

# MILITARY COUNSELING NETWORK

# SOUND OFF



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*Find out how to support a conscientious objector.*

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*While her husband was a CO in the army in Iraq, Helga lived on a military base in Germany. MCN Counselor, David Stutzman takes a look at what it is like to be the wife of a CO.*

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*A review of the main events for MCN in February*

## CO Appeals Case to Court: MCN Seeks Your Support

Conscientious objection is neither an easy nor a welcomed discharge to pursue while in the army, and least of all, in a time of war. There are few who pursue this discharge, a discharge established for soldiers who develop beliefs against participating in war and the bearing of arms. Most COs in Iraq have encountered hardship and, in due course, faced bitter disappointment. Agustin Aguayo has experienced it all. Returning in February after a year of service in a war zone as a medic, he has decided to take his struggle for separation as a CO to the next level.

At the beginning of his deployment to Iraq, Agustin submitted his CO claim. Six months later it was denied by the Conscientious Objection Review Board at the Department of the Army. Now, a year later, Agustin and his family are facing the daunting trial of appealing his case to a federal court.

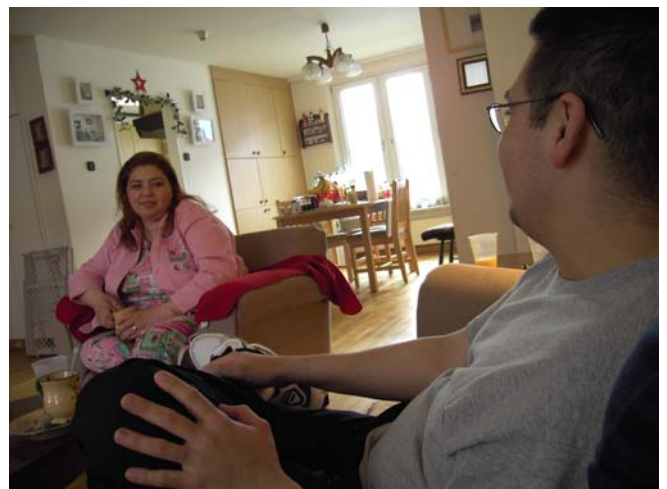
It won't be easy. The case will be lengthy, expensive and full of uncertainty. This is a big commitment for the Aguayos, which entails a \$12,000 investment for court and lawyer expenses and a 3 to 12 month

process. It will be emotionally challenging for Agustin, Helga and their two children, who have already gone through so much; stress of separation through Agustin's deployment, harassment for Agustin in Iraq, isolation for Helga at the base in Germany and the disillusionment of a disapproved claim.

Agustin and Helga are going to need financial and emotional support from others in the coming months. In this issue of *Sound Off*, we want to introduce you to Agustin and Helga, their situation, and their inspirational story. We want to stand behind them in the months to come and help organize broader support for their pursuit of recognition for CO status in a time of war. We are seeking the support of individuals, organizations and churches. With respect to the court process, Helga and Agustin have decided not to approach the press with their story at this time. However, they will need a community of support for the difficulties ahead. *Please contact MCN to find out how you can contact the Aguayos and how to help.* (Find out more on page 6).

They need our support.

**Agustin and Helga** (right) have decided to appeal the Army's disapproval of his conscientious objection discharge request. Some CO claims have been approved. For those who have come to believe that war is wrong, there are few options and a difficult road. The Aguayos are determined to never take part in war again. Please join MCN in supporting Helga and Agustin's struggle against war.





## Helga's Story

By David Stutzman - MCN Staff



In times of war, separation is a stark reality for those married to the military. Your loved one is gone and relegated to endure an unsafe and dangerous tenure. You hope. You pray. You try to make do. You are helpless. Many spouses and families gain strength through displaying solidarity and believing in the military. What do you do if you *don't* believe?

Agustin calls. They talk for a few seconds and then Helga starts repeating, "Can you hear me?" Finally she hangs up. "Bad connections. This is how it is. Agustin only gets 30 minutes, bad connection or not. Then he has to get back in line again, which can take three hours sometimes. He has done that before."

Deployment is a difficult time for all military spouses. There is painful absence. Communication can be infrequent and inconsistent. The nightly news is personally relevant to your life. You try to make do. The strain on families, marriages and relationships is incredible. Separation takes its toll, sadly ending many marriages in divorce. The strength to make it through also resides in the person living out the other half of this curt separation.

I first got to know Agustin and Helga when they called me on a Monday, the day before Agustin's deployment to Iraq. They had only just found the number of the Military Counseling Network and wanted to know all about the conscientious objection discharge. The night before, Helga had run across an article about a conscientious objector, Stephen Funk. Agustin and Helga were interested in finding out more and, like many in the military, were not aware that something like conscientious objection existed.

