

Conscientious Rejector? First Lieutenant Ehren Watada still refuses Iraq deployment orders

By [Global Research](#)

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First Lieutenant Ehren Watada still refuses Iraq deployment orders, calling the war illegal. A six-year prison term could result. Preliminary hearings are set for Thursday.

Hot Zone Team, Tue Jan 2, 6:38 PM ET

First Lt. Ehren Watada, a 28-year-old Hawaii native, is the first commissioned officer in the U.S. to publicly refuse deployment to [Iraq](#). He announced last June his decision not to deploy on the grounds the war is illegal.

Lt. Watada was based at Fort Lewis, Washington, with the Army's 3rd (Stryker) Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division. He has remained on base, thus avoiding charges of desertion.

He does, however, face one count of "missing troop movement" and four counts of "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman." If convicted, he faces up to six years in prison.



First Lt. Ehren Watada

Photo courtesy:

Jeff Paterson/thankyoult.org

Watada's court martial is on February 5. A pre-trial hearing is set for January 4, with an added scope of controversy: the Army has ordered two freelance journalists, Sarah Olson and Dahr Jamail, to testify against Lt. Watada at the hearing. Both journalists are fighting the subpoenas.

Kevin Sites recently spoke with Lt. Watada about the reasoning behind his decision, the controversy the decision has caused and how he is dealing with the repercussions.

Lt. Watada spoke on the phone from his family's home in Hawaii. [Click here](#) to listen to the full audio version of the conversation. A transcript of the interview follows.

KEVIN SITES: Now, you joined the Army right after the US was invading Iraq and now you're refusing to go. Some critics might look at this as somewhat disingenuous. You've taken an oath, received training but now you won't fight. Can you explain your rationale behind this?

EHREN WATADA: Sure. I think that in March of 2003 when I joined up, I, like many Americans, believed the administration when they said the threat from Iraq was imminent — that there were weapons of mass destruction all throughout Iraq; that there were stockpiles

of it; and because of [Saddam Hussein](#)'s ties to al-Qaeda and the 9/11 terrorist acts, the threat was imminent and we needed to invade that country immediately in order to neutralize that threat.

Since then I think I, as many, many Americans are realizing, that those justifications were intentionally falsified in order to fit a policy established long before 9/11 of just toppling the Saddam Hussein regime and setting up an American presence in Iraq.

SITES: Tell me how those views evolved. How did you come to that conclusion?

WATADA: I think the facts are out there, they're not difficult to find, they just take a little bit of willingness and interest on behalf of anyone who is willing to seek out the truth and find the facts. All of it is in the mainstream media. But it is quickly buried and it is quickly hidden by other events that come and go. And all it takes is a little bit of logical reasoning. The Iraq Survey Group came out and said there were no weapons of mass destruction after 1991 and during 2003. The 9/11 Commission came out and said there were no ties with Iraq to 9/11 or al-Qaeda. The president himself came out and said that nobody in his administration ever suggested that there was a link.

And yet those ties to al-Qaeda and the weapons of mass destruction were strongly suggested. They said there was no doubt there were weapons of mass destruction all throughout 2002, 2003 and even 2004. So, they came out and they say this, and yet they say it was bad intelligence, not manipulated intelligence, that was the problem. And then you have veteran members of the [CIA](#) that come out and say, "No. It was manipulated intelligence. We told them there was no WMD. We told them there were no ties to al-Qaeda. And they said that that's not what they wanted to hear."

SITES: Do you think that you could have determined some of this information prior to joining the military — if a lot of it, as you say, was out there? There were questions going into the war whether WMD existed or not, and you seemingly accepted the administration's explanation for that. Why did you do that at that point?

WATADA: Certainly yeah, there was other information out there that I could have sought out. But I put my trust in our leaders in government.

SITES: Was there a turning point for you when you actually decided that this was definitely an illegal war?

WATADA: Certainly. I think that when we take an oath we, as soldiers and officers, swear to protect the constitution — with our lives as necessary — and those constitutional values and laws that make us free and make us a democracy. And when we have one branch of government that intentionally deceives another branch of government in order to authorize war, and intentionally deceives the people in order to gain that public support, that is a grave breach of our constitutional values, our laws, our checks and balances, and separation of power.

SITES: But Lieutenant, was there one specific incident that happened in Iraq or that the administration had said or done at a certain period that [made you say] "I have to examine this more closely"?

WATADA: No, I think that certainly as the war went on, and it was not going well, doubts came up in my mind, but at that point I still was willing to go. At one point I even

volunteered to go to Iraq with any unit that was short of junior officers.

