

MILITARY COUNSELING NETWORK SOUND OFF



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Honorably discharged

By Tim Huber

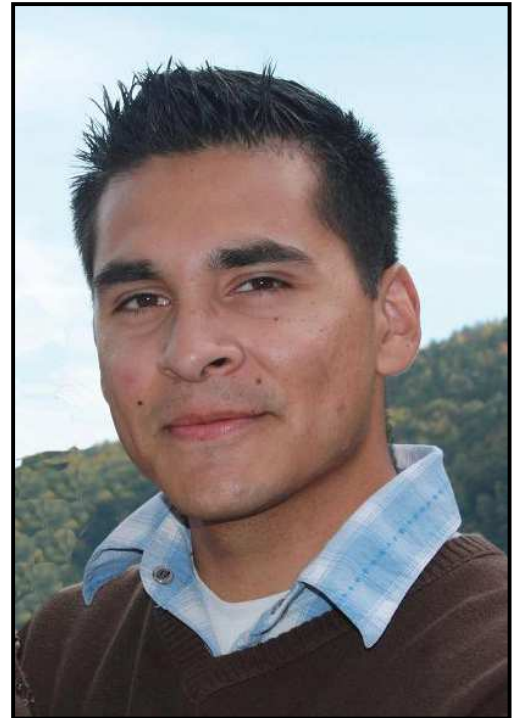
HEIDELBERG, Germany – Army Specialist Rich Siems was honorably discharged in February, bringing a close to a year-long struggle to be recognized as a conscientious objector.

Siems’ path to conscientious objection was anything but linear. As a child, he bounced among several foster homes and adoptive families (each with their own unique religious beliefs) before coming to rest with a Presbyterian couple as a teenager. The father – a U.S. Army chaplain – had specific expectations for his son, and a post-9/11 climate made enlistment an attractive avenue.

“My father being an ordained pastor pacified me on all of my uncertainties pertaining to war,” Siems said. “My father told me that if I joined the military I was not only serving my country, but I was also serving God. I felt that to ‘honor’ my parents it was necessary for me to join the military and become ‘a real man.’”

Two years later he met a nice girl, and things began to change.

After religious conversion and a deployment to the Middle East,



Conscientious objector Rich Siems was honorably discharged in early February of 2009.

Siems began attending services regularly with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Through Bible study in worship and membership classes, Siems was drawn to Christ’s teachings of peace. Though many Mormons are active members of the American military, Siems concluded his Christianity conflicts with military service.

“I do not believe Jesus Christ would wear the military uniform,” he said. “I am not just talking about pieces of clothing but what the uniform stands for. Like the Soldier’s Creed says, ‘To deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in

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Arcade Army

By Daniel Hershberger

A young man stands in front of a screen pushing buttons on a hand-held controller. The images on screen are lifelike, from the crumbling buildings to the smoke-hazed sunset in the background. The onscreen view is as if the young man were seeing it first person and the quick bursts of movement seem to capture the apprehension and fear that would accompany such an event in real life. With the push of a button, a machine-gun spits fire and the image of a man falls dead on the screen. The death is realistic, the way the body crumples to the ground and the graphic display of blood.

The young man cycles through his weapons, switching from machine gun to pistol and picking up ammo as he runs. Through a headset the young man communicates with his buddies, who are also running around in U.S. Army camouflage in this on-screen war-zone. The obvious is that

this describes a combat video game. What is not so obvious is who is doing the playing. Is it for the amusement of an early teen, a college student in a dorm, or the training exercise of a soldier who is learning to make war more effectively? The answer could easily be all three, as the worlds of video game and war technology have become ever more intertwined, not just in training for combat, but also in actual combat. Predator drones, able to seek and destroy the enemy in Iraq while being controlled, video game style, from air-conditioned trailers in California, are just one example of the increasing mix of video game technology and combat.

