

Soldiers Who Refuse to Kill

By [David Swanson](#)

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One of the most inspiring events thus far at the Veterans For Peace National Convention underway in Miami was a presentation on Thursday by several veterans who have refused to participate in war. Typically, they have done this at the risk of significant time in prison, or worse. In most cases these resisters avoided doing any time. Even when they did go behind bars, they did so with a feeling of liberation.

Gerry Condon refused to deploy to Vietnam, was sentenced to 10 years in prison, escaped from Fort Bragg, left the country, and came back campaigning for amnesty. President Jimmy Carter pardoned resisters as his first act in office. Condon never “served” a day, in either the military “service” or prison.

Jeff Paterson of Courage to Resist refused to fly to Iraq, choosing instead to sit down on the tarmac. Ben Griffin from VFP’s new chapter in the U.K. refused to participate in our nations’ wars and has been issued a gag order. He’s not permitted to speak, and yet he speaks so well. Mike Prysner of March Forward and Camilo Mejia of VFP here in Miami described their acts of resistance.

Mejia did us all the enormous favor some years back of putting his story down in a book — an extreme rarity, sadly, for peace activists with great stories to tell. Mejia’s book “Road From Ar Ramadi” is a terrific introduction for anyone wondering why someone would sign up for the military and then refuse to kill people. Mejia, who now works on domestic civil rights issues in Miami while remaining part of the antiwar movement (another rarity), is a co-convenor of the VFP convention.

In October 2003, Mejia was the first U.S. soldier to publicly refuse to fight in Iraq. At that time only 22 members of the U.S. military had gone AWOL from that war, a number that would quickly climb into the thousands as the war worsened and as belief in the various rationales offered for the war evaporated. Soldiers also began to refuse particular missions that would be likely to kill civilians or to put themselves at risk for no purpose other than the advancement of a commander’s career — a commander safely giving orders from a base. Veterans of the Iraq War would soon work with Veterans For Peace to form a new organization, Iraq Veterans Against the War. But at the time of Mejia’s refusal to fight he stood virtually alone.

Mejia joined the military largely for the very same reason most Americans do: the lack of other options. He had worked his way through high school and community college. But the government cut off his financial aid, and he couldn’t afford the college bills. The Army offered him college tuition and financial security. That was enough. This son of Sandinista revolutionaries headed off to Fort Benning, the home of the School of the Americas, where he would train to kill for U.S. empire.

Mejia learned to dislike the military. His commitment was due to end in May 2003. But in January 2003, the Florida National Guard shipped off to begin the invasion of Iraq that President Bush was publicly pretending to try to avoid and privately concocting harebrained schemes to get started. Mejia's contract was extended to 2031 (not a typo), and he was sent to Jordan. He was neither for nor against the military or the war in any simple sense. He was aware of the massive peace demonstrations around the world. He disliked many things about the military and about this particular war, which he believed was a war for oil. But he was loyal and obedient, not yet convinced of the extreme immorality of the operation in which he was playing a part.

Mejia's first experience in Iraq involved the abuse of prisoners. He disliked these practices but did not resist. Mentally he tried to brush them aside as the work of "a few bad apples." Or he tried to justify doing what he was doing out of loyalty to the soldiers around him.

Mejia gradually became aware of Iraqis' desire that the occupation end, but he believed it would end very quickly. During an Iraqi protest, a young Iraqi man was about to toss a grenade, and Mejia aimed and fired — as did others around him. The young man died instantly, but the trouble the incident aroused in Mejia's soul did not.

Mejia was troubled by his fellow soldiers' racist hatred of all Iraqis. Innocent Iraqis were imprisoned and interrogated, when they weren't shot. Their dead bodies were mistreated by joking soldiers snapping photos with their prize pieces of flesh. "It occurred to me," Mejia writes of some Iraqis who observed such actions, "how upsetting it must have been for them to see their relative in the dirt, half naked and covered in blood, being laughed at and humiliated even in death."

The beginnings of resistance among the troops arose out of their growing awareness that their commanders were using them in a competition for the most fire fights, the most kills, and the most prisoners. The needs of this competition outweighed justice or even strategy. Returning to base with innocent prisoners was far preferable to returning empty-handed. There was no grander goal driving any operations, as far as the soldiers could see. They went on patrols the entire purpose of which was to guard themselves as they patrolled.

As Iraqi resistance grew, so did U.S. fear, to the point where troops would fire even on unarmed children if the soldiers couldn't be certain that the children posed no danger. Mejia understood both points of view, and came to realize that in war the choices are bad or horrendous. The only good choice, he began to see, is to not cooperate with war at all.

At one point Mejia tried to explain to some Iraqis something he barely believed any longer himself, that the war was aimed at bringing "freedom" to the people of Iraq. One of the Iraqis who knew something about Mejia's situation pointed out that Mejia wished to leave the military and could not. "So how," this Iraqi asked, "can you bring freedom to us, when you don't have freedom for yourselves?" When Mejia took part in raids of Iraqi houses, he viewed the terror the Iraqis showed of U.S. capture and "detention" as misguided. Surely prisoners would all be fairly tried and released if innocent, he told himself. "As it turned out," Mejia admits, "the families . . . knew my own army much better than I did."

Yet the troops that left the bases knew more than the commanders who didn't. The latter, falsely believing that resistance was coming from outside the local area, ordered all the wrong roads blockaded to no purpose. The soldiers who knew such decisions were wrong dared not say anything for fear of what challenging a "superior" can do to your career.

Mejia was able to return to the United States for two weeks' leave. He went AWOL with assistance from peace groups, and turned himself in to face possible imprisonment. He'd "served" more than the eight years he'd agreed to. And he believed the war was killing human beings for no useful purpose whatsoever.

A mockery of a charade of a pretense of a trial convicted Mejia and sentenced him to 1 year in jail. "That day," as he went to jail, Mejia recalls, "I was free, in a way I had never been before."

David Swanson's books include "[War Is A Lie](#)." He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works as Campaign Coordinator for the online activist organization <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@davidcswanson](#) and [FaceBook](#).

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