SITES: At what point was that?

WATADA: This was in September of 2005. But as soon as I found out, and as I began to read and research more and more that the administration had intentionally deceived the public and Congress over the reasons for going to Iraq, that's when I told myself "there's something wrong here."

"I saw the pain and agony etched upon the faces of all these families of lost soldiers. And I told myself that this needs to stop."— Lt. Ehren Watada

SITES: Was there any kind of personal conviction as well, I mean in terms of exposure to returning soldiers or Marines — the kinds of wounds they suffered, the kinds of stories that they were bringing back with them — did that have any kind of influence or create any factors for you in coming to this decision?

WATADA: Sure, I felt, well, in a general sense I felt that when we put our trust in the government, when we put our lives in their hands, that is a huge responsibility. And we also say that "when we put our lives in your hands, we ask that you not abuse that trust; that you not take us to war over flimsy or false reasons; that you take us to war when it is absolutely necessary." Because we have so much to lose, you know — the soldiers, our lives, our limbs, our minds and our families — that the government and the people owe that to us.

SITES: Was there a fear that played into that? Did you see returning soldiers with lost limbs? Was there a concern for you that you might lose your life going to Iraq?

WATADA: No, that had nothing to do with the issue. The issue here is that we have thousands of soldiers returning. And what is their sacrifice for? For terrorism or establishing democracy or whatever the other reasons are. And I saw the pain and agony etched upon the faces of all these families of lost soldiers. And I told myself that this needs to stop. We cannot have people in power that are irresponsible and corrupt and that keep on going that way because they're not held accountable to the people.

SITES: You know on that note, Lieutenant, let me read you something from a speech that you gave in August to the Veterans for Peace. You had said at one point, "Many have said this about the World Trade Towers: never again. I agree, never again will we allow those who threaten our way of life to reign free. Be they terrorists or elected officials. The time to fight back is now, the time to stand up and be counted is today." Who were you speaking about when you said that?

WATADA: I was speaking about everybody. The American people. That we all have that duty, that obligation, that responsibility to do something when we see our government perpetrating a crime upon the world, or even upon us. And I think that the American people have lost that, that sense of duty. There is no self-interest in this war for the vast majority of the American people. And because of that the American soldiers have suffered.

There really is a detachment from this war, and many of the American people, because there is no draft, or for whatever reason, because taxes haven't been raised, they don't have anything personally to lose or gain with this war, and so they take little interest.

SITES: Do you think [President Bush](#) and his advisers are guilty of criminal conduct in the prosecution of this war?

WATADA: That's not something for me to determine. I think it's for the newly-elected congress to determine during the investigations that they should hold over this war, and pre-war intelligence.

SITES: But in some ways you have determined that. You're saying this is an illegal war, and an illegal act usually takes prosecution by someone with criminal intent. Is that correct?

WATADA: Right, and they have taken me to court with that, but they have refused — or it will be very unlikely that the prosecution in the military court will allow me to bring in evidence and witnesses to testify on my behalf that the war is illegal. So therefore it becomes the responsibility of Congress, since the military is refusing to do that. It becomes the responsibility of Congress to hold our elected leaders accountable.

SITES: Now this is the same Congress though that in a lot of ways voted for this war initially. Do you think that they're going to turn around and in some ways say that they were wrong? And hold hearings to determine exactly that, that they made a mistake as well? It seems like a long shot.

WATADA: Right, well I think some in Congress are willing to do that, and some aren't. And that's the struggle, and that's the fight that's going to occur over the next year.



Lt. Watada with his mother, Carolyn

Ho, and father, Robert Watada

Photo courtesy:

Jeff Paterson/thankyoult.org

SITES: Let me ask you why you decided to go to the press with this. In this particular case you're the first officer — there may have been other officers that have refused these orders, but you're the first one to really do this publicly. Why did you do that?

WATADA: Because I wanted to explain to the American people why I was taking the stand I was taking — that it wasn't for selfish reasons, it wasn't for cowardly reasons.

You know, I think the most important reason here is to raise awareness among the American people that hey — there's a war going on, and American soldiers are dying every day. Hundreds of Iraqis are dying every day. You need to take interest, and ask yourself where you stand, and what you're willing to do, to end this war, if you do believe that it's wrong — that it's illegal, and immoral. And I think I have accomplished that. Many, many people come up to me and say, "because of you, I have taken an active interest in what's going on over in Iraq."

