

MILITARY COUNSELING NETWORK

SOUND OFF



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Courage of Conscience

By David Stutzman

The checkpoint bristled with weapons and tension. It was a dangerous place. The car was coming too fast. Vincent LaVolpa (*below*) fired two warning shots. Up in the tower, the anxious machine gunner understood the gunshots as enemy fire and opened up with his .50 caliber. Sparks jumped off the hood where the bullets struck. On the ground, Vincent saw the sparks and thought they were flashes from a muzzle. Before he knew it, he had moved to the side crouched and aimed, instinctively reverting to his reflexes as a soldier. As he stared down the barrel at the figures in the car, his brain finally caught up with him. *What are you doing?* He hesitated, lowered his aim and shot the tires, bringing the vehicle to a stop. He and another, covering the car with their M-16s, cautiously approached the immobilized vehicle. Vincent opened the passenger door. In the car sat a little girl, a young woman and a man; a scared and helpless family. He would have killed them.

The War in Iraq has smoldered for more than two years now. Soldiers drive conveyors, run check points, go out on patrol and conduct raids. What we see as headlines, they know as daily routine. It is hard to imagine what it is like. I met often with Vincent in a cafe in Frankfurt, Germany. He has been in combat, received a purple heart and witnessed death. Once as we sat in the cafe, a loud clatter of pots from the kitchen interrupted our discussion. Vincent had been writing and had instantly tensed up. Noticing his sudden discomfort, I joked, "You wanted to hit the floor, right." Vincent let out a deep breath, "Yeah." He *knows* what it is like. I have worked for over two years now for the Military Counseling Network (MCN), a project supported by the

German Mennonite Peace Committee, Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mission Network. Since March 2003, MCN has provided information to US military personnel based in Germany, who have questions about their rights in the military, army regulations and procedures, and discharges from military service. We offer servicemembers a source of support outside of the military, a listening ear and straight answers about their options.

When explaining what I do, people frequently want to know why people want to get out of the military. *Didn't they join up voluntarily?* US servicemembers do indeed sign up voluntarily to be part of a vast, powerful, professional military. Assumedly, they are willing to kill. However, most people, upon joining, haven't deliberated a great deal and rarely know what they are getting themselves into either. It sounds simple.

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Growing up as a Mennonite, with parents who espoused peace and nonviolence, I never earnestly considered military service. Most people do not grow up with this kind of background. Many people see the military as something positive and an honorable means to serve one's country. On the flipside, we Mennonites have a long history of refusing military service and seeking recognition as conscientious objectors. We also have a tendency to have a distanced relationship with folks in the military. Often we intrinsically see folks in the military as holding the opposite values of peace. It isn't that simple.

The truth is that we are citizens in a country that has the most powerful military in the world, maybe in all of history. We live in a society where our military expenditures exceeds the military budgets of the next 20 countries collectively; where the mechanism of recruiting is powerful and persuasive; where socioeconomic issues determine much more why people join rather than their beliefs on war. For many, the military can be very attractive and does offer something better.

The post-Vietnam military is fundamentally different in composition than the modern, professional military of today. The US military is designed to fight a war anywhere, anytime and against anyone in the world. By volunteering, young soldiers subject themselves to this doctrine, sign away any prerogative of citizen soldiery in defense of one's country and are less able to contribute in the collective precaution to the necessity of war. A soldier once told me, "Everyone in the service realizes at some point that all the benefits, college money and pay you receive are not for *you*. They give you that because they need to be able to send your *body* somewhere." At some point most soldiers will ask themselves, *What did I get myself into?* Conscription relegates the responsibility of war squarely on the shoulders of the military. By volunteering, soldiers indirectly feel like they carry that burden of responsibility, but at the same time they have less

power to change their situation because of their own decision to join. The same soldier, a veteran of Iraq, also told me, "Ignorance is a soldier's best friend." This is truer in today's army than in the days of the draft. For those who signed up on their own volition, ignorance is all the more blissful in warding off the sense of helplessness.

