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Interview with objector Robert Weilbacher by Chris Hedges

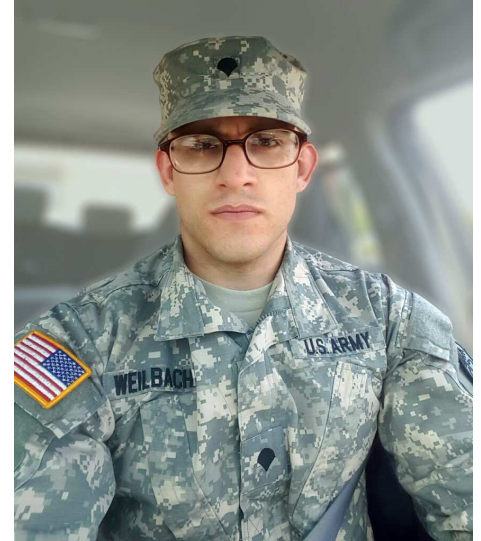
“If I’m forced to remain in the Army, I expect to eventually receive an order that I—as an objector—will be unable to comply with, resulting in a court-martial.”

Chris Hedges, reprinted from *TruthDig*.
June 7, 2015

The military in the US portrays itself as endowed with the highest virtues—honor, duty, self-sacrifice, courage and patriotism. Politicians, entertainers, sports stars, the media, clerics and academics slavishly bow before the military machine, ignoring its colossal pillaging of state resources, the egregious war crimes it has normalized across the globe, its abject service not to democracy or freedom but corporate profit, and the blind, mind-numbing obedience it inculcates among its members. A lone

soldier who rises up inside the system to denounce the hypermasculinity that glorifies violence and war, who exposes the false morality of the military, who refuses to kill in the service of imperial power, unmarks the military for what it is.

Spc. Robert Weilbacher as a new Army combat medic stationed in South Korea listened to stories told by combat veterans, many suffering from trauma and depression, about the routine and indiscriminate slaughter of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was horrified. He had believed the propaganda fed to him over the years. He considered himself



US Army Spc. Robert Weilbacher

a patriot. He had accepted the notion that the US military was a force for good, intervening to liberate Iraqis and Afghans and fight terrorists. But after hearing the veterans’ tales, his worldview crumbled. He began to ask questions he had not asked before. He began to think. And thinking within any military establishment

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‘You have a choice’: Vets call on drone operators to refuse orders

By Sarah Lazare, reprinted from *Common Dreams*. June 19, 2015

Dozens of US military veterans released an open letter this week urging drone operators to “refuse to fly missions” or support them in any way—and letting them know that if they say “no” to surveillance and assassination orders, there is a whole community rooting for them.

“At least 6,000 peoples’ lives have been unjustly taken by United States drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan,

Stock images above of a drone pilot and a Reaper drone firing a missile.

Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, the Philippines, Libya and Syria,” states the letter, which was organized by the education and advocacy organization KnowDrones.com.

“Those involved in United States drone operations who refuse to participate in drone missions will be acting within accordance of Principle IV of the Principles of International Law Recognized in the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal and the Judgment of the Tribunal, The United Nations 1950,” states the letter. “So, yes, you do have a choice—and liability under the law. Choose the moral one. Choose the legal one.”

Numerous veterans of the so-called “War on Terror” also signed the letter, including Aaron Hughes, Iraq veteran and organizer with Iraq Veterans Against the War. Hughes told *Common Dreams* that he backed the initiative because he thinks it is “extremely important for those who are flying those vehicles or doing logistics to know that there is a whole community out there that supports them in saying no.”

Nick Mottern, coordinator of KnowDrones.org, echoed this point in a press statement released this week: “The people signing this letter know that they are asking drone operators to take a heavy step, but we feel it is perfectly legitimate to advise military people to stop taking part in illegal activity that has killed thousands without due process, is terrorizing thousands more and is wracking their own ranks with moral

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Objector Army Spc. Robert Weilbacher cont.

is an act of subversion. He applied in February 2014 for a classification known as Conscientious Objector (I-0).

