

MILITARY COUNSELING NETWORK SOUND OFF



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MCN wins peace prize



Former German Mennonite Peace Committee director Wolfgang Krauss and Military Counseling Network counselors Tim Huber, Michael Sharp, and Daniel Hershberger display the EAK Friedrich Siegmund-Schulze Award for Nonviolent Action certificate and €3,000 bank transfer.

By Tim Huber

HÖCHST i.O. – The Evangelical Association for the Pastoral Care of Conscientious Objectors (*Evangelische Arbeitsgemeinschaft zur Betreuung der Kriegsdienstverweigerer - EAK*) recently recognized the Military Counseling Network as a 2008 recipient of the Friedrich Siegmund-Schulze Award for Nonviolent Action.

The €3,000 prize was awarded Sept. 24 at EAK's assembly meeting at the Höchst Monastery in Höchst in Odenwald near Darmstadt.

National EAK chairman Walter Herrenbrück noted that, while the road to conscientious objector status in Germany is easily travelled, in other nations such recognition is more difficult.

"The promotion of the fundamental right of conscientious objection is still indispensable," he said. "This freedom must be preserved."

MCN was recognized based on its efforts to support and assist U.S. Military conscientious objectors obtain honorable discharges. The organization assists roughly 100 U.S. Military servicemembers annually in a wide

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area of fields, also including family and medical hardships.

Former MCN director Michael Sharp acknowledged some could find it unusual that a historic peace church such as the Mennonites would work so intimately with professional soldiers.

“Jesus taught and lived a revolutionary idea,” said MCN counselor Michael J. Sharp. “No one is so far away, that they are not here with us. No matter what, they remain our neighbor.

“... For Jesus it was irrelevant whether people were prostitutes, thieves, or Roman soldiers,” he continued. “They all could experience transformation.”

At the ceremony, EAK also recognized the Village of Friendship in Vietnam. Founded in 1998 by former United States soldier George Mizo, the village works to



National EAK chairman Walter Herrenbrück presents MCN counselor Michael Sharp with the 2008 Siegmund-Schulze Award for Nonviolent Action.

rehabilitate victims of the Vietnam War and pursues reconciliation, understanding, and social work projects with a focus on those handicapped by war.

The award – named for the 20th Century Protestant German pastor, teacher and

theologian who proved influential in ecumenical and social causes – has been given six times in the last 14 years, most recently to London-based War Resisters' International in 2004 for its work assisting conscientious objectors around the world.

“Quote.”

*“We cannot kill
our way to victory.”*

Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testifying before a congressional committee about the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

According to McClatchy news reports, “Mullen said he is examining ‘a new, more

comprehensive strategy for the region,’ an acknowledgement that the current approach lacks coordinated reconstruction and humanitarian programs.”

And, “Experts inside and outside the U.S. government

agreed that a key reason for the resurgence is a growing popular sympathy for the militants because of an over-reliance on the use of force, especially airpower, by NATO has killed hundreds of civilians.”

Label Limits

By Daniel Hershberger

Humans are creatures of habit. We like to have things a certain way. We like a routine, we like knowing what is coming next. Or maybe I should speak for myself. I like knowing what is happening next, and if I don't know what that is, I will put a good amount of energy into finding out what is coming next. Sure, some of us are spontaneous, and from time to time I do like a surprise to break up the monotony of routine. But generally speaking, most of us like knowing where we are going to sleep and where our food and money will come from. When we are unsure of these things, life can be scary and unknown. It is the uncertainty of what is coming next that causes fear. It goes the same with how we interact with people. It is the fear of the unknown person that is at the root of prejudice, racism and hate. When we encounter people or groups that are unknown, we often dehumanize them. They become labels, and cease to be people. People are intricate, changing, and dynamic. Labels take those nuances away and paint others with broad characteristics like lazy, stupid, violent, etc.

The fear of the 'other' drives hate and prejudice on large and small scales. The town may react negatively to the new immigrant family. Immigrants steal our jobs, refuse to speak English and generally degrade



our culture. Or so say the broad words of labeling. What the labels miss though are the emotions, the struggles, the little things that add up to a person. That is on a local scale. On a large scale, wars are fought because of the fear of the other. Not just that, but war creates the other of which we are afraid. People cease to be people, and once again become labels. They become the enemy. They become 'Japs', 'towel heads', terrorists, or just simply 'evil'. It is easier to destroy and kill when a label is the recipient of violence. It is harder to kill when it is a person, with emotions, that is in the way of our violence.