Soldiers are caught in a difficult situation; within a system that wields considerable power over most facets of their lives. In times of war, bodies are simply needed. That is the bottom line. The military is under stress, currently involved in two protracted campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The separation from loved ones and the proximity to the reality of war precipitates all sorts of political questions for soldiers on the front line. Many can cope by believing in the mission and cause, fulfilling their duty. Many have doubts. They get to Iraq or Kuwait and they realize how contrary the objectives of the military are to their conscience. Some realize before they get to the Middle East. Some realize during boot camp, but they hold out, believing the chaplain who says, "You will get over those feelings of doubt . . ." Soldiers often feel helpless, belonging to a system that has tremendous control over their lives.

Enlistment in the US military is voluntary and issues of deployment,

separation and casualties probably will not impose much hardship on the Mennonite community at large. As a Historic Peace Church, we are enjoying a respite of not being directly confronted with issues of military service. Sadly, we live in a country that is at war and there are many individuals within the military struggling with difficult issues of duty, war, and killing.

Within the confines of the military, there are some soldiers who pursue discharges as conscientious objectors. The only option available for soldiers who want out because of what they believe is conscientious objection, an issue of this war that has remained relatively low key. In times of war, the military is extremely reluctant to release anybody from duty. Enlistment in the military is an eight year contract of active and reserve duty; there is no "two weeks notice." Discharges are obtainable for circumstances such as mental problems, family situations and permanent injuries, but a soldier simply cannot quit his job.

There are individuals who are deciding upon religious or ethical beliefs not to participate in war or bear arms. MCN has been working closely with COs for over three years now. Many of them have submitted their claims as soldiers on the frontline - Iraq.

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Unarmed in Baghdad

By Michael Sharp



When John's* brother joined the U.S. Marine Corps, John saw how proud his dad was of him, but he hadn't ever been proud of John in this way. "I felt that it was necessary to prove myself," John said. "So I joined the Army."

John grew up in a conservative Christian home, where supporting the U.S. military and going to church were almost equally important. "I always tied being in the military to selflessness," he said. "Those were ideal qualities that I sought to attain as a Christian. I had grown up learning to serve others above myself and place the needs of others above my own." When John got to basic training, though, he realized that being in the U.S. Army was not about serving others human beings above himself; it was about putting the United States of America above any human beings.

Another moment of clarity for John came after basic training, while his brother was still fighting in Fallujah. His brother's best friend had been killed there, and John was asked to attend the funeral in the place of his brother. "As I stood in my brother's place," he said, "I began pondering the moral and ethical dilemma of this senseless death. A crying mother, a grieving wife, a fatherless child; this scene had been repeated thousands of times over the years. How many lives must be lost before we win a war?"

It also reminded him about his brother's experiences in Iraq, and how he was still not able to talk about many of the operations he conducted. What had happened that was so bad that he couldn't talk about it?

After finishing his training, John was deployed to Germany, where he soon contacted us at MCN. He didn't know much about the conscientious objector discharge, but he had clearly decided he didn't want to be a part of the military anymore. As he put it, "The grim reality

is that there are no bloodless wars, and many more families will continue to suffer because we choose war over non-violent resolution of conflicts. We should be following Christ's example."

Soon after submitting his application for conscientious objector status, he was given deployment orders to go to Iraq. His wife was now pregnant, and his application was not likely to be approved before he left for Iraq. Christmas break was an intense time for John and his wife as they spent their last moments together before John was to leave.

This time was also intensified by the reaction of his chain of command. He was harassed on a daily basis. John was part of a detachment serving divisional headquarters. His immediate superiors were comprised of high ranking Noncommissioned Officers, who had lengthy military careers, including periods of service as drill instructors. So not only did John have the usual challenges facing a CO, but he was facing people who have made a career of knowing how to make life difficult for soldiers.

John is now in Iraq at Camp Victory in Baghdad. He is required to carry a gun, but he has taken the bolt out of it, so it can't be fired. He recognizes that he is at a higher risk since he would be unable to defend himself during an attack, but he has made his decision. Whether or not the military acknowledges that he is a conscientious objector, he is one. He will not be a part of the killing.

