

British soldier jailed for refusing to redeploy to Afghanistan

Harvey Thompson
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A British soldier was jailed this month for refusing to participate in the military occupation of Afghanistan and for his involvement in anti-war protests.

Lance Corporal Joe Glenton, 27, joined the Army in 2004 and served with the Royal Logistic Corps in Afghanistan. Having returned to the UK, just nine months after his previous tour Glenton was ordered to redeploy to Afghanistan. Instead, he absconded on June 11, 2007, and went to south-east Asia and Australia.

Glenton handed himself in to UK military authorities on June 16, 2009, when he was charged.

The following month, he wrote a letter to Prime Minister Gordon Brown, calling for British troops to return home and saying that the seven months he had spent in Afghanistan had made him realise that “the courage and tenacity of my fellow soldiers has become a tool of American foreign policy.”

“The war in Afghanistan is not reducing the terrorist risk, far from improving Afghan lives, it is bringing death and devastation to their country,” he continued. “Britain has no business there. I do not believe that our cause in Afghanistan is just or right. I implore you, sir, to bring our troops home.”

Glenton said he was still haunted by the memory of moving the coffins of the 14 British servicemen who died in the RAF Nimrod crash in September 2006. “It really brought the senselessness of it home. It was clear it had become a war of attrition. Both sides are just grinding each other down. We are not helping anybody, and I think the mission will fail.”

On October 24, Glenton addressed a Stop the War Coalition rally of around 5,000 anti-war protesters in London’s Trafalgar Square, where he questioned the military’s role in Afghanistan and spoke of his inability to continue to follow orders.

“I’m here today to make a stand beside you because I believe great wrongs have been perpetrated in Afghanistan,” he said. “I cannot, in good conscience, be part of them. I’m bound by law and moral duty to try and stop them....”

“I’m a soldier and I belong to the profession of arms. I expected to go to war but I also expected that the need to defend this country’s interests would be legal and justifiable. I don’t think this is too much to ask.

“It’s now apparent that the conflict is neither of these, and that’s why I must make this stand. The occupation in Afghanistan is at best dubious in terms of legality and morality. I can’t be involved in it on that basis and, not only that, I am also bound to try and stop it, try and change things. That’s the law, the occupation of a country like that, regime change, these things are all illegal.”

Glenton said military personnel had warned him not to appear at the rally, but that despite the threat of prison, he was determined to speak out. Already facing charges of desertion and a court martial, Glenton was arrested and charged with five further offences for his involvement in the anti-war demonstration.

In a court marshal held March 5, Glenton was sentenced to nine months detention for refusing to do a second tour of duty in Afghanistan. He was initially charged with desertion, but this was dropped, and he pleaded guilty to being absent without leave for over two years. He had apparently originally planned to contest the desertion charge by arguing that the Afghan war and occupation was illegal.

The court heard that Glenton was described by superiors as an intellectual soldier, and that he had joined the Army buoyed up by a “wave of enthusiasm” that a doctor who later assessed him described as

bordering on naivety.

“He thought he was going to help Afghanistan, to help the local people,” said Nick Wrack, who represented the soldier. Instead, “the experience and the reality began to conflict with that.”

Lars Davidsson, a consultant psychiatrist who assessed Glenton at the behest of his legal team in November, told the court, “Mortar rockets were regularly shot into the camp, and on one occasion there was a direct hit. One didn’t hit the camp but hit civilians nearby. He referred to feelings of guilt and uselessness.”

Dr. Davidsson said that Glenton was suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): “He had bad dreams and he woke up screaming. His dreams had to do with coffins being opened up.” Bangs and tyres screeching reminded him of mortar fire, said Davidsson.

Wrack also said Glenton had suffered from PTSD after his first tour of duty.

He told the court that when Glenton raised concerns about going back to Afghanistan, he suffered bullying by his commanding officer, who called him a coward and a malingerer.

Speaking in mitigation, Wrack told the court martial that Glenton’s unit was ordered back to Afghanistan only nine months after his previous tour had finished, even though military guidelines suggest soldiers should not be deployed again within 18 months. Glenton’s psychological disorder, combined with a growing sense that the war was unjust, had prompted him to go absent without leave.

Judge Advocate Emma Peters dismissed such arguments, summing up, “There are many soldiers in the Army today who have extremely unpleasant experiences, who watch friends die or suffer appalling injuries, but they have to return and do their duty.

“Absent without leave should not be seen as a means of securing an early release from the Army...particularly considering the seriousness of current operations.”

As well as being imprisoned, Glenton was stripped of his rank and demoted to private.

The military top brass are determined to make an example of this vocal “refusenik” in an attempt to intimidate popular anti-war sentiment combined with growing unease in the armed forces over their role in Afghanistan.

Just months before Glenton was apprehended, the *Sunday Telegraph* quoted from a leaked document entitled *Infantry Manning and Recruiting* that revealed 2,200 infantrymen were leaving the army voluntarily each year. The document blamed the loss of troops on the number of operational tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and the impact overseas service was having on family life.

Absence without leave and desertion were identified in the report as being responsible for troop shortages. The problem was said to be worse in the infantry, which, with about 25,000 soldiers, makes up a quarter of the army. Since the previous year, more than 20,000 troops had left the armed services. The army was trying to improve retention by offering soldiers £15,000 “golden handcuff” bonuses if they served for eight years. Other retention initiatives to be considered were MoD sponsored mortgages and offering bursaries worth up to £2,000 for school leavers.



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