



Published on Wednesday, February 28, 2007 by CommonDreams.org

Mark Wilkerson: Standing for a Soldier's Right to Conscience

by Susan Van Haitsma

My favorite photograph of Mark Wilkerson shows him smiling, looking relaxed. He is standing in a grove of trees whose trunks radiate outward from his image as though they are drawing life from him. One side of his face glows with reflected sunshine. He wears a black "Iraq Veterans Against the War" T-shirt with a small star over his heart.

I first met Mark on the grounds of the Texas Capitol during a peace demonstration on Gandhi's birthday, October 2, 2004. Mark was stationed at Ft. Hood, and he and his wife had driven down to attend their first anti-war demonstration in Austin. I didn't know then the extent of Mark's experience in Iraq, but he looked stressed, his eyes circled with dark shadows. He exuded nervous energy. He looked at the materials on our Nonmilitary Options for Youth table and described how he had been recruited through the JROTC program in high school with assurances that he would receive training to become a peacekeeper. At the demonstration, Mark met local members of Veterans for Peace, who understood more profoundly than I the internal and external battles he was facing.

Mark had served one tour of duty in Iraq, during which he had begun to question both the morality and the practicality of the invasion and occupation. Assigned to the military police, he participated in house raids and arrests of Iraqi citizens. He witnessed the effects of the occupation on Iraqi civilians and the change in attitude toward US soldiers. He began suffering serious post-traumatic stress and underwent a crisis of conscience about his participation in the army. He filed for a discharge as a conscientious objector in March 2004. When his claim was denied 8 months later, he appealed the decision, but soon learned that his unit was about to be deployed to Iraq for a second tour. Stuck between honoring his conscience and obeying orders to deploy, he went AWOL in January 2005.

Mark was AWOL for about 18 months. During that time, he said the nightmares didn't stop. He also felt at sea, as though he could not move forward with his life. He worked long hours, trying to save for a future that might include prison. Just before he turned himself in at Ft. Hood in August 2006, he held a press conference at Camp Casey in Crawford, TX. Flanked by other GI resisters and supportive members of Military Families Speak Out and Gold Star Families for Peace, Mark confidently and eloquently expressed his reasons for having left the military and his reasons for returning to the base to accept the consequences.

When I saw Mark Wilkerson last on February 22, 2007, he was embracing his family shortly before being handcuffed and walked to a van outside the Major General Lawrence H. Williams Judicial Center at Fort Hood, Texas following his sentencing by a military judge to seven months of confinement, demotion in rank and a bad conduct discharge for desertion and missing movement.

During the court-martial proceedings, several family members and officers in Mark's chain of command were called as character witnesses. Mark's wife described how, several months into his tour, his letters began to include doubts about his mission. During his first 2-week leave, she saw that Mark had changed. He was restless, bothered and "set off by little things. There was an edge to him that hadn't been there before." When he returned to Iraq, Mark felt increasing hopelessness about his mission, yet he performed his duties admirably, as his commanding officers testified.

After his tour, Mark had emotional battles, nightmares, and one night, a breakdown. "My body and my mind had never felt that way before," he said. He explained that when he was home, family and friends "were treating me like some sort of hero," but he felt nothing like a hero inside. He hesitated to ask for help in the military "because an unsaid rule is that we're not supposed to rock the boat." Even after he filed his conscientious objector claim,

he was advised to refrain from seeking PTSD counseling while the case was pending.

In Mark's court-martial, the fact that his conscientious objector claim had been denied prior to a looming second deployment could not be used as a defense to the charges of desertion and missing movement to which he pleaded guilty. However, it is important to note that the conscientious objector approval process in the military is considered by many to be a broken system. By law, the military must allow soldiers to apply for discharge as conscientious objectors when they have experienced, after enlisting, a "crystallization" of their moral, ethical or religious beliefs about participating in war. However, J.E. McNeil, director of the Center on Conscience & War, says that, according to military figures, only about 50 percent of CO claims are being approved, and anecdotal evidence suggests the percentage may be even lower. "They throw as many roadblocks in your way as they possibly can," she says. "The process takes incredibly long, and it really doesn't have to. They don't really follow their own regulations. They treat it as an annoyance."

Unlike the case of First Lt. Ehren Watada, the illegality of the Iraq war was not used as a point of defense in Mark's court-martial. However, at one point, the military judge asked if there wasn't an inconsistency inherent in Mark's guilty plea. Was his intent to "shirk a duty," or to resist an unjust war? If he was saying he was wrong to desert, was he also saying he was wrong to act on his conscience? Both defense and prosecuting attorneys stated that they saw no inconsistency, and the judge laid aside the concern.

The brief interchange touched on what may be the crux of the dilemma faced by soldiers in all wars. What is a soldier's duty? The prosecuting attorneys in Mark's case stressed that he "shirked his important service" when he was "absent by design." He was told that he "abandoned the Army family that would embrace him." Soldiers commonly say that when they are on the battlefield, they are not fighting to protect liberty or democracy; they are fighting for the soldiers on their right and left. If they are compelled by conscience to embrace a larger human family that extends to their adversary, it's no wonder that their expanded sense of duty presents a problem for the military and themselves.

One of the prosecuting attorneys distinguished between being a good soldier and a good public citizen. "This dichotomy must be maintained," he said. But, human beings simply cannot divide themselves into two separate beings with two separate moral codes and two separate sets of behaviors. Attempts to do so are injurious, and soldiers who suffer from PTSD know this.

Part of Mark Wilkerson's defense centered on his achievements in high school as a teenager with a keen interest in peacemaking. Following a serious family violence crisis when he was 12 years old that was described in detail during his court-martial, Mark adopted a strong leadership role in his family, his school and community. He used the tragedy to become more determined to prevent violence. He wanted above all to help people, to be a healer and a reconciler.

Mark wanted to help his country, but his country betrayed him. His country capitalized on his honorable intentions, gave him false promises, fed him misinformation, used him to carry out inhumane missions, caused him psychological injury and then punished him by making him an object lesson for his fellow GI's.

In fact, Mark is an example of the best kind, for all of us. In the same courtroom where soldiers were sentenced for harming Abu Ghraib prisoners, Mark was sentenced for refusing to harm. In his final testimony, Mark's plainspoken optimism rose above the contradictions of his surroundings. "I'm ready to live the life I know I can live," he said. "I still want to help people, to be useful. I always lived by a certain moral code. I know whatever I do, I'll do it well. I look forward to being able to do it."

Mark Wilkerson's blog is www.markwilkerson.wordpress.com

Susan Van Haitsma is active with *Nonmilitary Options for Youth* in Austin, Texas and can be reached at jeffjweb@sbcglobal.net

###

Discuss This Article

[click here...](#)