

# Regaining My Humanity

by Camilo Mejia

Editor's Note:

At age 19 Camilo joined the Armed Forces. According to Camilo: "I believe most young people who join the military do so for reasons other than war. I know I joined because I thought that doing so would bring me in touch with people all over the United States and maybe even the world. I was also seduced by the promise of a free college education, which later turned out to be not so free."

Camilo served as an infantryman from 1995 until 1998, then continued his contract as a reservist in the Florida National Guard. This contract was to end in May 2003. Despite the initial offers made to him by the army recruiting team, Camilo worked from 1998 until 2001 as a security guard to pay for the cost of his college studies. In December 2002, Camilo was enrolled in the University of Miami and was one semester away from finishing his BA in Psychology.

I was deployed to Iraq in April, 2003, and returned home for a two-week leave in October. Going home gave me the opportunity to put my thoughts in order and to listen to what my conscience had to say. People would ask me about

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my war experiences and answering them took me back to all the horrors—the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood or an innocent man decapitated by our machine gun fire. The time I saw a soldier broken down inside because he killed a child, or an old man on his knees, crying with his arms raised to the sky, perhaps asking God why we had taken the lifeless body of his son. I thought of the suffering of a people whose country was in ruins and who were further humiliated by the raids,

patrols, and curfews of an occupying army.

I listened to a higher power, the voice of my conscience. And I realized that none of the reasons we were told about why we were in Iraq turned out to be true. There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was no link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. We weren't helping the Iraqi people and the Iraqi people didn't want us there. We weren't preventing terrorism or making Americans safer. I couldn't find a single good reason for having been there, for having shot at people and been shot at.

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Coming home gave me the clarity to see the line between military duty and moral obligation. I realized that I was part of a war that I believed was immoral and criminal, a war of aggression, a war of imperial domination. I realized that acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military, and I decided that I could not return to Iraq.

I put my weapon down and I chose to reas-

sert myself as a human being. I have not deserted the military or been disloyal to the men and women of the military. I have not been disloyal to a country. I have only been loyal to my principles.

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When I turned myself in, with all my fears and doubts, I did it not only for myself. I did it for the people of Iraq, even for those who fired upon me—they were just on the other side of a

battleground where war itself was the only enemy. I did it for the Iraqi children, who are victims of mines and depleted uranium. I did it for the thousands of unknown civilians killed in war.

I was tried by a special court-martial at Fort Stewart, Georgia. The charge: desertion with the intent to avoid hazardous duty. My case received a lot of attention from the media, mainly because I was the first Iraq veteran to have been to combat, returned on a two-week furlough, and publicly refused to return to Iraq while denouncing the war as illegal, and who then surrendered himself to military authorities. For the first time since the invasion of Iraq the military had to deal with the delicate issue of public dissent within the ranks. [I was found guilty and] sent to a confinement facility in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I spent nine months of a twelve-month sentence. I was released today.

Many have called me a coward; others have called me a hero. I believe I can be found somewhere in the middle. To those who have called me a hero, I say that I don't believe in heroes, but I believe that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

To those who have called me a coward I say that they are both wrong and right. They are

wrong when they think that I left the war for fear of being killed. I say without any pride that I did my job as a soldier. I commanded an infantry squad in combat and we never failed to accomplish our mission. I admit that fear was there, but there was also the fear of killing innocent people, the fear of putting myself in a position where to survive means to kill, there was the fear of losing my soul in the process of saving my body. I was afraid of waking up one morning to realize my humanity had abandoned me.

But I was a coward, not for leaving the war, but for having been a part of it in the first place. I failed to fulfill my moral duty as a human being and instead I chose to fulfill my duty as a soldier—all because I was afraid. I was terrified, I did not want to stand up to the government and the army, I was afraid of punishment and humiliation. I went to war because at the moment I was a coward, and for that I apologize to my soldiers for not being the type of leader I should have been.

I also apologize to the Iraqi people. To them I say I am sorry for the curfews, for the raids, for the killings. May they find it in their hearts to forgive me.

One of the reasons I did not refuse the war from the beginning was that I was afraid of losing my freedom. Today, as I sit behind bars, I realize that there are many types of freedom, and that in spite of my confinement I remain free in many important ways. I am confined to a prison but I feel, today more than ever, connected to all humanity. Behind these bars I sit a free man because I listened to the voice of my conscience.

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*This essay is edited from statements Camillo wrote in prison, and from his conscientious objector claim. Reprinted from Camilo Mejia's Web site: <[www.freecamilo.org/index.htm](http://www.freecamilo.org/index.htm)>.*