Citing killing of civilians, lies:

US soldier refuses to return to Iraq

Jeff Riley
24 March 2004

A Florida National Guard soldier returned to his base of deployment at Fort Stewart, Georgia, to face charges for desertion after refusing to return to duty in Iraq to serve as, in his words, “an instrument of violence” in an “oil-driven war.” The incident has provoked disquiet within the military establishment, feeding concern over the morale of US occupation troops.

Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, a 28-year-old native of Nicaragua, turned himself in to military authorities at Hanscom Air Force Base, outside of Boston, on March 15, seeking conscientious objector status. He spent five months on the run after serving in Iraq from April 2003 until last October, when he came home on two-week’s leave and refused to return for redeployment October 16. Among his reasons for going AWOL, he said, were his witnessing of incidents in which Iraqi civilians were killed by US troops.

Mejia is one of about 7,500 troops who fail to return to their units each year from a force of about 1.4 million. There have been about 600 soldiers who have gone AWOL from obligations in Iraq in particular, but he is believed to be the first to give himself up. Hours before handing himself over, Mejia gave a press conference at the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Massachusetts.

He issued a statement to the press, in which he declared:

“I’m saying no to war. I went to Iraq—I was an instrument of violence—and now I’ve decided to be an instrument for peace. My conscience—I could not continue to do the things that I was doing in Iraq. This war, I’m completely against it because it’s an oil-motivated war. I don’t think that any soldier who ever signed to be in the military, signed to go halfway across the world to invade and occupy a nation to take their oil or any other natural resource.... We were all lied to when we were told that we were looking for weapons of mass destruction or we were going to fight terrorism.”

Mejia is now awaiting a decision from commanding officers on the charges that he will face. If his application for CO status is denied, he faces a court-martial that could carry a sentence of five years imprisonment for desertion and an additional five years for “missing a movement to avoid hazardous duty.” This would be followed by a dishonorable discharge that would end all benefits for the eight-year veteran and possible deportation.

Referring to the potential penalties for his action, Mejia stated, “I’m prepared to go to prison because I’ll have a clear conscience.... Whatever sacrifice I have to make, I have to go there.”

Camilo Mejia moved from Nicaragua to the US when he was 18 to live with his mother, Maria Castillo. He is the son of Carlos Mejia Godoy, the renowned singer from Managua and former cultural minister for the Sandinista government, whose music and poetry symbolized the struggle of the Nicaraguan people against US military intervention in that country.

Mejia joined the military one year after arriving in the US. He later explained that he did so because “I wanted to be part of this nation, and the military was at the very heart of the United States. I was very young and was just starting to form my identity, values and principles.”

He served three years of active Army duty and was a National Guard infantryman for five years, which helped to pay his college tuition. He was entering his final semester as a psychology student at the University of Miami when his unit, C Company, 1-124 INF of the 53rd Infantry Brigade, was called up for pre-mobilization combat training in Fort Stewart.

Mejia described training at Fort Stewart, where he served as a squad leader, in terms of a sped-up assembly line “merely intended to make our unit deployable.” He explained: “A soldier is not supposed to deploy if he or she doesn’t pass a physical exam. I knew a soldier whose hearing had been impaired after many years’ service in the artillery. But this didn’t matter; they checked the ‘pass’ box for hearing on his medical form. Another requirement was that we qualify with our rifles. After several attempts at the firing range, many soldiers still couldn’t qualify but they were all judged to be qualified.”

In describing the war in Iraq, Mejia drew attention to what he said was the callousness of the commanding officers and

© World Socialist Web Site

their disregard for the lives of both US troops and Iraqi civilians. In a statement to the Associated Press, he described an ambush on his squad in the central Iraqi town of Ar Ramadi last May that began with a bomb exploding in front of their lead Humvee.

"Prior to this attack I had briefed my squad on what I understood to be Standard Operating Procedure, which was that if we were ambushed we should haul ass while returning fire with our weapons," he said. "Following the blast, bullets rained down on us from both sides of the road as we drove out of the area. Back at the base, we were euphoric that no one had been hurt in the ambush.

"My commander, XO [executive officer], and First Sergeant immediately asked to be briefed. When I told them what happened they asked me why we had fled rather than staying and fighting. The commanding officers then stated that the squad's actions had sent the wrong message to the enemy. It dawned on me that protecting our troops didn't rank very high on our leader's agenda.... [M]edals, glory and 'sending the right message' were all worth the lives of a few soldiers."

He added: "They were trying to draw the enemy onto us for medals and Purple Hearts."

Mejia became particularly disturbed by an incident in which a child was shot and later died. He described the shooting in a statement to Citizen Soldier, a soldiers' rights advocacy group that is assisting in his defense: "One of our sergeants shot a small boy who was carrying a rifle. The other two children who were walking with him ran away as the wounded child began crawling for his life. A second shot stopped him, but he was still alive. When an Iraqi tried to take him to a civilian hospital, Army medics from our unit intercepted him and insisted on taking the injured boy to a military facility. There, he was denied medical care because a different unit was supposed to treat our unit's wounded. After another medical unit refused to treat the child, he died,"

The violence and repression unleashed against the Iraqi population rapidly led to Mejia's disillusionment with the war and caused him to change his view of the US occupation. "When I saw with my own eyes what war can do to people, a real change began to take place within me," he said in the statement to Citizen Soldier. "I have witnessed the suffering of a people whose country is in ruins and who are further humiliated by the raids, patrols, curfews of an occupying army. My experience of this war has changed me forever."

He continued: "I also learned that the fear of dying has the power to turn soldiers into real killing machines. In a combat environment it becomes almost impossible for us to consider things like acting strictly in self defense or using just enough force to stop an attack.... People would ask me about my war experiences, and answering them took me back to all the horrors—the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood, the time a man was decapitated by our machine gun fire and the time my friend shot a child through the chest."

As the justifications for the war in Iraq have been exposed before the world as a pack of lies, American troops continue to die on a daily basis, and it is becoming evident that the outrage expressed by Camilo Mejia is growing more widespread among the military rank-and-file. As Mejia powerfully summed up in the statement obtained by the AP, "When you try to find justification and you think about weapons of mass destruction and you think about terrorism and things like that, all you find is lies and you have no justification.... [Y]ou need that justification to live with yourself."

In turning himself in, Mejia was accompanied by both his mother and Private Oliver Perez, who served in the military with him in Iraq. Perez described Mejia as "a brave leader" and insisted that he should not be prosecuted. "I fought next to him in many battles," he said. "He is not a coward."

Concern that Mejia's action may strike a chord with a wider layer of troops presently in Iraq presents the Pentagon with a quandary. As Tod Ensign of Citizen Soldier pointed out, Mejia's actions represent a "test case that will have broad impact on other objectors or potential objectors.... [T]hey risk him becoming some sort of martyr to the antiwar movement." On the other hand, if Mejia is treated with leniency and granted conscientious objector status, it could encourage other soldiers to follow suit.

In the wake of Mejia's turning himself in, the US military command in Iraq reported that two US Army medics have applied for CO status. The two notified the army of their request on February 9. They asked to be honorably discharged from the military because the idea of killing is "revolting" to them, a US military spokesman said.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site