

GI SPECIAL 3C36B:



José Antonio (left), 6, and Marcos, 4, sleep on a dirt floor; their family has had no stable source of income since their older brother Tivito was killed last year in Iraq. (Photo: Jacob Wheeler)

NOTICE:

The reason for a GI Special B issue for 8.29 is that there are four articles here, outstanding, but too long for a news issue of GI Special.

First, “The Salvadoran Soldier Who Died In Iraq” travels with a reporter to an isolated village in El Salvador, where an impoverished, forgotten family mourns the loss of a man killed in battle in Iraq while serving in the army of El Salvador.

Second, “Free Speech At A High Cost” tells the story of Capt. Oscar R. Estrada, one of the first members of the U.S. army to go public with his criticisms of the war. Within days of the publication of his letter, Estrada was accused of "aiding the enemy," lost his job, lost a planned two-week r & r trip back home, lost his wedding date as a result, and was reassigned to a remote duty station. He deserves to be remembered, respected, and honored for refusing to keep silent.

Third, “A Skunk At The Party” is about a debate between Tom Hayden, a politician who thinks the demand to bring the troops home now is bad, and Stan Goff, Master Sgt. U.S. Army Special Forces (ret’d), who does not, with some free comments thrown in.

Fourth, “Jonathan Barriga--Conscientious Objector And His Fight With The Marine Corps.” is about exactly that.

The Salvadoran Soldier Who Died In Iraq

August 27, 2005 By Jacob Wheeler, WorldPress.org

To the naked eye, the village of Tacuba, in western El Salvador, resembles any other isolated, poor Central American mountain village defined by timelessness and obscurity. Mangy dogs lounge lazily near rutted roads stirring only when a rare vehicle rumbles by, and only the roosters who crow at daybreak seem eager for another day of poverty and struggle to begin. The affairs of the outside world would appear to have little bearing here.

Yet this remote outpost near the Guatemalan border has not been isolated from President George W. Bush's war on terrorism. Having joined the United States-led "coalition of the willing," El Salvador's president, Antonio Saca, has sent a force of 380 soldiers to fight in Iraq. Nearly 10 percent of them hail from the rural towns of Tacuba and Guaymango near Ahuachapan — three hours by travel in rickety "chicken busses" west of the capital, San Salvador, and almost impossible to locate on my map without a microscope.

Even though Saddam Hussein never posed a threat to Central America, and the national security of the United States is a concern only to those Salvadorans lucky enough to survive the harrowing migratory journey to "El Norte," some 35 local boys have fought side-by-side with the American armed forces near Najaf, north of Baghdad.

The war in Iraq has given them a chance to see the outside world and meet people far from the dusty streets of their home villages. Many have returned with the spoils of war from the deserts of the Middle East, along with eye-popping stories.

Only one, Natividad de Jesús Méndez Ramos, didn't make it home. "Tivito" died on April 4, 2004 in Najaf when his 16-member squad ran out of ammunition while fighting Iraqi insurgents. His body now rests in an elaborate gravesite in the cemetery outside of Guaymango, which was given by the Salvadoran military. Tivito's mother, Herminia, received condolences from her government, but today she struggles to continue forward. She is a widow and mother of five living in a humble dwelling where sickly chickens and flea-infested dogs compete for every inch of shade and drop of water.

When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited El Salvador on Nov. 11 of last year to thank this tiny country for its assistance in Iraq, he mentioned Tivito's death, but he did not visit Herminia. That would have entailed flying to the air base near Ahuachapan and then jolting down a series of unpaved dirt roads to face a poverty that few soldiers in the coalition of the willing would recognize.

A British photojournalist named Kat and I visited Herminia Ramos, who lives in Guaymango, in early April, accompanied by our driver, Manolo, who lives in nearby Tacuba.

Amistad Con Los Estados Unidos

The first thing one notices walking into the office of Joel Ernesto Acosta, the mayor of Tacuba, are the American and Salvadoran flags proudly displayed side by side on his desk. The man dresses in conservative western attire — in a pressed blue collared shirt with pens protruding from his breast pocket, wire-rimmed glasses, and a finely combed part in his dark hair. Acosta could be an accountant in any town in the United States.

He shakes my hand with eagerness and points with pride to framed pictures of himself attending various mayor conferences in Florida. During the subsequent interview, he uses the word “orgullosa,” which means proud in Spanish, no less than seven times.

“Tacuba is tiny, but the people here, their valor is great,” he beams. “We are proud to help the American army because we practically owe our freedom to them. We don’t look at ourselves as independent or separate from the United States, but as a country that stands together with them. That’s why our flags fly together.”

In this country there are two distinctly different ways of interpreting the United States’ role in El Salvador’s bloody, 13-year civil war that ended in 1992 after the United Nations helped broker a peace agreement.

To the revolutionaries, students, workers and priests in the Catholic Church who preached liberation theology to the masses, and sometimes paid with their lives, the United States under President Ronald Reagan, armed and funded the military death squads who used a scorched earth campaign and killed tens of thousands to quell the uprising.

Weeks before he was assassinated in March of 1980, Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador, wrote a candid letter to Washington asking the United States to stop funding the Salvadoran military because it was “killing our children.”

But to Mayor Acosta, a member of the traditionally right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (Arena) party, which triumphed over the Faribundo Martí National Liberation (F.M.L.N.) rebels in the civil war, the Americans were the only reason El Salvador didn’t fall to Communism; the elephant to the north stopped the bloodshed and helped the country regain its dignity.

Perhaps more importantly, the United States poured in millions of dollars in aid money after a devastating earthquake hit western El Salvador in 2001. If a poor man remembers the most recent act of kindness the most, then there should be no mystery as to why the mayor of Tacuba and his constituents all but worship the United States. For this village is a stronghold of Acosta’s party — put simply, the pro-American political option in this country.

Just contrast the state of the Arena party’s headquarters with that of its rival, the F.M.L.N. party. On a sunny day in early April the Arena stronghold’s doors are open to the public, just two blocks away from the clean and inviting Parque Central. Nearby on the street local boys jam out to boom boxes, and soldiers sit on doorsteps, cradling their automatic weapons in their laps and relaxing in the midday sun. There is life here.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town the F.M.L.N. revolutionary party's headquarters is closed and padlocked. Paint on the building is chipping away, and the whole place looks abandoned. Next-door is a sleazy discotheque where an obese, sweaty woman in a tight skirt dances by herself next to an overbearingly loud jukebox. Outside on the street a skinny dog lies in the dirt.

Walk up and down the streets of Tacuba and one can't help but notice several dozen houses lined with sparkling new coats of white paint that stand apart from the others like immaculate churches in the slums. Near the front door, each house boasts a plaque from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAid) in, naturally, the colors red, white and blue. These are homes that American money built after the old ones were completely destroyed by the earthquake.

"The people here already lived in great poverty," Acosta continues. "Many worked in the coffee plantations, but when the price of coffee fell the families suffered. There is no other source of income.

"And then the earthquake destroyed so much. If it weren't for our friends in the United States ..."

Not to mention the Salvadorans who now call themselves Americans. Largely to escape the civil war, nearly two million live in the land of opportunity, and almost every family here knows someone in the United States. Acosta, himself, has a brother and three nephews in Los Angeles.

And the family that runs the Mama and Papa Guesthouse, where tourists in Tacuba stay, married their daughter to an American colonel who was stationed in Ahuachapan in the late 80's to train the Salvadoran military. They now live in North Carolina, and happy pictures of the colonel in uniform, the bride in her white wedding gown, and two lovely, dark-haired children now adorn the living room's walls.

No News Is Good News

It is a vicious cycle, these soldiers going off to war and then returning six months later, if they are lucky, so others can take their place. Tivito's battalion represented the second Salvadorans to land in the Middle Eastern sands. The third group, which just came home two months ago, is still gallivanting around Tacuba with smiles beaming across their faces and welcoming parades of extended family and friends into their USAid-funded houses to show off their war trophies.

In the corner of Pvt. Wilfred Galese Amagoña's living room is a display reaching clear to the ceiling that could belong to any middle-class Middle Eastern family: stuffed camels and tigers stare down from the upper level of a green and yellow shelf table. Below them is a strategically placed Amstel beer can that was purchased in Kuwait. Behind the table on the white brick wall hangs a flowery curtain from the orient, and above that framed tapestries of the holy mosques at Mecca and Medina, lit up at night. Off to the right are posters of the Real Madrid and Barcelona professional soccer teams, and above that a plastic replica of a Kalashnikov rifle.