John's claim should be decided by the Department of the Army in the coming months. If he is approved, he will be brought back from Iraq and discharged from the Army, so he and his wife and soon-to-be daughter can go home. ♦

* Name has been changed

Email From Iraq

Hey Dave,

I just wanted to let you know that I had absolutely no problems handing my rebuttal in to the chain of command. In fact, I was asked (by my NCOs) as to when I was going to have it ready. My First Sergeant told me (after I had submitted it) exactly when she had submitted it and to whom. They also went way out of their way to make sure I could go and see the chaplain and JAG about it.

Quite a turn around from how they treated me in before. I am surprised about how willing they are to work with me on this. After what happened back in Germany, I thought it would get worse than it had already been. But no, now they are supportive of me. Maybe they are taking the old adage to heart "kill 'em with kindness". I don't know? They practically walk on eggshells around me, because they know that I will go to the proper people if I feel I am having problems.

Victory Base is a mud hole. When it rains, I have to walk 1/2 (uphill, lol) through mud to get to work. They do have rather limited facilities, but the Subway, Burger King, Pizza Hut, and Greenbeans Coffee make it somewhat bearable. We are having a dust storm now... second one since I have been here. Yes Dave...there are a lot of contractors, DOD civilians, DA civilians and so on here. I have a trailer that I share with another guy from my unit. We don't have a theater, but we do have TV in the trailers, which can cure some of the boredom experienced while I am here.

Occasionally we will hear gunfire in the distance, or see a tracer round now and then, but nothing too crazy. You were right; it is like a little piece of the U.S. here. (So what are all those darn Iraqis doing here? Oh Yeah, it is **THIER** country)

John*

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Sadly, the military is not recognizing many claims, disapproving COs who embody the very definition of having a "firm, fixed and sincere objection to participating in war of any form or the bearing of arms" (Department of Defense Directive 1300.6 §III.A.). These beliefs have crystallized directly through experiences in the military and from the dissonance of coming to terms with the fundamental task of what a soldier is required to do.

Some, like Vincent, are altered forever through encountering the reality of war. At the checkpoint, his military career and perspective changed that day. He can recall the scene clearly, a vivid imprint that he will never shake. Vincent had instinctively carried out a series of actions before his awareness caught up with him. That is what bothers him the most. He knows that he is trained to be a lethal weapon. He would have killed an innocent family. Vincent came to MCN to speak about getting out of the army. He had seen war, concluded that it is wrong and decided never to take part again. He submitted for discharge as conscientious objectors.

Sometimes exceeding one year, the CO process is difficult, lengthy and arduously bureaucratic. According to US army regulations, a conscientious objector must meet three criteria: object to participation in war in any form; the objection is based on religious, moral, ethical training and belief; demonstrate that the position is sincere and deeply held. First, one must submit a claim answering six questions about personal convictions and change in belief. An Investigating Officer is appointed and allocated with the responsibility for the investigation. Interviews with a chaplain, a medical officer, documents, supporting statements are assembled and the Investigating Officer makes a final recommendation. The claim works its way up the chain of command until finally reaching the Department of the Army for final determination by a CO Review Board. All this time a CO must live out his beliefs in an often unreceptive environment, enduring possible hostility from fellow soldiers and an uncooperative command. Applying for a CO discharge and living

out those beliefs within the military, changes someone for life. It is one of the few ways to stand up to the helplessness.

No matter what the individual believes, at some point they will face the fact of what their business is all about. War is about life and death. There are all sorts of people in the military and upon joining most people just do not think much about what the fundamental task of what their job entails. It is that simple.

There are people who have had a change in their beliefs; usually directly through their experiences of being in the military. They are often isolated and alone. I have learned to deeply respect those who are submitting for conscientious objection. They have the courage to stand up for what they believe in and face the consequences. Vincent received an honorable discharge for conscientious objection in December 2005. He has returned to the US and is studying to become an Emergency Medical Technician. He is determined to make a difference.

A genuine stance against war often leaves one feeling isolated and alone. The Mennonites have wrestled with the issue of military service for centuries and have considerable experience in living out their beliefs in the face of war. We live in a time where military service is not compulsive, but where the realities of war have not changed. Conscientious objectors do exist in the army and they need help from the outside.