They had been struggling with the impending deployment for months, torn between fulfillment of duty and not

wanting to participate in war. They had contemplated and had attempted to carry out such drastic measures as injuring Agustin's knee in the hopes of rendering him unfit for deployment. Helga recounts, "While he was sleeping, I stood over him with a hammer. He noticed that I was sobbing and woke up. He saw me with the hammer. He pulled the sheets up over his head and said, 'Do it.'" Helga laughs. Humor helps her deal with this.

Agustin was deployed to Iraq at the end of February, 2004 as a medic with the Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. "It is hard to describe, it was like someone dying. It felt like I was saying goodbye permanently. We didn't think it healthy to drag out the family at three a.m. to send them off... everyone is half asleep and crying. We just didn't want to be part of that." After long phone conversations with me and even longer deliberation, Helga and Agustin decided to apply for a conscientious objection discharge. Agustin was told that he would have to wait until he was in Iraq to submit the claim. "When he left he was hopeful. 'See you in six months! I'll be back and you will be proud of me.' 'I already am!,' I yelled back. It was a really sad, sad feeling. End of the world. You don't know if you will ever see that person again."

In Iraq, Agustin submitted his claim for conscientious objection. Since then he has been ostracized and even suffered harassment. "At one point I felt he was not being fed enough. I think it was because he was a CO. Many soldiers were worked hard with rigid work schedules. But I think Augie was worked harder and past chow times. I couldn't bear the thought so I sent him food. The first box I sent, he needed help to carry it when it came. I think it was over 100 pounds."

Back in Germany, Helga has to deal with living in a military community and the anxiety of him living in Iraq. "It felt like we



were walking on eggshells. Any moment of any day, someone could come to the door and say that he is dead. He would have died for no reason. His death would have been so in vain. I see people saying that it's the ultimate sacrifice. 'Honor first.' I think: these poor people *died*. There is no honor in dying that way. Can you imagine, at his funeral, a general having to stand there and say that he was a good soldier and gave the ultimate sacrifice?"

Similar to Agustin, she has felt isolated because of their decision to pursue a CO discharge and has struggled living in the insulated military community. "I have to constantly put on face. I can't have a good cry. The other day, I went to an open house at my girls' school. The base commander came out and talked about how the Army was great. He was great. The school was great. I was so angry. They always have to mix the Army into every day life. At the movie theater on base, they played the national anthem and salute the flag. I couldn't believe it. We were not at a military function, *we were at the movies*. My two daughters and I didn't stand-up initially and a lady behind me remarked, 'I can't believe that, that woman is not standing up.' I was bothered by the video played during the national anthem. They were videos of bombs being dropped and soldiers shooting. Of course they didn't show any aftermath. Why doesn't anyone think of the death and destruction? I whispered in my daughters' ears, 'We *do not* believe in this [the war and violence]. We won't be part of this for much longer, I promise.' They sighed and I kissed them." With loved ones in harms way, families rally around them by displaying solidarity for the war and the military...

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## Agustin's Story

By Reuben Miller - MCN Staff



In February of 2004, Dave Stutzman was on the phone with two soldiers and their families. Dave was at the Military Counseling Network office in Bammental, Germany; the soldiers and families were on an Army base in Bavaria, Germany. The two soldiers wanted to hear about conscientious objection in the US Military. Soldiers and wives gathered around a speaker-phone listening to Dave's voice. It was a tense moment for Dave – he had never counseled a *group* like that, before it had always been one soldier at a time. It was also a moment of truth for the two families that were listening on the other end – the two men had orders to deploy to the Middle East within a few hours. The two families had searched for solutions. They considered hiding, injuring themselves and refusing to get on the plane. Simply put: they did not want to participate in organized violence. These two soldiers, who had joined the Army for new direction in life and educational and monetary benefits, had experienced a personal change.

Agustin joined the military to get training in the medical field. He had a dream of becoming a doctor. The Army promised a future for him. When he joined up he had not thought much about going to war. But now when the military was committed in two conflicts, one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. He was confronted with his obligation to the military on one hand and his morals on the other. He found himself in an ethical dilemma: he joined the Army voluntarily, but realized after joining that he was not willing to carry out a mission that required him to use lethal force. He and his companions on the other end of the phone line were overjoyed to hear that there was a conscientious objection option for them, an option that struck a cord with his beliefs and unwillingness to kill. Agustin realized early on in his Army service that the military was not

for him. Nonetheless he committed himself to doing his job well. He was trained as a medic and people's lives depended on him. Yet to participate in the military system would be participating in a machine honed for war. It is a tough situation. He realized as well that the Army was well-suited to some individuals. In a message to young people in October 2004 he wrote, "[If you join the military] don't do it for the college incentives. Don't do it for the cash bonuses. Don't do it because you're trying to get away from problems at home or to better your opportunities. Do it because you believe it is the right thing for you to do. Know that it is not for everyone... and as a service member you will support directly or indirectly, the operations responsible for those deaths."

