

Abandon the Battlefield. “There’s No Way I’m Going to Deploy to Afghanistan”

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MARFA, Texas, May 26 (IPS) - “It’s a matter of what I’m willing to live with,” Specialist Victor Agosto of the U.S. Army, who is refusing orders to deploy to Afghanistan, explained to IPS. “I’m not willing to participate in this occupation, knowing it is completely wrong.”

Agosto, who returned from a 13-month deployment to Iraq in November 2007, is based at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas.

While in Iraq, Agosto never left his base, located in northern Iraq.

“I never had any traumatic experiences, never fired my weapon,” Agosto told IPS in a phone interview. “I mostly worked in information technology, working on computers and keeping the network functioning well. But it was in Iraq that I turned against the occupations. Through my reading, and watching what was going on, I started to feel very guilty.”

Agosto added, “What I did there, I know I contributed to death and human suffering. It’s hard to quantify how much I caused, but I know I contributed to it.”

Having served three years and nine months in the U.S. Army, Agosto was to complete his contract and be discharged on Aug. 3. But due to his excellent record of service and accrued leave, he was to be released the end of June. Nevertheless, due to the stop-loss programme, the Army decided to deploy him to Afghanistan anyway.

Stop-loss is a programme the military uses to keep soldiers enlisted beyond the terms of their contracts. Since Sep. 11, 2001, more than 140,000 troops have had tours extended by stop-loss.

A copy of his Counseling Form from the Army, dated May 1, reads, “You will deploy in support of OEF [Operation Enduring Freedom] on or about [XXXXX] with 57th ESB. This is a direct order from your Company Commander CPT Michael J. Pederson.”

Agosto posted copies of the Counseling Statements issued by the Army on his Facebook page. Counseling Statements outline actions taken by the Army to discipline Agosto for his refusal to obey a direct order from his company commander.

On one of them, dated May 1, Agosto’s written statement appears: “There is no way I will deploy to Afghanistan. The occupation is immoral and unjust. It does not make the American people any safer. It has the opposite effect.”

In another, dated May 18, he wrote: "I will not obey any orders I deem to be immoral or illegal."

On that day, Agosto was ordered to get his medical records in preparation to deploy to Afghanistan. He refused to do so. The Army threatened to take punitive measures, but Agosto wrote on the Counseling Statement, "I am not going to Afghanistan. I will not take part in SRP [Sealift Readiness Programme]."

If Agosto continues to refuse orders, he almost assuredly will face court martial, and likely jail time.

When IPS asked Agosto if he is willing to take whatever consequences the Army is prepared to mete out, he replied, "Yes. I'm fully prepared for this. I have concluded that the wars [in Iraq and Afghanistan] are not going to be ended by politicians or people at the top. They are not responsive to the people, they are responsive to corporate America."

Agosto added, "The only way to make them responsive to the needs of the people is if soldiers won't fight their wars, and if soldiers won't fight their wars, the wars won't happen. I hope I'm setting an example for other soldiers."

Agosto has overtly refused to follow any order that has anything to do with his taking an action that would support the occupation of Afghanistan. For a time, according to Agosto, he was given simple orders to clean the motor pool, or pull weeds.

"They switched that recently," he told IPS, "I've continued to be fairly defiant, so on Tuesday I have to meet with Trial Defense Services, which then begins the process of getting an Article 15, which is movement towards being court-martialed, if these reprimands continue."

"If I take the Article 15, I'll take a reduction in rank and pay. I don't know what is going to happen. I agreed to sweep the motor pool and pull weeds, but nothing else that I feel directly supports the war. I'm not going to follow orders I'm not comfortable with."

Agosto's case is not unique. The group Courage to Resist, based in Oakland, California, actively engages in assisting soldiers who refuse to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan.

"Although the efforts of Courage to Resist are primarily focused on supporting public GI resisters, the organization also strives to provide political, emotional, and material support to all military objectors critical of our government's current policies of empire," reads a portion of the group's mission statement.

IPS spoke with Adam Szyper-Seibert, an office manager and counselor with Courage to Resist.

"Currently we are actively supporting over 50 military resisters like Victor Agosto," Szyper-Seibert told IPS, "They are all over the world, including André Shepherd in Germany, and several people in Canada. We are getting five to six calls a week just about the IRR [Individual Ready Reserve] recall alone."

U.S. Army Specialist André Shepherd, who went AWOL after serving in Iraq, has applied for asylum in Germany after refusing military service because he is morally opposed to the occupation of Iraq.

The IRR is composed of former military personnel who still have time remaining on their enlistment agreements but have returned to civilian life. They are eligible to be called up in "states of emergency." The Army is currently undertaking the largest IRR recall since 2004, despite the recent inauguration of a so-called anti-war president.

Szyper-Seibert said that the number of soldiers contacting Courage to Resist has been increasing dramatically in the last year, and particularly in recent months.

"The number of soldiers contacting us is increasing," he explained, "With five to six IRR's contacting us a week, plus others going absent without leave [AWOL], the numbers are all climbing, as compared to a year ago. Since May 2008, we've had a 200 percent jump in how many soldiers are contacting us."

According to Courage to Resist, there have been at least 15,000 IRR call-ups since Sep. 11, 2001, for deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sgt. Travis Bishop, who served 14 months in Baghdad and is also stationed at Fort Hood, recently went AWOL when his unit deployed to Afghanistan.

Like Agosto, Bishop feels it is immoral for him to deploy to support an occupation he morally opposes.

"I love my country, but I believe that this particular war is unjust, unconstitutional and a total abuse of our nation's power and influence," Bishop's blog reads, "And so, in the next few days, I will be speaking with my lawyer, and taking actions that will more than likely result in my discharge from the military, and possible jail time... and I am prepared to live with that."

The reason he made this decision is addressed in his blog.

"My father said, 'Do only what you can live with, because every morning you have to look at your face in the mirror when you shave. Ten years from now, you'll still be shaving the same face.' If I had deployed to Afghanistan, I don't think I would have been able to look into another mirror again."

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