

US soldier sentenced to year in prison for refusing to fight in Afghanistan

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US Army Sergeant Travis Bishop, 26, a native of Louisville, Kentucky, was sentenced Friday to one year in prison after being convicted of going AWOL (Absent Without Leave) and disobeying lawful orders in connection with his refusal to be deployed to Afghanistan.

The sentencing of Sergeant Bishop follows closely on the heels of the conviction of Army Specialist Victor Agosto, 24, who was sentenced the previous week to 30 days in jail and demoted to private for his refusal to fight in Afghanistan on the grounds that the US occupation was immoral and unjust. Bishop and Agosto are both stationed in Fort Hood, Texas and share the same attorney, James Branum.

Bishop's punishment proved to be more severe than Agosto's. In addition to being sentenced to one year in prison and demoted from sergeant to private, Bishop will lose two-thirds of his pay for a full year and receive a bad conduct discharge from the military upon his release from prison. Branum has pledged to appeal the conviction.

Bishop's doubts about his involvement in the military had been building for some time. In a statement released by Bishop in May, he describes returning home from Iraq, where he served for 14 months, to a hero's welcome: "That was the first time I felt unsettled over what I had done overseas. My hand was shook, my back was patted, and every night my belly was burning, full of free alcohol. I was a veteran of a foreign war, hailed as a hero, and yet I felt ... unnerved, anxious."

He went on to say, "I felt as if I had a big secret inside me that threatened to burst out of me at any moment, exposing what I really was to the rest of the world ... but I couldn't figure out what the secret was.

Not for a long, long time."

Bishop describes no longer being able to understand why the US military was in Iraq. "Nothing sat right," he said. The young sergeant turned toward religion in his crisis and began studying the Bible. He soon came to the conclusion that he could no longer place himself in a situation in which he could be ordered to kill another human being. When he was ordered to return to combat, this time to Afghanistan, Bishop decided not to go. He would file for Conscientious Objector status, going AWOL in order to do so.

Bishop maintains he was unaware of his right to apply for Conscientious Objector (CO) status until just days before his unit was set to deploy to Afghanistan. This assertion has been verified by Bishop's commanding officer, Captain Christopher Hall, who testified that he had provided his soldiers with no information regarding CO status. Bishop, having discovered his rights too late to follow the standard CO procedure, made the decision to go AWOL for one week in order to prepare his application for CO status.

In a statement explaining his actions, Bishop said, "I left because I did not feel that I would have a sympathetic, understanding command structure to fully take my problems to, and also to give myself time to prepare for my CO application process, and the legal battle I'm currently fighting." Following the completion of the application, Bishop turned himself in to authorities to answer for his absence from duty.

From the start, Bishop's trial took on an anti-democratic character, with participants openly contemptuous toward the soldier. One of the jurors fell asleep during the trial. Another repeatedly shook his head in disgust as Branum argued Bishop's case.

Fort Hood chaplain Lt. Col. Ron Leininger testified against Bishop, asserting to the court that the

sergeant's religious convictions were not sincere enough to convince the chaplain to recommend him for CO status. The chaplain's written report on Bishop contained errors, including calling Bishop by the wrong name. The chaplain told the court his interview with Bishop lasted for a period of 45 minutes. Challenging this claim, Bishop later told *Truthout.org*, "The Chaplain only spoke with me for 20 minutes, took two calls on his cell phone, and was texting the whole time."

In his own defense, Bishop offered a statement to the court which reads, "[W]hat most Soldiers don't realize is that CO is not only a regulation, it's a right. To file for conscientious objector status is an individual right of every Soldier in the Army. This right ensures that Soldiers with the beliefs that I share have the opportunity to request to be discharged due to said beliefs. But, unlike other regulations in the military, this one remains unpublicized."

Bishop's statement discusses the military culture he struggles against. "Since day one of anyone's career in the military," says Bishop, "fierceness and bravado are pounded into every potential Soldier, and fear and doubt are viewed as weaknesses. This leaves Soldiers that feel as I feel in quite a predicament.

"Does a Soldier who feels as I feel tell someone in their Command? Or a peer? And risk persecution and ridicule? I have never heard the word 'coward' used more than when I say the words conscientious objector around a group of Soldiers."

The rate of desertion in the US Army has risen 80 percent since the Iraq War began in 2003. Soldiers, many of them even younger than Bishop and Agosto, have been forced into bloody colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars which have been associated with torture, rape, secret prison networks, the death of masses of Iraqis and an increasing number of Afghan civilians, and an assault on the most basic democratic rights. It is taking its toll, not only on the local populations, but on those rank and file soldiers who are engaged in its prosecution. Suicide rates among soldiers are at a record high. Large numbers of soldiers leave combat with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It is difficult to gauge the level of resistance to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan within the military, but it is safe to say Bishop and Agosto are far from alone in their sentiments. The Pentagon has chosen to make an

example of Bishop, whose only "crime" has been to refuse to take part in an illegal war of aggression. His punishment is meant as a warning to any military personnel considering opposition.



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