Amagoña's wife sits on a couch watching an old rerun on a poor quality, black and white television, and occasionally entertains her impatient young children. The soldier is not home. He went off with buddies to throw back a few beers.

But outside of town at the home of Hilda Dalila, whose sweetheart Juan Antonio Gonzalez shipped out to Iraq in February, and isn't expected back for another four months, the scene resembles that of Herminia Ramos, the mourning mother of Tivito. Worried anticipation and sleepless nights plague Hilda, who lives with her father, Angel Cortes Zacarias, and her and Juan's children, Mario Adilson, 4, and Elvis Aviel, 2. She only hopes she will be able to celebrate like the family of Private Amagoña when her own returns to Tacuba, unscathed.

Like Herminia, Hilda's family lives in a virtual shack under a sheet metal roof far enough outside of the village that one needs a durable jeep, hiking boots and a body slender enough to fit through the narrow opening in the barbed wire fence to access it. They all but live on the soldier's salary, which is deposited monthly into a bank account in Ahuachapan. If something were to happen to Juan, that money would dry up and leave the family in trouble. But right now they aren't thinking about finances, they just miss him.

"It's sadder for [4-year-old] Mario because he doesn't understand where his father is, and he cries often," says Hilda. Sure enough, Mario begins weeping during the interview, until his sobs become wails, as if he is having trouble breathing. "I told him that an airplane took Daddy away. Now Mario and Elvis want to fly away too, and go visit him. They haven't seen their father in almost two months."

Hilda thinks about Juan mostly in the evenings, when she is preparing dinner and the kids are running around the house looking for entertainment. They received one letter from him, from Kuwait shortly after he departed, stating that everything was fine ... but nothing since.

The family has no telephone, and they realize that any news would be bad news. They are aware of what happened to Tivito, the poor boy from nearby Guaymango, but don't like to think about it too much.

Hilda likes to pull out photos of Juan when she is lonely: proud shots of him posing in his army fatigues and holding various weapons, several pictures of him marching in San Salvador or playing soccer as a boy, and even a baby photo.

"He's handsome to me," she says with a shy smile. Hilda and Juan have been together for five years, and they plan to marry in the local church in Tacuba if he returns ... "when he returns," she says with a smile.

The Poorest Coalition Soldier To Die In Iraq

In the morning we leave for Guaymango, following a smooth new highway toward the Pacific Ocean. Suddenly the jeep turns and lurches down a dirt road fractured with washouts and potholes. Mango trees appear in the fields along the road and the jeep pauses so Manolo can get out and urinate on a stick fence.

Five minutes later, on the road again, Manolo rolls down the window and pulls over to the side of the road: “¿Donde está la casa de Natividad Mendez ... el soldado que murió en Iraq?” he nonchalantly asks an old woman with a cane, as if getting directions to a popular tourist attraction.

She obediently climbs in the backseat and beckons the jeep to halt behind a concrete building just past the Canton San Andrés country school. The woman, Manolo, Kat and I disembark and squirm single file through the narrow opening between a barbed wire fence and the corner of the house, then walk down a dirt path to yet another concrete house with a corrugated tin roof. A welcoming party of skinny chickens, suckling dogs and four filthy pigs greet the visitors.

Here lives Herminia Ramos whose son Natividad de Jesús Méndez Ramos bears the dubious distinction of being the poorest coalition soldier to die in the Iraq war. “Tivito” fell on April 4, 2004 when the ammunition his superiors had supplied his 16-member battalion proved tragically insufficient, forcing them to use knives to fight the enemy.

Only four brave soldiers fended off the Iraqi insurgents after Tivito was killed and 12 others were injured, prompting the Spanish counterparts in their brigade to dub them “Los Guacamayos,” a takeoff on their hometown. Prior to this, the brigade had been given the unflattering name, “Winnie the Pooh.”

The national newspaper, El Diario de Hoy, ran two articles about Tivito on March 31 of this year, commemorating the anniversary of his death and calling him a national hero.

But any pomp or sense of national pride clearly missed the turnoff to Herminia’s humble home. Her life of manual labor and raising children goes on, as if there never were a terrible war being fought on the other side of the world. When we arrive, unannounced, Herminia is out looking for bread to feed her family tonight. She has left her eldest daughter, 23-year-old Maria, to look after the toddlers, 6-year-old José Antonio and 4-year-old Marcos.

The young woman is deathly quiet as she scrubs dishes and clothing in the outdoor stone basin called the pisa, and says little about her fallen brother. The old woman with the cane, Herminia’s neighbor, picks up the story.

“Maria was married, but her husband left. She had a child, but it died,” the old woman refers to Maria in the third person as if she wasn’t within earshot. “She traveled to the capital along with Herminia to retrieve Tivito’s body. It was a difficult experience. She doesn’t say much.”

If it weren’t for the two boys swinging on the hammock and giggling at the strange, tall, pale white visitors, the awkward silence at this moment would be unbearable. One wears dirty, tattered shorts. The other wears nothing at all. At their sister’s request, they use an open-faced plastic jug to shake loose several sweet hocote fruits from a nearby bush, and feed their guests.

“He was a boy on the verge of becoming a man,” the old woman says. “A hard worker. This boy helped out his poor mother and worked for the good of the household.”

She pauses a second, as if in deep thought, then continues: "In these parts the household is your one resource. You need to bring something home for the household every single day."

Tivito's monthly salary of \$120 from the Salvadoran army was crucial for the family's survival given that his father died when he was young, and the soldier inherited the role of "man of the house." Now that he is dead, those funds no longer arrive. Unlike the United States, this country does little to compensate the widows or mothers of its fallen soldiers.

The United States paid for Tivito's journey in a body bag back to San Salvador, and the Salvadoran government arranged for Herminia and Maria to pick up the corpse in the capital.

But neither government paid for Herminia's hospital visits resulting from the subsequent heart troubles and stress at the loss of her eldest son. According to *El Diario de Hoy*, Herminia paid \$60 and \$40 for two doctor visits, but didn't have cash to pay for a third. She will be without federal assistance for another nine years until she reaches the retirement age of 55.

When it came time for the burial, Herminia and Maria cooked more than a hundred corn tamalitos for everyone in the village, in keeping with local traditions.

"People Die Here Every Day"

To kill time before Herminia returns home from her daily food hunt, we return to the jeep and visit Tivito's resting place in the cemetery on the other side of Guaymango. His casita is easy to spot because the one-room mausoleum built and financed by his compañeros in the Salvadoran military towers over the other gravestones. Tivito's grave is a popular draw this week during the one-year anniversary of his death, as evidenced by the two chickens pecking rudely through the arrangement of ribbons and flowers, looking for anything to eat.

Like any Latin American graveyard, this one offers an immaculate display of colors intended to please the dead as they ascend to the afterlife. Vast resources have been allocated to make this cemetery beautiful.

But a closer look reveals how poor this community really is. The marble tiles on the floor of Tivito's mausoleum are clearly fake, Kat points out to me, and will be hard-pressed to last another year without cracking. The flowers on headstones are all plastic. And the ribbons tied to crosses are made out of old Ranchero chip wrappers.

Tivito's death has convinced some local men that war is not all glory and exciting travel opportunities, as Domingo Mendoza, the major of Guaymango and cardholding member of the leftist-F.M.L.N. party, admits afterwards in his office. Not unlike the truth behind the colorful facade in the cemetery, I think.

“There has been resistance to joining the army after Tivito’s death, but sometimes that fear is overcome by the need for food,” he says matter-of-factly. Guaymango is the poorest town in the area, and significantly worse off than Tacuba.

A whopping 93 percent of the town’s populace lives outside of the village, in the campo, and Mendoza refutes any suggestions that Guaymango is somehow responsible for helping out Herminia Ramos financially in the wake of her son’s untimely death:

“People die here every day. We can’t just hand out money every time it happens.”

“Far Away From Me”

We return to Herminia’s house in the late afternoon and find her leaning against the pisa in a mint-colored dress, looking exhausted, but washing clothes nonetheless. She boasts a dignity in her stature, despite all she’s been through. And suddenly this story is no longer about the complicated matters of controversial wars or financial compensation, but about the simple, naked tragedy of a mother longing for her child.

