
Marine Iraq War Veteran – Texas Death Row Inmate

John Thuesen

By: Robert H Miller - October 12, 2015



For a brief moment, John Thuesen was able to smile. Pressing his hand against the glass, he sought out the warmth my hand could provide. My hand on the glass was his only way of “connecting” with another human being, he explained.

That was on the rare occasion he spent any time in the company of another human being. Locked inside an 8x10 cell in solitary confinement for 23 hours each day, Thuesen has little to do but to wrestle with his demons; his remorse; his grief. The 31-year-old man sitting on Texas death row barely resembled the 18-year-old who enthusiastically signed up for the Marines more than a decade ago. Growing up in a farming community in south Texas,

Thuesen decided to join the Marines after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. His motivating factor—to serve proudly and help defend his country from future attacks. After boot camp he was deployed to Iraq in 2004 and was placed directly into the hotbed of conflict for nine long months. No training could prepare him for the unpredictable and dangerous side of war. He was often on edge.

Few of his memories in Iraq were pleasant, but the one that continues to haunt him occurred while he was nestled inside the turret of his Humvee with his machine gun pointed at a vehicle checkpoint. Checkpoints were good opportunities for suicide insurgents. Their goal was to kill as many American soldiers as possible by driving vehicles loaded with explosives through checkpoints and then detonating them. Thuesen knew all this when he spotted a vehicle with darkened windows turning a corner at high speeds, approaching the checkpoint where he was standing guard. Alarmed at the escalating situation, Thuesen's military training kicked in and his heart began beating fast as he began zeroing in at the looming target.



“The driver ignored our warning gestures and shouting to stop. We all were getting concerned so one of our men fired a warning flare into the air that could be clearly seen in board daylight as our last attempt to get his attention for the driver to halt. Ultimately the warnings were ignored and he continued towards us.”

Thuesen realized the sedan could be a bomb on wheels; he hunkered down in fighting position with his eye to his sight and waited for the last possible moment before allowing his trembling finger to squeeze the trigger.

The quiet mild-mannered Texan was now being pushed to his mental limits by a life or death situation. Systematically, he started firing—first at the tires and wheels, and then to the engine—hoping the first two areas would be enough to stop the car in its tracks. As the continuous stream of bullets tore through the car, piercing the metal like it was flimsy paper, the car continued to roll onward unabated. Realizing the situation was now critical; Thuesen was forced to take aim towards the front windshield and started pumping bullets.

Within seconds the car started to slow down and eventually crawled to a complete stop. It suddenly became deathly quiet, there was no explosion or fire or further disturbance. Seeing this Thuesen and his fellow Marines took in breath and a big sigh of relief thinking the event

was over. Unbeknownst to the men, the rear door of the vehicle swung open and out stumbled a hysterical boy covered with blood, and pieces of flesh from the occupants in the front seat.

Fortunately the maze of gunfire pumped into the car missed the boy. But it became obvious he was severely traumatized from this horrific incident. Shaken to his core, Thuesen became numb to the initial experience but when he finally realized the enormity and sadness of the situation “I held back my flood of tears from ever appearing—I was operating under the standard operating procedure rules for engagement, but in events like these, one always questions if you did the right thing.”

Thuesen finished his Iraq tour of duty and eventually returned to Texas serving out his remaining time in the military with the Marine Reserves. But he wasn't the same man who had left for war. He suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), explained Brad Levenson Thuesen's attorney through the Texas Office of Capital Writs.

“John was increasingly withdrawn and distant—the war changed him significantly,” Levenson said. “He was a different man after his time in Iraq according to his family and friends. PTSD did play a role in this unfortunate incident.”

In August 2008, Thuesen was admitted to the Department of Veteran Affairs hospital because he was suicidal and hearing voices. The New York Times reported that Thuesen was released four days later, despite his mother's objections. Less than a year later, Thuesen was arrested for killing his girlfriend, Rachel Joiner and her older brother Travis.

“I have no real memory of the incident—it just happened and I snapped,” he said. “I don't know why I did it. I just wanted to see her for a little bit, but she wouldn't let me.”

When he began to realize what he had done, Thuesen was horrified.

“I have incredible remorse and grief,” he began, “Not only for what I done but for the families' lives I have destroyed. I have apologized to everyone I could, especially privately in my prayers to Rachel and Travis for my actions.”

“Nothing can change what I have done and I must live with that,” he said.

His attorney has argued that PTSD has played a significant role in Thuesen's actions that night and continues to plead his case in court. Thuesen's state direct appeal has been denied and he awaits the convicting court's decision in state post-conviction litigation. The principle issue in Thuesen's case is whether the jury had sufficient information regarding Thuesen's PTSD in order to find him guilty of capital murder and sentence him to death.

The trauma of war has left an indelible scar that may have been the forerunner of tragic events that now plague his life. A decade ago, Thuesen was proudly serving his country in Iraq. Now he sits alone in solitary confinement cell on Texas Death Row for capital murder. “I never thought I would ever be here.”