The military bureaucracy began making him jump through hoops that he is still trying to negotiate two years later. He became an example, to his fellow soldiers, of the physical and emotional harassment, as well as humiliation, that is visited on all who dare, within the military, to challenge the sanctity of war and discipline.

"I feel as if my own government is torturing me," he said, when I reached him by phone.

Weilbacher, 27, grew up in poverty, raised by a single mother, in the inner city of Columbus, Ohio. As a student at Ohio State

University, where he was a political science and English major, he started two organizations to help feed the homeless. He was an idealist. He wanted to serve humanity. And, in the warped culture in which he lived—American culture—the best way to do that was to join the military.

"The public perception is that soldiers are heroic," he said. "They're serving their country. They're in the best Army in the world. I didn't question this. I watched the commercials with the climatic background music for the Marine Corps... I thought, I have the credentials to be a Marine officer."

"Every message given to me by popular culture was that violence was a means of conflict resolution," he said. Every aspect of popular culture incentivizes violence, from television shows to movies like 'American Sniper.' Killing is presented as noble. Those who kill are supposed to be heroes. And this prepares us for the military."

When he graduated from college he signed up for Marine Officer Candidates School [OCS].

"When we marched in formation,

we shouted out cadences," he said. "Most of the cadences were about killing. ... The intent of OCS was to normalize violence, to condition us. It was very effective."

But four weeks into his training in early 2012, he was injured and had to drop out. He was devastated. He did not want to begin the whole application

process again with the Marines, and he enlisted in the Army in April 2013. He trained as a medic (68W) at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

In December 2013 he was deployed to Camp Hovey in South Korea, 10 miles from the border with North Korea. He was attached as a medic to the 4-7 Cavalry. He began to hear disturbing stories about the wars in the Middle East, not the

glorified stories spun out by recruiters, the media or the entertainment industry, but stories about whole families being blown up or gunned down by US troops in the streets of Iraq and Afghanistan. He lived among soldiers who were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Many were drinking heavily. He listened to them talk about being prescribed anti-depressants by Army doctors and then being redeployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. He may have been a medic, but he was required to carry a weapon and to use it in combat. He knew that for him, to do so would be impossible.

"I joined the military because I wanted to help people, to fight for the greater good," he said. "And then I learned about innocent people being routinely blown up in war. I started researching the statistics on collateral damage in Iraq and



Spc. Robert Weilbacher during an outing on Dobongsan Mountain in South Korea. He says he would go to the picturesque area "to escape the military and clear my head." Another way he dealt with stress while stationed in South Korea was to meditate in Buddhist temples.

Afghanistan."

"A medic in the Army weaponizes soldiers so they can go back out and kill," he said. "When we are trained as medics we are told that our task is to preserve fighting strength. ... Army medics exist to perpetuate warfare."

"I began to read about the wars in Vietnam and World War II," he said. "I read about Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Agent Orange, radiation and how it's still affecting people today. ... I read *A People's History of the United States*, by Zinn. I read *Understanding Power*, by Chomsky. A lot of my influences, even though I am an atheist, came from religious figures like Gandhi, Father John Dear and King. I read *Pilgrimage to Nonviolence*. We have a volunteer Army. If people knew the truth it would decrease the numbers who want to join. I had been betrayed."

Everything about the military culture, from its celebration of violence and hypermasculinity, to its cult of blind obedience, began to disturb him. He was disgusted by the military's exploitation of Filipino women who worked in the numerous bars and clubs near the base where he was stationed in South Korea. When he was off base he would meditate in Buddhist temples. That helped, he said.

On Dec. 16, 2014, he was granted status as a conscientious objector and an honorable discharge. But the deputy assistant secretary of the Army for review boards, Francine Blackmon, unilaterally overrode the determination and denied his application, even though Army regulations state that a review board decision is final. Now, in a final bid to achieve conscientious objector status, he has turned to the ACLU.

This will be his last bureaucratic battle with the Army. He has followed the rules for two years. He will not, he said, be in the Army in 2017 at the scheduled end of his tour.

