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### Report says few seek conscientious objector status in Iraq

by **JAMES FOLEY**

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WASHINGTON-- A congressional report released this week shows that the number of "formally reported" applications for conscientious objector status is small compared to the total size of the armed forces.

But some veterans who oppose the war in Iraq, say the actual numbers of conscientious objectors has been underreported due to the difficult application process and because peer pressure within a military unit discourages conscientious objectors.

The Government Accountability Office report found that from 2002 to 2006 the active and reserve components of all the military reported processing 425 applications for conscientious objectors of approximately 2.3 million current service members.

Of the 425 applications, 224 (53 percent) were approved, 188 (44 percent) were denied and 13 (3 percent) were pending, according to the GAO, an arm of Congress.

Conscientious objector, Aidan Delgado, a specialist mechanic for the Military Police who was deployed to Iraq and spent six months assigned at the Abu Ghraib prison, was not surprised by the small numbers showing up in the GAO report.

"Behind the numbers there's a huge invisible process of intimidation going on," Delgado of Atlanta Ga., said in a phone interview, "The army justice system is designed to conceal and squelch problems."

He said that many soldiers don't even know that a conscientious objector status exists.

Military policy recognizes "that service members' religious, ethical or moral beliefs can change over time and lead to conscientious objection to war."

Conscientious objectors must provide the military with convincing evidence that they are opposed to participation in the war based on such beliefs; and that "their beliefs are sincere and deeply held."

During the Vietnam War era many young men applied for conscientious objector status to avoid the military draft.

These days the process takes on average seven months to a year. First, the service member submits an application. The commanding officer assigns a chaplain and psychiatrist to interview him or her, leading to an informal hearing on the applicant's sincerity. A report recommending or denying approval follows, with a review board in Washington making the final decision.

J.E. McNeil of the Center For Conscience and War, a G.I. right's group, said the GAO report doesn't take into account hundreds of service members who were prevented from filing as objectors by overriding "stop-loss" orders – extending tours of duty. Nor does the report mention those who went to jail for outright refusing to go war.

First Lieutenant Ehren Watada, the first Army officer to face a court-martial for refusing to deploy to Iraq, is such a case, according to the Seattle Times.

McNeil asked what happened to applications that were not formally approved or disapproved. "The military only counts those that went through the process," she said in a phone interview. "It's the only process in which the commanding officer is second guessed all the way up to the Pentagon."

Aidan Delgado, who filed for objector status as a Buddhist, said his resolve was "hardened" by witnessing some of the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Delgado says he experienced intimidation and harassment including a commanding officer stripping him of his home leave, and another removing the ceramic plates from his body armor because he said a conscientious objector, "wouldn't need them."

Along the way his application was reported to be "lost" twice, he said. Delgado had to go to the Army's Inspector General for help. Some months after he returned to the U.S., he got conscientious objector status and was honorably discharged.

But not all veterans who applied to be conscientious objectors said they were harassed.

Andrew Gorby of North Carolina, was commissioned as an infantry officer but during Army Ranger school he began to feel uncomfortable about reconciling killing with his Christian beliefs. Gorby said in a phone interview that he was treated respectfully during the process and was granted conscientious objector status after six months.

Gorby said his experience was unique because as an officer – a second lieutenant-- "there is a certain amount of encouraging you to think."

It also happened that his officers were reasonable, he said. "I think that's a matter of luck," Gorby said

Kelly Dougherty, the Executive Director of Iraq Veterans Against the War, and an Army National Guard veteran of the Iraq war, agrees that there are many challenges to a successful conscientious objector application.

"One challenge," Dougherty said, is that "the process includes a 10 page essay on what were the crystallizing events that turned you against war. You have to point to specific events that have to be corroborated. For a lot of soldiers who start having feelings against the war, it's a gradual realization. Even for myself, it was a growing opposition."

The application may also favor those conscientious objectors who claim religious beliefs. "C.O. status is very narrowly described," Dougherty said, "many soldiers opposed to the occupation of Iraq, are still not qualified for C.O. status. They (the military) say it (must be based) on a strong belief like a religious belief. For someone who is an agnostic or atheist, it's more biased against them."

The report's lead writer and investigator at the GAO, Brenda Farrell, said in a phone interview that there was no data available on total applications filed for conscientious objector status. But she said her data was thoroughly checked among all branches and backed up by the Defense Manpower Data Center,

The report acknowledged that the data could, "under represent the total number of applicants for conscientious object status because applications could be withdrawn during the application process before they reached headquarters."

### **Conscientious objector tells of his experience in a book**

Aidan Delgado has written a book about his experiences entitled, "The Sutras of Abu Ghraib: Notes from a Conscientious Objector."