According to the Army Regulations, commanders are required to take conscientious objection seriously. The last thing that any commander needs in the days before deployment to a war zone is two soldiers who refuse to participate in war in any form. Nonetheless, the two soldiers prepared answers to the questions outlined by the US Army for conscientious objectors. They did not have much time to work on it since the time of deployment was rapidly upon them. However, they tried to submit their completed paperwork to the commander, but he refused to even look at it. Discouraged, the two COs were worried that their documentation would not get into the chain-of-command. Their wives decided to employ the commander's "open door policy" for soldiers' spouses. They were able to get into the commander's office but he refused to accept the conscientious objection packets. "Do it in Iraq," he said. Realizing that they had no other options, the two soldiers started working on their CO claims in earnest. They wanted to make sure that



they had the best possible responses to the questions about their beliefs on use of force, the nature of their belief and change in lifestyle. For these two soldiers, talking in-depth about their beliefs was hard, especially about issues that the Army works hard to suppress: "Am I willing to kill other people? Can I take orders from my command and without asking questions?" The two soldiers and their spouses turned to MCN for help in preparing the documents outlining these personal feelings.

The two families said goodbye to the men feeling the anxiety that all military families feel about "going downrange" to Iraq. For the family of a CO "in process," the moment of parting is additionally difficult. The Army community is largely unsupportive of COs and their families. The mutual support that Army families give each other is paramount to an Army of volunteers; career soldiers with families count on the Army community for support during the long deployments. Conscientious objectors violate a cardinal rule of military life: the rule of loyalty. COs venture into lonely territory when they answer the Army's questions about the "use of force" and "refusal to participate in war in any form." The family of a CO may also experience degrees of social isolation, which may also be self-imposed if not imposed by others. Both soldiers experienced harassment in Iraq. . .

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**. . . Helga's Story**

. . . CO spouses can't draw from normal outlets for relief and comfort. How does one cope?

"It is draining because I will be quiet and respectful, but it is so intense to be in the Army. You have to walk around holding everything in, whether is sadness, anger and/or outrage." She remarks, "It is funny, I thought I always came from a dysfunctional family, but the Army is so dysfunctional, it seems like I came from the *Partridge Family*. Many in the military are resentful of the negative environment, but at the same time are grateful for the Army. It is a double edged irony." But she finds empathy and solidarity among the wives who are also weighed down by the absence of their husbands. "People outside [of the military] don't understand. My neighbors understand. We may disagree and have different opinions. But at least we can relate and support each other."

The phone rings again. Agustin was able to get through again. This time, Agustin and Helga's nine-year-old twin daughters are home. Rebecca answers the phone, "Hi Daddy! I've missed you. I am doing well. Today I went to school and had fun. I love you Daddy and I can't wait to see you." Since Agustin left, Helga has been living on the military base in Germany managing in his absence, taking care of their two daughters. Helga turns to me and says, "They don't understand why he just can't quit his job. Kids see things in black and white. Raquel is more introverted and doesn't cry. Rebecca will just cry and cry. After five minutes she feels better. When he calls he always tries to talk with them for a few minutes. Talk about the future. Tell them that it was a mistake. I don't shelter him from their negative feelings. If it is good or bad, we let them say it. 'Why did you leave us?'"

"We take a lot of responsibility for what we have gotten ourselves into. We are just putting the pieces back together and trying to figure out how to make things right again. He always tells me, 'I can't believe you are not mad at me.' How can I be mad at him? It was a mutual decision. Our marriage is 50-50. A lot of wives hold their husbands accountable. They hold it against them. I don't do that.

Sometimes I want to, because it is easier to blame them. Agustin thought that he would never have to fight. Join the Army and never have to fight. It blows my mind, how stupid we were! "

"If he would have been a basket case, the Army could have discharged him out. If he would have hurt himself, he would have regretted it. [Now], he can look back and know that he was doing the right thing. He decided that, 'I don't want to go down like that. I have integrity. I want my daughters to know that their father is man of moral fiber.' He didn't want to take the easy way out. I wanted him to. I wanted the easy way. I know he is a CO, but I just wanted him home. It took a while for the CO part to evolve for me. I have come to see the bigger picture."

