

## Not Shooting our Heroes: It's a Start

The U.S. government hasn't shot military deserters since World War II (progress), but are we yet ready to recognize Iraq War deserters as heroes fighting on the front lines for our nation's soul? by Peter Laufer, posted on The Huffington Post, September 10, 2006

History often mocks contemporary actions, and it is incumbent for us to make careful choices as we react to the soldiers now rejecting duty in the Iraq War.

This last weekend I was at the Veterans for Peace convention in Seattle, a collection of soldiers from a variety of our nation's conflicts who now seek alternatives to war. I attended a picnic on the U.S.-Canadian border honoring those soldiers who have fled to Canada, deserting rather than fighting a war they are convinced is illegal and immoral. While in the Northwest I read from my book *Mission Rejected* to crowds up and down the Puget Sound who support the deserters and the other soldiers who are refusing Iraq duty.

Army Sergeant Ricky Clousing is one. He came out of hiding at the convention after a year AWOL, turning himself in to authorities while calling the Iraq campaign a "war of aggression." Lieutenant Ehren Watada is another, the first officer to refuse to deploy to Iraq. As he prepared for his court martial, he told conventioners, ". . . to stop an illegal and unjust war, the soldiers can choose to stop fighting it." Darrell Anderson is still another, an Iraq War veteran awarded a Purple Heart who fled to Canada rather than redeploy. He now tells me he intends to return to the U.S. because he believes his own court martial will help draw needed further attention on the wrongs he saw in Iraq. These soldiers and others who have come out publicly against the war hope their actions will convince others in the military to refuse service in Iraq.

With polls showing an increasing majority of Americans now opposed to the war, the question hangs in the air: When will our society honor and appreciate those soldiers who refuse to follow orders to fight in Iraq?

Several interviews from my book are being excerpted in a major magazine and I've been going over the galleys with the editor. One of the subheads for the article reads ". . . former soldiers tell why they have betrayed their nation." No, I insisted to my editor. Betrayed is the wrong word. Violated orders, disobeyed orders, even - perhaps - betrayed the military might be acceptable alternatives. But it is not soldiers with conscience who can be labeled betrayers of our nation. That title belongs to the Commander-in-Chief and his posse of warmongers.

Again, history is a harsh judge. During World War I, our main partner in the Iraq War debacle shot 306 of its own who were charged as deserters. This week, the British defense secretary announced that all 306 would be pardoned. Private Harry Farr is the poster soldier for the 306. He was executed after serving two years nonstop in the bloody trenches. In 1916, after a twenty-minute trial, he was shot for "misbehaving before the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice" after refusing to leave the trench one more time. As a result, besides losing Private Harris, his family received no military pension.

Private Farr's daughter, Gertrude Harris, is alive at 93 to witness the pardon. She is quoted in the Guardian newspaper as relieved "that this ordeal is now over and I can be content knowing that my father's memory is intact. I have always argued that my father's refusal to rejoin the frontline, described in the court martial as resulting from cowardice, was in fact the result of shellshock, and I believe that many other soldiers suffered from this, not just my father."

We must work to make sure that in 2006 we learn from errors such as World War I. Even though we no longer shoot the Private Harris of our military, we need to do more. We need to recognize and support those soldiers who realize from their front line experiences that the Iraq War is wrong. We need to help them and other soldiers follow the advice of the old and so-current Phil Ochs anthem: "I ain't marching anymore." We need to remember the mantra from the Vietnam War: ""What if they gave a war and nobody came." Lt. Watada is so correct. It is the soldiers who can end this war.