"If I'm forced to remain in the Army, I expect to eventually receive an order that I—as an objector—will be unable to comply with, resulting in a court-martial."



Vets call on drone operators to refuse orders cont.

injury and PTSD.”

The Air Force recently revealed that, due to “stressors” of the job, the military is losing drone pilots and being forced to cut back flights. And in a Government Accountability Office report, the agency warned that drone pilots are quitting far more quickly than they are being recruited.

In an article published in *TomDispatch*, writer Pratap Chatterjee asked, “Are pilots deserting Washington’s Remote-Control War?” He continued, “Could it be that the feeling is even shared by drone pilots themselves, that a sense of dishonor in fighting from behind a screen thousands of miles from harm’s way is having an unexpected impact of a kind psychologists have never before witnessed?”

Former drone operators have testified to the horrors inflicted by

the remotely operated lethal weapons. This reality is confirmed by civilians and reporters, including the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which tracks the high number of civilian drone killings in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, and Afghanistan. “When our country unjustly inflicts

violence on civilian populations, it is our duty to resist,” Maggie Martin, Iraq veteran and organizer with Iraq Veterans Against the War, told *Common Dreams*. “Whether at home or abroad, we have to take action to stand in solidarity with those facing state violence.”



On International Conscientious Objectors’ Day, May 15th, 2015, San Francisco Bay Area supporters of Courage to Resist gathered to celebrate the 9th Annual Berkeley CO and War Resisters’ Day at the flag poles in front of City Hall.

Chelsea Manning on five years in prison cont.

given permission to use them under close supervision. When I was finished, I had to return these items. At night, I had to surrender my clothing (despite recommendations by several psychiatrists that I was not deemed suicidal), and wear a “suicide prevention” smock—a single-piece, padded, tear-proof garment.

Eventually, after public outcry regarding the conditions of my confinement at Quantico, I was transferred to medium custody and the general population at an Army prison. It was a high point in my incarcerated life: after nearly a year of constantly being watched by guards with clipboards and having my movements controlled by groups of three-to-six guards while in hand irons and chains, I was finally able to walk around and have normal conversations with human beings again.

The government pressed forward with charges of “aiding the enemy”—a treasonable offense under the US constitution—and various charges under the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. Over nearly two years of hearings, I witnessed firsthand just how much the the government was willing to invest in my prosecution: the stacks of money spent; the gallons of fuel burned; the reams of paper printed; and the lengthy rolls of personnel, lawyers and experts.

For over 100 days, I watched the lawyers who prosecuted my case present me as a “traitor” and “enemy of state” in court and then become friendly people giving greetings and making chit-chat out of court. It became clear to me that they were basically just decent people doing their jobs. I am convinced that they did not believe the treason arguments they made against me—even as they spoke them.

The verdict and sentencing at the end of my court-martial was difficult to predict. The defense team seriously worried about the aiding the enemy charge and the very wide range for a sentence, which was anything between “time served” and life without parole. After the judge announced my 35-year sentence, I had to console my attorneys who, after years of hard work and effort, looked worn out and dejected. It was a low-point for all of us.

After years of hiding and holding off because of the trial, I finally announced my intent to change my name and transition to living as a woman on August 22, 2013—the day following my sentencing—a personal high point for me, despite my other circumstances. However, the military initially declined my request to receive the medically-mandated treatment for my diagnosed gender dysphoria, which is to live as a woman and receive a

Legacy giving

As you are making out your will, please consider a bequest to the “Alliance for Global Justice project Courage to Resist”, 484 Lake Park Ave #41, Oakland CA 94610, USA. For more info about bequests in your estate plans, please give us a call at 510-488-3559.

regular regimen of estrogen and androgen blockers. Just like during my time at Quantico and during my court-martial, I was subjected to a laborious and time consuming legal process. Finally, just under four months ago—but nearly a year and a half after my initial request—I began my hormone treatment. I am still fighting for the right to grow out my hair to the military’s standard for women, but being able to transition remains one of the highest points for me in my entire life.

