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## The Sunday Times Magazine

The Sunday Times August 27, 2006 ADVERTISEMENT

Report

### You wouldn't catch me dead in Iraq

Scores of American troops are deserting — even from the front line in Iraq. But where have they gone? And why isn't the US Army after them? Peter Laufer tracked down four of the deserters

They are the US troops in Iraq to whom the American administration prefers not to draw attention. They are the deserters — those who have gone Awol from their units and not returned, risking imprisonment and opprobrium.

When First Lieutenant Ehren Watada of the US Army, who faced a court martial in August, refused to go to Iraq on moral grounds, the newspapers in his home state of Hawaii were full of letters accusing him of "treason". He said he had concluded that the war is both morally wrong and a horrible breach of American law. His participation, he stated, would make him party to "war crimes". Watada is just one conscientious objector to a war that has polarised America, arguably more so than even the Vietnam war.

It is impossible to put a precise figure on the number of American troops who have left the army as a result of the US involvement in Iraq. The Pentagon says that a total of 40,000 troops have deserted their posts (not simply those serving in Iraq) since the year 2000. This includes many who went Awol for family reasons. The Pentagon's spokesmen say that the overall number of deserters has actually gone down since operations began in Afghanistan and Iraq, but there is no doubt that a steady trickle of deserters who object to the Iraq war have made it over the border and are now living in Canada. There they seek asylum, often with the help of Canadian anti-war groups. One Toronto lawyer, Jeffry House, has represented at least 20 deserters from Iraq in the Canadian courts; he is himself a conscientious objector, having refused to fight in the Vietnam war — along with 50,000 others, at the peak of the conflict. He estimates that 200 troops have already gone underground in Canada since the war in Iraq began.

These conscientious objectors are a brave group — their decisions will result in long-term life changes. To be labelled a deserter is no small burden. If convicted of desertion, they run the risk of a prison sentence — with hard labour. To choose exile can mean lifelong separation from family and friends, as even the most trivial encounter with the police in America — say, over a traffic offence — could lead to jail.

Many of the deserters are not pacifists, against war per se, but they view the Iraq war as wrong. First Lt Watada, for instance, said he would face prison

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rather than serve in Iraq, though he was prepared to pack his bags for Afghanistan to fight in a war that he considered just. They don't want to face the military courts, which is why they have decided to flee to Canada. A generation ago, Canada welcomed Vietnam-war draft dodgers and deserters. Today, the political climate is different and the score or so of US deserters who are now north of the border are applying for refugee status. So far, the Canadian government is saying no, so cases rejected for refugee status are going to appeal in the federal courts.

But there is no guarantee that these exiles will ultimately find safe haven in Canada. If the federal courts rule against the soldiers and they then exhaust all further judicial possibilities, they may be deported back to the United States – and that may not be what the Americans want. Their presence in the US will in itself represent yet another public-relations headache for the Bush administration.

## DARRELL ANDERSON

*First Armored Division, 2-3 Field Artillery, at Giessen, Germany. Age: 24*

Darrell Anderson joined the US Army just before the Iraq war started.

"I needed health care, money to go to college, and I needed to take care of my daughter. The military was the only way I could do it," he tells me. As we chat, basking in the sun on a peaceful Toronto street, he fiddles with his pocket watch, which has a Canadian flag on its face. He's wearing a peace-symbol necklace.

After fighting for seven months in Iraq, he came home bloodied from combat, with a Purple Heart that proved his sacrifice – and seriously opened his eyes. "When I joined, I wanted to fight," he says. "I wanted to see combat. I wanted to be a hero. I wanted to save people. I wanted to protect my country." But soon after he arrived in Iraq, he tells me, he realised that the Iraqis did not want him there, and he heard harsh tales that surprised and distressed him.

"Soldiers were describing to me how they had beaten prisoners to death," he says. "There were three guys and one said, 'I kicked him from this side of the head while the other guy kicked him in the head and the other guy punched him, and he just died.' People I knew. They were boasting about it, about how they had beaten people to death." He says it again: "Boasting about how they had beaten people to death. They are trained killers now. Their friends had died in Iraq. So they weren't the people they were before they went there."

Anderson says that even the small talk was difficult to tolerate. "I hate Iraqis," he quotes his peers as saying. "I hate these damn Muslims." At first he was puzzled by such talk. "After a while I started to understand. I started to feel the hatred myself. My friends were dying. What am I here for? We went to fight for our country; now we're just fighting to stay alive." In addition to taking shrapnel from a roadside bomb – the injury that earned him the Purple Heart – Anderson says he often found himself in firefights. But it was work at a checkpoint that made him seriously question his role. He was guarding the "backside" of a street checkpoint in Baghdad, he says. If a car passed a certain point without stopping, the guards were supposed to open fire.

"A car comes through and it stops in front of my position. Sparks are coming from the car from bad brakes. All the soldiers are yelling. It's in my vicinity, so it's my responsibility. I didn't fire. A superior goes, 'Why didn't you fire? You were supposed to fire.' I said, 'It was a family!' At this time it had stopped. You could see the children in the back seat. I said, 'I did the right thing.' He's like, 'No, you didn't. It's procedure to fire. If you don't do it next time, you're punished.'"

