

MILITARY COUNSELING NETWORK

SOUND OFF



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What It's Like

By Clifton Hicks

Stationed in Germany, Clifton served as a Private with the 1st Cavalry Division, and deployed to Iraq as a tank crewman from October 2003 – August 2004. He received Honorable discharge as a conscientious objector and is featured in a recent book, "Mission Rejected" (see next page)

The wind is cold and damp against the flesh of my face; the only exposed skin on my body. My shoulders ache under the strain of a thirty pound armored vest, the back of my neck is raw from the constant friction of my rifle's black canvas strap. My antiquated pistol holster constricts my lungs and digs painfully into my ribs. My hips are tender and bruised from constantly being jarred against the edge of the turret. Every few minutes I fall asleep for a split second, awakened only when my chin touches the bulky neck protector that is fastened tightly over my throat. The cloth is oily and slick and brown, coated with two months of sweat and filth, have I really only been here two months? I am utterly exhausted, I think of nothing.

A shot rings out, I ignore it, I'm so tired I don't care, and besides, someone is always shooting at something around here, I wish they would just fucking stop, this is so stupid. Another shot, followed by a few more, a bullet glances off something in the road and screams over my head, the spark remains in my eyes. I am awake now, totally awake, the kind of "awake" that cannot be described and most people never have to feel, how fortunate they are. It's four in the afternoon right now at home. My friends have just gotten out of school for the day, maybe on their way to work already. I know my mother is thinking of me, can she sense what is happening to her child? More bullets, closer this time, and they do not glance off the road but fly straight past my face, he is shooting a little

better now. I feel as though I can almost sense their heat, like sitting too close to the fireplace, and the sound of a thousand bull whips cracking all around me. So this is what it's like! Just what I expected, which in turn surprises me. No fear though, no time to be afraid, I have not the mental capacity to cheat death and realize fear.

I drop down inside the humvee and glance around at the faces of my comrades, they ask if I've been hit, "No, I'm fine, I'm fine." We're moving swiftly now, the road is uneven. I lose my balance for a moment but catch myself on the 'butt strap', the canvas strap that is hooked into place for me (the machine gunner) to sit on, though I have never been allowed to sit down during a patrol.

In fourth platoon we stand fully erect, completely exposed for all the world to see and kill. He is still shooting.

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When AWOL is the Only Way Out

By Peter Laufer

Increasing numbers of U.S. soldiers are returning from Iraq horrified by what they witnessed and what they did. Journalist Peter Laufer tells how these soldiers are transformed from trained warriors to activists in the struggle to end the Iraq War. Laufer's new book, Mission Rejected: U.S. Soldiers Who Say No to Iraq" (Chelsea Green, 2006), probes the universal issue of resistance to war by the very men who chose to defend the nation. (Book Excerpt)

"We was going along the Euphrates River," says Joshua Key, a 27-year-old former U.S. soldier from Oklahoma, detailing a recurring nightmare -- a scene he stumbled on shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. "It's a road right in the city of Ramadi. We turned a real sharp right and all I seen was decapitated bodies. The heads laying over here and the bodies over here and U.S. troops in between them. I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, what in the hell happened here? What's caused this? Why in the hell did this happen?' We get out and somebody was screaming, 'We fucking lost it here!' I'm thinking, 'Oh, yes, somebody definitely lost it here.'"

Joshua says he was ordered to look around for evidence of a firefight, for something to rationalize the beheaded Iraqis. "I look around just for a few seconds and I don't see anything." But then he noticed the sight that now triggers his nightmares. "I see two soldiers kicking the heads around like a soccer ball. I just shut my mouth, walked back, got inside the tank, shut the door, and it was like, I can't be no part of this. This is crazy. I came here to fight and be prepared for war but this is outrageous. Why did it happen? That's just my question: Why did that happen?"

He's convinced there was no firefight that led to the beheading orgy -- there were no spent shells to indicate a