I've been thinking about this idea of the 'other' a lot during the last few years. It was on my mind when I traveled to Vietnam in college, to a place that was at one time an 'enemy' of my country. Before I left, people told me to be careful, that the Vietnamese would still

be looking for Americans to fight. Their label from 30 years ago was still firmly in place. This idea of the other was on my mind three years ago when I lived in Germany amongst Russian immigrants. There I heard their stories of what it is like to try to fit in, to try to have the right label, of their desire to be seen as people and not just labels: not just job stealers, not just cultural burdens, not just outsiders, but as people, with all of the complexities that go with it. And now I find myself in Germany once more, thinking again about this idea of the other. I am an 'other'. I am not German; I speak only a little German and not all aspects of German culture come naturally to me. What is my label? Am I American? Am I a Christian? What are the labels I am giving people? Can I see them as human?

My work with the Military Counseling Network revolves around this topic in many ways. In one way, I have had to re-humanize a group of people that I had labeled. Growing up Mennonite, and embracing the peace position in college quite strongly, I had come to see violence, and those who used it, as forces that most needed opposed in this world. Not that I have in any way given that belief up. But in my excitement and passion for the gospel of peace, those who willingly used violence gradually ceased to be human in my mind. They became unreachable, unchangeable.

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Sentence equality

By Tim Huber

VILSECK, Germany – The saying goes, “Justice is blind.” In the case of military justice, it doesn’t matter whether you refuse to kill the enemy or conspire to murder him. Each carries the same punishment.

On May 13, 2008, conscientious objector Robert Weiss pleaded guilty to charges of desertion and missing movement when he refused to return to combat patrols in Iraq. Military judge Peter Masters issued a seven-month prison sentence – a punishment one month shorter than the pre-trial agreement orchestrated by the defense and prosecution.

Four months later in the same Rose Barracks courtroom, military judge Edward O’Brien issued a sentence in a starkly different case. Spc. Belmor Ramos pleaded guilty Sept. 18 to conspiracy to commit murder and received 40 years’ confinement, a dramatically lengthier span than the seven-month incarceration found within his own pre-trial agreement.

As part of the agreement, Ramos agreed to testify against other members of his unit who are charged with allegedly shooting four Iraqi detainees in the head before dumping the bodies in a Baghdad canal in Spring of 2007. Though he did not take part in the killings, Ramos did stand guard in a machine-gun

turret while the act occurred.

The U.S. military’s Uniform Code of Military Justice allows for a possible sentence of life in prison for conspiracy to commit murder. Desertion during a time of war carries a maximum punishment of death by firing squad.

Though the judges were different, the ultimate punishments are nearly identical, although Weiss and Ramos – similar only in rank, military branch, and current address – couldn’t be more different.

Weiss deserted only after his strenuous struggle to be recognized as a conscientious objector was denied. Citing Christ’s call to love both the neighbor and the enemy, he refused not just to kill other human beings (whether they be innocent or not), he refused to take any part in a military system based fundamentally on that strategy.

“I said I was cool with it,” Ramos said at his court martial, recalling the unit being asked if anyone was against undertaking the retribution shooting. “... I understood at the time that ‘taking care of them’ would mean that they would end up dead. I didn’t care.

“... I wanted them dead,” he said. “I had no legal justification or excuse to do this.”

Most members of his battalion, including superiors,

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Hershberger

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They were part of the machine, and soon I began to see it just as that, a machine. They were no longer human. But the story doesn’t end there. My eyes were opened wider, and the prejudice and intolerance has been replaced with compassion and understanding. I had to leave my comfort zone. I had to interact with the ‘other’ in my life. I had to rediscover the human element, those little things that add up to a complex person. I am excited about my work here because I am working with people that have come to similar understandings about the ‘other’. I will be working with soldiers who realized that what was once a label (enemy) is in reality human. I am eager to hear their stories, and to work for peace on a personal level.

This all seems so full of redemption. In the midst of the horrendous violence and destruction of war, some good walls are being knocked down. Here and there, a few walls are falling as soldiers recognize the human at the other end of the gun. Walls built of labels are falling, as hate and destruction are replaced with compassion and understanding. It is a glimpse of redemption and reconciliation happening on personal levels. The message through all of this needs to be proclaimed loud and clear ... People are people are people. People can change, people can grow, and people are dynamic. We just might have to be willing to be a little uncomfortable as we grow, and engage our fears as we get to know some of the ‘others’ among us.

War, Inc.

By Tim Huber

War, Inc. has 107 minutes specifically earmarked for those who like their political satire nice and dark.

How dark?

