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# G.I. Seeks Conscientious Objector Status

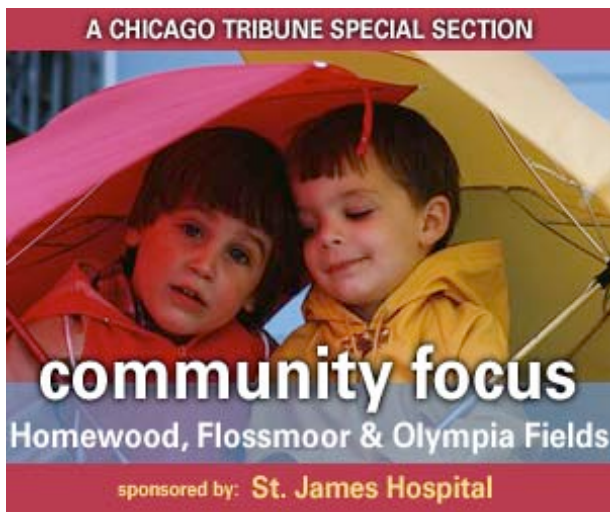
By ERIK SCHELZIG

Associated Press Writer

Published March 15, 2004, 10:37 PM CST

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. -- A Florida soldier who refused to return to duty in Iraq turned himself in to military authorities Monday, saying he would seek conscientious objector status.

After surrendering in Massachusetts, Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, 28, was released and followed orders to return home. He said he would turn himself in to his Florida National Guard unit Tuesday morning.



"This is an oil-driven war, and I don't think any soldier signs up to fight for oil," Mejia said at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport before the ride to his home in Miami Beach.

Mejia was in Iraq for about five months last year. He began a 14-day leave on Oct. 1 and was supposed to return on Oct. 16. His lawyer said Mejia spent much of the time

since living in New York City.

Mejia said he was particularly upset over an incident in which he and others were ambushed and innocent civilians were allegedly hit 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," he said.

His mother, peace activist Maritza Castillo, accompanied him on the flight home. "I believe in my son and I don't believe in this war," she said.

Officers at Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts released Mejia Monday afternoon and told him to fly immediately to Florida and report to his unit.

A spokesman for the Florida National Guard raised the possibility that Mejia could be transferred to Georgia, where his unit was activated for Army duty.

"The Florida National Guard does not have any jurisdiction over the individual," Lt. Col. Ron Tittle said. "He's active duty Army."

Mejia was accompanied by his lawyer when he surrendered at Hanscom to

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"They were doing everything to put soldiers in harm's way and against military doctrine and practice in order to instigate a fight."  
-- Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, who says many orders were morally questionable

**The Commander**

"As a commander, I don't question orders ... and I don't expect anybody below me to question my orders."  
-- Capt. Ted Warfel, who defends his actions in the war and says Mejia lost his nerve as a soldier

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two military police officers.

"I have not committed a crime, and I should not run," Mejia said before turning himself in.

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

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

"I am saying no to war; I have chosen peace," Mejia said earlier at a news conference in the town of 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."

Font said he planned to file for an administrative discharge when he and his client arrived in Florida, based on Mejia being a conscientious objector.

Mejia's unit commander will decide if the soldier will face charges, officials 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 could face up to one year in prison for being absent without leave and up to five years if convicted of desertion, according to Tod Ensign, director of Citizen Soldier, a New York-based group that provides counsel to military resisters and is organizing Mejia's defense.

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