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Catholic soldier refuses to fight in Iraq

Claire Bergin

An American soldier who went missing while on leave after six months' active service in Iraq, has pledged not to fight there again.

Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejia, 28, told a press conference at the Peace Abbey, in Sherborn, Massachusetts, on Monday, that he planned to seek conscientious objector status. Wearing a large medal of St Francis and carrying a Bible, Mejia was accompanied by his parents, grandmother, brother and other relatives.

Mejia said: "I went to Iraq and was an instrument of violence, and now I have decided to become an instrument of peace."

Throughout his tour of duty, Mejia said, he was troubled by the number of Iraqi civilians who were killed by soldiers.

Mejia did not report back for duty last October after coming home for two weeks' leave. He turned himself in at Hanscom Air Force base in Concord, after the press conference.

An estimate 600 soldiers are currently classified as AWOL in America said Tod Ensign, a lawyer and director of Citizen Soldier, a New York veterans' organization with Christian philosophies. Mejia, was the first veteran of the Iraq war to seek conscientious objector status, he said.

Born in Nicaragua, Mejia came to America when he was 18. He joined the Army in 1995.

He said: "When I saw with my own eyes what war can do to people, a real change began to take place within me. I have witnessed the suffering of a people whose country is in ruins and who are further humiliated by the raids, patrols, curfews of an occupying army. My experience of this war has changed me forever.

"One of our sergeants shot a small boy who was carrying an AK-47 rifle. The other two children who were walking with him ran away as the wounded child began crawling for his life. A second shot stopped him, but he was still alive. When an Iraqi tried to take him to a civilian hospital, Army medics from our unit intercepted him and insisted on taking the injured boy to a military facility. There, he was denied medical care because a different unit was supposed to treat our unit's wounded. After another medical unit refused to treat the child, he died.

"I also learned that the fear of dying has the power to turn soldiers into real killing machines. In a combat environment it becomes almost impossible for us to consider things like acting strictly in self-defence or using just enough force to stop an attack.

"Going home on leave in October 2003 provided me with the opportunity to put my thoughts in order and to listen to what my conscience had to say. People would ask me about my war experiences and answering them took me back to all the horrors - the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood, the time a man was decapitated by our machine gun fire and the time my friend shot a child through the chest.

"Coming home gave me the clarity to see the line between military duty and moral obligation. My feelings against the war dictated that I could no longer be a part of it. Acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military and by putting my weapon down I chose to reassert myself as a human being.

"I know I have made the right decision, and that God has forgiven me already."

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