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Soldier who refused to return to Iraq turns himself in as war protest

By Martin Finucane, Associated Press, 3/15/2004 15:00

HANSCOM AIR FORCE BASE, Mass. (AP) A Florida soldier who refused to return to duty in Iraq turned himself in to military authorities on Monday, saying he would seek conscientious objector status.

Accompanied by his lawyer, Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, 28, surrendered at the base's gate to two military police officers, who drove him away.

A crowd of peace activists cheered Mejia and shouted encouragement: "We love you!" "Be strong!" "Go with God!"

Mejia was in Iraq from March until October last year, when he returned home on leave. He did not return to duty.

"I am saying no to war; I have chosen peace," Mejia said earlier at a news conference at Sherborn arranged by anti-war activists. "I went to Iraq and was an instrument of violence and now I have decided to become an instrument of peace."

Lt. Col. Ron Tittle, a Florida National Guard spokesman, said authorities were beginning their investigation of Mejia's case.

"We're glad that he's turning himself in. We have to wait and see what action he's going to pursue," Tittle said.

Mejia's lawyer, Louis Font, said he believes Mejia is the first soldier to turn himself in after refusing to return to Iraq.

"I have not committed a crime and I should not run," Mejia said.

Font said Mejia will seek an administrative discharge from the Army based on his being a conscientious objector. Font said his client has never received official notification that he was considered absent without leave.

Tittle said he did not know whether Mejia had received such notification or not.

Hanscom spokesman Kevin Gilmartin said Mejia's unit commander would make the ultimate decision if he would face charges. Gilmartin said Mejia could be released on personal recognizance or transported to his unit.

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Mejia began a 14-day leave on Oct. 1 and was supposed to return on Oct. 16. Font said Mejia spent much of the time since living in New York City.

He said he was particularly upset over an incident in which he and others were ambushed in Iraq and seven innocent civilians were killed in the ensuing gunfire.

"That's one of the things that tells me there's no such thing as a fair war, no such thing as a just war," Mejia said.

A native of Nicaragua, Mejia is a permanent resident of the United States who served in the Army for three years. He had served in the National Guard for five years when his unit was called to active duty. In civilian life, he was a student at the University of Miami.

Mejia's mother, peace activist Maritza Castillo of Miami, and his father, Nicaraguan songwriter and performer Carlos Godoy Mejia, were with their son on Monday.

"I am scared, but I am very proud of my son and I hope the action my son is doing will help to end the war and bring all the soldiers home," Castillo said in Spanish, translated by a family friend, after watching Mejia turn himself in.

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