

In Good Conscience

By Scott Fleming

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Aidan Delgado was a Florida college student looking for a change when he decided to join the Army Reserve. He signed his enlistment contract on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. After finishing the paperwork, he saw a television broadcast of the burning World Trade Center and realized he might be in for more than one weekend a month of low-key service.

In the ensuing months, Delgado became dedicated to Buddhism and its principles of pacifism. By April 2003, when he began his year-long tour in Iraq, he was openly questioning whether he could participate in the war in good conscience. Having grown up in Cairo, Delgado spoke Arabic and had not been steeped in the racism that drove many of his fellow soldiers. When he surrendered his rifle and declared himself a conscientious objector, he was punished by his officers and ostracized by his peers.

His unit, the 320th Military Police Company, spent six months in the southern city of Nasiriyah, and another six months helping to run the notorious Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad. Now 23, having served his tour and been honorably discharged, Delgado is speaking out about what he witnessed. He says the prison abuse broadcast on *60 Minutes* last spring was the tip of the iceberg; brutality, often racially motivated, infected the entire prison and the entire military operation in Iraq.

Why did you decide to join the Army?

It was not for high-minded reasons. I was in school, but I wasn't doing all that well. I was stagnating. I wanted to get a change of scenery, do something different. I signed up for the reserves, because in the pre-Sept. 11 world, the reserves meant you work just two days a month; you get to be in the army, but you don't have to do anything. I signed my contract the morning of Sept. 11 and then all of a sudden my reserve commitment meant a whole lot more.

How did you feel about your decision to join the army in light of what happened that day?

At the time, the whole country was riding high on this surge of patriotism, so I felt vindicated, that I had made the right decision. Because I joined before Sept. 11, I felt morally superior – I joined before it was popular to do so. Afterwards, when I saw the Sept. 11 feelings being redirected – Afghanistan was one thing, but then they started turning it towards Iraq – my feelings of patriotism waned.

It wasn't long after 9/11, maybe six months, before the Bush administration started publicly building their case for invading Iraq.

Yeah, that's what I thought was very striking. I felt like they had made a very strong case for attacking the Taliban and the whole Afghanistan campaign. But when they started talking about Iraq, I said, "Wait, there isn't any proven connection, and there are several facts that seem to indicate they were not connected."

How did Buddhism influence your feelings about the army and the war in Iraq?

My Buddhism developed parallel to being in the army. I wasn't a Buddhist before I joined the military, but after I signed on I had a couple of months before I went to basic training. That's when I started studying Buddhism intensely, doing research to cope with the stress of being in the army. I went into advanced training the next summer, and that's when I became really serious about Buddhism. I became a vegetarian. I started talking to my sergeants, saying, "I'm not sure the army's right for me; I'm a Buddhist now."

Within a few months of arriving in Iraq, I told them that I wanted to be a conscientious objector and I wanted to leave the military because of my religious beliefs. It ended up taking over a year to get my status, so I served in the whole conflict as a conscientious objector. I finally got conscientious objector status after my unit returned to the U.S.

How hard was it to get conscientious objector status?

Extremely difficult – there's a huge burden of proof. You have to do an interview with an investigating officer who grills you on your beliefs to find out if you're just making it up or if you've really thought it out. You have to have some kind of documentation. I think one of my strongest points was that I had a lot of military paperwork showing that I had gradually identified myself as a Buddhist. I also had a lot of conversations with my superiors where I talked about being an objector and being a Buddhist, and they went on the record and said, "Yes, he's talked about it progressively throughout the deployment." That really did a lot to establish my sincerity.

The command was extremely hostile to me, and there were all kinds of punitive measures. They wouldn't let me go on leave. They took my ballistic armor away – they told me that I didn't need the hard plate that goes inside your flak jacket, the part that actually protects you against bullets. They said that because I was an objector and I wasn't going to fight, I wouldn't need it. This proved not to be the case; when we got to Abu Ghraib, there was continuous mortar shelling. I did the whole year's deployment without that plate. I really feel that was more maliciously motivated than anything else.

Also, I was socially ostracized. A lot of my fellow soldiers didn't want to eat with me or hang out with me or go on missions with me. They felt I was untrustworthy because I was critical of the war and I was a Buddhist. My command "lost" my CO [Conscientious Objector] paperwork or misdirected it. They'd say, "We lost your copy, you'll have to do it again."

I eventually got my home leave back because I threatened my commander that I was going to have them prosecuted for discriminating against me on religious grounds. My company commander, my company first sergeant, and my battalion commander had all decided they were not going to let me leave – they said I couldn't go home on a two-week leave because I wouldn't come back. My stance was that they were just doing this because I'm a Buddhist and they didn't agree with my beliefs, and I was going to get the ACLU and the World Congress of Buddhists involved. Ultimately, they decided it wasn't worth the headache.

You were a mechanic, right? Were you going out on patrols?

