

Refusing to Fight

Refusing to Fight: an interview with resister Kyle Snyder
by Karen Button, posted on Uruknet.info

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Those who have seen the recent documentary about U.S. GI resistance during the Vietnam war "Sir No Sir!" will understand the numerous parallels to growing resistance in today's military and its solidarity with the civilian anti-war movement. From non-violent demonstrations and sit-ins to the radical actions of The Weather Underground, hundreds of thousands protested the Vietnam war for years. Finally, officials began leaking classified information. But, ultimately, it was the individual soldier refusing to participate any longer that brought the military machine to its knees.

Fragging of superiors and outright refusal to follow combat orders became commonplace. Desertion and Absent Without Leave (AWOL) hit an all-time high; the Pentagon documented 1,500,000 during that time. About 100,000 of those active duty members went into exile, and at least 90 percent of them fled, to Canada.

Today, those precedents are being repeated. Resistance to the U.S. occupation of Iraq (and, to some degree, Afghanistan) among its own military is growing rapidly and the Department of Defense teetering on the brink of recruitment crisis.

Thousands of soldiers are refusing to participate any longer. Dozens, like First Lt. Ehren Watada—the first commissioned officer to refuse—have chosen to go public and face the consequences. Others simply disappear.

By the Pentagon's own admission, over 8,000 GIs are now AWOL (many now calling it Against War of Lies). While most are living underground in the States, according to Canada's War Resisters Support Campaign, another 100-200 have fled to Canada, following the footsteps of their Vietnam-era counter-parts. Of those, 24 have come forward and sought assistance from the Campaign. Based in Toronto, the Canada's War Resisters Support Campaign (WRSC) reinforces Canada's historical stance and provides a base of support for those, like American Kyle Snyder, who refuse to fight.

Thus far, the Canadian government has not deported any U.S. war resisters. Says Lee Zaslofsky, Coordinator of WRSC and Vietnam War deserter, "The US government has no authority to arrest or deport anyone who is in Canada. Since it is not a crime in Canada to be AWOL from the US military, the US cannot extradite anyone for that 'offense'."

This is good news for 22 year-old Kyle Snyder, who arrived in Vancouver last August on leave. Though he went to visit a friend, Snyder also knew he would not return to an Army he says has lied to him.

A thin young man with a small soul patch, spiked hair and tattoos running down both arms, Snyder looks more like he's about to hop on a skateboard than talk about the life-changing events that brought him to Canada. I talked with Kyle Snyder after he and other resisters spoke at Vancouver's World Peace Forum.

An Easy Target for Recruiters

"I joined the military when I was 19 years old from a government program called Job Corps, in Clearfield, Utah," Snyder begins. "I wasn't a good kid. I didn't have a good background. I was in foster homes from thirteen to seventeen, then when I was seventeen, I went through a government program called Job Corps. So, from thirteen all the way up, I didn't have parental figures in my life really. My parents divorced; my father was really abusive towards my mother and he was abusive toward me. I've still got scars on my back. I was put in Social Services when I was thirteen. I was an easy target for recruiters, plain and simple.

"The minute I graduated in 2003, Staff Sgt. Williamson came to me and he mentioned all the benefits military programs had to offer. And, for the first time in my life, I saw that I could become something more. I saw a man in a professional

uniform, clean-cut, a very professional man coming up to me, wanting me, saying I could look just like him. I wanted that. I don't know any other 19 year old that wouldn't want that.

"I joined the military for materialistic benefits. A \$5,000 bonus seemed really really nice being 19 years old. Maybe I could put a down payment on a car or something. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to provide for a family; I wanted to have a family. I wanted all the benefits that the military had to offer."

I asked Snyder if he thought about the invasion of Iraq when he joined the military. He said yes, but "more than anything I wanted to reconstruct the civilization of Iraq. I wanted to help liberate the people of Iraq, just like the American president was saying. So, I signed up to be a heavy construction equipment operator, part of the 94th Corps of Engineers. I figured if I was an engineer in the United States Army I could build foundations for the Iraqi people to form their new government, to form a civilization after the bombings of 2003."

Snyder did his basic training in Ft. Lenonwood, Missouri, which he described as "a simple military process that… breaks you down, breaks down all of [your] values into believing that killing another human being is ok, and that you can make money off of killing another life, taking another human being's soul."

"The military took my child"

While at basic training, Snyder's grandfather died. He was denied leave to attend the funeral. Two weeks later he was allowed to go home, and it was then that his fiancée became pregnant.

After graduation, Snyder was sent to Germany where he became part of the 94th Engineers Combat Battalion Heavy. "That's where I met my new friends, my new brothers that I would fight with. This was my family." It was there, Snyder says, he found out that his "child was dying inside of my fiancée's…womb. I brought it up to medical sergeants, medical commanders. They told me that they couldn't provide any medical attention for my child because we were not legally married. The military took my child! And nobody could say that I wasn't trying to become a good father because I was in the military."

