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# Man's beliefs pit military vs. Navajos

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**Durango** - Ronnie Tallman comes from a long line of Navajo spiritual leaders, but there also were soldiers among his kin.

At the age of 19, he decided to follow in the footsteps of the soldiers, joining the Marines in October 2004. Now he believes it was the wrong path, that his destiny lies in healing, not fighting.

The Navajo Nation and an organization of medicine men agree. The Marines do not, and now a federal court must decide a case that pits the spiritual beliefs of the Navajo against United States military rules.

It started in November 2005 while Tallman was on weekend leave on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona.

There, he says, he underwent a spiritual experience and discovered he had been given the gift of a sacred entity known as *teehn leii*, a rare form of spiritual diagnosing and healing celebrated among Navajos. Tallman is a hand trembler. While a simple definition is clouded in the translation from Navajo, hand tremblers are rare medicine men who can sense people's problems and illnesses and often restore physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

Because Navajo spiritual law holds that Tallman cannot keep the power and serve his people if he participates in killing, for almost three months he didn't rejoin Delta Company of the 3rd Assault Amphibian Battalion stationed at Twentynine Palms, Calif. When he did, he applied for conscientious-objector status.

### Marines reject request

Over the course of a year, Tallman's application garnered recommendations of approval from the Christian chaplain and investigating officer who interviewed him to the battalion commander and assistant commander of the 1st Marine Division. Three psychiatric evaluations found, for varying reasons, that Tallman should be discharged.

Then, on Jan. 13, Tallman learned his application failed. His only recourse to deployment in Iraq is a review by a federal court.

The Marines don't simply want you to use weapons, Tallman said in his application; the Corps teaches you "to want to kill people and to think that killing is a good thing."

He was not ready, he said, to sing songs and join chants about killing people.

The Dine Hataalii Association, an organization of medicine men recognized by the Navajo Nation, has licensed Tallman as a hand-trembler diagnostician. The process includes being tested by an enrolled member of the association to see if the applicant sees what the member sees, Tallman says.

Then, the applicant goes before a board and is sanctified by another trembler in a ceremony that includes traditional songs and prayers.

Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. wrote a letter urging Tallman's discharge because "our gifted medicine people are small in numbers."

Gen. James T. Conway, the Marine commandant, disapproved the application after a majority of the Conscientious Objector Status Screening Board decided that "Pvt. Tallman failed to provide clear and convincing evidence that his claims of objection to war in any form were sincere and deeply held."

The board believed that the timing of Tallman's religious experience and request, coming a month after notification of his unit's upcoming mobilization, was "simply a means to avoid combat deployment to Iraq."

He tried to avoid deployment "through argument, medical reasons and finally unauthorized absence before



Marine Pvt. Ronnie Tallman learned last year that he has what his Navajo community considers a sacred gift. (Special to The Denver Post \ Mark Avery)

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