Combat video games sell. As a part of the growing popularity of video games in general, combat video games have jumped to the top. The top-selling game of 2007, *Call of Duty: Modern War* sold more than 7 million copies between its release in November of that year and January 2008. In 2008 video games surpassed box office sales, generating \$21 billion (with \$11 billion spent on

games) compared to \$9.8 billion at the box office. It is a telling sign of the times that playing war, very realistic war, has become fun. War, of course, has always been played, with chess and capture-the-flag representing two drastically different forms of warfare. Chess represents the structured, rule oriented movements associated with the Revolutionary War-era warfare, while capture the flag represents a guerrilla style of war based on stealth and speed. It is clear that as war has evolved, so too have the ways in which war is played.

What is emerging currently with combat video games is a growing connection between the actual tools of recruiting, training, and making war, and purchasable forms of entertainment for young people. While the war video game industry is huge and growing, the products differ very little from the video games developed by *Project Executive Office-Simulation Training and Instrumentation (PEO-STI)*, the U.S. Army's gaming

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“Quote.”

“Why do the numbers keep going up? We cannot tell you.”

U.S. Army Secretary Pete Greene in a January 30, 2009, *Los Angeles Times* article about the 2008 Army suicide rate (at least 128 by the Army's count).

The suicide total is the highest in the 30 years the Army has kept such records.

Many Army officials acknowledge emotional and

psychological stress from repeated and lengthy combat deployments have taken a toll on America's soldiers and their families.

Q: Why does the American military not allow selective conscientious objection?

By Tim Huber

As military regulations go, it's a lightweight. Weighing in around 30 pages, Army Regulation 600-43 can't intimidate through sheer mass, forcing it to instead rely on the power of the written word.

Sandwiched between AR 600-38 (Meal Card Management System) and AR 600-46 (Attitude and Opinion Survey Program), the U.S. Army's regulations concerning conscientious objection can appear to be just another sheaf of papers dedicated to bureaucracy.

Actually, a "bureaucratic to-do list" is an accurate analogy. What should never be underestimated, though, is this particular list's importance to service members who now seek an expedited path out of military service. At the heart of contemporary American military conscientious objection is its

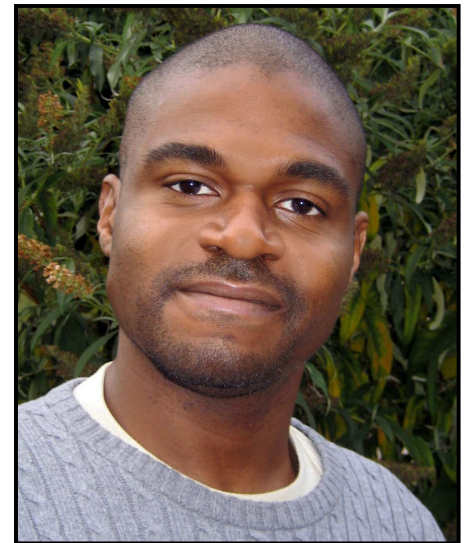
regulation definition: A firm, fixed, and sincere objection to participation in war in any form or the bearing of arms, because of religious training and belief. (Despite the heavy-handed word selection, one need not be religious to be granted a C.O. discharge.)

One page later, the regulation further clarifies, "A person who desires to choose the war in which he or she will participate is not a conscientious objector under the regulation. His or her objection must be to all wars rather than a specific war."

Such reiteration is clear, the U.S. Army – and all the military's branches, for that matter – demand a conscientious objector be against all war, not an unjust smattering of a few unnecessary conflicts.

Why is this?

Sometimes referred to as



André Shepherd applied for German asylum Nov. 26, 2008. He is now waiting for the Federal Bureau for Migration to reach a decision.

"discretionary armed service," selective conscientious objection was squashed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1971 case *Gillette v. United States*. Though the Supreme Court restricted conscientious objection to all war, it did broaden the discharge beyond purely religious grounds.

