

PFC Matthew D. Harju

Petition for Conscientious Objector Status 1-0
Formatted IAW AR 600-43 Appendix B-1

Training and Belief

I, Matthew David Harju, am seeking an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector (1-0)

2. Describe the nature of the belief which requires you to seek separation from the military or assignment to noncombatant training and duty for reasons of conscience.

First I want to declare that the experiences I have met in the Army have summed to my conclusion that war serves no good purpose in human nature and I will never serve in or support any war for the rest of my life.

Throughout my time in the Army, I have been constantly pressed by my mentors to make sure I always do the right thing: From the drill sergeant above the recruit to the gunner above the driver. But, now that I have participated in a war and witnessed the trauma of death and hardship brought on to the participants on both sides of a war and their families, I can't help but raise question to if my participation in the Army *is* the right thing to do. The Army's sole purpose is to plan, prepare for and wage wars. Among many questions in which I still seek the answers for, there are a few that I continue to ask myself everyday: Which wrong(s) does war make right? How can we humans make as much progress as we have yet still resort to killing each other in an attempt to solve our problems? What is human life *really* worth?

I strongly believe that all humans are created equal and should be treated so. But there is a very harsh reality behind war that is contrary to this belief and can only be truly recognized after living through such circumstances. War is undoubtedly the deliberate forcing of one's own beliefs onto another through the organized killing of people between two or several countries or groups of people with the hope of improving the general well-being of their own nation/people and/or the world. The only thing concerning the belief of equality of men in my interpretation of war is that the act of war goes against this belief completely. That is what I have realized through my Army career and 8 months in Iraq. One forcing their own theories or beliefs onto another is only possible with a feeling of supremacy or "inequality". And it's certainly a vulgar display of ignorance of this belief to take another person's or a group of people's lives over it. Aside from the number of combatants who die in wars, many innocent civilians are killed as a result of this too, unfortunately. When Thomas Jefferson gave the opening statement of the Declaration of Independence as, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights..." one cannot deny that our country was founded primarily on this belief for the reason that it is indubitably a key working fundamental of human life. More importantly, that it indeed applies to *all* people in the world.

I also hold deeply to the belief that self-preservation ranks above any and all other duties that man can claim to be his obligation in life. Why? Words cannot describe my gratitude for being granted the privilege of human life. Part of what makes us human and separates us from all other beings is the gift of having a brain that allows one to think freely and believe in whatever one desires. The simple nature

of war clearly proves that it does nothing more than demote the human mind to a level somewhat closer to a machine or computer in order to be effective in a combat zone. Almost every aspect of war consists mainly of action and reaction, "muscle memory" as most soldiers like to call it. There is no room for error, thus leaving little or no time for what humans learn from and do best: Think. I can give an example of this on one of the lowest levels of warfare. In every war, you find humans killing humans. People killing people. Often times, the soldiers trying to kill each other don't even really know anything about the person they're shooting at; who they are, where they're from, their hobbies, their name, etc. For all they know, this person could actually turn out to be a good friend under different circumstances. But the theoretical mind of a soldier only sees a "target", not a person. Their task is to "destroy" the target. They only judge one another by the nation in which they represent through the uniform they wear, apply this information to their "objective" and react accordingly. I suppose this is why it is said that the aim of Basic Combat Training (BCT) is to "break you down completely and build you back up into a soldier". In other words, erase your original personality completely and replace it with a soldier's instinct, a killer instinct. However, through my own choice to think about what I am actually doing I find myself incapable of morally justifying killing someone under any foreseeable conditions, especially in war, when war itself is driven by things which common sense and good order would otherwise deem as a bad or negative feeling, for example; Greed, pride, envy, anger or revenge. Very much like the emotions found to be the drive of almost every murder case on record. By acknowledging these facts, there can only be one way for me to define taking another person's life: Murder. I cannot be the soldier that the Army wants me to be because I am not nor will I ever be a person of this nature. Simply put, I see war to be nothing more than what I choose to call Man's demoralization and destruction of himself.

