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OP-ED COLUMNIST

'Gooks' to 'Hajis'

By **BOB HERBERT**

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The hapless Jeremy Sivits got the headlines yesterday. A mechanic whose job was to service gasoline-powered generators, Specialist Sivits was sentenced to a year in prison and thrown out of the Army for accepting an invitation to take part in the sadistic treatment of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison.

But there's another soldier in serious trouble to whom we should be paying even closer attention. His case doesn't just call into question the treatment of prisoners by U.S. forces. It calls into question this entire abominable war.

Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia is a 28-year-old member of the Florida National Guard who served six harrowing months in Iraq, went home to Miami on a furlough last October, and then refused to return to his unit when the furlough ended.

Sergeant Mejia has been charged with desertion. His court-martial at Fort Stewart, Ga., began Wednesday, the same day that Specialist Sivits pleaded guilty to the charges against him. If Sergeant Mejia is convicted, he will face a similar punishment, a year in prison and a bad-conduct discharge.

Sergeant Mejia told me in a long telephone interview this week that he had qualms about the war from the beginning but he followed his orders and went to Iraq in April 2003. He led an infantry squad and saw plenty of action. But the more he thought about the war — including the slaughter of Iraqi civilians, the mistreatment of prisoners (which he personally witnessed), the killing of children, the cruel deaths of American G.I.'s (some of whom are the targets of bounty hunters in search of a reported \$2,000 per head), the ineptitude of inexperienced, glory-hunting military officers who at times are needlessly putting U.S. troops in even greater danger, and the growing rage among coalition troops against all Iraqis (known derisively as "hajis," the way the Vietnamese were known as "gooks") — the more he thought about these things, the more he felt that this war could not be justified, and that he could no longer be part of it.

Sergeant Mejia's legal defense is complex (among other things, he is seeking conscientious objector status), but his essential point is that war is too terrible to be waged willy-nilly, that there must always be an ethically or morally sound reason for opening the spigots to such horror. And he believes that threshold was never met in Iraq.

"Imagine being in the infantry in Ramadi, like we were," he said, "where you get shot at every day and you get mortared where you live, [and attacked] with R.P.G.'s [rocket-propelled grenades], and people are dying and getting wounded and maimed every day. A lot of horrible things become acceptable."

He spoke about a friend of his, a sniper, who he said had shot a child about 10 years old who was carrying an automatic weapon. "He realized it was a kid," said Sergeant Mejia. "The kid tried to get up. He shot him again."

The child died.

All you really want to do in such an environment, said Sergeant Mejia, is "get out of there alive." So soldiers will do things under that kind of extreme stress that they wouldn't do otherwise.

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"You just sort of try to block out the fact that they're human beings and see them as enemies," he said. "You call them hajjis, you know? You do all the things that make it easier to deal with killing them and mistreating them."

When there is time later to reflect on what has happened, said Sergeant Mejia, "you come face to face with your emotions and your feelings and you try to tell yourself that you did it for a good reason. And if you don't find it, if you don't believe you did it for a good reason, then, you know, it becomes pretty tough to accept it — to willingly be a part of the war."

A military court will decide whether Sergeant Mejia, who served honorably while he was in Iraq, is a deserter or a conscientious objector or something in between. But the issues he has raised deserve a close reading by the nation as a whole, which is finally beginning to emerge from the fog of deliberate misrepresentations created by Bush, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz et al. about this war.

The truth is the antidote to that crowd. Whatever the outcome of Sergeant Mejia's court-martial, he has made a contribution to the truth about Iraq.

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