It can be hard, sometimes, to make sense of all the things that have happened to me in the last five years (let alone my entire life). The things that seem consistent and clear to me are the support that I receive from my friends, my family and the millions of people all over the world. Through every struggle that I have been confronted with, and have been subjected to—solitary confinement, long legal battles and physically transitioning to the woman I have always been—I manage not only to survive, but to grow, learn, mature and thrive as a better, more confident person.

Chelsea Manning on five years in prison

By Chelsea Manning, published in *the Guardian*. May 27, 2015

It can be difficult, sometimes, to make sense of all the things that have happened to me in the last five years.

Today marks five years since I was ordered into military confinement while deployed to Iraq in 2010. I find it difficult to believe, at times, just how long I have been in prison. Throughout this time, there have been so many ups and downs—it often feels like a physical and emotional roller coaster.

It all began in the first few weeks of 2010, when I made the life-changing decision to release to the public a repository of classified documents that provided a simultaneously horrific and beautiful outlook on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. After spending months preparing to deploy to Afghanistan in 2008, switching to Iraq in 2009 and actually staying in Iraq from 2009-10, I quickly and fully recognized the importance of these documents to the world at large.

I felt that the Iraq and Afghanistan “war diaries” (as they have been dubbed) were vital to the public’s understanding of the two interconnected counter-insurgency conflicts from a real-time and on-the-ground perspective. In the years before these documents were collected, the public likely never had such a complete record of the chaotic nature of modern warfare. Once you come to realize that the co-ordinates in these records represent real places, that the dates are our recent history and that the numbers represent actual human lives—with all of the love, hope, dreams, hate, fear and nightmares with which we all live—then you cannot help but be



San Francisco Pride Parade Chelsea Manning contingent lead banner, 6/28/2015

reminded just how important it is for us to understand and, hopefully, prevent such tragedies in the future.

A few months later, after spending months poring over at least a few thousand classified US diplomatic cables, I moved to also have these documents released to the public in the “cablegate” archive. After reading so many of these documents—detailing an exhaustive list of public interest issues, from the conduct of the “global war on terrorism” to the deliberate diplomatic and economic exploitation of developing countries—I felt that they, too, belonged in the public domain.

In 2010, I was considerably less mature than I am now, and the potential consequences and outcomes of my actions seemed vague and very surreal to me. I certainly expected the worst possible outcome, but I lacked a strong sense of what “the worst” would entail.

When the military ordered me into confinement, I was escorted (by two of the friendliest guys in my unit) to Kuwait, first by helicopter to Baghdad and finally by cargo plane. It was not until I arrived at the prison camp in Kuwait that I actually felt like I was a prisoner. Over the succeeding days, it only got worse as the public and the media

began to seek and learn more about what happened to me. After living in a communal setting for about a week, I was transferred to what amounted to a “cage” in a large tent.

After a few weeks of living in the cage and tent—not knowing what my charges were, having very limited access to my attorney and having absolutely no idea of the media firestorm that was beginning to swirl in the world outside—I became extremely depressed. I was terrified that I was not going to be treated in the dignified way that I had expected. I also began to fear that I was forever going to be living in a hot, desert cage, living as and being treated as a male, disappearing from the world into a secret prison and never facing a public trial.

It didn’t help that a few of the Navy guards delivering meals would tell me that I was was waiting for interrogation on a brig on a US cruiser off the coast of the horn of Africa, or being sent to the prison camps of Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. At the very lowest point, I contemplated castrating myself, and even—in what seemed a pointless and tragicomic exercise, given the physical impossibility of having nothing stable to hang from—contemplated suicide with a tattered blanket, which I tried to choke myself with. After getting caught, I was placed on suicide watch in Kuwait.

After being transferred back to the US, I was confined at the now-closed military brig at the Marine Corps base in Quantico, Virginia. This time was the most difficult for me overall, and felt like the longest. I was not allowed to have any items in my cell unless I was



Group photo of the Chelsea Manning Flash Mob Dancers prior to performing in the SF Pride Parade, 6/28/2015

All articles printed here have been edited for length. Full versions can be found online.

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