Furthermore, I strongly support and favor the good things that human intellect gives us the potential to do as opposed to the bad things we more commonly choose to do. I find it to be a big waste of time, energy, resources and manpower and see no point in governments investing hundreds of billions, perhaps trillions of dollars towards the training of men and women to be able to carry out and commit violent acts against the good of humanity and in funding the production of machines and equipment to further assist those men and women in completing their "objective". Perhaps these governments could use the same superabundance of money for a better purpose. Things that support the betterment of humanity. For example, research towards how to refine a more efficient and pollutant-free general fuel, or investing into the research of medications that could cure the illnesses and diseases that the world currently deems untreatable. After all, if we're capable of perfecting an act of destroying ourselves through the application of technology, crafting of raw materials, and use of general knowledge, who is to say it is impossible for us to perfect our own life and our worldwide living conditions?

Now that I have personally seen the reality of war and that my service in the Army and in war has led to the crystallization of my beliefs stated above, I find myself no longer compatible with military service. To receive further training would be simply a waste of time and funds. And under my own good conscience I cannot, do not and will not agree with or be a participant of war in any form while simultaneously holding these beliefs in their entirety and by their utmost sincerity.

3. Explain how your beliefs changed or developed, including an explanation as to what factors caused the change in or development of your conscientious objection beliefs.

There are several factors from even before I joined the Army that take part in the development and changing of my beliefs that comprise somewhat of a story, but I feel the information is necessary to fully understand my background and answer to this question. So I will start from the very beginning.

I come from a family line of military service. Starting from my great grandfather having served in the Army during WWI, both my grandfathers served in WWII, followed by my father who served 8 years in the National Guard and my three uncles who all served in the Navy. I was naturally curious about their experiences and after my grandfather first shared his experiences as a Marine Raider with me when I was fourteen, I felt a great sense of respect for him and the rest of my prior service family members. I was convinced of the great honor that came with courageously risking their life for their country. I began to grow an interest in the military which led to the development of childhood fantasies about being in combat, heroism and military service. Somehow, I completely overlooked the fact that "willing to die for your country" usually also means you're willing to kill for your country.

During my first two years of high school, I enrolled in the NJROTC program to try and learn more about the military as I now had ambitions to enlist after graduation. But as the two years progressed I found no free space in my schedule to study other subjects that I found intriguing, so I transferred out of NJROTC. I then picked photography in my junior year as the alternate elective. Through photography I found passion and through passion I found new ambition. Around the time I graduated high school I was having problems at home with my parents. Now that I was a legal adult and had a diploma, my parents saw it fit to let me do whatever I wished. Unfortunately, I chose to focus more on the new freedom of living on my own than I did working on going to college to continue my studies. I moved out and went in on a lease with some friends. It was an impulsive decision, and I only had part-time work that was now 30 miles away. So I eventually quit my job to start a new one that I never ended up getting, rendering me broke and unable to pay the rent. This pattern of house hopping and gaining and leaving what I considered to be dead-end jobs continued for about a year, until I finally found myself in a deep hole. I had no money, no job or motivation to find one; I had to sell my camera so that I could afford to eat and I definitely didn't want to move back in with my parents, like most teenagers. I began to think about what options I had and the one I found most legitimate was joining the military. I hadn't forgotten about how badly I once sought out enlistment. I went to the Army recruiter's office to discuss my options and had come to the conclusion that I can get the best of all worlds out of it: I could fulfil the dream of joining the army, carry on my family tradition, save some money and in a few years study photography through the GI Bill. I then talked it over with my friends and family, who all seemed to be in support of this option. They agreed I could greatly benefit from something honorable as military service. So I enlisted, said my goodbyes and was sent to Fort Knox on 19 July 2007 to undergo 19D Cavalry Scout OSUT.

