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Thursday, Sep 02, 2004

## Iraq: The Aftermath

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Posted on Wed, Sep. 01, 2004

### Army officer says deserter is not a conscientious objector

SEAN MURPHY  
Associated Press

**OKLAHOMA CITY** - An Iraq war veteran convicted of desertion at Fort Stewart, Ga., should not be considered a conscientious objector, an Army officer has recommended.

Army Capt. Michael W. Johnson conducted a conscientious objector hearing for Pvt. Camilo Mejia in June at the Fort Sill correctional facility where Mejia is being held.

Once Johnson's recommendation is reviewed by the commanding general at Fort Stewart, it will be forwarded to the Army's Conscientious Objector Review Board for a final determination, Mejia's attorneys said Wednesday.

"This ruling flies in the face of both the facts and the law," Mejia's attorney Louis Font of Brookline, Mass., said in a statement. "The Army just didn't want to keep a GI behind bars whom its own commanders had found to be a C.O. (conscientious objector)."

A spokesman at Fort Stewart said he could not comment on the specifics of Johnson's recommendation.

"Mejia's C.O. packet was organized appropriately and an officer was appointed to review what was submitted," Fort Stewart Public Affairs Officer Rich Olson said by telephone. "He talked to Mejia personally and listened to the witnesses, and based on whatever the regulatory requirements are, he made his personal recommendation.

"This is still an ongoing process."

Olson said Mejia's attorneys have until Sept. 10 to prepare a rebuttal to Johnson's recommendation that will also be presented to the Army's review board.

Mejia, a 28-year-old Iraq war veteran, was convicted in a Fort Stewart military court of desertion on May 21 after refusing to return to his Florida National Guard unit after a two-week leave in October.

He was sentenced to a year in a military prison, received a dishonorable discharge and was reduced in rank from a staff sergeant to a private.

In his conscientious objector application, Mejia claims he saw Iraqi prisoners treated cruelly while he was overseeing the processing of detainees at al-Assad, an Iraqi air base occupied by U.S. forces.

Among those who testified on Mejia's behalf at his conscientious objector hearing was Daniel Ellsberg, a former military analyst who leaked the 1971 Pentagon Papers, a top secret study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.



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