Bitter and angry at the military now, it was the loss of Snyder's child that planted those first seeds. Depressed and in shock, Snyder requested an exit from the military. "I tried for six months while the deployment orders were still in effect for my unit." He was refused. "I became very depressed. I just went numb inside. I was put on medication, Lorazipam and Paxyl. I later refused to take the medication because I felt that it was numbing me. I decided that was something I needed to heal from myself. And I believe it's still something I need to heal from."

"I felt that the only reason I was getting [the anti-depressants] was because they wanted me…to be a soldier."

"I learned all the different weapon system that the military could offer in a combat situation. 50 cal are used with depleted uranium rounds; I found that out when coming to Canada. I was never told that while I was in Iraq."

Though Snyder had just lost his child, was depressed, and was about to be deployed to the violence that is now Iraq, for the month prior his superiors assigned him to "Fallen Soldier Detail," where, Snyder says matter-of-factly, "I would salute the dead bodies that were put into caskets as they were returning to Germany before we shipped them off to the United States."

I ask him if that affected him, to see the dead coming back from where he was about to go. Surprisingly, he shakes his head…"nah, not really." Snyder says he didn't expect to see combat anyway. "Going to Iraq meant I was going to reconstruct a city, not kill people. That's what I believed I was going to do."

Lied to by the Military

When Snyder arrived, however, he says he saw no reconstruction of Iraq. "The only reconstruction I saw was building

army bases.

"I was in Mosul. I was in Baghdad. I was in Stryker. I was in Scania. [Both, military bases.] I was in Tikrit… Iraq is the size of Texas, it’s a small country. People need to realise that. There were reconstructions of forward operating bases and military bases, but no city work being done. I mean, none of that. So, why are the engineers there? " he asks rhetorically, shaking his head.

Instead of doing the job he signed up for, says Snyder, "I was sent into what we called The Force Protection Program; it was a separate entity from my unit. We escorted everything up to a general.

"I don’t know what is worse, telling your friends you can’t fight with them because you’re escorting a general who doesn’t want to see combat, or actually being a part of the combat."

Snyder’s first mission further demoralised him. "Capt. John G. Chung left me during my first mission. He left me and 8 personnel and 4 vehicles behind in Baghdad. He went to Forward Operating Base Scania, which was an hour north of Baghdad. My platoon sergeant, Staff Sgt Perkins went up to him and asked him why he had left. He didn’t answer us for about two months, until we confronted him and set a meeting up asking him why he had left us during the mission. 'That’s not any of my concern, because I’m just a Private. He has different orders. I don't care what his orders are.’ How would he explain to my mother if I had died, that he was missing during that mission?"

Though in Iraq only four and half months, Snyder says he conducted over 38 documented missions. "Most men don’t even do two in a year. The chances of me surviving a firefight were 30 percent…because I was a gunner. I was lucky because I wasn’t in too much combat. But I did see my friends come back injured and I did see men from other units killed."

"Three months into Iraq, my friend, a man that I drank beer with, a man that I had even gone to college with for awhile, shot an innocent civilian who was raking rocks along the side of the road. I remember having to go back to Forward Operating Base Marez, and reporting to my commanding officer what I just seen. I remember writing a mission statement. I remember requesting an investigation be done and I remember it being refused.

"’I can’t take this anymore!’ That’s what I thought to myself. This is not what I signed up for and it’s not what’s being shown to the American public. So, why the hell should I fight? Because what that commanding officer was telling me by refusing that investigation, was that I could pick up my M-16 or my M-4 or my M-2 and go and kill 50 Iraqi civilians because I was angry and get away with it because it’s war!"

Snyder angrily declares, "The American president was saying that we were liberating and we were reconstructing. Well, I expect to be doing that! I mean, who’s in the wrong here? I was given false orders. I was given false information. I did expect to go and help reconstruct a society.

"You know, if they want to help people in Iraq… imagine a 15 year-old kid, for the last 5 years all he’s seen is [US] military personnel with weapons going through his city. How is that child supposed to believe that that man, in that uniform is helping him? Now, if that child saw a convoy of logs being brought to his city, or a convoy of water being brought to his city, still guarded, it would be a completely different situation. That’s where the American military messed up. Because they forgot about the perception of civilisation. They forgot about the perception of the Iraqi people."

A Refugee in Canada

Snyder began documenting his missions. "I wanted to find out…you know it might have been because I was already angry with the United States Army…but it doesn’t matter. When they took my soul that way… you want them to be accountable for what they have done. Right? So, for me, documenting and taking pictures and doing all of that, that was my way of saying 'look, you know what? You guys are the ones that are fucking up.’