Contrary to my original visions of glory and sacrifice, I began to realize through my weapons training that there is a difference between shooting your friend in a BB gun war and shooting a grown man in a real war with the intent to kill. The difference is that your friend is only "dead" for the game and the man is dead forever. Naive as I was, I was confused why I was even learning to fire numerous personal and crew served weapons when my job was to only be "the eyes and ears of battle". I shrugged it off as being nothing more than standard training and figured it would be different when I got to my unit. Not even three months later reality came down on me pretty hard and fast when I found myself in Baghdad at a new arrival briefing from my

squadron leadership. My squadron commander's first words were, "Welcome to the squadron and welcome to Iraq." He made it clear that our job here was "to seek out and kill the enemy".

In Baghdad I felt like what we were doing as soldiers shouldn't even be considered a war. Mostly our day's work consisted of regular street patrols, speaking with sheiks about how their neighborhood is holding up and what we can do to help keep the area pacified, providing security at the work site of a hospital being barricaded to prevent the threat of suicide bombers, delivering school supplies to financially unfortunate schools and we even got the chance to visit the Baghdad zoo. I got a sense of satisfaction in knowing we're actually helping Iraqi people live a better life. I felt that we really were living up to the name of supporting "Iraqi Freedom". But my experience in Iraq reversed itself when our squadron moved to the Diyala province. After only two weeks of patrolling our new sector I had my first IED strike when returning from a 16 hour mission. It was then followed by two more strikes in the following six weeks. Having never seen any real combat before these events and having never seen the people who planted the IED, I fell into my thoughts. I asked myself things like, "Who is it that's trying to kill me? Why is he trying to kill me? What have I ever personally done to this person in order for them to be driven to kill me?" I found the answers to my questions when I saw the death of someone I knew to be a good person. One particular mission, my platoon took up the outer perimeter of a small village while another platoon from my troop was securing the village itself. Our job was to conduct a "screen line" around the entire village, to watch for and report people fleeing the site and to observe and call up any possible House Borne IEDs within the village. After having confirmed and reporting that almost every building in this village showed indications of being rigged to explode, an order was given to the other platoon to dismount and verify that they were HBIEDs. After hours of sitting in the driver's hole of a Stryker and monitoring the radio, I was shocked and awoken from my doze of exhaustion to what i'd just heard. As I sat up and looked through the periscopes, sure enough, about 800 meters away I saw three small figures walk from a Stryker and towards the buildings. Before I could say anything to my gunner, I lost sight of them as they approached a house and almost immediately they were engulfed by a towering gray cloud of dust followed by the delayed concussion of the "boom!" that sank into my chest. After realizing that they had just set off an enormous IED, it was assumed that they were dead. The other platoon sent more dismounts to see if anyone survived and found one of the three digging through a pile of rubble to get to one of them that was crushed from the debris. A medevac was called immediately and arrived some minutes later to take away the wounded. Unfortunately, this man died in the air enroute to the hospital. He had just left his wife and two children not even a month prior. Besides the fact that the people who caused this man's death didn't know anything about him, they still found enough reason to attempt to kill him only because of where he is from and what he stands for. And then I realized that I was almost killed three times for the same reasons. These people didn't care about the person or personality they just killed, only the uniform he wore. They're only aim was to kill the American soldier, not Jeremy. This proved to me that there is no real humane part of war, because nothing of the human intellect is practiced. Just people killing people over the conflict of their beliefs.

Another experience from my time in war, ironically, was almost a completely reversed situation from the one stated before. It was my last patrol with the platoon before I left a month early to Kuwait on the wash rack detail for redeployment to Germany. It was getting dark. We had just wrapped up a patrol on our last day of an