I have often reflected on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. An expert in the law posed the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with the well known and heartening story of the merciful Samaritan. What strikes me is that the Good Samaritan was the outsider. The Levite and the priest walked by. The Samaritan, a stranger and pariah, showed compassion and looked after the man.

There are few soldiers who are not changed by their experience in the military and even fewer who are not somehow scarred through their experience in war. As this war drags

on, returning soldiers are going to need understanding, sympathy and compassion. In a system that often "passes by on the other side" of the needs of its members, we Mennonites have much to offer the military community. People in the military are not our opposites. They are our neighbors. They are going through extraordinarily difficult times and trying to come to terms with the realities of war. I have repeatedly encountered relief and gratitude because I, as someone outside of the military, can understand and respect what they are dealing with and going through.

I have met my fair share of servicemembers and heard all sorts of stories. Through contact with folks in the military, my respect and sympathy for them has increased appreciably. I have learned that military might is not something to shrug off as pointless and theoretical. It is a reality that we have to deal with. At the same time though, my belief in not participating in war has become firmer. My beliefs are further grounded now through direct contact to those who have experienced war and having been aquatinted with the military community. My faith in God's Kingdom has deepened due to my personal involvement with the most traditional instrument of power for kingdoms of this world. My forefathers needed to face issues of military service in wars past. Because of my proximity to the reality of war, I have role models for what it means to have courage in the face of war today.

One conscientious objector told me once that when people in his company found out about his beliefs they ridiculed him. Then through the course of the one-year deployment in Iraq, they started to inquire about his beliefs. As time went on, some soldiers agreed with him, even though they themselves could not do what he was doing. One soldier asking hard questions about their job of killing compels others to think. Their courage is inspiring and makes a difference. ❖

Dave Stutzman has worked as the Coordinator of MCN since February 2003



MCN Office Report

February 2006

Conscientious Objectors

There has been some very good news! Three soldiers received honorable discharges as conscientious objectors in December and have all returned to the US. We are hoping to fly two of them to Europe for a speaking tour this March and April.

Recently, two CO claims were recommended for disapproval by General Sanchez, citing the timing as the main cause. Sanchez gives the final recommendation before the CO claim heads to the Department of the Army, and is well known for giving negative recommendations. Up until that point all recommendations for both COs had been positive. Both have submitted rebuttals to be added to the claim before heading to the DA.

AWOL

Five soldiers come to MCN about AWOL in January. In two cases, the decisions were quite intense and difficult. The units were being deployed with in a matter of a week when they contacted MCN with wanting to know about going AWOL. In the end both decided at the last moment to be deployment. One was three days AWOL and called late at night to inform MCN that because "it would kill his Dad," he decided to return to military control. He was obviously very torn about the decision. The other guy, an Iraq veteran, was hoping for a discharge and had an action pending when he contacted us. He found out one hour before his deployment that the request had been denied. It was too late and he is now in Kuwait. Last week we heard from his mother and fiancé that the command, upon further review, may decide to ship him to Germany.

The Aguayos

Helga and Agustin have been waiting, waiting and waiting. A final decision should be imminent! In November the military asked for a 30 day extension. Since then little new information has been issued. If the decision is negative, the Aguayo's lawyers are prepared to file the *Habeas Corpus*, which was avoided until now due to the Military's request to reprocess Agustin's case at the Department of the Army.

MCN Email

The following is an email sent from a CO describing an encounter with one of his superiors:

I had my second run-in with my Battalion Command Sergeant Major (BNCSM) today. Lovely. This is the same guy that threw me out of his office three months ago yelling at me telling me that I was cancer.

So how did I prompt this? Well, this was the week that I decided that something needed to get going. So I wrote a letter (always a favorite here with my Battalion) saying (a) the progress of my case thus far, (b) what the next step was, and (c) that I wanted an update. Nothing bad at all. No threats. No pushiness. Just straight up. I wish I would have just said what I wanted if I knew I was going to be belittled anyways...

Anyways, I walk into his office and right off the bat, before I can even get to parade rest, he says, "Are you still a conscientious objector?"