At its core, selective conscientious objection is most analogous to Just War Theory, positing that war should only be a last resort and undertaken with utmost concern to protect innocent lives. President Barack Obama somewhat revealed an inner selective C.O. during a late October

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Selective C.O.s in a different land

Interestingly, the Israeli Defense Forces pose opportunities for selective conscientious objection on both sides of the ideological divide. Some left-wing C.O.s are jailed when they refuse compulsory conscription into the military or incursions into Palestinian territories. Other right-wing objectors face similar punishment when they refuse orders to evict Zionist settlers from Palestinian-controlled sectors. Both parties refuse military orders they feel are unjust.

*Games**... Continued from page 1*

development unit. The military has not been blind to the positive effects that video games can bring to training. "The Army takes this very seriously. We own gaming for the Army" said Lt. Col. Gary Stephens, project manager of PEO-STI, which "will watch gaming trends and identify technology that can be used for military training."

It seems only natural that the guys who do war for real would utilize their war-knowledge and join the combat video game movement. To work towards this end, the Army spent between \$6 and \$8 million (part of an overall recruiting budget of \$5 billion) to create *America's Army*, a free-for-download first person shooter

openly acknowledged as being a recruitment tool. The goal with *America's Army* was to create a platform that would aid the Army's ability to communicate with young Americans and assist assessment of marketing effectiveness. *America's Army* certainly reaches the masses, taking residency in the top 10 online video games with more than 9.5 million registered users having completed over 380 million missions ranging from basic training to missions based on the War on Terror (source: Wikipedia/America's Army).

The implications of a free, easy to access video game which camouflages a recruitment tool could be significant. *America's Army* and video games like it allow the messages of the military

to reach millions of young Americans with relative ease. To download and play the game, one needs only an Internet connection, leaving the game open to anyone old enough to surf the web. In the game, players can enter virtual recruiting stations to explore a potential future military career, and receive bonus points for chatting with "Real Heroes" about their military experiences. In basic training, players begin training with various weapons as marksmanship stats are kept and tallied on an open internet scoreboard. Fundamental military values like brotherhood and camaraderie are forged as players work together to climb the ranks, hoping to achieve "Special Forces" status, thus allowing

*... Continued on page 6**Discharged**... Continued from page 1*

close combat.'"

He quickly took his newfound beliefs to heart and contacted the Military Counseling Network with questions about preparing his conscientious objection application. His military career swiftly changed courses, most notably when he abandoned a virtually automatic promotion to sergeant, even though he had promotion points in abundance.

"I cannot be a direct reflection of Jesus Christ while reflecting an image of war," he said. "As the scriptures say, no man can serve two masters."

Like many conscientious

objectors waiting for their applications to be processed, Siems was confronted with the dilemma of where to draw the line with military service. He was being judged on the sincerity of his opposition to all war in all form, but he still had orders and a job in the military.

In the fall of 2008, an investigating officer recommended against the application's approval, citing Siems' continued acceptable performance in his hospital supply job after becoming a conscientious objector. Siems submitted a rebuttal, stating that he should not be "punished" for completing tasks assigned to him. (The alternative to the investigating

officer's rebuke raises a significant question: Would Siems' application been looked upon more favorably had he refused orders and exhibited other less-than-honorable actions?)

The Department of the Army Conscientious Objector Review Board ultimately agreed with Siems. He is currently unpacking his belongings and setting up a new life for his family in the United States. Though the moving boxes are heavy, his heart is not.

"The military was asking me to ignore my conscience and continue the mission," Siems said. "I cannot go against my conscience, lest I sin against God."

Selective Conscientious Objection
... Continued from page 3

2002 protest in Chicago when he said, "I don't oppose all wars ... What I am opposed to is a dumb war."

Virtually every member of humanity is – in varying degrees – a selective conscientious objector. The difference is simply where each individual draws a line between just and unjust wars (with full conscientious objectors choosing to establish the distinction that no war can be just).

