

Soldier joins SOA Watch march as conscientious objector

Patrick O'Neill | Nov. 22, 2011

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: Cilean torture survivor Mario Venegas, actor Martin Sheen, and peace activist George Martin at SOA Watch. (Tom Bottolene, SOA Watch Minnesota)

COLUMBUS, GA. -- Mixed in among the crowd at [Sunday's SOA Watch procession](#) [1] was a U.S. Army soldier stationed at Fort Benning, Ga. Walking with his GI Rights counselor, who asked that *NCR* not publish the 25-year-old soldier's name for fear of reprisal, the clean-cut soldier agreed to talk about his pending conscientious objector application. Stationed at Benning since April, the soldier said he joined the Army two years ago not fully realizing what he was getting into.

"One of the biggest reasons why I joined the military: You're sold on this idea of pride and money, and for a starving college kid sometimes that's just good enough," he said as the names of the martyrs were being chanted with the crowd responding, "Presente."

"I became a conscientious objector when I was stationed in Korea in 2010."

As part of his Advanced Individual Training (AIT), which follows basic training, the soldier was assigned to "make a list of military targets of interest, to go out and find these people and drop rounds on them, you know, blow them up, basically is what it was."

He said he quickly realized that these training missions included the reality that "innocent people would die," he said.

When he questioned his officers about it, his fears were confirmed.

"Civilians who die are just considered collateral damage," he said they told him. "They don't really see them as people. They're very, very dehumanized. I started to really, really doubt what I was doing."

He also questioned his squad leader, a staff sergeant who had returned from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"He told me that, 'Yes, that really does happen. Innocent civilians will die. It will be hard at first, but then you just get used to it.' And I thought to myself, 'I can't get used to that; I can't do that.' I didn't know about that going in," he said.

Few soldiers question their orders out of indoctrination and fear, he said.

"Even if a soldier had questions, a lot of those questions would go away because of fear," he said. "In order to shape somebody, to mold somebody, break them down and build them back up in the military, one tactic they

use is fear. It's either fear of getting a bad discharge out of the military and flipping burgers for the rest of your life or fear that a big, bad drill sergeant might beat the crap out of you if you don't do what you're told.

"That fear carries on after basic training and through AIT, and when you get to your unit you're already in shape. They don't really have to do much with you, except tell you what to do, but by then you're so indoctrinated into what they're doing you don't ask questions anymore. It's very clever; it really is."

During his deployment in Korea, the soldier said he spent "a great deal of my time reading the Bible, and I became very religious. I needed that. It really brought me back to God."

Adopted by a foster family, the soldier grew up in New Jersey. As a college junior, he ran out of money and decided to drop out and join the Army.

"Like everybody else who goes into the military, you don't really have a good idea what this is all about," he said. "You're sold on this idea that you're really defending freedom, and then when you get in you're actually doing the exact opposite. You're oppressing people and you're taking away other people's freedoms. I can't do that."

To further make his point, the soldier reached into his pocket and took out a carefully cut out article from the *Army Times* that reported the story of Calvin Gibbs, the 26-year-old staff sergeant who received a life sentence as the ringleader of a rogue Army unit that killed three Afghan civilians last year, taking fingers and a tooth as trophies from the dead.

At the SOA Watch gathering, the soldier said he felt at home. "It feels great to be around a whole lot of people who support me," he said.

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