And also, you know, [I want to] give a little hope and inspiration back to a lot of people. For a long time I was really without hope, thinking that there was nothing I could do about something that I saw, that was so wrong, and so tragic. And I think a lot of people who have been trying to end this war felt the same way — that there was just nothing that they could do. And I think by taking my stand publicly, and stating my beliefs and standing on those beliefs, a lot of people have taken encouragement from that.

SITES: You've said that you had a responsibility to your own conscience in this particular situation. Did you also have a responsibility to your unit as well? I just want to read you a quote from Veterans of Foreign Wars communications director Jerry Newbury. He said "[Lt. Watada] has an obligation to fulfill, and it's not up to the individual officer to decide when he's going to deploy or not deploy. Some other officer will have to go in his place. He needs to think about that." Can you react to that quote?

WATADA: You know, what I'm doing is for the soldiers. I'm trying to end something that is criminal, something that should not have been started in the first place and something that is making America less safe — and that is the Iraq war. By just going there and being willing to participate, and doing my job, or whatever I'm told to do — which actually exacerbates the situation and makes it worse — I would not be serving the best interest of this country, nor the soldiers that I'm serving with. What I'm trying to do is end something, as I said, that's illegal, and immoral, so that all the soldiers can come home and this tragedy can come to an end.

It seems like people and critics make this distinction between an order to deploy and any other order, as if the order to deploy is just something that's beyond any other order. Orders have to be determined on whether they're legal or not. And if the order to deploy to a war that is unlawful, if that is given, then that order itself is unlawful.

SITES: How did your peers and your fellow officers react to your decision?

WATADA: I know that there have been some people within the military who won't agree with my stance, and there have been a lot of members of the Army of all ranks who have agreed with what I've done. And I see it almost every other day, where someone in uniform, or a dependent, approaches me in person, or through correspondence, and thanks me for what I have done, and either supports or respects my stand.

SITES: You've remained on base, and that's been a situation that can't be too comfortable for you. Can you fill us in on what that's been like there?

WATADA: I think that for the most part, people that I interact with closely — I have been moved, I'm no longer in the 3rd Striker Brigade, I'm over in 1st Corps — treat me professionally, politely, but keep their distance. I don't think anybody wants to get involved with the position that I've taken, either way. People approach me in private and give me their support.

SITES: Tell me about the repercussions you face in this court martial.

WATADA: Well I think with the charges that have been applied to me and referred over to a general court martial, I'm facing six years maximum confinement, dishonorable discharge from the army, and loss of all pay and allowances.

STES: Are you ready to deal with all those consequences with this decision?

WATADA: Sure, and I think that's the decision that I made almost a year ago, in January, when I submitted my original letter of resignation. I knew that possibly some of the things that I stated in that letter, including my own beliefs, that there were repercussions from that. Yet I felt it was a sacrifice, and it was a necessary sacrifice, to make. And I feel the same today.

I think that there are many supporters out there who feel that I should not be made an example of, that I'm speaking out for what a lot of Americans are increasingly becoming aware of: that the war is illegal and immoral and it must be stopped. And that the military should not make an example or punish me severely for that.

SITES: Do you think that you made a mistake in joining the military? Your mother and father support you in this decision, and your father during the Vietnam War refused to go to Vietnam as well, but instead joined the Peace Corps. He went to his draft board and said, "let me join the Peace Corps and serve in Peru," which is what he did. Do you think in hindsight that that might have been a better decision for you as well?

WATADA: You know I think that John Murtha came out a few months ago in an interview and he was asked if, with all his experience, in Korea, and Vietnam, volunteering for those wars — he was asked if he would join the military today. And he said absolutely not. And I think that with the knowledge that I have now, I agree. I would not join the military because I would be forced into a position where I would be ordered to do something that is wrong. It is illegal and immoral. And I would be put into a situation as a soldier to be abused and misused by those in power.

STIES: In your speech in front of the Veterans for Peace you said "the oath we take as soldiers swears allegiance not to one man but to a document of principles and laws designed to protect the people." Can you expand upon that a little bit — what did you mean when you said that?

WATADA: The constitution was established, and our laws are established, to protect human rights, to protect equal rights and constitutional civil liberties. And I think we have people in power who say that those laws, or those principles, do not apply to them — that they are above the law and can do whatever it takes to manipulate or create laws that enable them to do whatever they please. And that is a danger in our country, and I think the war in Iraq is just one symptom of this agenda. And I think as soldiers, as American people, we need to recognize this, and we need to put a stop to it before it's too late.

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