As the courts routinely side with the military on matters of selective C.O.s, I cannot help but wonder if perhaps this is in defense of a very dangerous and slippery slope.

Like most militaries around the world, the U.S. military requires – more than anything else – "Good Order and Discipline." The foundation of this concept is built upon each echelon of the armed forces following the orders given by superiors, all the way up to the Commander in Chief.

The American military blanches at the thought of widespread critical thinking when it comes to war. Basic training and every other element of military culture revolve around the importance of following orders and respecting authority.

What if – as the U.S.-led Nuremburg Trials established – each soldier analyzed every order they receive? A critical look at an Iraq War based on ever-shifting justifications could lead to a critical look at Afghanistan. Or Vietnam. Or

even ... World War II.

Such a pattern of thinking can quickly spiral and snowball into full-on conscientious objection. Why not simply nip that early on (similar to evicting pre-cancerous polyps) with a definition restricting conscientious objection to being against even the most hallowed and "vital" conflicts of history?

That strategy didn't work for American selective C.O. André Shepherd.

He enlisted to help those most in need while getting a steady paycheck, but experiences as an Apache mechanic in Iraq led him to examine the original grounds for invading the country. Compared to the mission he was

ordered to accomplish, those factors didn't add up, and he eventually went absent without leave after returning to his Katterbach, Germany base.

His discontent came to a head Nov. 26, 2008, when he applied for German asylum on the grounds that he would be unjustly persecuted for refusing to take part in an illegal war should he return to the U.S. military.

He is not against all war, but he does have "a firm, fixed and sincere objection to participation" in the war in Iraq. Unfortunately, American military regulations offer no solace to those of Shepherd's sort.

His application reached a notable stage when an investigative hearing – standard procedure for all asylum applicants – was held Feb. 4. Though most hearings require only a few hours, his went into relative overtime, requiring nine hours. The final transcript is now on its way to the Federal Bureau of Migration's headquarters in Nuremburg (how appropriate) where a decision is expected sometime in the next six months.

Meanwhile, Shepherd waits, and hopes the German government will honor its anti-war stance when it comes to Iraq and stand with him against it.

"I swore an oath on the American Constitution," he said. "But just because I swore an oath doesn't mean I should check my personal responsibility at the door."

How to Help

Navigating the waters of international asylum and military law is impossible without a lawyer.

MCN Legal Fund: To donate by Paypal to the MCN Legal Fund in the United States, visit the Centre on Conscience and War's Web site at www.centeronconscience.org/donations/mcn.shtml. To donate by bank transfer in Europe, use the page six MCN bank information, attention (Stichwort): "Legal-Fund."

General MCN donation information is available on page six.



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How to Help a C.O.

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 C.O. 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 soldiers like Siems and Shepherd. Financial assistance is also always needed. (See below)

Games

... Continued from page 4

them to participate in multiplayer missions with fellow elite soldier. As a first-person shooter game, soldiers are trained to react and shoot, to work together, and subconsciously learn the behaviors it takes to complete each mission.

Along with learning (or being conditioned) to aim, shoot, and kill on screen, other harmful values are reinforced as well. Combat video games obviously pit good against bad, teaching the player that the enemy, often either a WW II era German or present-day Arab terrorist, is bad and must be killed. Players are taught to label their own cause as good and just, while the cause of the enemy is evil. War as a last resort is also unavailable, as combat video games take away all chance at negotiation or peaceful conflict resolution, cutting past the words and jumping straight in with bullets, thus making war not a last but rather first resort.

Whether or not combat video games do aide in recruiting numbers, (stats show that at least 33 percent of recruits have played *America's Army* before joining, and the numbers seem to be rising) the harmful messages are still getting passed on, namely the trust of violence in solving conflict and the fun of war. It doesn't take much to see the combination of those two values likely won't lead to a more peaceful future.



Contribute Financially



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Please send check with note that includes:

- Name of individual or group
- Date
- Mark for "EU 108: MCN"
- Signature