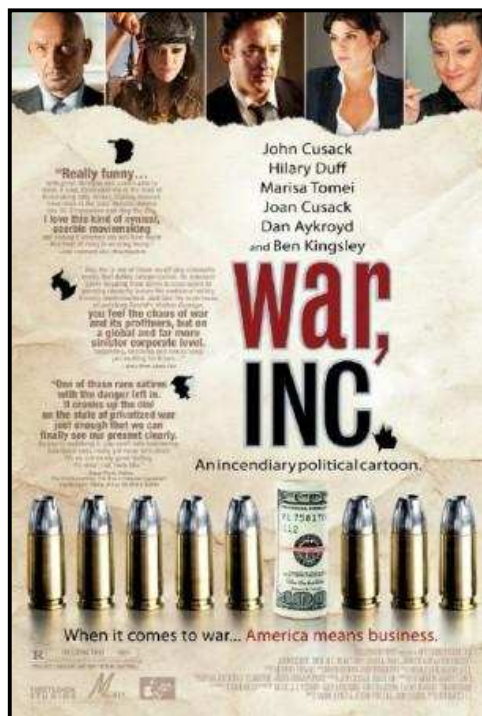
The tanks used by private corporation Tamerlane – no national military is ever depicted – carry so many advertisements they look more NASCAR than NATO.

The film – produced and co-written by John Cusack – stars John Cusack as Brand Hauser, a one-man killing machine searching for purpose in a life dictated by the highest bidder. (Similitude to Cusack's lead character from *Grosse Pointe Blank* is allowed.)

The plot is addressed early when Cusack receives a call from Dan Aykroyd, playing Tamerlane's CEO and former Vice President of the United States. His services are needed immediately in the fictional Middle East/Central Asian country of Turaqistan. A certain Middle East oil minister has been getting outrageous ideas concerning the ownership of his nation's natural resources, and must be dealt with.

As producer of a Tamerlane trade show of epic and patriotic proportions (his cover) he will simultaneously oversee the glittering wedding of over-sexed and under-parented pop singer Yonica Babyyeah (Hilary Duff in a distinct departure from her Disney Channel roots).

Along the way, the script



War, Inc.

**“When it comes to war ...
America means business”**

Director: Joshua Seftel

Starring: John Cusack,
Joan Cusack, Marisa
Tomei, Hilary Duff, Dan
Aykroyd, Ben Kingsley

Rated: R

Runtime: 107 min.

Language: English

DVD Release date:

October 14, 2008 (USA)

never passes up an opportunity to skewer the military-industrial complex. The Tamerlane logo is ubiquitous – an overboard and perpetual allusion to Halliburton and the like.

In addition to the aforementioned advertising draping all military equipment, “contractors” in military garb perform every soldier function, including fetching dry-cleaning. As Cusack strolls his readying

expo, a kick-line of female amputees performs a last-minute rehearsal. His assistant can't help but gush how amazing it is to see such a collection of people exclusively wounded by Tamerlane landmines receiving the miracle of mobility by Tamerlane prosthetics. Ben Kingsley – the actor playing the main villain – just happened to win a certain golden statue for his portrayal of Gandhi.

“This is a historic moment Hauser. The first war ever to be one hundred percent out-sourced to private enterprise,” Aykroyd's Cheney-esque CEO glows to Cusack early in the film. “Tamerlane jets, Tamerlane tanks, Tamerlane soldiers ... and to top it all off, a brand-USA expo!”

Though the film's focus is not on the modern American servicemember per se, the overall message targets the contemporary (or not-so-contemporary) political and entrepreneurial pursuits that can often seem to take priority over the men and women sacrificing themselves on the ground.

War, Inc. experienced a timid initial release of art-house proportions in late May, gracing screens in only two American theaters. However, its estimated opening weekend gross of \$36,600 placed it second only to *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* for per theater earnings.

War, Inc. comes to DVD in the United States Oct. 14, in what could well be an election-season ploy to sell lots of shiny discs. Regardless, it will no doubt be easier to catch on the small screen.

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Sentencing

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knew about the killing and Ramos' involvement. Sgt. Gustavo Pena said he would gladly have Ramos in his Bradley fighting vehicle crew.

"Their opinion is that he is a good soldier," Pena said at the court martial.

I initially found the fallout from these two cases discomfoting. A conscientious objector's ultimate refusal to take another human being's life through desertion has been equated to conspiracy to murder an innocent civilian.

(Try to compile a list of other paths to prison that are rooted upon refusing to kill. It is a rare thing to receive a felony for the rest of one's life, simply for refusing to pick up weapons in the name of killing other people.)

However, while one of my

main pursuits is the lessening of punishments doled out to those who refuse to take part in what they believe is immoral; there might be a glimmer of something resembling a justice of sorts in this pairing of punishments.

Typically, the right thing to do is not the easy thing to do. Working overtime pays time-and-a-half, while taking off early fosters an overgrown inbox. Eating celery is aerobic, but hot fudge sundaes somehow aren't.

Had Weiss refused to kill knowing he'd only receive a slap on the wrist with a feather duster, in my opinion his stand would have been compromised. His faith is not based on doing the Christian thing when it is convenient, but more appropriately, when it is not.

That is what separates him from Spc. Ramos.



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

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!*