

## Chapitre/Chapter 23

### **Peace Activists and the U.S. Military: Misunderstandings, Challenges, and Potential for Cooperation in the Era of the Professional Soldier**

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There is a long history of contentious interaction between peace activists and the military as those opposed to warfare naturally come into ideological conflict with those who believe fighting wars is sometimes necessary. Understandably, the interaction between these groups becomes most intense when the United States engages in, or prepares to engage in, an armed conflict. The United States is currently fighting an unconventional war in Iraq, and we, as proponents of peaceful solutions, need to address that in some way. The discussions regarding this war and how we can react are often within the political, legal, or academic realm, and there are indeed significant implications for these fields. But for those who fight, for those who bleed, and for those who lose friends and family, the war is no longer political or academic; it's no longer about political miscalculations or the legality of pre-emptive war. It's about life and death, and it's about the reality on the ground.

We are not academics and can only speak authoritatively on what we have personally experienced working with the military of today and with those service members who are serving in this war. We have the unique perspective of growing up in a peace context and now working day in and day out with the military community, the community that has always seemed like our opposite. This interaction has shaped the way we see and do peace work.

It is important initially to understand the context in which we are working and to highlight some key points about the military. Understanding the modern context of the military, its culture and life, and the socio-economic issues that shape its character helps to explain the need and rationale for GI counseling and leads to suggestions on how activists can better engage in peace work.

#### The Military Today

We are citizens of a nation that has the most powerful conventional military force in the world, and arguably the most dominant in all of history in terms of global reach and technological superiority. We live in a nation where the military expenditures exceed the military budgets of the next 20 countries combined, where hundreds of millions are invested in the mechanism of recruitment. There are currently more than 1.3 million active duty service members in the US military. One-third of these troops are stationed in over 120 different countries around the world, including 100,000 in Europe. This military has divided the world into five areas of operation and is prepared to fight anywhere, anytime, and with anybody. In Iraq, this global strategy, capability, and intent has been realized.

Although most of the wars in American history up until 1973 were fought by conscripted soldiers, the military today is made up entirely of volunteers. This has profoundly affected the dynamics and composition of the military, even though it is often assumed by peace activists to be, for all intents and purposes, the same as during the Vietnam era.

Because the military is now completely dependent on volunteers, a wide range of benefits are offered for those who join. The most common reason that we hear for joining is to earn money for college. Ever since World War II, the GI Bill has allowed for enlisted troops meeting a certain number of requirements to receive money toward a college education. Plus, any college courses taken while in active duty are free.

Another reason people join is simply to get a steady job. It's no secret that the poor and the uneducated are much more likely to join as some of them feel that they must decide between that option and working somewhere like McDonalds. To meet quotas, recruiters intentionally focus on the poor parts of town, going to the poor malls and hangouts. One could argue that while many European countries have extensive social programs to support the poor and unemployed, the US has the military to play that role.

Others join because their family has a tradition of serving. "Grandpa fought in World War II, dad fought in Vietnam, and now I'm going to do the right thing and fight for my country as well." It is logical that those who believe in the necessity and honor of the military are more likely to instill similar values on their children, who are therefore more likely to join the military when they grow up.

Many have joined to protect the country after the September 11 terrorist attacks, to earn American citizenship, to find adventure, to get away from home, or to learn discipline. For most people it comes down to the benefits, and as it has become more and more difficult to find recruits in this time of war, the monetary benefits have skyrocketed. Enlistment bonuses can be as high as \$40,000 and re-enlistment bonuses as high as \$100,000. It remains to be seen whether the military will be able to maintain high enough recruitment levels as the war in Iraq continues to lose popularity. Success or failure in this area could affect the ability for the government to continue in its current aggressive foreign policy strategy.

### Life in the Military

Military life is very different than what we experience as civilians. It is a much more controlled environment, where everything from haircuts to what you wear to when you wake up is regulated. The discipline, lifestyle, and regulations of the military are shaped by the very nature of its profession. It is in the business of war.

Enlistment in the military is an eight year contractual obligation of active and reserve duty; there is no "two weeks notice." The term GI, commonly used to describe American servicemembers stands for Government Issued. They become, literally, state property. Pay, rank, job description, and time of service can all be changed by the military. In a time of war, enlistment length can be extended indefinitely.