It’s clear that she’d rather not talk about Tivito, given that guests like us will be arriving all week for the one-year anniversary of his death. But something in her eyes, her tired, mournful eyes, wants to speak.

“I don’t want to remember how he was,” Herminia says in a whisper. But Manolo and I encourage her to continue, prodding at her unhealed wound before the sun sets into the mountains.

“Did he work hard? What kind of work did he enjoy? Where did he get the nickname Tivito?” Her youngest son tugs at her waist, needing his mother. “Was Tivito as handsome as this little one?” I ask.

Finally a response, and a smile: “He was a little chubby, actually ... he worked for five years in the fields before joining the army ... harvesting milpe and corn.” She is speaking slightly louder than a whisper, and only the iPod recorder picks up every word. “He liked the army ... told of how he made good friends there.”

“Did he write letters from Iraq?”

“Yes, he told of how everything was fine ... a very beautiful place where he was ... he didn’t talk about the people of Iraq, though ... he was there for two months ... went with the first battalion ... yes, there was a Salvadoran priest with the battalion ... every group that goes brings one with them ...”

The child nags, needs something. Herminia’s voice rises, she is becoming impatient, frustrated.

“The army has basically forgotten about us,” she says. “We went to retrieve the body at the airport ... soldiers from certain bases arrived here to pay their respects ... but no one from the United States.”

"The community?"

"Hasn't helped."

"The mayor?"

"No, tampoco."

"No one is helping me. What happened, happened. And now we are forgotten."

"What do you think about the war in Iraq?"

"I am Salvadoran ... I don't know why a Salvadoran has to be fighting a war in Iraq when no Salvadorans are dying there." The straight face and posturing Herminia offered the national press, the military and the government is gone. At this moment she is a mother, and wearing it on her face.

"There's no reason for Salvadorans to go and suffer in another country. The Salvadoran needs to stay and protect his own country ... If President Saca hadn't signed and sold out El Salvador to the United States, then that battalion wouldn't have been sent away ..." She begins weeping.

"Are you proud of him?" I ask.

Her anguished face, about to collapse from the weight of the question, and the tears in her eyes offer the answer. But the recorder also picks up the faint words, "Far away from me," and maybe, just maybe, if it isn't just an echo, "He is so ... far away from me."

Manolo motions to us that it is time to leave; the iPod recorder clicks off; and Herminia resumes washing clothes in the pisa.

Overcome by guilt, I pull out a \$20 bill and subtly hand it to the grieving mother. I am violating a cardinal rule of journalism, but the pain erupting inside of me at this moment overshadows my professional obligation.

Guilt for reopening these wounds with my prying curiosity, guilt for the poverty to which she awakes every day, and guilt for the blue passport with the bold white eagle on the front stuffed in my back pocket.

I want to tell her that this war is wrong, that she has every right to blame the United States for her son's death, and that someone, perhaps Donald Rumsfeld himself, should have visited her home the day Tivito was buried in Guaymango.

But I don't. I just hand over the \$20 bill and apologize.

She thanks me and asks her two young boys to fetch a bag of sweet hocotes for us visitors before we leave.

Neither Kat nor I are able to speak on the drive back to Tacuba, so Manolo pulls over at a tienda and we force ourselves to enjoy the pungent hocotes while

drinking a round of beer and toasting to Herminia Ramos, the mother of the poorest coalition soldier to die in Iraq.

Free Speech At A High Cost

"I believe it is wrong to punish soldiers or anyone else for expressing a dissenting point of view," he continued.

"Our country is polarized and there are those that feel that because we are at war, the only right thing to do is to rally around the leadership, embrace the cause and not question authority.

"I believe this is a dangerous mindset, and one that can cause our nation and our military to blindly and arrogantly stumble down a path that may not be the best one."

7.19.04 By Joseph R. Chenelly, Army Times staff writer

Capt. Oscar R. Estrada didn't like the way the war was going in Iraq, the way his fellow soldiers were treating local Iraqis, the way the Iraqis were treating the American GIs in their midst.

But when he put those thoughts on paper and sent them from his tent in Baqubah, Iraq, to The Washington Post, the resulting furor was more than he ever bargained for.

"Are we winning (Iraq's) hearts and minds?" he asked in an article that topped the Sunday Post's Outlook section June 6. The unspoken conclusion to his piece: No.

Within days of publication, Estrada was accused of "aiding the enemy," lost his job, lost a planned two-week rest and recuperation trip back home, lost his wedding date as a result and was reassigned to a remote, less important duty station.

And he learned that exercising free speech can carry a substantial price.

Disillusionment

Estrada, 36, is not your typical Army captain. A full-time law student one semester shy of graduating from the University of Michigan, he is a team leader with the 415th Civil Affairs Battalion, an Army Reserve unit deployed to Iraq since December 2003.

A native of Nicaragua, he emigrated to the United States when he was 9, grew up in San Francisco, graduated from the University of California at Berkeley and spent more than eight years as a foreign service officer with the State Department in Central America.

With 13 years in the Reserve, he was already a veteran of a lengthy deployment to Kosovo before arriving in Iraq. But after six months there, he had become disillusioned with the mission and America's potential for victory.

"I realize that Iraqis may see our help as something else," he wrote. "I see how paying them to collect trash may be demeaning and remote from their hopes for prosperity in a new Iraq. I see our good faith efforts to provide medical care lead to disappointment and resentment when we have neither the medicine nor the equipment to cure or heal many ailments."

He questioned the use of the term "anti-Iraqi forces" for what he terms bad guys. "The fact that most AIF members are Iraqi," he wrote, "is neatly ignored as we try to win the good will of the 'good' Iraqis."

A month after publishing his opinion, Estrada is unbowed. "My intent was not to deride our soldiers, because I fully understand that their actions are usually proper given the threats they are under on a daily basis," Estrada, 36, wrote in an e-mail to Army Times.

"My point was that these actions contradict our efforts to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis and make that mission next to impossible."

'Aiding the enemy'

But to Col. Dana J.H. Pittard, commander of the 1st Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade Combat Team, which Estrada's unit fell under, the article amounted to "aiding the enemy."

The colonel called Estrada into his office for questioning and scolding three times within a week.

"I decided that if he felt so negatively, that he could not be capable of accomplishing the goals we have set in this AO," Pittard told Army Times in a telephone interview. "From reading the article and talking to his peers, I have discovered he is a mean, mean guy, who is selfish and doesn't appear to care about his soldiers."

Pittard was initially angry and disappointed, but he didn't decide to transfer Estrada until other "captain peers" privately expressed anger over the article. Pittard said the officers complained the article was "rife with terrible inaccuracies," failed to recognize successes and focused exclusively on problems — without offering any solutions.

Estrada, in a lengthy e-mail conversation, said he experienced some of that anger firsthand, when he was "accosted" in the chow hall in Baqubah by two soldiers involved in a cow-shooting incident he had written about.

Capt. Thomas Johnson was one of those soldiers. Estrada had referred to Johnson, the commander of F Troop, 4th Calvary, 3rd BCT, in the article by his radio handle, "Bravo 6." He was in charge when the cow was shot. He said the account of the incident was incomplete, but his biggest gripe was what he called "unprofessional" behavior by

Estrada. Johnson is angry because he wasn't told before the article was published that he was quoted, he said.

Estrada's article didn't mention that Johnson and his soldiers paid the farmer about \$100 on the spot for the livestock loss and that Pittard later paid the farmer more still when he arrived on the scene. He also didn't mention the farmer was apparently mute and not "in shock," as the quotes in Estrada's article say.

Estrada defended his article in an e-mail exchange.

"I suppose I could have written about some commanders' belief that money can cure all wrongs and that people will forgive and forget as long as we give them a few hundred dollars," Estrada said. "I chose not to do that because in the end the piece was my sharing a question, a doubt, that has developed in me and others based on what we see and hear on a daily basis."

Pittard said he considered writing a rebuttal, but he did not want to get into mudslinging."

"We encourage people to write," the colonel said. "We encourage people to think outside the box. I love debating, but (Estrada) presented an image that differed from reality."

During the third meeting with Estrada, Pittard said, he ordered an investigation into some statements in the article, particularly the old man showing Estrada "how our soldiers hit him when he was detained." Pittard sent another commander to visit with the elderly Iraqi man. Pittard said the man denied being hit and instead told the commander the American soldiers were "very polite."

