

Tribute to Aaron Bushnell

The airman's self-immolation is a cry we are all choking back

By Iraq Veteran, Mike Prysner

The US military is presented as an institution that does protecting; defending; “saving.” But fundamentally, it is an institution of killing. Of mass killing. Throughout our country’s entire history there have been service members who could not grapple with that fact; who were horrified by it, and by their participation in it—of those who rebel against it, in some form or another. Aaron Bushnell was one of those service members. And he is, in his act of desperation and despair, a giant among them.

What is courage? I can’t claim to have it myself. I don’t even have the courage to watch the video he streamed of his self-immolation, even though I know he wanted us to bear witness to it. What more painful end is there? It is a nightmare millenniums old—a fixture in the human imagination as the worst punishment even a God could inflict. But he chose it.

So we know Aaron Bushnell had courage. Far, far more than the commanders who rise through the ranks—the ones who take us to war, who sell it on cable news or in the Pentagon press room. What courage is there in pretending, in myth-making? A force for good, for democracy, for human rights, for self-defense... what a lie. A story peddled by cowards who casually direct murder from the safety of command centers, who sell the weapons from their board rooms, or who spin fantasies in Congress. People who are revered as our leaders. Those who will who really only see those qualities in the mirror.

We also know that Aaron Bushnell could see. In a deeply racist and propagandized society, he still saw his kinship with people he never met, across the world, with a different language, culture, and religion—a spirit of internationalism that only blooms in white America by first breaking through layers of brick-laid jingoism.

Bushnell knew that even though he was not pulling a trigger or firing a missile, being in an IT position, he still helped facilitate killing. Killing for no good reason, but plenty of bad reasons.

By the accounts I’ve heard from those who knew him, he struggled for a long time with this, as so many of us do, and tried to make up for it in other areas of his life, involving himself in progressive struggles. I’ve talked to people who regularly saw



Bushnell, who live-streamed the action, said, “I will no longer be complicit in genocide,” before lighting himself on fire and repeatedly shouted “Free Palestine” as he was engulfed in the flames. He was pronounced dead in the hospital later that day.

him at protests against police brutality and for abortion rights, as well as attending anti-war teach-ins, for years. He was known as mild-mannered, genuine, and deep thinking. For at least a year he had committed his time to mutual-aid work.

It is a balance many service members today try to strike, as the surge in political consciousness among young people is equally felt among young people in the military. Many become anti-war and even class conscious, like Bushnell did.

But then came October 7 and its aftermath. The torment of Israel’s barbarism has been a trying time for all people with a conscience. We have all reeled for months through rage and hopelessness. The anxiety every morning, wondering what new tragedy we will see that continues to defy what we believed were the human limits of evil. There are moments of optimism in this wave of mass awakening, but it has mostly been a time of darkness we have been in—together, but at the same time alone.

For Bushnell, that meant also having to put on the uniform of the institution loading the weapons, running the supply missions, providing tactical and strategic assistance to the genocide. Not only that, but one also doing the killing: conducting the air strikes on Yemen, Iraq and Syria against people we have no reason or right to kill. Bushnell saw the plain truth: that he was an accomplice to all that. The truth

killed him. The Pentagon brass killed him. Joe Biden and Congress killed him.

Since Oct. 7, I have spoken to many service members in the active-duty military, Reserves and National Guard who are repulsed by their association with this, and therefore repulsed by the uniform they wear. There are, for sure, countless more I have never spoken to. I know at least one, an airman like Bushnell, who just filed for Conscientious Objector status over it. So many of them have been in the protests in solidarity with Palestine across the country and found solice.

To those of you in uniform, there are many ways out, and it is far easier than you think. You can even do so publicly, in protest, and be more or less protected. You can walk away today. Every service member with a conscience should take those steps now.

Much more importantly than your own personal salvation, by doing so you can contribute to the mounting political crisis for

Washington. The only thing that can stop this genocide is deepening that crisis—what more powerful turn of events than rebellion within the military?