outpost rotation and were heading back to the FOB for a day's rest and vehicle maintenance. After making a turn through a checkpoint, out of almost thin air, our relieving platoon (the same one from the instance before) came barreling past us heading to the outpost. About five minutes later, their platoon sergeant came up on the troop radio net reporting that they had hit a civilian car. According to the details given to our platoon sergeant by troop base radio operator, one of the Strykers evidently ran over and dragged a car underneath it some distance while they were trying to stop. I couldn't tell through the thermal driver's screen if they had headlights on or not when they passed, but I don't remember seeing the glare of their lights in the reflection of my periscope like I normally do when passing a vehicle. When we got to the site there was shattered glass all over the road. At the end of the stretch of tire marks from the car being dragged, it laid there completely destroyed and crushed flat with the driver still inside it. I couldn't see the scene since my vehicle was facing away from it covering the road, but someone from the other platoon came across the net with a description similar to, "the car only has one occupant, a man. He's suffered heavy trauma wounds, bleeding from the eyes and ears, barely recognizable." Apparently the driver was trapped in the crushed car, his limbs shattered and severely bruised, no longer possessing the shape of a normal human. Troop net came across and said, "make sure to check the vehicle as best as you can to After about ten minutes of tampering with the heap of scrap metal which was once a car, they called up to troop saying they're unable to move the man out of the car and asked if they should call for a medevac. For some reason, the request went with no reply. After this platoon's lieutenant called again asking if they should call for a medevac, troop net replied with "what is the man's status? Is he still alive?" The platoon leader replied saying the man still had a pulse and was told to wait by troop net. After a few minutes of waiting, the platoon leader called again saying something like, "I don't think we need to call a medevac anymore, the man has no pulse." "Can you confirm he has no pulse?" troop net replied. It was confirmed that the man had no pulse and was dead. He was killed, nearly mutilated by the negligence of soldiers. The ignorance and incompetence of people who are said to be professionals cost one poor, innocent man his life. For all I know, this man was coming home from work to his family or going to buy food. More shockingly, no effort was made to try and save this man whatsoever. However, when an American gets injured or killed all the proper procedures are done immediately in order to at least make an attempt to save a life. His right to live was completely ignored and his right of equality was nonexistent at the time of his death. And what was the end result? Sworn statements, just another day closer to home for the Americans and a now ruined family who will never be able to understand the circumstances in which their loved one died. Only who was responsible for it. And worst of all, after it was all said and done, the only thing a certain staff sergeant had to say about the incident was, "Oh well. He was probably a terrorist anyway".

Among many other events, the two described were the major turning points for my beliefs and perspective on what is good and bad. After what I saw I no longer believe in freedom through war. I don't believe in war at all. When no freedom is even granted during war, how can something like freedom be promised as a result of war? The only thing I now believe about war is that there is nothing humane about it; obviously no human intellect is practiced in war. No beliefs are respected in war. No human rights are respected in war.

4. Explain when these beliefs became incompatible with military service and why.

Despite what I thought about the military before I joined, I now know how it really is. It is nothing like the image it is portrayed to be through the numerous television advertisements, glorified war movies and the news. I was not a conscientious objector before I joined the Army. But a few days after the incident with the civilian being killed, my conscience let my mind know that it objects. I had decided to go see combat stress and try and talk to somebody about what I was feeling, since I couldn't find any comfort or trust in talking to my platoon members about it. After I was granted permission to go by my chain of command, my section sergeant began to talk to me about what was going on. All he could assume was that I was tired of getting blown up by IEDs and told me, "I know what you're feeling. It's normal what you're going through and eventually you just learn to get over it and move on. I've been blown up fourteen times and I seem to be fine." But by then I knew that there was more than just the IEDs bothering me, a lot more. I found it unjust to simply forget about what happened and "move on". He then asked me if I felt that I was combat effective. I wasn't sure what he meant, so he asked me, "If I were to pull you out of the driver's hole and put you on the ground as a dismount, and we got into contact, would you be able to engage, close in and kill the enemy?" Now I began to really think about the question. I thought about how my beliefs had changed over the last eight months and then tried to picture what it actually meant for me "close in and kill the enemy". I thought about the main reasons I joined the Army, so that I could go to college and honor my family. When I put one and one together, I asked myself, "Am I willing to kill for college money or to make my family proud?" So I answered, "No, sergeant. I would not be willing to do that." This conversation alone was the catalyst that brought together my wartime experiences to be compared to my good conscience. From that moment on, it was crystal clear that I am not willing to kill for anything. I realized that the whole time I was questioning my actions I was actually learning more about what I truly think is right. I left for Kuwait two days later.

Now, there is not a doubt in my mind that war serves no good purpose and only makes the world what it is today. That the beliefs stated in the first question really are my most deeply and sincerely held. And I will not participate in a war ever again. Therefore, I find my beliefs incompatible with military service.