Yes, I was a mechanic and I primarily worked on vehicles. But because I spoke Arabic – I was the only one in my company who spoke any Arabic – I ended up, especially in the south, doing a lot of mission support with military police (MPs) to speak to local people, usually to buy things or trade or exchange money. I would also help MPs get around in the city. I got to meet a lot of local Iraqis and see a different side of things. After Nasiriyah, I didn't do any more translating because by that point I had made my CO status request. I had been very critical of the war and the command knew I was not going to play ball, so they kept me far away from Iraqis and prisoners in Abu Ghraib.

Let's talk about Abu Ghraib. When you first arrived there in November 2003, wasn't that right around the time all the abuse that eventually made the papers was taking place?

We heard about that in late December or early January. We heard that someone had sent a tape to CNN and they had been abusing the prisoners in some way. We didn't know how, so the nature of the abuse was a shock. But that they were abusing [prisoners] was not news to us – we had known about that for a long time.

What kind of abuse did you witness?

There were prisoners who were beaten severely – to within an inch of their lives – for various infractions like disrespect or refusing to move. [They were] horribly brutal beatings.

There were a number of prisoners that I know of who were killed for throwing stones during a riot. I shouldn't say riot; it was more like a disturbance. I talked with a guy who shot several of the prisoners. The prisoners were protesting the conditions – lack of food, lack of cigarettes – and they were marching around the yard. Some of them started picking up stones and throwing stones at the guards. They deployed extra military police to quell the disturbance. At first, they had rubber bullets and tear gas, but they ran out of that, and it wasn't really effective. At some point – I'm not sure who authorized it – the guards requested the right to use lethal force and opened fire with a machine gun, and ultimately killed several prisoners for throwing stones. The guards testified that they felt they were in danger, so they opened fire. The military accepted that. There wasn't any inquiry, and no one glanced an eye at the dead prisoners. This was for throwing stones. The world community has roundly condemned Israel for shooting Palestinians for throwing stones. And that happened at Abu Ghraib.

Did you personally witness the incident in which the prisoners were shot?

Actually, I wasn't there. I was segregated in the motor pool when it happened, but I ended up getting photos from people who shot the prisoners – [the photos] were treated as trophies and were circulated in our company. It was not a secret; everyone knew about it. All the members of the unit were passing [photos] around, and they posted them in the command center for everyone to see. This was something they were proud of. It was a very macho thing to shoot unarmed prisoners. One guy was a local hero for the week because he'd killed X number of prisoners – one of the prisoners he had shot in the groin had taken three days to die. This was something people were laughing and joking about. This guy was strutting around after having killed these prisoners and I remember just being utterly sickened. We were soldiers, and to shoot an unarmed, caged prisoner was not something to be proud of. Abu Ghraib and all the prisoner abuse [came out of] this atmosphere of brutality.

Can you give more accounts of the day-to-day brutality at Abu Ghraib?

We talk about the Geneva Conventions a lot, but most people haven't read the Geneva Conventions and don't know what they say. [One thing] they say [is] that prisoners can't be held in an injurious climate. Abu Ghraib was extremely cold, and one of the ways guards used to control prisoners was to remove their clothing and tents, leaving them exposed to 30-degree weather. That's a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

Another provision of the Conventions is that prisoners have to be protected. We were taking constant mortar and artillery bombardment [at Abu Ghraib] from the insurgents outside the prison. Of course, [the prisoners] weren't protected; they were in open tents, and over 50 of them were killed because they were out in the open, they couldn't flee, and they had no cover. I remember fearing for my life many times – and I had a flak vest, a helmet, and shelter. I can't imagine being a prisoner, hemmed into a barbed-wire lot with no overhead protection, no protective clothing, and no air raid shelter. When there were bombs falling, they just had to sit and hope they didn't get killed.

I'm not really interested in naming names or getting culprits caught; I'm just interested in letting people know that what happened in Abu Ghraib was not an anomaly. It was virtually standard operating procedure.

Another incident I heard about was that a prisoner had shot a guard in the chest with a smuggled-in handgun. The guard didn't die, but [the guards] retaliated by shooting [the prisoner] in the leg and the side with a shotgun. His leg had been broken by the shotgun blast and was hanging off by an odd angle. They were taking this guy to a hospital to get medical treatment for his broken leg, and dragged him on his snapped leg and then threw him into the back of a truck. Granted, this was a man who had attempted to kill a guard. There was no question that he was a dangerous individual – but he was not dangerous at that moment, handcuffed, with a bag over his head and a broken leg. To drag him on that broken leg and to toss him in the back of a truck was additional brutality that wasn't professional and wasn't humane.

What else did you witness at Abu Ghraib?

I worked in the radio headquarters of Abu Ghraib for a while. They were once again trying to punish me by putting me in an undesirable job. While I was there, I ended up reviewing the prisoner records and looking over the offenses of the people who were in Abu Ghraib prison. I found out that most of them were actually not there for anti-coalition offenses. They weren't insurgents. Most of them were there for petty theft, drunkenness, forged documents, really minor crimes.

Who would arrest them for these kinds of crimes?

