

US sailor refuses deployment to Iraq in protest against war

Andrea Peters
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On December 6, as his ship was setting out for Iraq, Naval Petty Officer 3rd Class Pablo Paredes refused to board the vessel out of opposition to the war. In doing so, Paredes joined the ranks of military personnel who have spoken out against the invasion of Iraq and the US military's conduct of the war.

At least four US soldiers are either imprisoned or have completed jail terms for refusing to serve in protest against the war, and several others have been "less than honorably" discharged. Hundreds more troops have applied for conscientious objector status.

This week alone saw at least two other incidents reflecting mounting discontent among US troops. At a meeting with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at Camp Buehring in Kuwait, soldiers assailed the government for not providing adequate armor and forcing them to serve beyond their terms of duty as part of the military's "stop-loss" program. (See "US troops confront Defense Secretary Rumsfeld"). In Canada, a hearing was held on December 8 for a US soldier who is seeking asylum on the basis of his opposition to the war and his fear that he will be forced to commit atrocities if he is made to serve.

Paredes, a weapons control technician, was assigned to the Bonhomme Richard, an amphibious assault ship that transports Marines to Iraq. The 23-year-old native of New York told the media as he stood on the docks at the 32nd Street Naval Station in San Diego that he did not "want to be part of a ship that's taking 3,000 marines over (to Iraq), knowing a hundred or more won't come back." He added, "I can't sleep at night knowing that's what I do for a living."

He said his actions were motivated not by fear for his own life, but rather because he was "totally against (the war)."

"I'd rather do a year in prison in the military that do

six months of dirty work for a war that I don't believe in—and not many people believe in—and get Marines in harm's way," Paredes said on Monday.

In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) on December 8, he further explained his position:

"I don't see what we're doing there or why we're there. I don't believe for one minute that it's about spreading democracy. I don't believe for one minute that it was about weapons of mass destruction. Oil sounds like the number one, you know.

"Unfortunately, our president continues to hide behind the bravery of the troops, and it disgusts me because it's absolutely possible to say, you know, 'These guys are great. They're doing their job.' But what you're sending them to do doesn't make sense. And it's a fundamental thing that has to happen in this country. Everyone's almost afraid to say something against the war because it's unpatriotic, and I don't understand why you have to trade humanity for patriotism. I don't know when that happened."

Paredes has said in various interviews with the news media that his fight "takes a lot more courage" than sending Marines to their deaths.

Paredes said that at the time he joined the Navy in 2000 for a six-year enlistment he, like many young people, had very little understanding of US foreign policy and "never imagined, in a million years, we would go to war with somebody who had done nothing to us."

According to the NPR report, after serving in Japan, where he met numerous people in the military who were critical of US overseas interventions, Paredes began reading the Internet in search of alternative opinions. He has since decided that he is opposed to war in general.

The sailor, who faces possible court martial, a prison

sentence and a dishonorable discharge, says he hopes his stand will provoke similar protests by others. “I know other people are feeling the same way I am, and I’m hoping more people will stand up,” he wrote in his press release.

The San Diego Military Counseling Project is advising Paredes, who is still looking for a lawyer to take his case. As of Wednesday, he was not yet in military custody, although he could be arrested at any time.



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