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Iraq vet speaks out

Former soldier discusses desertion

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At the time, Mejía said he tried to tell himself what the lieutenant had done was permissible because the boy learned not to antagonize U.S. soldiers, but later realized there was no justification for what had happened.

"[Instances like this] destroy the moral fabric of a society," said Mejía. "These are the things we, as soldiers, don't think about until we come home. You don't have the luxury to think morally about things. It's too intense. It's too dangerous."

When he returned home for a two-week leave, Mejía said he had time to discover how he truly felt about the war.

"It became clear to me that I had to make a decision to follow my idea of right versus wrong or to follow my military commands," he said.

Mejía said his decision not to return to service after his leave was not easy and he was afraid.

"I didn't have the courage to speak out," he said. "I simply didn't get back on the plane."

Eventually, Mejía said he felt he could not remain silent. He said the hypocrisy of the "support the troops" motto was one reason he began talking to the media.

Soldiers were not being adequately supplied on the battlefield or treated properly when their service ended, Mejía said.

Meanwhile, "these billions of dollars a week were basically lining the pockets of corporate CEOs," he said.

In March 2004, Mejía surrendered to being AWOL at the Army Air Force base in Lexington. He was court-martialed and convicted of desertion by a military jury who sentenced him to a year in military prison and gave him a bad conduct discharge.

A desertion conviction during wartime can result in a death sentence, under Article 85 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

While in prison, Mejía said he enjoyed the time he had to reflect on his service in Iraq and plan for what he wanted to do after his release.

"Being a deserter or conscientious objector in military prison is like being a bank robber in civilian jail," said Mejía. "The other inmates gave me mad respect."

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