Estrada, who doesn't speak Arabic, admitted in his article that he conversed with the Iraqi without an interpreter. Pittard says that proves he was making claims beyond his reach.

"He had no clue what the man was really saying," Pittard said July 12 by phone from Iraq. "But his default, of course, was to take the negative view."

Estrada said via e-mail that he initially spoke to the man with an interpreter, but that the interpreter was called away by other soldiers.

"The old man asked me why we had come into his house and dragged him away," said Estrada. "He asked me why he had been punched. He told me that he had been punched by a soldier. I stand by that. If he changed his story when a convoy of soldiers went to his house ... well, I'm not surprised."

'Uproar' follows

Pittard has said Estrada's fellow soldiers were so outraged by the article that they stopped talking to him.

"I have not found a single person who thinks he did justice to what we're doing here," Johnson said. "I think he violated a professional code. I'm not talking about 'what

happens in the field, stays in the field.' If someone does something illegal, then they should be punished.

"This man questioned a maneuver commander in the field. It is a slap in the face to all of us. He should know the uproar is just-caused."

But nine other soldiers, all of whom served or serve with Estrada, e-mailed Army Times saying they saw no ill will toward Estrada. While some said they didn't agree with Estrada's views, they all said they support him.

Most are still in Pittard's area of operations.

"We are here to bring freedom to the Iraqi people, it seems wrong that the soldiers fighting for that peace shouldn't enjoy it themselves," said Staff Sgt. Walter Sasse, who is with the 415th and was the team sergeant on Estrada's team when he wrote the article.

"I disagree with most of Capt. Estrada's liberal, Democratic political beliefs," he continued. "I believe he has an inalienable right to have these ideas, however."

Another NCO said he's known Estrada for years and has never seen any mean or vindictive behavior. "I have over 21 years of service in the Marine Corps and Army and would say he is one of the good officers," said Reserve Sgt. 1st Class Dale R. Kramer, Estrada's team sergeant now.

Capt. Matthew Handley, a spokesman for the 30th BCT, acknowledged Estrada's superiors are satisfied with Estrada's work in his new area of operations, eastern Diyala province.

More than half the soldiers responding to queries about Estrada were willing to comment only on condition of anonymity. The only officer allowing her name to be printed is Capt. Donna Kentley, a physician's assistant with the 415th's public health team. She said that while she doesn't know Estrada well, she finds him to be "caring" and a "fine soldier."

"As for his fellow captains not speaking to him, that to my knowledge is not true, at least within the unit," she said. "None of us had anything bad to say to him or about him before or after the article was printed."

Sgt. Luke Monck, a member of Estrada's new team, also spoke on the record.

"Capt. Estrada is one of the best civil affairs officers I have ever worked with," Monck said. "He is a consummate professional — driven, focused on the mission but tempered with common sense and great care for his soldiers."

Monck also said Estrada's views were not that different from his own.

"Despite what is reported by our administration, based on my personal experiences in Iraq," he said, "I feel that our rebuilding efforts here face great

obstacles and are perhaps doomed to failure. I think that, while they may not admit it, many in the civil affairs community feel the same way."

Wedding postponed

Pittard told Army Times that at the time he decided to transfer Estrada, he was unaware of the scheduled R&R. He said that he wasn't canceling the scheduled leave, but that the impending transfer would prohibit Estrada from using the leave slot that administratively belonged to 3rd BCT.

"The R&R was not canceled by design," Pittard told Army Times. "The timing was regrettable. I am sorry it worked out this way."

Nevertheless, Estrada would not head home with the others in his unit.

His wedding was going to have to wait. Family and friends planning to attend the ceremony that was to be held alongside the Iwo Jima monument in Arlington, Va., would have to get refunds for their airline tickets. There was no getting the money back that his fiancée had paid to have the dress rush-ordered.

"We did not lose as much money as I thought we would," his fiancée, Caroline Conley, said.

"The biggest cost has been emotional. The whole situation has drained both of us."

In a June 8 memo, Estrada notified Pittard of the wedding plans, and he apologized for any negative effects the article may have had on his fellow soldiers. He also said he regretted not going through the brigade's public affairs office, but noted he was unaware if that was required.

He stopped short of apologizing for his opinions.

Pittard said going through public affairs is not required but added Estrada should have at least notified more of his chain of command.

"We could have helped him get his facts straight," Pittard said. "I never would have said not to do it."

Estrada said he believes that if the Army had been able to take legal action against him, it would have.

Before sending his article to the Post, he checked with a lawyer — a judge advocate general bunking with him in Iraq — to see if doing so was legal. Estrada said he wasn't seeking official legal advice, but the JAG told him a soldier was within his legal limits as long as the article didn't attack the military's senior leadership or reveal classified information.

Estrada also passed the piece among several soldiers, he said, including his company commander. Nobody objected.

Later, Estrada said, the commander thought differently, telling him, "I should have paid closer attention to what you were doing. I feel like I let you down."

Congressional contact

Out of concern for difficulties portrayed in the column, a staffer in the office of Rep. Steven Israel, D-N.Y., sent an e-mail to Estrada the day the article was printed. The e-mail asked to discuss the needs of civil affairs teams. Estrada replied, saying he appreciated the interest but could not discuss his situation until he returned to the United States and left active duty.

The reply gave Israel's staff the impression that the captain's superiors were displeased, a spokesman for Israel said.

A few days later, unbeknownst to Estrada, Conley contacted Israel's office. She told them she felt Estrada was being punished for writing the article. The congressman's office made a request with the Army to formally contact Estrada.

The office of the Chief of Army Reserve Lt. Gen. James R. Helmly asked Estrada on July 8 for permission to give Israel his contact information. Israel, who is a member of the House Armed Services Committee, has offered to inquire with the secretary of the Army about Estrada's treatment.

Estrada agreed but has not, as of press time, decided how he will proceed.

According to an Army spokesperson, a soldier's right to speak freely in the media is not absolute. Military law emphasizes the protection of classified or sensitive information. And the spokesman said a commander has the inherent authority to act to avert a perceived danger to the morale, welfare or discipline of his unit or an individual.

Estrada doesn't expect another opportunity to head home before his tour is scheduled to end late this year. He said he would not accept one of his fellow soldiers' leave slots if offered.

"This isn't about leave, and I did not contact the press or anyone else to whine about losing my leave," he said.

"I believe it is wrong to punish soldiers or anyone else for expressing a dissenting point of view," he continued.

"Our country is polarized and there are those that feel that because we are at war, the only right thing to do is to rally around the leadership, embrace the cause and not question authority.

"I believe this is a dangerous mindset, and one that can cause our nation and our military to blindly and arrogantly stumble down a path that may not be the best one."

A Skunk At The Party

August 24, 2005 By STAN GOFF, [Staff Sgt., U.S. Army Special Forces. Ret'd], CounterPunch [Excerpt]

I feel compelled once again to be a skunk at the party, but it's a role I'm growing into. Cindy Sheehan's squatter's camp has re-energized the antiwar movement, but just as it has done so, it has also re-energized the herd dogs of the Democratic Party who fear nothing more than an independent mass movement.

Cindy plopped down outside the Bush gopher ranch on a 98-degree day. The cops told her to leave. As tactfully as she could, Cindy advised them in less scatological terms to piss up a rope, putting the cops, the Bush administration, and the Democratic Party in a dilemma.

Neither the cops nor the admnistration wanted to be held responsible on camera for dragging away the grieving mother of an Iraq war fatality (her son, Casey). For a moment, they were hopeful that there would be an untimely end to this little action when Cindy collapsed from severe dehydration on the first day; but alas she re-hydrated and re-appeared the following day and began attracting mad media.

For the Democrats, of course, of whom exactly one elected official (Maxine Waters) has deigned to visit "Camp Casey," this presented quite another problem -- the same problem that the whole movement against the war presented prior to the last electoral farce in 2004.

The masses were moving to their left and threatening to expose this moribund Weimar formation as the waste of both money and oxygen that it has repeatedly demonstrated itself to be.

I want to talk about something more specific, and that is one of the tactics being employed by the partisans of this rotting political edifice to try and contain the newfound energy that exploded onto the scene at Crawford and threatens to fill the DC Mall with malcontents on September 24th.

And that is the "exit strategy" proposal drafted by Tom Hayden and being vigorously pimped by by policy-encrusted liberals all through cyberspace, the print media, and soon enough on television.