"I think overall [being a CO] has given him sanity and let keep himself intact. He has been true to himself. He knows he is doing the right thing. Because he hasn't given in, he can keep going. If he hadn't [applied] he would be a basket case right now."

It has helped Helga too. "You know what keeps me focused? Somehow we have to use this information. When this is all over, something has to be done."

Our conversation is interrupted when the kids are finished talking to Agustin. Helga makes sure she can enjoy the remaining minutes of the call. Agustin and Helga have a well-worn calling routine. On the days that Agustin can call, Helga doesn't leave the house more than a few minutes in case of a call from Agustin. "All our conversations are positive. I try to make them uplifting. I tell him that I am proud of what he is doing: being a CO. I tell him how much I love him. I focus on the future."

Deployment imposes extra challenges for spouses of conscientious objectors. Like the men they support, they undergo a conscientious separation from the military. Agustin and Helga have lived over a year now as conscientious objectors within the Army. Since I interviewed Helga for this article, Agustin has returned from Iraq. They are not alone anymore and can finally face their challenges together. ❖

**. . . Agustin's Story**

. . . because of their conscientious objection to war. They certainly did not brag about filing for CO status, but word quickly got around. Because soldiers in Iraq eat, work and sleep together, they know just about everything about one another. Additionally the families back on base in Germany also have a tightly knit community. Stuff gets around. Some soldiers admired the courage of the two COs. Others disliked them for their decision. Yet others were unsure what to think. The COs were routinely subject to verbal abuse and derogatory nicknames. Yet in another instance fellow soldiers gave their medals to the COs after a medal-awarding ceremony to which the COs were not even invited. They were persecuted not just because of their beliefs but also because of their actions. All soldiers are issued weapons. Agustin decided to leave his weapon unloaded, even during guard duty. Dave encouraged him to disclose this to the command. After some research a Medical Officer discovered that per Geneva Conventions it was inappropriate for medics to execute guard duty. So rather than make an exception for a conscientious objector, all medics were taken off guard duty, including Agustin.

Most conscientious objector cases take six months to a year to be resolved. After submitting for conscientious objection in February, the CO claim was processed at the company level. After the CO claim was forwarded "up the chain of command," he remained uninformed about the progress of the claim. Where was the paperwork? Was it sitting on some desk? Was it lost? Agustin's wife, Helga, wrote to their Senators Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer as well as the Headquarters of the Army. The Senators responded with up-to-date information which included negative recommendations by upper-level commanders. A CO is afforded rebuttal rights to any negative information that is added to the conscientious objection file. Agustin's rights were overlooked. Furthermore, the letters to Congress provoked the Army to look into the . . .

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## MCN Office Report February

### AVA Summit, Munich

On the 30 and 31st of January, Reuben Miller and Jim Miller represented MCN, at a meeting in Munich, with American Voices Abroad (AVA). AVA is an organization made up of Americans living in Europe and the Middle East who are in opposition to current trends in US politics. Established in February 2003, in response to the war in Iraq, AVA also stands in opposition to preventative war and the Patriot Act. Participants came from as far away as Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin and Beirut.

Reuben Miller outlined the work of MCN in Germany and described some soldiers' experiences, with particular emphasis on the Agustin and Helga Aguayo story. MCN's presentation was



highlighted by conference call (above) with Helga Aguayo and the meeting participants. AVA invited MCN to discuss possibilities of collaboration between the two groups. Through brainstorming and discussion it became clear that MCN provided concrete project matter to AVA and AVA members could provide valuable connections and volunteer hours. AVA participants reflected a variety of professional backgrounds and essentially two generations of Americans in Europe.

AVA members discussed themes related to working with US soldiers and their dependants in Germany, including publicity for MCN among Americans in Europe, legal issues for US military personnel living in the EU, GI rights counseling training and support groups for military personnel and their families.

### MCN Presentation, Mainz

On February 17, Dave and Reuben went to Mainz to address a group of Germans about the stories of US soldiers, advertised under the heading, *Bush's War: A conversation with American Peace Workers*. The event was sponsored by Pax Christi as well as Lutheran and ecumenical peace groups. Over sixty people attended. The seminar was in response to Bush's visit to Europe, including Mainz. The MCN workers talked about the dilemmas of soldiers in the military system as well as in the Iraq war; stories from soldiers provided real-life examples helped people to appreciate the variety of situations that soldiers are in. During the second part of the event, the group asked questions and participated in a dialog about military service and conscience.