5. Explain as to the circumstances, if any, under which you believe in the use of force, and to what extent, under any foreseeable circumstances.

The use of force can be a very vague statement because the use of force has several definitions. There is a difference between using defensive force and excessive, deliberate and lethal force. The latter use of force is more commonly known as "violence", and this use of force is what I consider to be incorrect and completely avoidable. I feel that conflicts on any level can essentially be solved without any use of force, but applying the proper use of force depends solely on the situation. By that, I mean that the use of force to restrain someone from doing wrong and strictly as a last resort is both legally and morally acceptable. For example, if a woman walking home from work finds herself being assaulted or even raped by a stranger, she certainly has the right to defend herself. I'm sure using pepper spray would do just fine and provide enough force to restrain the suspect. It is only wrong for her to continue attacking the suspect after she knows she has a chance to get away. Another example could be if you find yourself in a bar and all the sudden, some drunk decides to pick a fight with you. If he is deliberately attacking you, you should and do have the right to defend yourself. If it were me, before use of any

physical force (like a countering punch), I would first try and at least restrain the person, as this would clearly be using the minimal amount of force necessary to ensure one's safety. Violence, however, is any further use of force and/or the use of force for means other than self defense. It can be seen as anything from the man trying to rape the woman to using air support, armor and infantry to occupy a land. I see no possible way to obtain world peace through violence and I see no reason for committing acts of lethal violence in an organized and deliberate manner. This is why I will never advocate or support war.

6. Explain what in your life most conspicuously demonstrates the consistency and depth of your beliefs that have risen to your claim.

I have only considered myself a conscientious objector since late September 2008. But it didn't take long for me to decide what is right for me and what I truly stand for. Perhaps submitting my application, in a relevant and legal attempt to change my life is the most conspicuous evidence of my sincerity. It is only my burden to submit my claim. I am aware of the less-than-stellar success rate for CO applications in the military as I am also aware of the negative effect that writing and turning in this application could have on the remainder my military career. I don't plan on any further promotions after submission nor do I expect much friendliness from most of my co-workers solely because I have a good feeling there will be a vast difference in our views. Yet, here I am, still writing this application with full intent of submitting it because I myself know the sincerity of my beliefs.

The simple fact is that my wartime experiences have led to the development and crystallization of my personal belief in the transcendent importance of the equality and preservation of man. I put my beliefs of what is right before anything else, even my job. That is why I can no longer work for the Army in good conscience.

7. Explain how your daily life style has changed as a result of your beliefs and the future actions you plan to continue in support of your beliefs.

Since the crystallization of my beliefs, I have noticed some simple changes in my habits as well as making decisions in support of a healthier lifestyle, both physically and mentally. Since my return to Germany, I have seldom felt the desire to drink alcohol. This lack of interest in my prior destructive habit has helped me find the will to gradually quit smoking as well. And despite having been a major hobby of mine for the last nine years, I have decided to put an end to playing violent or war based video games as I find it easier and more enjoyable to relax through playing sports or racing games instead. My reading habits have drastically changed in the sense that I never really had interest in books; I take great interest in the works of Cormac McCarthy and LTC Dave Grossman.

Some larger changes in my life include starting to re-study and hone my German speaking skills. Through this I find a way to better relate to the culture right outside of my post as well as communicate with my fiancé and her parents. I also have put more emphasis on my previous ambition of photography. With photography I find a sense of peace by being able to use my own creativity to portray the true beauties of the world. All of which I can share with other people to remind them of the delicacy of the Earth and its inhabitants. I enjoy almost all subjects: Sports especially, but travel, documentary, nature and portraits as well. Through dedication and a bit of

finesse I hope that someday I will still be able to fulfil my dream of working as a freelance photographer.

Participation in Organizations

Organizations:

Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC) September 2002-April 2003
Burlington-Edison High School
301 N Burlington Blvd
Burlington, WA 98233

Reason: Desire to learn about the military with ambition to enlist after high school