Many of the first amendment rights are also limited or curtailed for servicemembers. Freedom of speech is limited, in that a soldier has a legal restriction on publicly criticizing his or her chain of command, which includes the president as commander-in-chief. Freedom to assemble is also restricted, as is freedom of religion to a certain extent. It is not that active limitations are sought, but the military concerns will always override religious practice.

Military life is a world in and of itself, with its own language, customs, traditions, schools, and services. This world is often very detached from civilian life, especially on installations overseas. These self-contained, walled military communities can become a servicemember's entire world. Being a professional soldier today means that, for all intents and purposes, one has given up the role of citizen and become an extension of the government.

## Military Counseling Network

We work for the Military Counseling Network (MCN), which was created to be a concrete, active response to the war and to provide a service that would have a direct impact. MCN is a not-for-profit organization that provides free counseling, information, and support for those who are questioning participating in war or want to know more about army regulations and discharges from military service, like conscientious objection, hardship/dependency, and disability. MCN provides soldiers and their families with information about their options so they can make informed decisions.

Established during the late 1980s through the collaboration of American and German church and peace groups, MCN fielded calls from more than a thousand soldiers or family members and assisted several dozen soldiers receive conscientious objector discharges during the first Gulf War. After a dormant period in the late 1990s, MCN was reestablished in March 2003 as a project of the German Mennonite Peace Committee and supported by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mission Network. MCN is part of the GI Rights Hotline in the US and the only organization providing GI Rights counseling internationally. MCN works closely with many peace and church networks.

With two full-time counselors and 8 volunteers around the country, MCN has worked with over 300 soldiers since the beginning of the current war in Iraq, and as the war drags on and the reasons for the occupation change, the number of soldiers questioning their participation increases.

It is often difficult for soldiers to find someone outside the military to talk to, and the troops stationed overseas are especially isolated on the self-contained military bases. MCN is a point of contact outside of the military structure and a listening ear. MCN seeks to provide personal support to those dealing with the difficulties and realities of war by creating a network of support outside of the military. Due to the nature of a professional military, soldiers often feel helpless in what they can do and powerless in what they can say. MCN acts as a bridge between the civilian and military community in order to empower the voice of soldiers, to lend credibility to the critical position on the war, and ultimately to influence public discourse.

## Realities of War and Conscientious Objectors

A large part of our time is spent working with conscientious objectors. The fact that there are still those applying for conscientious objection in the time of a volunteer military seems counterintuitive to some. One could suggest that it is only logical that if people signed up willingly for military service, they can't be against war. And that is true to a certain extent. At that time, when they signed up, they were indeed not conscientious objectors. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that at some point after signing the contract, things might change. And indeed the thing that is as important as it is obvious is that war changes people. They may have been pizza delivery guys or bank tellers or college students; atheists or Christians or Jews. But when they experience combat, receive incoming fire, lose friends, and shoot other human beings - when they live in fear - they change.

Some pacifists, and especially those who struggled vigorously to avoid being forced into military service in Vietnam, seem to be inherently distrustful of those voluntary military persons seeking conscientious objector status today. In one sense, this is understandable in

that pacifists of earlier times had to struggle mightily to avoid forced service. They risked prosecution, fines, jail time, and harassment, to give a small list. Today some of them join in with the rest of mainstream society and say, "If you sign up for the military, you got yourself into it and should follow through."

Beyond this initial response, however, should be the realization that professional soldiers "converting" to anti-war stances are actually impressive examples of what most pacifists and peace activists consider to be a basic truth. That is, if one truly understands what war is all about, one won't want to participate in it. In addition, soldiers add credibility in the eyes of some, who see pacifists and war resisters as idealists out of touch with reality, especially in the so-called "post-September 11 world." Few will be so bold as to suggest that a combat veteran doesn't understand war. One could make a strong argument that those who have experienced, and consequently rejected, war should not only be accepted in the peace circles, but recognized as an absolutely integral part of the overall movement.

