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# The final, anguished years of a warrior-scholar who exposed **torture by U.S. troops**

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Retired Special Forces Maj. Ian Fishback, seen in December 2019, deployed four times to Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2005, he blew the whistle on U.S. troops who were torturing people in Iraq.

Retired Special Forces Maj. Ian Fishback graduated near the top of his West Point class, deployed four times to Iraq and Afghanistan, earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Michigan and was named one of *Time* magazine's most influential people in 2005 for blowing the whistle on torture by the U.S. military.

He died broke, virtually homeless and medicated with heavy antipsychotic drugs in an adult foster care center near Kalamazoo, Mich., on Nov. 19 at age 42, as his friends and family scrambled to find him mental health care.

"He was Captain America," says Marc Garlasco, a former Defense Department official who was at Human Rights Watch when Fishback reached out in 2005.

"It's just hard for me to comprehend that this is how the life of Captain America would end, in mental anguish while being forcibly medicated in some facility," Garlasco says. "It's a real damning, damning statement on 20 years of war and how we treat the veterans of this country."

Fishback grew up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He wasn't an obvious candidate for a military career, says his boyhood friend Justin Ford.

"There was no indication until he decided one day he'd go to West Point," Ford says. "A lot of those people have to plan most of their high school career for that. He got almost all of that through just hard work. Nothing ever came easy for him — he worked and got everything."

Fishback graduated from West Point with a bachelor's degree in Middle Eastern studies in 2001 and later deployed to Afghanistan and then Iraq with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division. It was in Iraq that he saw troops using "enhanced interrogation" tactics, including breaking prisoners' bones and stripping them naked in the freezing cold.

"It wasn't just a problem that we weren't following the Geneva Conventions. It was a problem that there was no clear standard to replace the Geneva Conventions. So people were just basically making their own stuff up," Fishback later told the *Hi-Phi Nation* podcast. By that time, the world had seen pictures from the Abu Ghraib scandal, but then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told Congress it was a simple matter of bad apples who would be punished, not a systematic problem with new U.S. military policy.

"My concern was that these soldiers were being scapegoated and that we weren't being honest to Congress," Fishback told *Hi-Phi Nation*. Fishback protested within his Army chain of command and continued to raise the issue for more than a year. Then he called Garlasco.

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Garlasco says Fishback was concerned about the Iraqi victims of torture but also his own soldiers. "He was worried about the moral injury that they had sustained, having participated in the torture of human beings," Garlasco notes.

Conversations with Human Rights Watch led Fishback to send a [letter to Sen. John McCain](#) that closed, "If we abandon our ideals in the face of adversity and aggression, then those ideals were never really in our possession. I would rather die fighting than give up even the smallest part of the idea that is 'America.' "

Fishback later met with McCain and many other members of Congress, meetings that were credited with helping to pass McCain's [Detainee Treatment Act of 2005](#). Being a whistleblower put Fishback in a delicate position, just as he was completing the arduous selection process for the Army's Special Forces. His sister, Jazcinda Jorgensen, says it was typical of Fishback to push on despite the headwinds.

"There's a right and there's a wrong, and you do what's right regardless of the cost. He's kind of stood by that throughout his life. And so when he recognized it, he wasn't intimidated necessarily by the size of the opposing force," she says.

Fishback always kept different parts of his life compartmentalized, according to Jorgensen.

"My role in his life was sister. So he left a lot of professional stuff behind. A lot of people kind of viewed him as serious, but he was goofy," she says, recalling how he would read books to her children and his own daughter. (Fishback's marriage in 2001 to a fellow soldier ended in divorce.)

"He would read to the kids at night from Harry Potter or Winnie the Pooh, and it was so much fun to hear him do the voices," Jorgensen says.

Fishback deployed twice more to Iraq, with Special Forces, and lost none of his moral rigidity, according to Army Lt. Col. James Vizzard. Vizzard would join Fishback in daily briefings to the commanding U.S. general in Baghdad, where it was often Fishback's job to refuse the general's requests of the Special Forces group.

"A lot of times, you know, our general wanted them to do things that frankly wasn't within their mission," Vizzard says. "And so here is a very young captain facing a two-star general, and a lot of times he had to basically say, 'No, we're not going to do that.' "

But Fishback was losing faith in how the U.S. was fighting the war in Iraq, focusing too much on direct action and not enough on building up Iraqi forces.

"It was like being in *Catch-22*, except you don't have the overall justification of beating the Nazis because you're not accomplishing anything. You're at best kicking the can down the road," Fishback told *Hi-Phi Nation*.

And Fishback felt that a few of his teammates distrusted him or thought he was soft on the enemy. He told the podcast that he got called a coward for opposing one mission but then reckless for suggesting another.

"I said, 'Look, man, I can't be cowardly and reckless at the same time. You got to pick. And the difference between these two missions is the last one was you got to go shoot stuff and fly around in helicopters and this one you don't. This is the most important type of mission for our sector, so get on the truck,' " Fishback told *Hi-Phi Nation*.

In 2014, he left the military and pursued a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Michigan. That's how he met Georgetown University professor Nancy Sherman.

"I knew him both as a warrior-scholar, a philosopher of just-war ethics and as someone who turned to me as a confidant when he was troubled," says Sherman.

She and other friends and family were starting to notice the strain. Fishback was speaking nationally about philosophy and war and completing his doctoral thesis, but his behavior veered toward paranoia. He claimed that other academics were stealing his work and talked about U.S. government agencies pursuing him. Considering his credentials, friends didn't immediately doubt him.

"One of the problems with Ian was that some of his paranoia seemed very reasonable," says Ford, his boyhood friend. "You know, like if the FBI is watching him and that seems plausible, right? I mean, but if a normal person from the street told you that, you think they're crazy."

Sherman thinks Fishback's mental illness could have been triggered during his Iraq tours with Special Forces, an intense fraternal group where he did not always feel completely trusted.

"Where there's a real sense of trust betrayals, it can lead to a kind of paranoia. You know, as the years went on, I saw this in Ian, and it broke my heart," says Sherman.

His sister says he was on and off medication, at turns refusing to get care from the Department of Veterans Affairs or accepting that he needed help.

After many public outbursts in his hometown of Newberry, Mich., a court ordered him put into treatment and on medication. He was placed in an adult foster care facility. His sister and friends started a GoFundMe campaign to get Fishback moved to a private psychiatric treatment program. At the same time, they lobbied the VA to find space for him — but the coronavirus pandemic has made an already [critical shortage of mental health care](#) even worse. On the evening of Nov. 18, a "veterans services navigator" from Southwest Michigan Behavioral Health visited Fishback. The next morning, Fishback was found dead. The cause is still unclear. Hours after he died, according to his sister, the VA Medical Center in Battle Creek, Mich., called her to offer him help.

"I'll have my friend in my heart forever, but I think that the nation did lose a very powerful voice," Ford, his boyhood friend, says.

"Going into the future, he was becoming a very talented philosopher. We all remember the McCain incident, but he was really becoming a very powerful voice for the morality of how we go to war. And I think he would have been a really good voice for the morality of how we handle mental illness."