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THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ: DESERTION TRIAL

Baptism in Iraq spawned opposition to war, sergeant testifies

By Michael Martinez
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FT. STEWART, Ga. -- Taking the stand in his own defense Thursday, accused deserter Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia said his objection to the Iraq war germinated when he was baptized for the first time in the Euphrates River by a military chaplain last year.

When Mejia, who attended Roman Catholic schools, took a two-week furlough home last October, his crisis of conscience crystallized, he said, and he decided not to return to his post as an infantry squad leader in Iraq's Sunni Triangle.

Mejia, 28, of Sunny Isles Beach, Fla., told jurors he abandoned his Florida National Guard unit partly because he felt the military was ignoring its laws regarding his overdue discharge.

But he could only refer vaguely to some apparent abuses he says he witnessed, which have drawn widespread attention.

Mejia told the court his views on the war evolved during his more than five months in Iraq during which he witnessed the deaths of young Iraqis, "among other things."

"I disagreed with many things that happened in Iraq," Mejia told the jury of four commissioned officers and four enlistees ranking from sergeant 1st class to lieutenant colonel, all ranks above Mejia's. "But I cannot speak of them."

Col. Gary Smith, the judge in the case, had ruled that the details of Mejia's pending conscientious objector application could not be introduced as evidence in a special court-martial focusing on the desertion charge. If convicted, Mejia faces a maximum penalty of a 1-year imprisonment and a dishonorable discharge.

Late Thursday, the defense rested its case. Jury deliberations are scheduled to begin Friday.

When speaking about his overdue discharge, Mejia testified, "If anything, I thought I had a right to be discharged, but the military didn't want to uphold military law."

Mejia, who is not a U.S. citizen, enlisted in the Army for three years and then signed up for five years in the Florida National Guard. He said Army regulations limited him to eight years of service--a term he reached last May in Iraq--because he is not a citizen but a dual citizen of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. His commanders ignored the matter, he said.

After more than five months away from his unit, he surrendered to military officials in March after he found civilian lawyers and prepared his application for conscientious objector status.

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When a juror relayed a question through the judge, asking why Mejia didn't go to the inspector general, Mejia said he didn't trust the inspectors. The office of inspector general serves as a watchdog.

When Mejia continued--saying that "during my time in Iraq, several instances were brought to the attention of the inspector general, and nothing happened"-- the judge interjected, "I think you already answered it."

"Your honor," added defense attorney Louis Font, "I believe he should be allowed to answer" more fully.

"No," the judge said.

In his 54-page conscientious objector application, Mejia accused his commanders of issuing morally unacceptable orders in Iraq, which he described as using him and other soldiers as bait to lure and kill Iraqi fighters in an effort to accumulate combat badges and Purple Heart medals.

Mejia also has alleged war crimes were committed with Iraqi detainees at the Al Asaad camp near the Baghdad International Airport where he said U.S. soldiers deprived prisoners of sleep for 48 hours and simulated their executions.

Before Mejia's testimony, lead prosecutor Capt. A.J. Balbo said Mejia betrayed his role as part of "the backbone of the military," as non-commissioned officers are regarded.

Balbo told the jury the case was "about a squad leader who abandoned his men when they needed him most. It's about an NCO, a staff sergeant, who turned his back on everything an NCO stands for."

The only prosecution witness was one of Mejia's battlefield commanders, Capt. Tad Warfel, leader of Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion of the 124th Infantry Regiment, who called the desertion "a cowardly act."

Members of Mejia's squad, called as defense witnesses, called Mejia a trustworthy leader with a calm demeanor.

"He was a great leader. He always took care of his men," said Spec. Oliver Perez of Miami, a machine gunner in Iraq.

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