Well, hello! No! I'm doing this for my health. Of course I am still a conscientious objector!

I barely know what was said, and what he asked me, except that he kept throwing out those stupid (STUPID, STUPID) "what if" questions. You know the ones that nobody can answer, yeah those... Anyways, I told him the truth. I told him that I didn't know what the exact right answer was or that I knew exactly what I would do, but I knew that I wouldn't kill. Well that wasn't good enough for him. He took the whole "pacifism" to mean the beloved passivism. You know - do nothing, roll over on your back and play dead, ignore the situation, let your family be killed, bury your head in the sand - that kind of "passivist." Sorry BNCSM, you have falsely spelled my description, it is paCIFist, not paSSIVist. Get a dictionary.

So he had me read the first paragraph of Hebrews 11. Of course, at first he wanted me to cite it to him. I can't cite crap, especially on the spot, sorry. But he was just lovely and let me read it instead. His point

was that you go on and your faith will allow you to be safe and to do the right thing. "True Sergeant it is about faith." I beg to differ though, A LOT. Sorry. So what is your point Sergeant? I still don't know, but he was satisfied at my acknowledgement of Hebrews 11 being about faith.

Anyways, he is convinced that I am scared out of my pants of going down-range to Iraq. He would bet his life on it, I would guess. He also explicitly said that I joined for only college money, which is partially true, but not entirely true because I joined for a multitude of reasons. He even went and re-read all my supporting letters exclaiming that they all mention that I joined for college money. True, I think three of them said something about college money, but I guess the other three letters that don't say anything about college money don't mean anything? Besides, who in the world joins the military solely to go and fight? Is college money not the reason (or partially) for most, IF NOT ALL soldiers anymore?

I can't stand talking to high ranking people. You can't just have an open forum or a debate with them. You can't speak your mind. You just answer their questions. They can make it seem like you are a sack of crap liar because, essentially, it is just a one sided story - theirs. I guess I did all I could do. And from the sounds of it, my presence and determination are aggravating to the command. I know that because I had to stick around after my belittling so that my NCO escort could talk to my old commander and my new commander to set something up with the Battalion commander. Maybe this meeting will turn out to be another belittling, but maybe it is so he can set up my Investigating Officer hearing for my CO claim. At least they know I'm still here and kicking. Plus, I already have a letter to congress typed up and ready to go, just in case they balk again.

Peace be with you,

Kent*

*Name has been changed



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How You Can Help a CO

The Low Down:

MCN has been working closely with COs for over three years now. Many of them have submitted their claims as soldiers on the frontline - Iraq. Sadly, the military is not recognizing many claims, disapproving COs who embody the very definition of having a "firm, fixed and sincere objection to participating in war of any form or the bearing of arms" (Department of Defense Directive 1300.6 §III.A.). These beliefs have crystallized directly from experiences in the military and from the dissonance of coming to terms with the fundamental task of what a soldier is required to do. COs are not the only ones dissatisfied by the military's reluctance to discharge soldiers. Numerous soldiers have expressed to us that in times of war, bodies are simply needed. That is the bottom line.

What they need:

Folks in the military need to know that there are others on the outside, who support what they are trying to do and will stand by them. They need personal support and financial assistance. Although, their cases involve a symbolic struggle for CO rights, they will also need the personal support.

How you can help:

Send this Newsletter to people you know who might want to help. For individuals, peace organizations, small groups and congregations interested in helping, you can make personal contact with Helga and Agustin. They will need financial support to make this happen. We encourage churches and organizations to donate a token contribution, of \$200-\$500, towards the court fees. (See below)



Contribute Financially



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About Our Newsletter:

Sound Off is a publication of the Military Counseling Network (MCN). It is a platform for people to tell their stories and relate their opinions in this time of war and political uncertainty. MCN is dedicated to the discussion of issues relevant to servicemembers and their families; Germans and Americans, soldiers and civilians.

We welcome any submissions to the newsletter that deal with the War in Iraq, Americans abroad, Americans at home and European-US relations. We especially welcome submissions from soldiers and their families. *Please send us your opinions, letters and stories!*