Veterans, military families, those with links inside the military have a role too, to encourage those still in to take that stand, and provide them the tools to do so.

The anti-war organizing by soldiers and veterans within the military, and their leadership in the broader anti-war movement, had become dominant in 1970-71 and was a decisive factor in stopping the US killing spree in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It can again today for Gaza.

I hope Aaron Bushnell is the last of us to do what he did. Moreso, I hope the fire he lit becomes a turning point for those becoming politically conscious within the ranks. If you were moved by him there is only one way to honor him: to say “no”.

Drop your CO packet. Go AWOL. Raise your voice in a way that disrupts the war machine and throws it into chaos. Join us in the streets instead of in despair. I wish Aaron Bushnell would have. But you can for him.

Millions will be in the streets against the Rafah invasion on March 2; find a demonstration near you. Vigils will be held across the country for Aaron Bushnell in the coming days, including one I am helping organize in Portland, OR.

If you are a member of the US military want expert, confidential advice on how to get out, call the GI Rights Hotline 24/7 at 1-877-447-4487

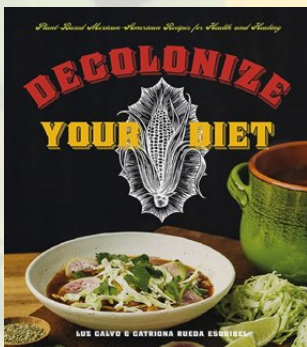
BIO: Michael D. Prysner is an American socialist political activist and U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq as a specialist. He is also producer and co-writer for the program, The Empire Files, with his wife Abby Martin.

¡Rest in power, Catriona!

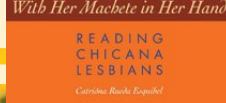


Catriona Rueda Esquibel, scholar in the field of Chicana lesbian literature, associate dean of the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University, and contributor to the creation of

the department of Race and Resistance Studies, died on February 8 at the age of 58. Luz Calvo, her partner, a professor emeritus of Ethnic Studies at Cal State East Bay confirmed her death saying that Esquibel suffered a hemorrhagic stroke on February 2 at their home in Oakland. After 6 days on life support and in a coma, Luz reassured her that it was time to let go and Catriona died peacefully with Luz constantly at her side. In 2015, Catriona and Luz co-authored “Decolonize Your Diet,” a book with recipes including reflections on modern Mexican and



American food intermingled with ancient Mesoamerican cuisine and culture, and



the idea of food as medicine. The Esperanza Center was privileged to host them in June of 2017 for a booksigning where they were received with a full house. In her book “*With a Machete in Her Hand*,” Esquibel analyzed depictions of Chicana lesbians in literature, following a decade of research. The days following Catriona’s passing were filled with multiple tributes from fellow academics, friends, family and the activist community. Grace Yoo, dean of the College of Ethnic Studies noted that Esquibel helped develop two majors: *Race and Resistance Studies* and *Race, Ethnicity, and Health*. She also helped create minors in *Arab and Muslim Ethnicities & Diasporas Studies*, *Critical Mixed Race Studies*, *Critical Pacific Islands and Oceania Studies*, and *Queer and Trans Ethnic Studies*. Immensely loved and respected by all, Catriona’s place in academia and in the hearts of many is irreplaceable. Catriona considered herself a ‘stitcher’. Her Instagram handle was *munequerx* and she posted her crochet doll creations there. Her dolls were an extension of her activist work and she even donated some to a Palestinian fundraising event among others. An animal lover, Catriona joins her recently deceased cat, Flaco. Luz requests that donations be made to *Floripondio End of Life Planning & Services*, bit.ly/flori-end-of-life

who helped Luz with Catriona’s transition. Our hearts at the Esperanza Center go out to Luz and their family, friends and colleagues. Catriona Rueda Esquibel, siempre presente!