He is now using the documentation as evidence in his refugee claim. His defense? "That this war is illegal and I should be able to make moral decisions as a soldier; I'm using international law and this is an international war, it's not a civil war so they need to take into consideration international law."

"I left the military because the situation is now that it is not conducting itself as a professional unit. Altogether the US military, in my eyes, is scrambled to the point that nobody knows what they're doing, except the generals. I think the generals are making bad decisions and giving bad orders to people like me. So, I refuse to work in an organisation that is not professional. I refuse to work in an organisation that commits war crimes. It would be like if I worked for 7-11 and I found out my boss was laundering money. I wouldn't want to work for them, would I? Nobody would question me then, if I quit that job. I mean, that's the reality of it.

"I thought about turning myself back in about four months ago. I thought hard about this, to just get it over with. But, you know what? More and more, I think they have to catch me first. I'm not hiding. I'm right here. But how bad would that look if Americans came over to Canada to arrest me?"

A De-moralised Army

Still in touch with his unit, Snyder says they fully support what he's doing and now confide in him. "From the people that I know morale is like, 'well, what are we doing here for the fourth time?' They're upset because they've been there for the third or fourth time and they're married...a lot of them are. So, if you've see your wife two months out of three years, how are you supposed to maintain a stable relationship? And that's part of the reason that a lot of them joined the military in the first place! A lot of family men join, so nobody wants to fight a war they don't have to."

I ask Snyder about soldiers committing atrocities, like those in Haditha where 24 civilians were intentionally killed, or the rape of a teenager and subsequent murder of her and her family in Mahmoudiya.

Snyder says he and most other soldiers are horrified by these events. But, he says, it's also important to remember the situation in which they've been placed. "You've got people who just don't care! It's probably their third or fourth deployment and they blame the Iraqis because who are they going to blame?"

There have been accusations that some soldiers have been using drugs and I ask what Snyder thinks. Snyder says he personally didn't see drug use, but, says, "there is prostitution. The US military brings Iraqi women on the bases, five to six at a time. They were probably in their mid-twenties...it was right across the street at Camp Diamond, in a massage parlor. I was appalled the U.S. would be funding this! It's sickening. U.S. taxpayer's money is going toward prostitution rings on U.S. bases. I'm willing to sit in front of a court and say these same things."

When I ask how he knows the U.S. is funding this, he fires back, "You tell me where the money is coming from? I hold the Bush Administration responsible." Someone, he says, has approved it, otherwise they would not be on the bases. "They owe an explanation why that kind of shit is going on."

Leaving the U.S.

"I love my country. And that's why I'm in Canada right now. That's it. Plain and simple. ...and any soldier that refuses to fight in this war has my respect."

They also have the respect of the War Resister's Campaign members, many of whom, like campaign coordinator Lee Zaslofsky, are U.S. deserters of the Vietnam war.

Of this current conflict, he says, "Jeremy Hinzman and Brandon Hughey are the first two war resisters to apply for refugee status. Their refugee claims were denied by the Immigration and Refugee Board. They appealed to the Federal Court and their case was dismissed. They now await a hearing on their appeal before the Federal Court of Appeal, which will probably happen this Fall. These two cases are different from each other, but are being considered together for

convenience. If they are successful, it will be a good precedent that will benefit other war resisters; if their current appeal fails, we will try to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada."

Kyle Snyder and other resisters are watching these cases closely because they will set precedent. But no matter how the cases turn out, there is still strong support among Canadians.

"The War Resisters Support Campaign does not rely only on legal proceedings to make it possible for US Iraq War resisters to remain in Canada permanently," says Zaslofsky. "We are also rallying support among Canadians with a petition campaign, media, political lobbying, speaking tours, etc. We believe that the best solution will be a provision by the government that makes it possible for the war resisters to stay permanently, rather than repeated refugee claims, each of which is considered individually."

Until that happens, resisters like Kyle Snyder remain in limbo. But, that doesn't mean that life has stopped for him. Snyder's schedule is full with speaking engagements, interviews, letter-writing, and organising. "Right now I'm working on getting a [safe] house in Surrey than any resister can come to."

Though emotionally exhausted, Snyder says he keeps going on the support he's received. "It's what fuels me, what gives me strength, just knowing that people all over the world support me."

I ask Snyder what he wants for the future. "I want to go back to college. I want the government to leave me alone and give me time to think and to process everything. I want 21 back. I want this war to stop. That's what I want."

"I want my friends home, and I want to know that Iraq is being reconstructed. And that can still happen. Economically, we owe the Iraqi people billions of dollars if you add up every single home and every single life that's been taken. America owes at least that."

For more information about the War Resisters Support Campaign go to www.resisters.ca