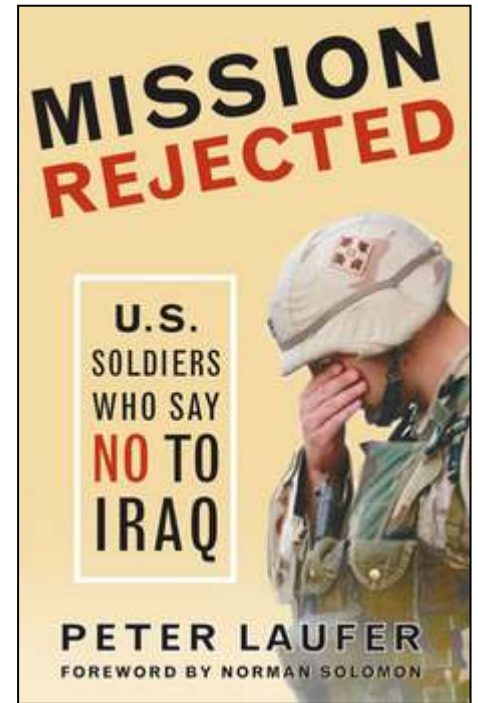
battle. "A lot of my friends stayed on the ground, looking to see if there was any shells. There was never no shells, except for what we shot. I'm thinking, Okay, so they just did that because they wanted to do it. They got trigger happy and they did it. That's what made me mad in Iraq. You can take human lives at a fast rate and all you have to say is, say, 'Oh, I thought they threw a grenade. I thought I seen this, I thought I seen that.' You could mow down 20 people each time and nobody's going to ask you, 'Are you sure?' They're going to give you a high five and tell you that you was doing a good job."

He still cannot get the scene out of his head. "You just see heads everywhere," he says. "You wake up, you'll just be sitting there, like you're in a foxhole. I can still see Iraq just as clearly as it was the day I was there. You'll just be on the side of a little river running through the city, trash piled up, filled with dead. Heads and stuff like that. I don't sleep that much, you might say. I don't sleep that much."

His wife, Brandi, nods in agreement and says he cries in his sleep.

We're sitting in the waning summer light on the back porch of the Toronto house where Joshua and his wife and their four little children have been living in exile since Joshua deserted to Canada. They've settled in a rent-free basement apartment, courtesy of a landlord sympathetic to their plight. Joshua smokes cigarettes and drinks coffee while we talk. He's wearing a T-shirt promoting a 2002 peace rally in Raleigh, North Carolina. There's a scraggly beard on his still-boyish face; his eyes look weary.

Sleep deprivation while on duty, first in Kuwait and then in Iraq, was routine, Joshua says, and he thinks exhaustion was generated intentionally by his



commanders. "You'll do whatever the hell they say just to get that sleep. That's the way they controlled us. You ain't had no sleep and you got shitty food all the time. I got to call my wife once every month, maybe once every two weeks if I was lucky. Mail, shitty, if it even came." Food and water were inadequate, he says.

"When we first got to Kuwait we were rationed to two bottles of water a day and one MRE [meals ready to eat]. In the middle of the desert, you're supposed to have six bottles of water a day and three MREs. They tell us they don't have it. I'm thinking 'How in the hell can the most powerfulest nation, the most powerfulest military in the world, be in the middle of a damn desert and they don't even have no food to feed us?'"

Joshua rejects the U.S. government line that the Iraqis fighting the occupation are terrorists. "I'm thinking: What the hell? I mean, that's not a terrorist. That's the man's home we killed. That's his son, that's the father, that's the mother, that's the sister. Houses are destroyed. Husbands are detained and wives don't even know where they're at.

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Looking Beyond The Fence

By Dominique Burgunder-Johnson



Dominique is interning for MCN this summer for eleven weeks as part of the Service Inquiry Program with Goshen College.

Within military culture I've often encountered the phrase, "Home is where the heart is." Two years ago as I stood outside the gates of Ft. Benning, protesting alongside several thousands against the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Operation (WHINSEC/formerly School of Americas-SOA), I was struck by my desire to enter onto the base. Numerous individuals throughout the day shared my temptation. Knowing that as un-authorized persons their entrance onto the base would lead to their arrest, several protestors saw it as an opportunity to engage in an action that would be evidence to the gravity of their convictions. Yet my desire to go on base was not fueled by an opportunity to attest to the cause for which I had traveled almost 20 hours the night before; I was just feeling homesick.

While much of my life has been spent standing on the inside of the fence of a military base, in recent years, much more has been spent standing outside. My heart is with both the military and the peace movement, and I have come to find that my home is on both sides of the fence.

I recently graduated from Goshen College, a Mennonite school in northern Indiana, with a dual bachelor's degree in History and Peace Studies. Prior to enrolling at Goshen, I lived in Germany all of my life. Besides having a strong connection to Germany, I am also significantly tied to the U.S. military. My dad was enlisted in the U.S. Army for 21 years. He retired as a SFC/E-7 in 1994. After retiring from the military, he

worked 8 years as a DoDDS (Department of Defense Dependents School) employee, and currently works for the U.S. Army ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) program at Central State University in Ohio. My mother is German and is the Relocation Assistance Program Manager at Vilseck's Army Community Service. She has held this position for about 15 years.

