

No return: Refusing duty in Iraq

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Army Sergeant Kevin Benderman, 40, faces a military trial for refusing to return to Iraq for a second tour of duty. The trial is scheduled for May 11 at an army base in Georgia. A Tennessean of Southern Baptist background, Benderman joined the army in 1987, was honorably discharged in '91 and reenlisted in 2000. He has a distinguished military record, including a dozen medals. He has applied to be classified as a conscientious objector. The Century asked him about his change of mind.

Didn't you have a pretty good idea of what war is like before going to Iraq?

How can you know what anything is really like until you experience it for yourself? You can look at someone who has burns on his body and you can think that it would hurt, but you would not know how bad it hurts unless you were burned yourself.

Can't someone have an experience and see that they were living the wrong way and try to make changes in how they were conducting themselves? If an alcoholic or a drug addict were to realize that the way he was living was very detrimental, would he not be expected to put forth the effort to change? That is what I am doing.

No doubt there are those who will say you are just trying to save your own skin and are letting down your fellow soldiers by bailing out. Others may say you are a romantic, naïve idealist who underestimates the power and extent of evil in the world and what is required to cope with it.

The people who say those things have a right to their opinion. I cannot let them stop me doing the things that I know are best for me. As far as letting down fellow soldiers, I feel that I am trying to get the very thing that kills them stopped permanently—and if they don't see that now, then I hope they will in time.

You have said that at one point your company commander in Iraq ordered your unit to fire on small children who were throwing rocks at the troops. Would you elaborate on that incident?

Out of curiosity, the children would climb on the wall of the building that we had moved into. These kids, who were seven to nine years old, were just being kids. It must have been really exciting for them to see the equipment, and they acted like kids who have never seen that type of thing before.

We had not had the chance to secure the perimeter of the place with concertina wire, and the captain was nervous, I suppose, about the possibility of someone throwing a bomb or something. So he overreacted to the situation. Everyone looked at him like he was crazy—because there was no way that we were going to shoot those kids.

Apart from that incident, did you see other evidence of mistreatment of civilians by U.S. military personnel during your six months in Iraq?

That question is not fair to the soldiers. Soldiers are in a situation where it is very hard to tell who the “enemy” is, and so things were done to people who did not deserve it. I didn’t see torture or anything of that nature, but I did see some people who did not pose a threat to us shoved around roughly. I also saw a severely burned girl who was pleading for help, and we were told not to come to her aid because our medical supplies were limited.

But war is an extraordinary circumstance that makes people do things that are against their nature. Soldiers are in a situation that no one should ever have to be in and that will make some people behave in ways they normally wouldn’t.

Are you a selective objector, opposing only the war in Iraq, or do you now consider yourself a thoroughgoing pacifist, opposed to all war in all forms?

I was not in any other war, so this is the one that gave me firsthand knowledge of what war is. War’s only purpose is to kill.

Do you feel that you meet the military’s criteria for status as a conscientious objector? Is your objection based on "religious training and belief?"

The army’s criteria for conscientious-objector status does seem rather narrow in its scope. Who is to say what religious training is? I have read the Bible extensively since I was about 18, but I have not attended church. I think that I have training from the Creator directly as I have read the Bible, the Qur’an and many other books

on the matter. I do not believe that I have to have a “middle man” between me and the Creator to know what is expected of me. Every kind of religious scripture I have read states in some way that you shall not kill.

At your trial you are likely to be asked: If it were a defensive war, would you still be opposed to it? What if the U.S. were attacked directly? Would you use coercive force to protect your own family, and if so, to what extent? How would you answer such questions?

This particular war is not any of those things. And I cannot answer a “what if” question. The U.S. was not attacked directly by Iraq. You cannot associate defending yourself from imminent personal attack with declaring war on another country—that is comparing apples and oranges.

I have never been in another war, so the only thing that I can personally say that I experienced is this war—and that is what has driven home to me that war is insanity. If you stop and think about them, you will know that all wars are the same. War is war, and it is designed to kill human beings. That is why I say that we need to leave it behind us.