While the current state of military policy is less menacing to traditional pacifists, those who come to their pacifist beliefs by way of their war experience have a very difficult time attaining conscientious objector status. According to a Department of Defense spokesman, "There is no historical record of CO applications. They're only paper records, kept for 90 days." The numbers that have been given suggest an approval rating of less than fifty percent. This number doesn't take into consideration the service members who tried to apply, but never had their claims passed up the chain of command, or those who would have applied if they had known it was a possibility.

Enlisted service members seeking a discharge for conscientious objection must show that they have a "firm, fixed, and sincere objection to participating in war of any form or the bearing of arms." In addition, the objection must be "based on religious, moral, or ethical training and belief" and must demonstrate that the position is "sincere and deeply held." The applicant must submit a claim, demonstrating his or her qualifications for the provision by answering seven questions regarding personal convictions and changes in belief. The applicant is then interviewed by a chaplain, a psychiatrist, and an investigative officer, who make recommendations for or against approval. The claim then makes its way up the chain of command along with any supporting letters, ultimately to be decided upon by a Conscientious Objection Review Board at the Department of the Army.

According to military regulations, the entire process should take no more than 90 days, but in practice, it is likely to take at least nine months. During this time, the conscientious objector must live out his or her beliefs in an often unreceptive environment, enduring hostility from other service members and an uncooperative command. Whether or not conscientious objectors mean to condemn other service members' continued military service, their new stance against war is inherently in conflict with the underlying principles of the military.

In some branches of the military, regulations state that while applicants for conscientious objector status are being processed, they should be given jobs that "least conflict with their beliefs." However, they can be, and sometimes are, asked to do weapons training or even to deploy to a combat zone. It is in these situations that a conscientious objector must decide to give in to the orders or break the law by either refusing the order or running away (AWOL - absent without leave). These illegal options can result in court martial, dishonorable discharge, fines, and time in a military prison.

Those who experience war and the conscientious objection process have a story to tell - a story that speaks both to the terrible effects of war and to the courage of conscience. As one conscientious objector, Vince LaVolpa, said, "It takes a lot of balls to stand up to the Army and say, 'Screw it.' It's a lot easier to go with the flow. I know, because that's what I did for a while." The stories of these soldiers who do stand up need to be told.

### Courage of Conscience

One of these stories is about Clif Hicks, who served as a tank crewman in Iraq in the Army's First Cavalry Division. Growing up in Alabama, his favorite pastime was Civil War re-enactment, and he wanted nothing more than to be a soldier in the United States Army. His father had been a Master Sergeant and his father's father had been a Lieutenant Colonel. His grandma and grandpa on the other side of his family had both served in World War II. When he was 17-years-old, he convinced his mother to sign the waiver allowing him to enlist as a minor, and a few months later, he was in Iraq.

There were three major events that changed things for Clif, beginning in January of 2004, when he first saw a casualty of the war. An Iraqi had been run over by a Humvee right outside the gates of his base. "This was an unarmed man," he said. "He had been run over by American soldiers and left to die."

The next month, Clif arrived at a place where American troops from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division had mistakenly opened fire on a wedding party. Clif saw the three civilians who had been hit. A young girl had been shot in the leg, a middle aged man was wounded in the arm, and another younger girl had been killed.

The most formative experience, though, came when he first shot at another person. He was the gunner on a Humvee, which was taking fire, so he opened fire in the direction of the shots. "This was a major turning point in my life," he said. "I was thoroughly repulsed by what I had done and prayed that I would never have to try to kill a fellow human being again.

He said he had joined to "defend the people of the United States," but after eight months of constant combat operations, his concept of war as a defense of the American people had changed. It was at that point, with two months of service remaining in Iraq, that he told his chain of command that he was a conscientious objector and that he wasn't willing to handle a weapon. Soon after, he was demoted, fined \$800, and given 45 days of extra duty for making anti-war statements on a website.

An excerpt from his application for conscientious objector status says much about how far he has come. "I was disgusted by my own reflection. I saw and did things there that should never be viewed as acceptable by civilized people. I have been shot at, I have been mortared, I have destroyed the livelihood of innocent people, and I have seen men rejoice in the torment of other men. As I recall these unfortunate events I find myself disgusted and ashamed. I pray that I may never live to endure such things again."