In Germany I spent four years in Nelligen (near Stuttgart) and 14 years in Vilseck (near Nürnberg). I attended DoDDS for almost all of my elementary and secondary education. Vilseck's military base was not only the location of my school and parents' employment, but also the place for many of the social and extra curricular activities I was involved in. I also spent two summers working for the U.S. Army Health Clinic in Vilseck as a clerical assistant. Many of my closest relationships always have been and still are with people closely linked to the U.S. military. I have a number of friends in the military and many of my friends' parents are also employed by the military.

As Mennonites are traditionally known for being a historic peace church, which most often led members of the church to reject involvement in military service, I've often been asked about the seemingly conflicting interests I have in growing up as a "military brat" and ending up as a Goshen College graduate with a degree in Peace Studies. Admittedly, I often share the difficulty with others in understanding the bridge between my upbringing in a military environment and my resulting political and religious alliance with the, supposedly opposite, non-violent peace and social justice movement. I do not believe that there is any simple explanation. The best explanation I

have been able to come up with is that my values and ethics have been shaped by a far more complex interplay of experiences and perspectives than those which appear at the surface.

Unlike many of my "peacenik peers," the military, soldiers, and the realities behind U.S. involvement in war are not merely abstract concepts, but quite personal realities. I know the military from childhood memories and as part of my personal identity. I know soldiers as parents, friends, mentors, peers, and colleagues. I know the war in Iraq as maiming my friend's dad, killing a classmate's dad, and psychologically traumatizing one of my close friends.

With the culture of the peace movement and that of the military as significant parts of my identity and experience, I have come to criticize the military at a systematic level, while still being able to empathize with and support the individuals of that system. I became interested in working with MCN, because it supports the military at an individual level, without supporting it at the systematic. This seemed to be a perfect match for my own desire to work with and stay connected to U.S. military culture in Germany as a part of being actively involved in the peace and social justice movement.

Many of the WHINSEC protesters at Ft. Benning stood so far back from the fence that they were only given a blurred perspective of the military personnel standing behind it. Yet I stood directly in front of the fence and was able to see the distinct features of each individual standing beside me and of those on the other side. MCN, through its work, reflects that which I have found to be true in my own life and a central part of the peace movement. A fence can so often distort the human face of those standing on the other side. I believe that MCN carries out the most essential part of building peace. Their work builds a bridge over the dividing fence, allowing people on either side to come together and obtain a clearer and more personal image of the other. ❖

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I notice that his weapon is on semi-automatic, they never use semi-automatic, but not this one, he is aiming, and he means to kill me. I respect him now. After all, he is not like me; a soulless mercenary who kills in exchange for a college education, this is his life. He hates me, I cannot hate him, but I must try to kill him. He continues to shoot at me, I wish he'd just run home like the rest of them.

Them... how I hate them. We all do. They are so easy to hate, so vile and treacherous, they are subhuman. It is because of them that I am here in the first place, God how I hate every inch of every one of them. They thief and lie and have killed boys who were once my friends. People that I used to carry on intelligent conversations with, and when I saw them last I never knew it would be the last. They have transformed them from men into cumbersome heaps of cold flesh, no longer anything more than a sanitation problem to be solved with the aid of a plastic bag. The blood and entrails must be scrubbed away with simple green and scratch pads. My first true friend in the Army was cleaned up in this way. Thank God I wasn't there, had I seen it I would not remember him as I do now; always a smile, always a comment worthy of note, always something interesting on his mind. And when he died I didn't even bother to cry, I wanted to, I even tried a little bit, but that was stupid and wrong. No need to lie to yourself my friend, you are no longer human and everyone knows it.

Using my butt strap I bring my head up just enough to peer over the lip of the turret ring. Where is this motherfucker? I take a look around.... and there he is. Not "him" per say, but a flash of light, followed by the report of a rifle and the sound of a bullet striking concrete or metal, I never learned to tell the difference. I look down at the orange handle which will unlock the turret and allow me to swing it around, pointing the machine gun in his direction. No, there is no time for all that, with the way this humvee is rocking I would never be able to do it anyway. The gun alone weighs nearly eighty pounds, it's the old kind, a "fifty cal". Besides, he is

standing on the roof of an apartment building, and I am imagining a family inside their cramped home. They are poor and the weather is cold so they sleep in the same room, probably without beds. I will not send a score of fifty caliber bullets into that building, to grind and shred the flesh of three generations with one flick of my pathetic thumb, my thumb that is only eighteen years old. I am not that inhuman, not that cruel, not yet at least.