This is the oral formulaic appeal to "reasonableness and realism" of weak-kneed liberals every time a mass movement threatens to gain any momentum -- we have to present a "reasonable" alternative (always a POLICY alternative, of course), and we have to face the fact that we can't "move" "our" agenda without accepting a "realistic" (read: watered down) approach.

You kiddies have acted up enough now; go on and play; leave the rest of this to Daddy and Mommy in Congress.

Republicans, of course, are only at risk of losing a tiny sliver of their base among the strictest libertarians over the war.

The Democrats are already grooming a few 2008 candidates, including the execrable Hillary Rodham Clinton who has stated her desire to beef up the war against Southwest Asia.

Let's not forget that her husband presided over an Iraqi holocaust that George W. Bush is still trying to match.

The Republicans are secure for now with their white nationalist popular base.

An active and increasingly militant left is a more immediate threat to the Democrats who have prospered from Republican reaction for decades now by capturing social bases that feel they have nowhere else to go. That dilemma is real, but it is also predicated on the notion that to "go there" we need to contain ourselves in electoralism and pluralist policy fights that are engineered by corporations and NGOs.

That's why Sheehan and others who propose the radical option of simply leaving Iraq are now being surrounded by the friendly faces of "progressives" who will try and redirect this newfound mobilization along the acceptable policy-debate paths.

Enter Tom Hayden with his "proposal" for disengagement in Iraq. Hayden's proposal appeared recently in the LA Times, where he explained:

"The rallying cry of 'out now' expresses the belief that the Iraq war is not worth another minute in lost lives, lost honor, lost taxes, lost allies. But its very simplicity makes the demand easy to ignore or dismiss."

Oh thank you, oh wise one, for instructing us on the finer points of political realism.

And thank you for putting words in our mouths that have us express precisely the kinds of chauvinist horse manure being shoveled out of the DP stable.

Most of us oppose the war because it is a cynical, amoral, imperial crime. To hell with allies and "honor." And don't worry. We will not be dismissed. Cindy Sheehan, one of those naifs who say "out now" isn't being dismissed, now is she?

Except by Tom Hayden, who in a patronizing tone, calls Cindy's "bring them home now" position a "moral stance."

Tom says that we "deserve a hearing," and that this means we will have to propose an exit strategy of our own... which is actually Tom Hayden's.

By they way, Tom, we intend to be heard one way or another, unless you mean we deserve to be heard -- with our respectful hats in our respectful hands -- by the venal "leadership" of elected official-dum.

Your statement is a non sequitur, by the way. There is not anything about our deserving-ness that in any way suggests we have to propose some abstract, unenforceable, debatable-for-the-next-five-years "exit strategy." But thank you oh so much for validating us in our deserving.

Tell the surviving families of those thousands of Iraqis whose corpses rotted under the rubble of Fallujah that they "deserve a hearing." Where do you people learn to talk like that? Is there some kind of secret school for Democrats where they get a graduate degree in Weasel Wording?

Here's Tom Hayden's "plan":

"First, as confidence-building measures, Washington should declare that it has no interest in permanent military bases or the control of Iraqi oil. It must immediately announce goals for ending the occupation and bringing all our troops home - in months, not years, beginning with an initial gesture by the end of this year."

Tom, old boy, I can't help myself. This is bullshit.

Are you joking about this? Guarantees from the US? You been to Pine Ridge lately? Ask them about guarantees from the US government. Perhaps you can explain to some of us why this administration would ever offer a guarantee to turn its back on the central goal of the whole Iraq invasion.

Let me propose a different confidence building measure to reach out to Iraqis. We make the political cost so high in the US for continuing the war that it threatens the entire US state with destabilization... just an alternative suggestion, you understand.

More of Tom's "exit strategy":

"Second, the U.S. should request that the United Nations, or a body blessed by the U.N., monitor the process of military disengagement and de-escalation, and take the lead in organizing a peaceful reconstruction effort."

Tom, are you having a mescaline flashback?

The United Nations?

What nationalities, pray tell, will be under those Carolina-blue K-Pots? Or does the UN employ angels?

Moreover, why in the world would the US or the Iraqis need anyone to "oversee" a disengagement?

Here you propose a plan that is allegedly going to conform to a set timeline, yet it is utterly dependent on the script being followed by actors over whom the US exercises little to no control.

I can't help remembering a similar notion that was enacted by Richard Nixon in 1969. He did get out of Vietnam, however, six years and a million dead bodies later with people clinging to the skids of UH1H helicopters.

Let me just say something about how to withdraw. This is my plan. Hey, if Tom Hayden is qualified to write up exit strategies, why not an old grunt like me, eh?

The Plan: The National Command Authority orders all US forces redeployed out of Iraq within one month and out of the theater in two months.

Any commander that fails to meet the deadline will be summarily relieved, and replaced with a commander that will thereby be placed on a shorter timeline.

I can promise anyone who has no experience of the military that this is perfectly feasible, and that with that kind of command emphasis, the mission can and will be accomplished.

Here, of course, is where we discern the liberal pre-occupation (pun intended) with "overseeing" disengagement and other such poppycock. Oh Gasp! they will declare. What then will become of these simple-minded brown people who want nothing more than to drink each other's blood?

At the end of the day, a liberal can be every bit as much the white nationalist as any rock-ribbed Republican Confederate.

They really believe that the United States is the beacon of civilization because we have sitcoms and theme parks, and that the brutality of the US military occupation is an aberration -- the antithesis of our true nature. Under all this verbiage is plain, Anglo-American Kiplingesque white supremacy. Remember the "white man's burden to civilize the dark races?"

Tom, here is a delivery from the cluetrain. Iraqis were doing algebra and astronomy when some of our European ancestors still believed that a bath would leave you vulnerable to evil spirits -- number one clue. Having smart bombs doesn't make you smarter. It just makes you meaner. Get over your chauvinist self.

Number two clue -- the primary catalyst for the intensifying violence in Iraq right now is... the US military presence. Tom, you say this yourself later on in your proposal, which only makes this protracted and abstracted "disengagement" thing all the more remarkable.

But, of course, Tom goes on:

"Third, the president should appoint a peace envoy, independent of the occupation authorities, to begin an entirely different mission in Iraq. The envoy should encourage and cooperate in peace talks with Iraqi groups opposed to the occupation, including insurgents, to explore a political settlement."

So let me get this straight. The US authorities should be replaced... by a different US authority, renamed, of course, an "envoy." And the the envoy would be the countryman of... the occupying military. This bait-and-switch is... a "political

settlement." Wow, I'm really getting the hang of this now. I'm beginning to feel like I might be able to CLEP out of Weasel Wording 101.

Tom reminds us that "[n]either the Bush administration nor the news media have shown interest in these voices (of the antiwar movement), perhaps because they undercut the argument that we are fighting to save Iraqis from each other."

Huh? You yourself are proposing a plan with this assumption at its very core.

But even more astonishing is the attempt to lay the blame for this war at the doorstep of Republicans (and of course the news media). There is an entire party allegedly in opposition to the Republicans -- your party, Tom -- that hasn't shown any interest in the voices raised against the war, until of course two things happened: (1) The polls shifted against the war, and (2) large numbers of non-Republican people became disenchanted with the utter and gutless capitulationism of the Democratic Party and started listening to actual leftists.

Some of us were saying all the way back when that Arkansas horseshit-huckster was in the Oval Office that Iraqis were being killed off by the hundreds of thousands in a war (and its sanctions) that started -- by the way -- in 1990 and has not ceased for one moment since.

That war went on all the way through both terms of that sexually exploitative (It DOES matter!) prevaricator, who bombed Yugoslavian bridges and aspirin factories with the same enthusiasm that Bush the Younger has displayed in bombing Afghani weddings and Iraqi hospitals. Where were the Democrats listening to "these voices" then?

Here's another voice the DP can listen to.

"You're over."

More and more of us are learning that we can never let you take us for granted again. And we can fight Republicans on our own terms... by any means necessary.

See you in September.

Hayden Answers Back

[Thanks to PB, who sent this in]

8/25/2005 By **Stan Goff**, at stangoff.com

I just received an email from Tom Hayden. Here is his letter, and my reply:

LETTER FROM TOM HAYDEN:

Stan, I thought you might support this proposal, or at least understand it. The proposal is offered as a way to implement the meaning of "out now" in a way that will draw more

support. It's not offered as an alternative to the agenda of the movement, but a complement.