Anderson shakes his head at the memory. "I'm already not agreeing with this

war. I'm not going to kill innocent people. I can't kill kids. That's not the way I was raised." He says he started to look around at the ruined cityscape and the injured Iraqis, and slowly began to understand the Iraqi response. "If someone did this to my street, I would pick up a weapon and fight. I can't kill these people. They're not terrorists. They're 14-year-old boys, they're old men. We're occupying the streets. We raid houses. We grab people. We send them off to Abu Ghraib, where they're tortured. These are innocent people. We stop cars. We hinder everyday life. If I did this in the States, I'd be thrown in prison."

Birds are singing sweetly as he speaks, a stark contrast to his descriptions of atrocities in Iraq. "I didn't shoot anybody when I was in Baghdad. We went down to Najaf with howitzers. We shot rounds in Najaf and we killed hundreds of people. I did kill hundreds of people, but not directly, hand-to-hand."

Anderson went home for Christmas, convinced he would be sent back to the war. He knew he would not be able to live with himself if he returned to Iraq, armed with his first-hand knowledge of what was occurring there day after day. He decided he could no longer participate, and his parents – already opposed to the war – supported his decision. Canada seemed like the best option. After Christmas 2004, he drove from Kentucky to Toronto.

But he says he has had second thoughts about his exile. Not that he is worried much about deportation: he has recently married a Canadian woman and that will probably guarantee him permanent residency. But he plans to return to the US this autumn, and expects to be arrested when he presents himself to authorities at the border. "The war's still going on," he told me.

"If I go back, maybe I can still make a difference. My fight is with the American government."

It's not only anti-war work that's motivating him to go home; he's thinking about his future. "Dealing with all the nightmares and the post-traumatic stress, I need support from my family."

Anderson expects to be convicted of desertion, and he says he will use his trial and prison time to continue to protest against the war. He imagines that just the sight of him in a dress uniform covered with the medals he was awarded fighting in Iraq will make a powerful statement. "I can't work every day and act like everything is okay," he says about his life in Toronto. "This war is beating me down. I haven't had a dream that wasn't a nightmare since I came to Canada. It eats away at me to try and act like everything's okay when it's not." Not that he feels his time in Canada was a waste. "There was no way I could have gone to prison at the time: I would have killed myself. I was way too messed up in the head to even think of sitting in a prison cell. I owe a lot to Canada. It has saved my life. When I came back and was talking about the war, Americans called me a traitor. Canadians helped me when I was at my lowest point."

## **JOSHUA KEY**

*43rd Company of Combat Engineers, at Fort Carson, Colorado. Age: 28*

We was going along the Euphrates river," says Joshua Key, detailing a recurring nightmare that features a scene he stumbled into shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. "It's a road right in the city of Ramadi. We turned a sharp right and all I seen was decapitated bodies. The heads laying over here and the bodies over there and US troops in between them. I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, what in the hell happened here? What's caused this? Why in the hell did this happen?' We get out and somebody was screaming, 'We f\*\*\*ing lost it here!' I'm thinking, 'Oh yes, somebody definitely lost it here.'" Key says he was ordered to look for evidence of a firefight, for something to explain what had happened to the beheaded Iraqis. "I look around just for a few seconds and I don't see anything."

Then he witnessed the sight that still triggers the nightmares. "I see two soldiers kicking the heads around like soccer balls. I just shut my mouth, walked back, got inside the tank, shut the door, and thought, 'I can't be no part of this. This is crazy. I came here to fight and be prepared for war, but this is outrageous.'"

He's convinced that there was no firefight.

"A lot of my friends stayed on the ground, looking to see if there was any shells. There was never no shells." He still cannot get the scene out of his mind: "You just see heads everywhere. You wake up, you'll just be sitting there, like you're in a foxhole. I can still see Iraq just as clearly as it was the day I was there. You'll just be on the side of a little river running through the city, trash piled up, filled with dead. I don't sleep that much, you might say." His wife, Brandi, nods in agreement, and says that he cries in his sleep.

We're sitting on the back porch of the Toronto house where Key and his wife and their four small children have been living in exile since Key deserted to Canada. They've settled in a rent-free basement apartment, courtesy of a landlord sympathetic to their plight. Joshua smokes one cigarette after another and drinks coffee while we talk. There's a scraggly beard on his still-boyish face; his eyes look weary.

Key rejects the American government line that the Iraqis fighting the occupation are terrorists. "I'm thinking, 'What the hell?' I mean, that's not a terrorist. That's the man's home. That's his son, that's the father, that's the mother, that's the sister. Houses are destroyed. Husbands are detained, and wives don't even know where they're at. I mean, them are pissed-off people, and they have a reason to be. I would never wish this upon myself or my family, so why would I wish it upon them?"

On security duty in the Iraqi streets, Key found himself talking to the locals. He was surprised by how many spoke English, and he was frustrated by the military regulations that forbade him to accept dinner invitations in their homes. "I'm not your perfect killing machine," he admits. "That's where I broke the rules. I broke the rules by having a conscience." And the more time he spent in Iraq, the more his conscience developed. "I was trained to be a total killer. I was trained in booby traps, explosives, landmines." He pauses. "Hell, if you want to get technical about it, I was made to be an American terrorist. I was trained in everything that a terrorist is trained to do." In case I might have missed his point, he says it again. "I mean terrorist." Deserting seemed the only viable alternative, Key says. He did it, he insists, because he was lied to "by my president". Iraq – it was obvious to him – was no threat to the US.

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