the blues. He's mentally ill."

The initial shock of Akbar's arrest was followed by vexing questions about his possible motives. Military officials disclosed that he had been repeatedly disciplined for insubordination and was being held back from advancing with his unit -- the 326th Engineering Battalion. A spokesman for the 101st said he had an "attitude problem."

Nothing about Akbar's upbringing seemed to presage the act of violence that gave him a measure of infamy. He was born Mark Fidel Kools, but his mother changed his name to Hasan Akbar. He had risen out of the rough Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles to earn aeronautical and mechanical engineering degrees at the University of California at Davis.

He later joined the Army and was stationed at Fort Campbell, which straddles the border between Kentucky and Tennessee. Neighbors painted conflicting pictures of him, with at least one describing Akbar as a "typical bachelor" with a garbage can filled with pizza boxes and beer bottles. Another neighbor said Akbar refused a beer at a cookout, citing his Muslim beliefs.

Akbar rose through the ranks to a low-level leadership position. In Kuwait, he was in charge of a unit that cleared land mines.

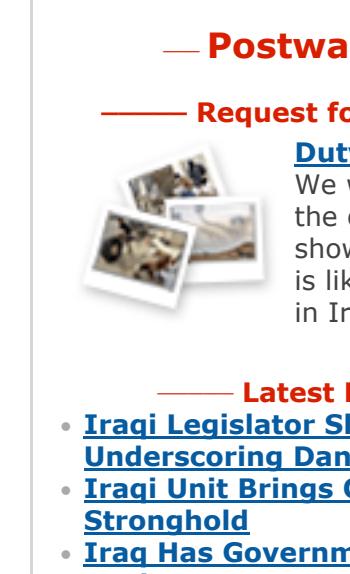
Akbar's mother, Quran Bilal of Baton Rouge, La., told reporters that he had skipped the 1991 Persian Gulf War because it conflicted with his religious faith. Military officials initially said they did not believe Akbar's religious beliefs had anything to do with the attack he was accused of committing in Kuwait. But not long after his arrest, Akbar's mother told reporters that she sensed his Muslim beliefs were creating tensions in his battalion as it prepared to invade a predominantly Muslim nation.

One of the men Akbar killed -- Air Force Maj. Gregory Stone, 43 -- was pelted by 83 pieces of shrapnel. The other was Army Capt. Christopher Seifert, 27. When they laid Seifert to rest in Pennsylvania, three of his old ROTC buddies mourned. They had once called themselves "The Four Musketeers."

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Sgt. Hasan Akbar, found guilty of murder in 2003 attack, faces the death penalty. (Gerry Broome -- AP)

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