You say we don't need an exit strategy, that our military commanders can order it done in thirty days. And you call my suggestion unrealistic. Have you tried your argument on the undecided public?

Look, I used to say we made up a lie to invade so we can make up a lie to withdraw. I found the listeners wanted a little more substance.

I am not arguing that we should rely on the Democratic Party. I am arguing that we should become a complicating factor for hawks in congressional districts, and that we need a vocal peace faction in Congress. Why are thousands of people descending on Washington to protest if they don't intend to move the politicians?

My strategy is people power against the pillars of the policy: undercut Bush in public opinion, funding, troop recruitment, alliances, etc. The work is carried out at the grass roots level, as the protests in Idaho and Utah have shown. But hearings in Congress like Conyers' on Downing Street and Woolsey on exit strategy are useful steps.

The tone of your article concerns me most. It is full of rage.

We shouldn't be turning on each other. I support and admire what you've written before, and the work you do. I hope you will take another look at the proposal.

TOM

REPLY [From Stan Goff]:

Tom,

I appreciate you writing on this, but my argument still stands. I appreciate your laudatory remarks about me. I love to be loved, Tom. But I oppose you on this.

My anger is with the patronizing tone that you have taken toward us for our "unrealism."

I've seen this movie before. As for sounding this message out, I have received around 300 emails in the last two days on this, and all but about 4 of them were supportive.

They aren't mad at you. They are rightfully fed up with parliamentarianism... which as a student of history you know has never accomplished a single radical transformation until a mass movement has threatened to destabilize the whole shithouse.

My son just came back from his second hitch over there, and they are telling him he will go back again by January. So I might be attracted to the notion of some Congressional fix that will stop this one, now, and let everything return to normal, except for a couple of things.

First, normal is why we are seeing a generation that includes my son being done to what I and others were done to in Vietnam.

We ended one war, but we did not end the system that breeds war. Second, normal that ends the Iraq war (in however many years) through some plan that fails to also destabilize the whole system here in the imperial core means that Jaydin, my grandson of 32 months now, and who I love more than any creature who draws breath on this planet, will be part of the next generation to go.

I didn't manage to keep Jessie out of uniform, but I goddamn well intend to try and keep Jaydin out.

So it's not rage you are hearing when you psychologize my writing, Tom. It's love.

My own experience as part of that last generation to get thrown into the charnel house of capital almost rendered me incapable of experiencing love... but circumstances offered me a measure of redemption, and I intend to use it to my very last breath to fight alongside millions of others for the utter destruction of this system, root and branch.

Stopping this predation and plunder in Iraq is just the first step for some of us.

And the reality is that this quick-fix you are advocating will not shorten the war itself. It will prolong it. It is, right this minute.

Tom, if you offer a plan that is genuinely unilateral, I'm there. I'll camp on David Price's Congressional porch until they drag me off in handcuffs to fight for it, and I'll call you a national hero.

But this "plan" is no such thing.

Neither you nor the Democrats nor the whole US government have the slightest right to negotiate anything with a single Iraqi.

The US invaded THEM. The authority of the US is completely illegitimate, and any claim to it is racist to its very core.

Making a policy proposal palatable by ignoring (1) the imperial nature of the US government and the class to whom it belongs and (2) the anti-Arab racism that underwrites liberal "concern" for post-occupation Iraq, is unacceptable.

There is one and only one moral alternative here. Leave.

I agree we have to move politicians. Where we diverge is on the question of how.

But that is a very big divergence and goes to the heart of where we want this movement to go.

I do not believe in lobbying... at least not the lobbying that involves respectfully approaching elected officials and asking them to support this and that.

This leaves the power relation between pols and proles exactly the same.

But when we are leveraging their insecurity and making demands, and they are FORCED by the situation WE create to move, then that relation has changed. This is Direct Action Organizing 101.

Every time one of these elected officials (or you) comes back with one of these dithering proposals that says we will leave when this or that condition prevails (over which “we” have no control), we (the we in which I include myself) are going to chant the same naive-by-your-account mantra... NOW.

Leave NOW.

Your proposal says we have to create certain conditions in Iraq first.

This is the point where I rely on scatological remarks as part of my critique.

Neither you nor the entire United States government has the ability to make these conditions appear.

Moreover, the reality – since you are so wedded to what is realistic – is that the US state has a distinctive class character that is unmentionable in polite political discourse that renders it genetically incapable of (1) promoting anything resembling popular democracy anywhere (in fact, quite the contrary, it has to stamp it out wherever it finds it) and (2) being responsive to the real needs of people here in the US.

Now for some realism of my own. Mass times velocity equals momentum.

There was a point not that long ago when over 90% of the American public had been stampeded by the lies of our ruling class into supporting the notion that we had to attack Iraq. Those lies were propagated by Republican and Democrat alike.

Lately, over 60% of that same polity says this is a very bad idea, and over 30% have come to share our position about NOW.... that is, unilateral and unconditional withdrawal. Cut and run; the faster the better. That’s why Walter (of Freedom Fries fame) Jones here in Jesse Helms country is wavering.

So if the momentum is heading to the left (the NOW position), why in the world would we choose this particular moment to introduce a more equivocal position to become a new point of reference?

Your proposal does NOT draw more support to the “out now” position.

First, and this is no mere technicality, your proposal is not an “out now” position.

Second, we are already drawing more support every day... as the polls show.

Your proposal only draws more support from one quarter. Nervous Democratic Party officials.

And why – when Congress is reacting on its own to catch up with this momentum – would we try to turn the initiative over to them now by diverting an increasingly militant and mobilized antiwar movement into parliamentary horse-trading? I can only think of one reason. To blunt that momentum.

Here is my love-and-rage response: Fuck that!

I have no idea how this war will end, and I have no doubt that the actual end will be overdetermined in bafflingly complex ways.

But I am an activist in the Bring Them Home Now! campaign, and you know what? When we were plodding along, beating our brains out to push this campaign along on pennies, duct tape, and bailing wire, building MFSO and VFP, and midwifing GSFP and IVAW, Moveon and their ilk found us to be anathema.

But we stuck to our position, through a lot of struggle with people who are articulating the same thing you are now – which is NOT an “out now” position – and our patient persuasion along with the breakdown of the cover-story and the dreadful progress of the war started people moving our way.

They just needed someone to catalyze them, then Cindy encamped in Crawford, the media reacted, and suddenly they, you, and everyone else shows up with a bunch of NGO-whiteboy “strategies” (and most dangerous of all, money) to instruct us all in the virtues of parliamentary pluralism.

And it will work, Tom, and that’s the most fucked up thing about it.

These appeals will take advantage of people’s undying hopefulness about a mythical “America” of which they are yet to be disabused, and their anxieties about mass movements, and you and others will succeed in draining some of the militance and focus out of this movement.

As a result, not only will you preserve the whole wicked system for a bit longer, but more immediately you will end up prolonging the war itself.

I don’t have the power to stop that. The only power I have right now is to name it. So I am.

Yours for a new future,

Stan

Comment: T

Mr. Hayden’s kind have plagued us for centuries, the political sneaks who want this or that Imperial war over, just not yet.

For example, following this comment is what a rather well known anti-war activist from 1915 had to say about the Hayden's of his day, and what they were about. All you have to do is substitute names, but social nationalists like Hayden have been throwing the same old bullshit forever.

This is not rocket science. Either you want the war over today, and every U.S. soldier gone from Iraq today, or you are for the war continuing and for the Empire that is continuing the war. There is no middle ground.

The friends of the Empire -- like Hayden, Nader, and other political leaders opposed to demanding the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq -- spin their webs of deceit about having some plan to get out sometime, just NOT NOW, NOT YET.

You can either be in their camp, the more war camp, or you can join the camp that wants this war over right now, proudly organizing to fight for the immediate unconditional withdrawal of all occupation troops from Iraq.

You may come to see the fight doesn't stop there, and that Imperial wars will continue until we put an end to the Empire and the system of rule by the privileged elite that holds the Empire in place, bringing on one war after another. That discussion is not what is at issue right here right now. Life and death is Iraq, and whether it stops or goes on is what is at issue right here right now.

Soon enough, the elections of 2006 will be upon us.

Pick your side.

