

UK Navy medic has Afghan conscientious objector status refused

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29 December 2010

A Royal Navy medical officer, who objected to serving in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan in the wake of the WikiLeaks' revelations, had his appeal to stand down on moral grounds dismissed December 17.

Michael Lyons joined the Navy in 2005, at 18, as a medical assistant submariner. In 2008 he was promoted to leading medical assistant.

Last June, Lyons received an order for deployment to a patrol base in Afghanistan by March 2011. However, in July he became aware of the tens of thousands of covert military documents released by WikiLeaks on the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan between 2004 and 2009. The Navy medic was particularly affected by what he called "the enormous under-reporting of civilian casualties" attributable to NATO forces.

Lyons' request to leave the service was refused by his commanding officer. He then lodged an appeal at the Advisory Committee on Conscientious Objectors, but the original decision was upheld at the hearing.

Lyons told the committee, "I was unable to find a real, just and noble cause to go out but I still had a sense of duty to my country. It was a big dilemma. Soon after, WikiLeaks leaked a large number of military documents.

"Examples included a convoy of marines tearing down a six-mile highway, firing at people with no discrimination.

"Being in the military, most people's view was you just have to go out there and do what you're told to do.

"I came to the conclusion I couldn't serve on a moral ground and I couldn't see any political reason for being there."

After carrying out research, Lyons said, his objections to the war hardened: "I feel the great loss of human life, the only thing it's doing is radicalising civilians out

there. People losing family and friends are now taking up arms and trying to fight back."

Lyons explained that he was further repulsed at the thought of serving in Afghanistan when he learned he may not be able to treat civilians in need.

He told the hearing, "It seems from previous testimony and courses I've done that even going out as a medic with all good intention, if you're at a patrol base or forward operating base, it's likely you'll have to use your weapon and will have to turn civilians away who are in need of medical aid."

Visibly upset, Lyons concluded, "If more people in my position stood up, there would be a lot less innocent lives lost around the world."

Asked by Judge Timothy King whether he thought service personnel should be able to choose which conflicts they serve in, Lyons replied, "If a serviceman or woman deems a conflict they are going to serve in as wrong on moral, political or religious grounds, they have to stand up and say they won't be a part of it."

As to whether he was "scared" of going to Afghanistan, Lyons explained, "I had the normal fears of leaving my wife a widow and fears of seeing things or being injured, but I wouldn't say anything more than anyone else required to go out there."

Giving evidence, Lyons' mother, Jill Bland, described the pressure her son had come under since announcing he wanted to leave the service as a conscientious objector. "We have a military tradition in our family. Michael has dealt with enormous pressure at work to change his mind and enormous pressure within the family," she said.

"Certain members of the family are very aggrieved over Michael's decision. I'm extremely proud of Michael and I feel it has taken more courage to go through what he has gone through over the last few

months, or as much courage at least, as it would have done to put his objections aside and go and serve.”

At the conclusion to the hearing, panel chairman Judge King rejected the appeal and upheld the decision of Lyons’ commanding officer. No reasons were given for the decision. In a departure from past practice, the judge said the written reasons would soon be published and made available to Lyons’ chain of command.

The *Guardian* published an interview with Lyons’ wife, Lillian, on her fears for her husband. “Michael felt he could not serve after learning the truth about the Afghan war, but the navy mocked him,” she said.

She described the impact that the WikiLeaks revelations had on her husband, and continued, “I remember the day I asked Michael how he felt going to Afghanistan, considering the publication of these [WikiLeaks] reports. Upset by what he had read, he said he didn’t believe we were over there for the greater good. He went on to tell me he wouldn’t be able to live with himself knowing he had been a part of that. He said: ‘I can’t have that on my conscience’.”

The Advisory Committee on Conscientious Objectors panel’s recommendation will be fed back to the Ministry of Defence, which will make the ultimate ruling on whether or not Lyons can leave the service as a conscientious objector.

Increasing numbers of British soldiers are leaving the armed services in the wake of the military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and more are becoming disillusioned at what are widely seen as predatory wars aimed against the civilian populations.

Lance Corporal Joe Glenton, of the Royal Logistic Corps in Afghanistan, was jailed in March for refusing to redeploy to the occupied country, saying he believed the war was “bringing death and devastation to their country. Britain has no business there. I do not believe that our cause in Afghanistan is just or right.”

Last year, a leaked document, *Infantry Manning and Recruiting*, appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* revealing that 2,200 infantrymen were leaving the British 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.

Being absent without leave and desertion were identified in the report as responsible for troop shortages. The problem was said to be most severe in

the infantry, which, with about 25,000 soldiers, makes up a quarter of the army.

The military authorities are clearly worried about this trend and are seeking to make an example of Lyons.



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