Vince LaVolpa is another soldier who was changed by his war experience. In many ways, he embodied all that a good soldier was supposed to be; he was fast-paced in combat and moving up quickly through the ranks. He was a combat engineer and became a "team leader" during his time in Baghdad and Karbala during the fighting with Al Sadr's militia. By the time he was finished with his year of combat, he had attained the rank of Specialist (E-4) and earned

an Army Accommodation Medal, two Army Achievement Awards, a Combat Badge, and a Purple Heart. But Vince was not happy.

"I keep thinking, my job is to kill people," he said. "I'm getting paid to kill people." He like many others, had joined for the college money, and when it was all said and done, he wasn't willing to do it anymore. "Killing someone is a personal thing," he said. "It is yours. You have to live with it afterwards. You don't kill someone over \$40,000 of college money or because you're afraid to stand up to your commander and tell him you think this war is wrong. You don't kill someone for those reasons."

One of the experiences that seriously affected Vince was near the end of his time in Baghdad. A Humvee had been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, and his unit went into the closest village to check things out. He told the story this way:

"We followed [some bystanders] back into the village, and the squad leader sent out warning shots again, and they all dispersed. As we came out onto the other side of the village there were two tracks in front and one behind for rear security. In front of one of the tracks were a hill, and two people popped out on top. Some people said the one had a gun, and some say he didn't. Either way, one of the sergeants on the 50 cal. opened fire and took out one of the guys, who turned out to be a 15- or 16-year-old kid. He shot him in the back and killed him. When we got there, he didn't have a weapon.... They just left him there for his family to find."

"Being a [conscientious objector] is taking responsibility for that and saying: 'You know what, I was watching that guy's back when he killed that kid.' No matter what the cost. No matter what benefits I lose. No matter what kind of discharge I get. No matter how much time I have to spend in jail. I'm not going to put my college money ahead of someone else's life."

Kevin Hicks, also a combat engineer, is another example of someone transformed by the war in Iraq. He joined because he wanted to serve his country and it seemed like the right time since he had just been laid off. As he was waiting to swear in, he heard George W. Bush announce that the attack on Iraq had begun.

In Iraq, according to the military, Kevin became a hero. During a firefight, he picked up a discarded enemy weapon and fired a rocket-propelled grenade at the attackers, killing three of them. According to those who were present, he had saved American lives that day. His three confirmed kills gave him extra decoration for his uniform and the respect of fellow soldiers, but it also brought home the reality of what it means to kill someone.

Later, during a routine mission, an Iraqi truck backfired, sounding like a gun shot. His unit chased the truck down in their Humvees and beat up the driver before realizing that there were no weapons in the truck, only ice being brought to the market. The driver got a handshake and drove away. Kevin described it as "hazing the Iraqis into democracy." In another instance, he saw an Iraqi man shot off his moped while returning from the market with groceries. It was just another civilian casualty ignored during a time of war.

"There are too many stories like this to tell," he said. "Each one is enough by itself to convince me never to contribute to war again, and all together, more than enough to understand that war is never justified, never worth it, and has no place in the modern world."

From the very beginning, Kevin had been the ultimate soldier. He was the one from his basic training class picked to accept the certificate of graduation. He was smart, fast, and a born

leader. His superiors had only positive things to say about him, especially after his term in Iraq. But there was no glory in these achievements for Kevin, and he would never again be part of a military operation.

### A Personal Stake

The relationship between the American civilian population and the professional military is one of misunderstanding and distance. With less than 0.4 percent of the population serving on active duty, it's easy for a civilian to have no close friends or relatives at risk and therefore be emotionally detached. While it is understood that there are people in harms way, having no personal stake in the conflict allows for the debate to stay in the political, theoretical, or academic realm. But as one Non-Commissioned Officer told us, after bagging up his best friend in Iraq, "It wasn't an academic argument for me anymore." The peace movement in the United States can only be strengthened by telling these stories and by encouraging others to go beyond the theoretical and partisan talking points and actually feel something about what this military and the war in Iraq is doing to people, American and Iraqi.