No, but I will use my rifle. Now I am ready, now I have a purpose. No longer will I cower inside this armored hull and take whatever he chooses to give me, now I will give him something, I will take control, I will kill him. I bring the rifle to my shoulder, the same kind my father and uncles carried when they were in the service. What a gruesome object, it's black steel and plastic lay cold and lifeless in my hands, much like the corpses it was designed to create, incapable of human warmth. I place the tip of my nose on the charging handle, shut my left eye, and peer into the sight hole.

Now I am in a different world all entirely - a still, silent void that has but one entrance. You cannot reach it through meditation or by ingesting some strange plant, not even in death can one find it. This man-made world can be glimpsed only through the sights of a rifle, only when it is pointed at a living thing. Here there is no God, no Hell, no consequences and no remorse, those will all come later. For the time being, we are completely alone.

Now, the moment of truth arrives. Am I really going to go through with this? Can I? Oh yes, I can, and I will, I must. This man is attacking you and your comrades. It is your duty as the gunner of this vehicle to kill him as soon as possible. You are responsible for the lives of these men inside this humvee. I hope... I know that they would do the same for me. Now I am nervous, my knees tremble, I feel almost like a child who has just been caught stealing. For an instant I can almost see his bullet coming for me, flying straight towards my face, I vividly imagine the impact. Switch the safety off, take a moment to blink your eyes and take a deep breath. Let me wait and see one more muzzle flash before I strike, let me wait for him

to show me where he is once more. Oh what sweet satisfaction I am about to receive! Two months of misery and a lost childhood because of you, damn you, I finally get to kill one of you now. I will use you as the object of my vengeance. This is for everything you have done to my life and to my family. You alone will pay the price, tonight. I think of nothing else now but my own misery and suffering, selfish I know, to kill a man and not even think about him. Then my wish comes true, I see another flash, he has revealed himself.

Instantly I readjust myself, he is fairly close so I aim a little lower than usual, just like they taught us at Ft. Knox. And then I squeeze the trigger. In this moment I think of my father, who always taught me to "squeeze" a trigger, never to "pull" it. So, ever so slightly, I begin to squeeze. The movement of my index finger is barely distinguishable to the human eye, it curls inward only one or two millimeters a second, and when the rifle finally discharges it is almost unexpected. My enemy, my peer, a man who I have come to respect in the last few seconds, it seems that I have known him for so long, stops firing immediately. I raise my cheek from the rifle and look for him. I see him for the first time, nothing more than a black silhouette against a midnight sky, but I see him. He goes down behind the edge of the roof. I never see him again, I never learn his name or his lineage, and I never learn what became of him.

Later the next morning, when the patrol is over, after I've refueled the humvee and put away the weapons, I am congratulated by the others. I say very little, though I am not upset. I sit down on my cot and disassemble my rifle, the one I used against my enemy, the brother I never had, the only man who has ever faced me as a natural equal. The smell of the spent bullet is strong, but the weapon is mostly clean, after all it was only one shot, I clean it well and reassemble it. I thank her for not failing me in my hour of need. I imagine for a few seconds the next soldier who will carry this rifle after I have left, will he ever know of the sin it has committed this night? How many people did you kill before I took you off the rack? I push such thoughts aside and am asleep in a matter of minutes. ❖



Absent With Leave

By David Stutzman



Is it going to be hard to go back?

After living abroad as an American for over four years now, I am returning to the US. I have watched from yonder as my country has become entangled in two protracted wars and become deeply polarized along cultural fault lines. I am anxious to see what it will be like to return after being sheltered from the political context in the US. Above all, finishing my term of service as Coordinator of MCN means I will be leaving the intimate connection to the war behind. Ironically, by returning to the country that is at war, I will be further away from the realities of war.

In visiting the US, it would probably take a person a while to discover that our country is actually at war. From the beginning, the message has been, relax, sit back and enjoy the show, manifesting itself in the policy of not appealing for sacrifice from US citizens to wage war and calling upon the American populace to maintain, and even revel in, our comfortable American lifestyle. Sure, there is concern about Bush's popularity and the rising cost of gas, but how many know first hand what it is like in Iraq? Despite the bleak headlines, the war remains a world away.

To mildly understate the point, wars tend to be burdensome when they impose sacrifice, like rationing and conscription, on the entire society. Sure we were told that sacrifice is at hand, that our freedoms were being preserved and that our country defended, but in reality the burden of this war has been relegated to a small portion of the population – our professional military and military families. (Less than .4% of the US is active duty military.)

Within the current context the military has been politicized in the support of this war, something a professional military is susceptible to. For all intents and purposes, the military belongs to

the government and is bound, out of duty and contract, to the will of the government.

