

# First Iraq Mutiny

## As War Drags on, Will There Be More?

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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Mutiny. This word, fearsome to the brass of any army (but joyful to anti-war activists), was left out of October media accounts about a US Army Reserve unit whose soldiers refused to deliver fuel along a route in Iraq they considered too dangerous to travel.

Eighteen soldiers, including the commander of the 343<sup>rd</sup> Quarter-master Company, refused to under-take a fuel delivery north of Baghdad in what they characterized as a “suicide mission,” given the frequency of attacks and the lack of armor for their unit. The commander was relieved of duty with the hope that the entire incident could be swept under a rug already showing great bulges from previous sweepings.

All armies depend on the unquestioning adherence to orders with no allowance made for individual or subordinate group objection. To do so, we are continually told, would jeopardize the command authority of any army. Military training stresses, perhaps even more than fighting skills, the necessity to take orders without hesitation. This is particularly acute in the US since all of its conflicts since World War II involved aggressive acts or imperial machinations.

Throughout the recent Iraq episode, the mutiny of the 343<sup>rd</sup> is routinely referred to as “mission refusal,” so reluctant are the armed forces and their compliant corporate media to resurrect the specter of Vietnam, where such acts almost sunk the army. After insisting, “I will not be the first American president to preside over a losing war,” war criminal Richard Nixon began a withdrawal; the U.S. military had to get out of Southeast Asia before imploding under the pressures of desertion and insubordination.

### “Army in State Approaching Collapse”

By the late 1960s, the spirit of rebellion and insubordination of youth currents at home was no less present on the battlefields of Vietnam.

In a 1971 article under the ominous title, “The Collapse of the Armed Forces,” *Detroit News* military analyst Col. Robert D. Heintz Jr. observed: “The morale, discipline, and battle-worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at anytime in this century and possibly in the history of the United States. By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous.” [See on this site: “The Collapse of the Armed Forces” by Robert D. Heintz Jr., FE #335, Winter, 1990–91]

US troops in Iraq are nowhere near that point today, but in the age of instant communication, the troops are well aware of the ongoing debate about the war at home, the lies Bush manufactured to justify it, and the massive expressions of anti-war sentiment. And they are apparently less than cowed

One outspoken Florida National Guardsman, asked if he feared retaliation for criticisms of the war he made to an MSNBC reporter, labeling it a “quagmire,” replied sarcastically, “What are they going to do, send me to Iraq?”

Another squad member, Sp/4 Jeremy Polston, an insurance broker from Lake Worth, Fla., said, “I have no idea why we’re here.”

The entire military command structure is comprised of Vietnam veterans or those who entered the armed forces just following that conflict when the military was in the shambles described by Col. Heinl. Today the brass worry what a further deterioration in Iraq would bring.

## **Massive Expression**

Discontent is clearly high among combat troops, but complaints are most often about being restricted from battle, not having a clear sense of mission, or lack of proper equipment. Indiscipline is probably more widespread than reported by the mainstream press, but more of a crisis-military or political-will have to occur before Vietnam level refusals happen again. Still, AWOLs are at a twenty-year high; even more significant are the collective acts of National Guard units that clearly do not want to enter the fray in Iraq.

In September, at Fort Dix, N.J., 635 soldiers of a South Carolina National Guard battalion scheduled to depart for a year or more in Iraq spent their off-duty hours under a disciplinary lockdown in their barracks for two weeks. During the Labor Day weekend, 13 members of the 178<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment went AWOL, according to press reports.

Although desertion hasn’t yet become a serious problem, several cases are reminiscent of the exodus of draft age men to Canada during the Vietnam war. Brandon Hughey, a former member of the U.S. Army, left the country rather than participate in a war he brands as an illegal act of aggression. He is currently fighting extradition in Canada to avoid being sent back to the States where he would face desertion charges. His web address is [www.brandonhughey.com](http://www.brandonhughey.com)

Jeremy Hinzman also made the trip North after becoming persuaded by pacifist ideas. His site is [www.jeremyhinzman.net](http://www.jeremyhinzman.net).

These are two well known cases, but many Guardsmen simply don’t show up for duty or disappear into the big cities or countryside.

One of the most publicized cases involves Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, who abandoned his unit in the middle of the war in one of the most dangerous parts of Iraq. Mejia told the 60 Minutes II TV program in March that he went AWOL because he was morally opposed to a war that had killed or wounded nearly 4,000 US soldiers. (The figure is now closer to 10,000.) After several months in hiding, the former platoon leader was eventually tried and sentenced to one year in the brig.

## **Cannon fodder Who Think for Themselves**

The armed might of the political state has no room for its cannon fodder to think for themselves. The convicted guardsman’s decision to go AWOL did not sit well with Capt. Tad Warfel, who was Mejia’s Florida National Guard commanding officer. “His [Mejia] duty’s not to question myself or anybody higher than me,” says Warfel. “His duty is to carry out the orders that I give him or his platoon leader gives him. We’re not paid in the military to form personal opinions or to doubt what our leaders say.”

The conflict between a psychology of submission and one of individual freedom could not have been put more succinctly. Submit to those above you. Don’t question authority. This is the ideology of the world we currently live in; to act differently is to challenge the entire ruling apparatus.

Well-meaning anti-war liberals often have bumper stickers on their cars stating, “Peace is Patriotic.” Actually, peace is not patriotic; it’s subversive of a culture and society that needs authority and war to maintain itself.

GIs need to know the history of mutinies where soldiers—from World War I to Vietnam—took matters into their own hands and refused to fight. Soldiers formed autonomous groups within their units to discuss what they were

being ordered to do and broke with the murderous aphorism of "Ours is not to wonder why; ours is but to do or die."

Not this time: Not for oil; not for the imperial state. U.S. Out of Iraq and the Middle East NOW!

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