### MCN in the Press

The visit of President Bush to Mainz on February 23, spurred significant media interest in MCN. In January and February, MCN workers responded to a number of media requests, giving interviews to one television program, *Südwest Rundfunk (SWR)* from Kaiserslautern and three radio programs, *Rheinland-Pfalz Rundfunk* in Mainz, *Freies Radio Marburg* and *West Deutsche Rundfunk*. MCN has had noteworthy exposure in the German media over the past two years and we hope that we may also contribute to the overall story of soldiers relating their experiences and opinions on the war in the future. MCN has continued working with several conscientious objection cases and soldiers who have been disillusioned by war. MCN is helping two new COs, both veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

### ... Agustin's Story

... conduct of Agustin's Chain of command. Under pressure from above, Agustin's commander in Iraq called him into his office. The commander berated him in front of ranking commissioned and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) for "causing trouble" and undermining the chain of command. The commander demanded that Agustin not contact

Congress before using the chain of command. "I *did* and no one wanted to help me! *That's* why I contacted Congress!" he retorted. Later the NCOs remarked, "You have balls for contacting Congress about this!"

Early in his time in Iraq, Agustin was called to attend soldiers that were in a vehicle that was hit by enemy fire. Four men were severely injured and two died while receiving medical care. The officer chose Agustin as one of the medics specifically to tend the corpses. "I have never seen so much blood in my life," said Agustin to his wife. He was assigned to fit the corpses into body bags.

Agustin was eventually moved to an office job where he was answering phones at night. All soldiers work seemingly endless days. Agustin worked nights, and during the day when he was trying to sleep, NCOs would wake him and give him extra work. Because he was working a full shift at night and fulfilling extra duty during the day, he hardly had time to get chow. He was missing meals regularly. Helga would ship him extra large boxes of food from Germany so that he would not go hungry.

In the office, Agustin was working close to the commander. "The commander knew I was a conscientious objector and was annoyed by my presence. I think he didn't want to see me," said Agustin. Shortly thereafter Agustin was transferred to another base. On August 31 2004, Agustin called from Iraq and talked to me at the MCN office in Germany. He said that he got a letter from the Department of the Army informing him that his CO claim was reviewed and deemed to lack sincerity. He was noticeably upset. For MCN workers, Dave and I, the news was a great disappointment. We deal with many conscientious objectors and Agustin is an exemplar of commitment and sincerity. It was a big blow.

Becoming a CO is life changing. Submitting a CO claim requires a soldier to think about beliefs and commitments. It also yields to an inevitable encounter with unsympathetic and scornful elements. Being a CO in the Army takes initiative and confidence. It takes "balls." ♦



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## **How You Can Help a CO**

### **The Low Down:**

MCN has been working closely with COs for over two years now. Many of them have submitted their claims as soldiers on the frontline - Iraq. Sadly, the military is not recognizing many claims, disapproving COs who embody the very definition of having a "firm, fixed and sincere objection to participating in war of any form or the bearing of arms" (Department of Defense Directive 1300.6 §III.A.). These beliefs have crystallized directly from experiences in the military and from the dissonance of coming to terms with the fundamental task of what a soldier is required to do. COs are not the only ones dissatisfied by the military's reluctance to discharge soldiers. Numerous soldiers have expressed to us that in times of war, bodies are simply needed. That is the bottom line.

### **What they need:**

Folks in the military need to know that there are others on the outside, who support what they are trying to do and will stand by them. They need personal support and financial assistance. Although, their cases involve a symbolic struggle for CO rights, they will also need the personal support.

### **How you can help:**

*Send this Newsletter to people you know who might want to help.* For individuals, peace organizations, small groups and congregations interested in helping, you can make personal contact with Helga and Agustin. They will need financial support to make this happen. We encourage churches and organizations to donate a token contribution, of \$200-\$500, towards the court fees. (*See below*)



## **Contribute to: The Aguayo Legal Fund**



### **Germany**

**Deutsches Mennonitisches  
Friedenskomitee (DMFK)**  
Hauptstr. 1  
69245, Bammental  
Germany

### **Transfer:**

Kontonr. 21240069,  
Kreissparkasse  
Heilbronn,  
BLZ 620 500 00  
Attn: "MCN Legal Fund"

### **USA**

**Please Make Checks Payable to:  
The Center on Conscience & War  
Attn: "MCN Legal Fund"**

The Center on Conscience & War  
1830 Connecticut Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20009

### **Donate Online:**

- Make a Credit Card Donation with PayPal
- Visit the CCW Website at [www.nisbco.org](http://www.nisbco.org)
- Click on Donations
- Click on "MCN Legal Fund"
- Easy and Secure

## **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!*