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Fla. national guardsman charged with desertion

By Heather Allen, Globe Correspondent, 3/26/2004

The Florida national guardsman who surrendered in Massachusetts last week after deciding not to return to combat in Iraq was charged yesterday with desertion.

The charges against Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejia, 28, of Miami, were brought by Mejia's commanders at Fort Stewart in Georgia, where he was ordered to return earlier this month after six months in hiding.

Mejia did not return to his Florida National Guard unit for duty following after a two-week leave in October. He appeared at the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Mass., on March 15 and announced plans to seek conscientious objector status. He then reported to Hanscom Air Force Base, where he was ordered to Florida. Authorities there sent him to Georgia, where his combat unit was based.

Though other soldiers have sought objector status, Mejia is the first veteran to both fight in Iraq and seek conscientious objector status.

At a news conference in Sherborn, Mejia said that he would not run, and that he was standing up for those fighting overseas. "I'm not a criminal, and I have not committed a crime," he said. "I should not run. I am not turning my back on my comrades. I am doing this for them."

Now that he has been charged, Mejia will be tried by a special court-martial. It was not clear last night when the proceedings would begin.

The maximum sentence he can receive is one year of imprisonment and a bad conduct discharge. Mejia's civilian attorney, Lewis Font, said the discharge is not as severe as a dishonorable discharge, but the consequences would hurt Mejia in the long run. Lewis said he will use the conscientious objector status as a defense and argue that the war is "illegal under international laws. . . . The military tends to want to hurry up their trials, but this will take some time," Lewis said.

A representative from Fort Stewart could not be reached for comment last night. If convicted, Mejia could lose all military benefits and would only be able to seek civilian employment.

Mejia's mother, reached by phone in Miami with the help of an interpreter last night, said this issue is not about benefits. "It is not fair that the charges are accusing him of desertion. He did it out of conscientious objection for humanitarianism. He is following his

humanitarian conscience," said Maricca Castillo.

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