We were the depository for the Iraqi justice system; they didn't have their own prisons. Iraqi judges would sentence criminals, and a lot of them would end up coming to Abu Ghraib prison. The military would also do random sweeps if they received fire or were attacked from a certain area; they would just arrest everyone of a certain age in that area and take them to Abu Ghraib for questioning. Most of them would be cleared, but the process took so long that you'd end up being in Abu Ghraib for six months to a year before being released. I felt very vindicated last week when a report came out from the Pentagon that talked about the reasons the Iraqis are so upset. One of the reasons [had to do with] these random sweeps and detentions. Family members or friends would get taken to a military prison for a year, for nothing. That was definitely highly immoral, if not illegal – and counterproductive, because of the animosity it generated.

How many prisoners are at Abu Ghraib?

I can't say exactly, because I might get in trouble with the army, but several thousand. It would fluctuate on a daily basis. There was a shuffling going on between Abu Ghraib, Basra, Umm Qasr, and lesser prison camps along the way. There was a continual shifting of prisoners. That would really upset the local Iraqis because sometimes relatives would be shuffled around between these prisons. Someone who was arrested in Baghdad might be sent out to Basra in the far south of the country and be out of contact with their relatives and in the process of being shuffled around. A lot of the paperwork got mishandled or mismanaged, so people wouldn't know where their relatives were. I encountered that routinely in the operations command. Relatives would come, trying to track down a prisoner, but we didn't know [where he was.]

How many of the guards or others working at Abu Ghraib are prison guards or police officers in the United States?

A relatively high percentage. Out of my unit of 140, I would say at least 30 were police officers or correctional officers.

Do you think a connection can be drawn between the criminal justice system and the prisons in the United States and the people who were working at Abu Ghraib?

I don't have much direct experience with corrections in the U.S., but what I hear from news reports is that the corrections system in America is rife with brutality and

misconduct as well. So I'm not really surprised that they transplanted the misbehavior from American prisons overseas. At least in America there's some sense of responsibility; a prisoner has some recourse to seek redress. Over there, they are literally anonymous prisoners, and there is nothing they can do. The guards have absolute authority – life and death authority.

One of the things that disturbed me about Abu Ghraib was that the soldiers [claimed] they didn't know it was a violation of the Geneva Conventions. They said they didn't know that it was wrong, they didn't have experience in handling prisoners. But if my company was indicative of the rest of the guards at Abu Ghraib, there was a high percentage of police officers and correctional officers; there was plenty of experience with felons. They knew what the standard was for humane treatment of prisoners. That sort of defense rings hollow.

Did you ever try to report these kinds of incidents?

No, I never did – I didn't have good credibility in my unit, because I was known to be a liberal. I was a pacifist, I was against violence, and I was very critical of the war, so no one took me seriously. My command was very hostile to me because I was in the process of trying to get my conscientious objector status. I thought that what they did was immoral, but I thought that if the command was sympathetic they could easily find some legal basis for it. So I decided that nothing would happen [if I spoke out] because the command accepts what they did. There was no outrage about what they did, so there was not going to be any punishment. What I needed to do was to go home and try them in the court of public opinion.

You spent most of your formative years in Egypt. Here in America there has been a lot of racism against Arabs for a long time and it really increased after 9/11. How did that affect the army?

I think racism is a key motivating factor in the war. We witnessed a Marine kick a six-year-old child in the chest for bothering him about food and water. People in my unit used to break bottles over Iraqi civilians' heads as they drove by in their Humvees. A senior enlisted man in my unit lashed Iraqi children with a steel antenna because they were bothering him.

The only way people can do these sorts of things – which would never be acceptable in America – is [because of] the notion that Iraqis are somehow related to terrorists and 9/11. We completely dehumanize them. I used to come into conflict with other members of my unit who were doing these things, and [tell them] it was wrong. It made me really unpopular, the radical notion that you should treat Arabs or Iraqis as human beings.

Why did you decide to speak out about your experiences in Iraq?

At first, I just wanted to live quietly and leave the whole experience behind me. [But then] people started asking me about my war experiences. In a way, my first discussion was a response to all these people. I thought I would have a forum and talk to everybody at once and I would never have to tell anyone else ever again. As I

went along, it snowballed and I gave a talk to [my] community – and that's when 400 people showed up.

After I spoke, people were really moved by what I had said. I received several offers to speak on college campuses in Florida. I don't think the American people are bad or willfully making wrong decisions. I think they're making misinformed decisions. If they had some more information, they wouldn't support the war and their views would change. That's really my goal, to create a sense of critical thinking, of disbelief, a sense of responsibility for the negative consequences of the war.

Have you made any links with other veterans who feel the way you do?

Yes. [St. Pete for Peace](#) is a group I've worked for, also [Iraq Veterans Against the War](#) and [Veterans for Common Sense](#). My concern is that some of these groups haven't been very effective in creating a cogent movement. I feel that if I can personally draw 400 people with a slideshow, there's no reason why a group like Iraq Veterans Against the War shouldn't be able to draw an audience of thousands. I look around America and am dismayed by how the war is on the back burner for people – it's not in their consciences. I want to make it something that's on the forefront of peoples' minds every day, rather than something you see occasionally on the news when something particularly bad happens.

[Scott Fleming](#) is a criminal defense attorney and occasional journalist from Oakland, Calif. This interview is excerpted from one that will appear in [LiP Magazine](#) in March.