If you put yourself forward as some kind of anti-war leader while supporting any candidate that is for anything less than immediate withdrawal, however much you twist and dodge, you have signed on with the enemy, a despicable betrayal of the kind described here:

“David’s book is striking proof of the fact that the liberal bourgeoisie (and their agents in the labour movement, ie., the opportunists), in order to influence the workers and the masses in general, are ready to swear allegiance to internationalism any number of times, to accept the slogan of peace, to renounce the annexationist aims of the war, to condemn chauvinism, and so on and so forth, anything except revolutionary action against their own government....

“In point of fact this ideology, mathematically speaking, is both necessary and sufficient to fool the workers.

“One cannot offer them less because it is impossible to rally the masses without promising them a just peace, without scaring them with the danger of invasion, without swearing allegiance to internationalism; one need not offer them more because all that is “more,” i. e., the seizure of colonies, the annexation of foreign territories, the pillaging of conquered countries, the attainment of advantageous treaties will be carried out, not by the liberal bourgeoisie directly, but by the imperialist-militarist governmental war clique after the war.

“The roles are well distributed; while the government and the military clique, supported by the billionaires and by all the bourgeois “men of affairs.” wage the war, the liberals comfort and fool the masses by the promises of a democratic peace, etc.

“Non-liberal tactics, differing in principle from the above, begin where there begins a decisive break with any justification of participating in the war; where there is in practice the politics of propaganda and preparation of revolutionary actions during the war and for the purpose of utilizing the difficulties of the war against the respective governments.”

From: “German Opportunism On The War,” By V. Lenin, May-June 1915

Jonathan Barriga--Conscientious Objector And His Fight With The Marine Corps: Asshole 1st Sgt Watkins At It Again

After 8 months, the conscientious objector application Jonathan submitted according to all military law, rules and regulations, Jonathans command has not even begun to process his application.

No wonder Jonathan was so intimidated and did not fully express his objection to war—he was in the very same Separation Barracks as was Trent and Jonathan saw on a daily basis what the Marine Corps subjected Trent to after he made application as a C.O. 4 different young men in those barracks have attempted suicide in the past 4 or 5 months—something is seriously wrong at Camp Geiger and Camp Lejeune, N.C.

July 31, 2005 By: Jack Dalton, Jack's "Straight-Speak"; jack-dalton.blogspot.com

Jonathan was a young man in high school when the Marine recruiter approached him about joining the Marines “Delayed Entry” program.

That’s where a young person under-age and still in school, with parents permission, can sign on the bottom line, supposedly receive an enlistment bonus, then once out of high school straight off to Boot Camp. That’s pretty much how it happened with Jonathan; who is now at the Marine Corps Base, Camp Geiger, N.C.

This is the very same base Trent Helmkamp was at, and where he underwent an outrageous ten month ordeal after submitting paperwork as a Conscientious

Objector. Not only is Jonathan at the very same base, but he is also in the very same Separation Barracks and under the very same command as was Trent.

After 8 months, the conscientious objector application Jonathan submitted according to all military law, rules and regulations, Jonathans command has not even begun to process his application.

It would seem that today's Army does not think its command structure has to follow its own laws, rules and regulations when it comes to those who stand as conscientious objectors.

In fact just two weeks ago, Jonathan's new Commanding Officer told Jonathan, "you might as well start training as your C.O. application is never going to be approved."

The military is really slick, especially the Marine Corps (that's the branch of military I was in) in how they not only approach these kids in school, but in who they have approach them and their parents. The "how and who" in Jonathan's case really points out just how "slick" military recruiters are. Jonathan's parents immigrated to this country from Ecuador. Jonathan's mother does not speak English and his father speaks broken English. Jonathan is first generation born in this country.

When Jonathan's parents answered the knock at their front door, there in the doorway stood a tall, smartly dressed Marine in full dress uniform—a most impressive sight. There was no language barrier as the Marine recruiter that was sent to convince Jonathan's parents to give their permission for Jonathan to enlist in the Delayed Entry program also had immigrated to this country from Ecuador. Get the picture?

This fellow "countryman" the Marine Corps sent to hustle Jonathan and his parents did a really good job at it. After the recruiter made a lot of promises and guarantees that, to paraphrase, "I will be there to watch over him; those of us from Ecuador after all have to stick together."

This recruiter then went on to tell Jonathan and his parents, "as an electrician, you will not be going into combat or even be traing for combat." Jonathan and his parents signed the Delayed Entry papers behind these statements of this recruiter.

Jonathan and his parents had just been conned and hustled by one of the Marine Corps so-called "finest."

At the same time this Marine Corps recruiter had just committed the Corps to a verbal contract in terms of what Jonathan would and would not be doing.

And, yes, I know that verbal contracts don't hold water with the military. Hell, today, written contracts don't hold water in today's military from what I have been seeing. But Jonathan and his parents didn't know that. They believed what the recruiter told them, which under the circumstances is understandable.

Jonathan was now in the Marines Delayed Entry program. According to Jonathan, "I joined the Marines because of my recruiter's good way of talking." But then Jonathan

told me, “Before leaving for Boot Camp I got this feeling like I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. I told my recruiter I didn’t want to go no more, that I think it’s not for me.”

Rather than take the chance of a bad fitness report that would prevent promotion, Jonathan’s recruiter told him, “...I can’t; it’s too late.” So off to Boot Camp went Jonathan.

When Jonathan arrived at Marine Boot Camp, things went from bad to worse for him. According to Jonathan, “...that’s when it hit me, I’ve been lied to.”

Jonathan went on to say, “everything that was said to us recruits was ‘kill’...I remember plenty of times while getting disciplined, the drill instructor would be screaming we need to be ready and tougher; that we need to be able to kill a little kid...coming at you and have no physical or mental feeling towards it and carry on.”

For crying out loud, Jonathan is still a “kid” himself! Kids with guns killing other kids with guns; and that is called “spreading freedom and democracy” by the megalomaniacs in Washington, D.C.—the people I refer to as Bush & Co and that my friend Dr Steven Jonas at “The Political Junkies” calls the “Georgites.”

Jonathan’s conscientious objection crystallized even more when the time came to train with the M16. Jonathan says it best: “The force and power that the weapon contained was incredible. I held in my hands what can determine a human beings fate as well as mine. The severity of killing became more apparent when we were trained to shoot at targets in the shape of human beings. Although it was not made of flesh and blood, it made me feel depressed. I actually talked to my drill instructor on several occasions telling him, I couldn’t continue with further training. I didn’t fully express my objection to war or killing due to being intimidated by what would happen if I did. None the less, he (drill instructor) told me to “suck it up” and that I can’t (stop training) because I signed a piece of paper called a “contract.”

When Jonathan graduated from Boot Camp at Parris Island in Nov. 2004, he went home for leave. By the time he got home he was in a state of total depression and a lot of stress. It was while he was at home on leave that Jonathan filled out the military’s forms to file as a conscientious objector.

When his leave was over he reported to his next duty station at Camp Geiger, N.C. which is right next door to Camp Lejeune, where AWOL’s and “suicides” are increasing in numbers. As soon as Jonathan got to Camp Geiger on Dec. 7. 2004, he filed his paperwork as a conscientious objector.

8 months later, Jonathan’s application is still sitting on some Colonels desk.

Two of the people at Camp Geiger that held up Trent Helmkamp’s CO paperwork and gave him such a bad time were the same people that would be handling Jonathans application, Maj. Laws and 1st Sgt Watkins—it you remember it was 1st Sgt Watkins that called Trent a “F.....g faggot conscientious objector.”

No wonder Jonathan was so intimidated and did not fully express his objection to war—he was in the very same Separation Barracks as was Trent and Jonathan saw on a daily basis what the Marine Corps subjected Trent to after he made application as a C.O. 4 different young men in those barracks have attempted suicide in the past 4 or 5 months—something is seriously wrong at Camp Geiger and Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Over the months Jonathan has had three interviews and all three of those that interviewed Jonathan all have said the very same thing: "...all three have found me to be a conscientious objector within the military's regulations and meaning."

However, Jonathan was told by Maj. Laws, "my investigating officer I appointed recommended you for a discharge but that doesn't mean that I have to." That was Jan. 2005. Since then Jonathan has heard nothing other than what his new commanding office told him two weeks ago, "you might as well start training as your application is never going to be approved."