On the home front, the politicizing of the military to rally support for this war is epitomized in the phrase “support our troops,” a furtive mask for saying “support this war.” Invoking support of the troops as a response to criticism of this war implies that naysayers are not ready to carry the burden of this war and that they are abandoning the will of those in the military.

Why does this matter? It matters because the architects of this war are subtly diffusing responsibility for it. This is the administration's war, not the military's. Not only do I feel that the military is being misused in Iraq but also misused by offering the administration a convenient mask to hide behind. They are *our* troops, but it is *your* war, Mr. Bush.

What I think about this war and our troops has moved beyond the political. It is personal. I have had the great privilege and unique opportunity to be close to the issues of this war and connected to the people who are from the community bearing the suffering.

So, yes, it is going to be really hard to leave.

But when I return, it won't be as if I had never been away. I believe that it is my duty not to forget what I have learned and experienced and to continue working on the issues of this war out of respect to the troops I have met.

David is returning to the US in mid July. Along with Michael Sharp of MCN, He will be speaking across the country, sharing stories and raising awareness about the issues of the military and the war in Iraq. Michael will return to Germany as the MCN Coordinator in August. In September, David will begin the Intercultural Studies masters program at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

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I mean, they are pissed-off people, and they have a reason to be pissed off. I would never wish this upon myself or my family, so why would I do it upon them?"

Pulling security duty in the Iraqi streets, Joshua found himself talking to the locals. He was surprised by how many spoke English, and he was frustrated by the military regulations that forbade his accepting dinner invitations to join Iraqis for social evenings in their homes. "I'm not your perfect killing machine," he admits. "That's where I broke the rules. I broke the rules by having a conscience."

And the conscience developed further the more time he spent in Iraq. "I was trained to be a total killer. I was trained in booby-traps, explosives, landmines, and how to counterresolve everything." He pauses. "Hell, if you want to get technical about it, I was made to be an American terrorist. I was trained in everything a terrorist is trained to do." In case I might have missed his point, he says it again. "I mean terrorist."

Deserting to Canada seemed the only viable alternative, Joshua says. He did it, he insists, because he was lied to "by my president." Iraq -- it was obvious to him -- was no threat to the United States. He says he followed his orders while he was in Iraq, and so no one can call him a coward for deserting. "I was not a piece of shit. I always did everything I was told and I did it to the highest standards. They can never say, 'Oh, he was a piece of shit soldier.' No bullshit."

Joshua doesn't mind telling his war stories again and again. He readily agrees to talk about the horrors he experienced in Iraq, his life AWOL and underground in the States, and his new life as a deserter in Canada.

Telling the stories helps him deal with his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), he says, and he apologizes in advance if his narrative is not linear or if he has trouble expressing himself. In fact, his scattered approach to his timeline and his machine gun-like delivery set the scene for his troubled memories -- there is nothing smooth or simple or easy to understand here. ❖



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MCN Summer Speaking Tour

After counseling servicemembers and working with the issues of the war in Iraq, MCN Counselors David Stutzman and Michael Sharp will be speaking at churches and peace groups across the US between late mid July and early September. They will address issues of the military, the war in Iraq and tell stories of American soldiers who have been downrange. Sharing from their experience working with the Military Counseling Network in Germany, they will talk about who joins and why, what it's like, and what soldiers say when they come back.

The Military Counseling Network (MCN) located in Germany, where 70,000 US troops are currently stationed. Home of the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Armored Division, V Corps, and the European Command, Germany also contains Rammstein Airbase and Landstuhl Hospital, the

biggest military medical facility outside of the US where all casualties from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are taken. Most of the soldiers in the country are either getting back from Iraq or preparing to go in the near future.

MCN is funded by the German Mennonite Peace Committee, Mennonite Central Committee, and Mennonite Mission Network, but is largely dependent on individual donors. Along with raising awareness, Dave and Michael hopes to raise money for operation and project costs for the upcoming years.

To arrange for Michael or Dave to speak at your church, small group, or peace meeting, please contact them at Michaeljsharp_mcn@yahoo.com (Michael) or stutzmdl@hotmail.com (Dave).



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About Our Newsletter:

Sound Off is a publication of the Military Counseling Network (MCN). It is a platform for people to tell their stories and relate their opinions in this time of war and political uncertainty. MCN is dedicated to the discussion of issues relevant to servicemembers and their families; Germans and Americans, soldiers and civilians.

We welcome any submissions to the newsletter that deal with the War in Iraq, Americans abroad, Americans at home and European-US relations. We especially welcome submissions from soldiers and their families. *Please send us your opinions, letters and stories!*