

Conscientious Objectors

Contributed by Skywalker
Friday, 09 April 2004

Editors note: This weeks guest rant was submitted by a former Marine who happens to be a good friend of mine. I need to have a way for users to submit some type of "bio" with their rants but for now this will have to do

Reports from the Iraq front and a recent survey clearly indicate growing psychological pressures and disillusionment among many of our deployed troops. At the same time, more troops are seeking conscientious objector status to get out the Army. According to official Army statistics, the number of conscientious objectors has tripled since the beginning of the Iraq War. Sixty soldiers applied for conscientious objector status in 2003 and the numbers are on the rise for 2004. The latest soldier who has won notoriety for declaring himself a conscientious objector is Army Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia of the 1st Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment of the Florida National Guard. Mejia, who's been absent without leave for five months before he turned himself in to authorities, insists that he can't return to Iraq because he believes that the war against Iraq was driven by oil.

He also claims

to have suffered trauma from an ambush he witnessed and during which innocent civilians were hit. Here you have an interesting mix of political misgivings, combined with traumatic combat memories, experienced by a noncom with several years in a grunt unit and who never previously had a serious problem. The Mejia case and a few others, such as paratroop Spc. Jeremy Hinzman, who moved to Canada to avoid deployment, raise interesting questions. Is the status of conscientious objector truly applicable in an all-volunteer military, and how should it be dealt with? So far, the draft hasn't yet returned to America and no U.S. citizen or resident alien is yet forced to join. One should expect that soldiers, who voluntarily and consciously join the ranks of America's combat troops, know what to expect when they train for deployment. If nothing else they have to accept their assigned missions and especially to protect their fellow troopers to the best of their abilities. Saving your own butt and that of your comrades outweighs all political considerations.

Having said that, I

also believe in justice and fairness for America's troops. Yes, a close-in combat experience can leave trauma and psychological residue on good people. Some might not ever want to touch a gun again – that's okay. If a soldier suffers a breakdown, he/she should obviously be afforded every opportunity for treatment and rehabilitation. I don't believe, however, that a soldier should have an immediate option to leave the service or turn conscientious objector. If front-line psychological rehabilitation fails, the next step could be serving in more rearward areas, not in direct-fire combat.

Fact is that in

guerrilla warfare, no one is totally safe – convoys, supply dumps, and headquarters facilities are very lucrative targets for the insurgents. The other option for conscientious objection to serving with a weapon is to give COs a chance to help their fellow comrades as medics, as one highly decorated Nam vet reminded me. “The CO would often find himself in the middle of a rice paddy, trying to patch up Johnny while the bullets were flying around everybody's ears.” To be very honest, I would highly respect and honor every CO who chooses to do that for his/her buddies. That takes guts! Although I'm not a political fan of the occupation quagmire in Iraq, I acknowledge that our military leadership has a problem. It can't afford to bleed excessive personnel strength through over-diagnosis of combat-related stress and by accepting countless requests for conscientious objector status. Any careless policy moves could rapidly open the gates to serious personnel meltdown and quality erosion. With more and more people clamoring to get out of uniform, despite astronomic bonuses, pay raises and benefits bonanzas, I'm afraid that a big surprise could be in store after the elections. That surprise could be – the DRAFT. And with it, conscientious objection will become a valid issue once more.