Someone I have gotten to know over the past year, and who is an active duty high-ranking officer with 26 years of service under his belt, wrote to me just today and relayed a conversation he had with a British officer. The conversation was about "conscientious objectors" how they are handled in this country and how they are handled in Briton.

It is more than worth looking at and then taking note of: "While In England a few weeks ago, I was talking to fellow RN officers I know about Trent, and they were dumbfounded when I told them Trent could not get out on the basis of his beliefs. They told me Royal Marines who objected to killing would be released and without stigma." Could our military "leaders" learn from that or what?

Here in this nation, as a direct result of the total top-down insanity unleashed by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Rice, and the rest of that totalitarianistic mob of Mayberry Machiavellis', people who apply as a conscientious objectors are turned into "criminals" and I use that loosely as the only criminals are the ones in charge of this Twilight Zone episode.

"Is this what we have allowed this nation to become? Lives that are not our own, but the states to do with as it will when it will? That's not an all volunteer military, that's called forced indenture—once it was called slavery."

This nation set up the process by where those in uniform that refuse to participate in war as a matter of moral principle and conscience, may make application as a conscientious objector. The procedures and process are very well spelled out for the applicant and the military.

The problem comes in due to the simple fact the military uses its own laws, rules and regulations to create a major obstacle and stumbling block for those that make application as a C.O. Let's hear it for the "rule of law" which does not seem to exist in today's politicized military.

At one time in this nation individuals had the right to choose how to live their own lives; what they would do; where they would work; what kind of work they would do; at least

until now. If, when after starting a “job” the individual decided, nope, this is not for me, they could quit and move on from there. Now we are in a situation where a person that goes into the military full of John Wayne movies (what can I say, I’m old), highly trained military recruiters who know how to get inside a kids head and computer generated war games gets confronted with the reality of the military and its mission says, “nope, I cannot do this,” and then is criminalized for not wanting to kill or even learn how to kill.

For decades we have been told that “serving in the military is the highest form of national duty and service.” And for decades people have enlisted in great numbers to stand against all the so-called “enemies” our government has told us wanted our national downfall. In fact that was what motivated me to enlist in the Marine Corps behind the Cuban missile “crisis” in Oct of 1962—gotta stop our “enemies.”

Some of us, once we got to boot camp, understood that there were some people who just did not belong in uniform.

Some were not physically able and no amount of training or “motivation platoons” would change that. Others were not mentally or emotionally fit for military service. That in no way is meant to impugn those not mentally or emotionally fit to be in the military—it’s just a statement of fact.

And young Jonathan Berriga definitely does not belong in the Marine Corps. So why won’t those in command and control at Camp Geiger just do what the investigating officers recommended and discharge Jonathan?

The following from an active duty Naval Captain may have more than just a little to do with why not:

“...ill-equipped to make a determination with respect to an individual's desire for status as a Conscientious Objector. Military Officers are not trained to make these kinds of assessments. More importantly, line officers are compromised from the start and should not be placed in this position because a positive endorsement on their part is currently culturally unacceptable in the officer corps generally and could impugn the credibility and professionalism of the Investigating Officer specifically - especially in the Marine Corps where the "warrior ethos" is strongly espoused at commissioning and reinforced daily thereafter. Officers will deny this bias and publicly, firmly deny that they are to act as expected. Yet we cannot deny that competition for promotion is keen and an officer's decision to be supportive of a Conscientious Objector while on the cusp of further promotion is an extraordinarily difficult prospect just prior to his 20th year of service when vested in retirement.

“These are especially difficult decisions when many must ensure they will be retained at mid-career and have a retirement for the benefit of their family - generally, no blemish on an officer's service record is sustainable.

“I am not suggesting that comments on an officer supporting an applicant for Conscientious Objector status would appear in detail on his annual Fitness Report, but his judgment might well be questioned and marks that are less than superior in any category will cause promotion board members to reject an officer when most competitive

officers present perfect records. Grade inflation has been and remains a well documented problem within the services and has caused several "course corrections" to be made to governing instructions for officer fitness reports and enlisted evaluations. With a very limited number of promotion spots available, it is difficult to blame an officer for not wanting to "stand-out" from his peers for any reason other than superior performance in an "acceptable" realm - such as combat."

"Since most all records presented before promotion boards are those of superior performers, board members must hunt for any fault, weakness or some data-point that is "less-than-perfect" to distinguish between those eligible for promotion. Of course, as you know, not everyone can be promoted as officer corps manning is limited (by rank) by Congress so even small discrepancies in an officer's record can make the difference between being promoted or not. Some might consider the process cut-throat, or Darwinian or just simply unfair; but whatever you call it, it's the process we have, like it or not. Nevertheless, we can not blame the Investigating Officers for the environment they are subjected to, but we must understand the impact the system might have on an officer's decision process and eventually, his clear-minded willingness to render a recommendation for approval."

"Additionally, it would not surprise me if the officers would prefer that Conscientious Objector applicants simply go on Unauthorized Absence and eventually become Deserters rather than having to deal with the staff work associated with preparing and investigating the application for the desired status."

"Separations for reasons of misconduct are, after all, a "face-saving" alternative to admitting that our recruiting process does not properly disclose, in sufficient detail, the ugliness of combat to young enlistees. Perhaps instead of handing out decals, tee-shirts, and other do-dads to potential recruits, the services should provide some kind of realistic portrayal of the Services' combat performance expectations by MOS before the contract is signed. I simply do not believe proper, full-disclosure is provided our recruits. Certainly no "amnesty program" exists at Boot Camp to excuse recruits who begin to understand better what is expected of them personally after they are placed in training and then decide they can not live with some aspects of these requirements burdening their conscious for the rest of their lives. The value and right to a free conscious, after all, is what this is all about."

The contract Jonathan signed as far as I am concerned is null and void. Bush & Co along with the military voided that contract by this war of choice, this war of aggression, this war against the peace in Iraq. As such, Jonathan has all the right in the world to be let out of the Marine Corps.

"Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace" is exactly what this nation is being led into by a relatively small group of hard core neo-cons with an army of pundits, religious zealots, corporate greed merchants and "Mayberry Machiavelli's" comprised of: the Project for a New American Century; the Carlyle Group; the Heritage Foundation; the American Enterprise Institute; the Club for Growth; and the Federalist Society. All of whom are at the head of the BushCo parade attempting to redefine this nation.

This is by no means all that comprise the menagerie of megalomaniacs pulling the strings of “government.” But these “groups” are pretty much at the top of the heap of those that “help” formulate what the foreign and domestic policies emanating from the Bush administration and Congress will be. And have led this nation to where it is now today and it is due to the Bush & Co policies that have put Jonathan in the position he is in; it is those same policies that has caused the imprisonment of Kevin Benderman for doing nothing more than declaring himself a conscientious objector.

It has been encouraging to observe, in recent months, the emergence of an apparent awareness among many American soldiers of the insanity of the war system, particularly as it has been playing out in Iraq.

Soldiers have refused to obey orders that would send them on life-threatening missions; others have spoken out about the lack of adequate armor and protective equipment; still others have questioned the national purpose and/or morality of their participation in the killing of innocent people, particularly children.

A number of soldiers have brought a lawsuit challenging the continuation of their service beyond the original commitment. Not surprising, National Guard officials announced that enlistments have fallen well below anticipated levels.”

Thru all of this I am absolutely certain of this: recruiters have absolutely no business hustling kids to join the military while they are in school. And the situation Jonathan is now faced with clearly points that out. On top of that, the “war” these kids are being trained to go fight is by all standards of international law, illegal on face value!

So why do we sit back and continue to allow young men like Jonathan, Trent among many others to be brutalized in the manner they are; why do we continue to sit by as men like Kevin Benderman are sent to prison only because they believe in the immorality of war and especially one like this in Iraq which was initiated on nothing but lies, manipulation and disinformation; and one that has absolutely nothing to do with defending or protecting this nation.

If anything this Bush & Co war of choice has made this nation one great big target. Let those that started this mess as well as those that support it send their kids to go fight it and leave everyone else the hell alone!

Especially the nation’s young people in school.

Free Kevin Benderman—Free Jonathan Barriga!

Do you have a friend or relative in the service? Forward this E-MAIL along, or send us the address if you wish and we’ll send it regularly. Whether in Iraq or stuck on a base in the USA, this is extra important for your service friend, too often cut off from access to encouraging news of growing resistance to the war, at home and inside the armed services. Send requests to address up top.

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