

New York meeting supports US sailor who refused orders to Iraq

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5 March 2005

Pablo Paredes attempted to resign from the US Navy last December to protest his unit's deployment to the Persian Gulf. He subsequently filed a formal discharge request as a conscientious objector.

His brother Victor Paredes is on a tour to publicize Pablo's case. He spoke to students and others at New York University on March 1 at a meeting entitled "When Soldiers Say No to War," called by the Campus Antiwar Network.

With only 20 months left on his six-year enlistment, Pablo was transferred last November from a unit in Japan to the USS Bonhomme Richard, assigned to ferry marines and military equipment such as helicopters to Iraq. He opposed the Iraq war from the beginning, but when he was stationed in Japan, he felt removed from direct participation. With the reassignment, however, he felt he had to act on his antiwar convictions.

The sailor held a San Diego waterfront press conference as his ship was departing, notifying authorities of his intentions in advance. "I know other people are feeling the same way I am," he said at the time. "I'm hoping more people will stand up. They can't throw us all in jail."

At the NYU meeting, Victor Paredes described his family's upbringing in a working class section of the Bronx in New York City. "Pablo signed up for the education," Victor explained. Then the recruiters offered him a signing bonus, and he found himself locked into a six-year commitment.

"During his three years in Japan, he was able to learn and to read about things. His Catholic background gave him a strong sense of moral values. He saw that the Japanese police force didn't need weapons.

"He came back from Japan much more conscious," Victor explained, and he developed a deep opposition to war. When his ship was going to be ordered to the

Persian Gulf carrying 3,000 men to Iraq, he disobeyed his orders.

"His intention was never to desert," he said. "His application for a discharge is based on his conscience."

Victor Paredes went on to discuss the social and political context of his brother's case, pointing to recent poll results showing that some 60 percent of the US population opposes the war.

He said an "economic draft" forced many youth with no prospects for the future into the armed forces and denounced recruiters for dangling a college scholarship in front of young people, without explaining what they would be getting into. "Young men have to be better informed about what the military is actually used for," he said. "How do you tell a youth that he shouldn't be signing up, when that's the only hope he has to pay for his education?"

Victor said that his brother had submitted a formal request for a discharge from the Navy, but faced possible charges, including unauthorized absence, failure to obey a direct order, and missing a ship's movement.

Pablo and his brother are expecting the authorities to exact some penalty for Pablo standing up for his convictions. It could be limited to a disciplinary action, such as a demotion, but could also include a sentence in military detention.

In closing his presentation, Victor Paredes explained, "This is bigger than just Pablo." He said there are over 5,000 others in the military who, like Pablo, have refused to fight in Iraq. They have either deserted, gone AWOL or have applied as conscientious objectors. "There are record levels of suicide in the Marines. There's got to be something wrong."



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