From the May 2004 Catholic Peace Voice:

Coward. Betrayer. Deserter. Hero. Voice of conscience. Courageous. These are some of the words swirling around Camilo Mejia, Staff Sergeant in the Florida National Guard. After refusing for reasons of conscience to return to Iraq, Mejia was sent to Ft. Stewart, GA, where he awaits a May 19th court martial for desertion.

It is difficult to verify the numbers of military personnel who have applied for CO status or other discharges. But it is clear, as more troops are called up and tours extended in Iraq, that hundreds have gone AWOL (away without leave) or UA (unauthorized absence).

Camilo Mejia, 28, of Miami, Florida, is one such soldier. After joining the military in 1995 to get money for college, he spent over 8 years with the Army and the Florida National Guard. Mejia was stationed in Iraq, in an area with heavy Iraqi resistance to the U.S.-led occupation, from April until October of last year.

Upon return to the United States to work out problems with his green card (Mejia, a native of Nicaragua, is a permanent U.S. resident but not a citizen), he began questioning whether he could in conscience go back.

Mejia states, “People would ask me about my war experiences and answering them took me back to all the horrors—the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood, the time a man was decapitated by our machine gun fire and the time my friend shot a child through the chest.”

"Coming home gave me the clarity to see the line between military duty and moral obligation. My feelings against the war dictated that I could no longer be a part of it. Acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military and by putting my weapon down I chose to reassert myself as a human being." (from notinourname.net)

Although he had fulfilled the initial 8 years of his contract, Mejia, like thousands of other soldiers, was not released from military duty due to troop retention policies during wartime. From the U.S., he asked his commanding officer to be released from active duty. The commanding officer denied his request.

But Mejia felt he could not in conscience go back to Iraq. Other troops in his unit, including his commanding officer, ask for punishment for him, including sending him back to Iraq. As one soldier said in an interview with reporter Dan Rather, “we’re not paid in the military to form personal opinions.”

But forming opinions in line with one’s conscience is what the Catholic Church teaches. Catholics who believe that war or participation in war violate their consciences or the teachings of Christ are morally bound to obey their consciences. The U.S. Bishops’ Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection says, “. . .It is clear that a Catholic can be a conscientious objector to war in general or to a particular war ‘because of religious training and belief’. . . .we should regard conscientious objection and selective
conscientious objection as positive indicators within the Church of a sound moral awareness and respect for human life.” The bishops reaffirmed their support for conscientious objection in their November 2002 statement on Iraq.

In March 2004, after attending Mass at the Peace Abbey in Massachusetts, Mejia reported to a military base, surrounded by supporters. He has submitted an application for discharge as a conscientious objector.

Before turning himself in, Mejia went public with his decision. In an interview with Dan Rather, Mejia said, "When you look at the war and you look at the reasons that took us to war and you don't find that any of the things that we were told that we're going to war for turned out to be true, when you don't find there are weapons of mass destruction and when you don't find that there was a link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda and you see that you're not helping the people and the people don't want you there and, to me, there's no military contract and no military duty that's going to justify being a part of that war."

What You Can Do

* Support Camilo Mejia:
Mejia’s mother, an active member of Military Families Speak Out (www.mfso.org), has asked that people write letters in support of Mejia and an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector. Write to:

Ssg. Mejia Camilo  
A Company USAG MED-HOLD 865  
Hase Road  
Ft. Stewart, GA 31315  

Major General William G. Webster, Jr.  
Commanding General, Fort Stewart  
42 Wayne Place  
Ft. Stewart, GA 31314  

Acting Secretary of the Army Les Brownlee  
The Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20310  

* Learn more:
Pax Christi USA:  www.paxchristiusa.org  (information and resources on conscientious objection, including the position of the Catholic Church)  
AFSC’s National Youth and Militarism Program:  www.afsc.org/youthmil  (military recruitment, conscientious objection, Junior ROTC)  
GI Rights Hotline:  www.girights.org,  800-FYI-95GI  (free, nongovernmental hotline for those in the military experiencing difficulties)  

* Share what you know:
Share what you learn about conscientious objection and military recruitment (for instance, in immigrant communities). Help others, including the media, to understand that COs are not cowards or traitors but people living out their consciences. Talk with young people before they enter the military.

Especially during wartime, COs and military resisters – especially those who go public – have a very difficult time. They may not have the support or information that they need, and they face much resistance from the military hierarchy. In past wars, military resisters have said that even their supporters at times used them for political purposes, without recognizing the reality of what they faced. Be aware of these dynamics.