

# The Making of a War Resister

Jack Gilroy



Young Jack Gilroy, US Army

*Jack Gilroy joined the Naval Reserve while in high school and afterwards was discharged to allow his enlistment in the U.S. Army Infantry. After Army and college, Jack taught high school in upstate New York.*

*During the Vietnam War, Jack was told to “love it or leave it,” so Jack, his wife Helene, and four children emigrated to Australia where Jack taught high school in New South Wales. After shaking up the NSW Education Department with anti-nuke activities, Jack realized his real mission was to love his country and raise hell at home. He has been doing that ever since.*

**O**n September 11, 2001, I was in federal prison serving a six-month term for protesting the teaching of terror by the United States government. My conviction was not for a felony but for a criminal misdemeanor—which was actually a petty offense. On two occasions, I had walked across a white line at the roadway entrance to Fort Benning, Georgia. My first offense was carrying a coffin filled with petitions to close the United States Army School of the Americas (SOA). A few years later, I walked onto the post carrying a cross bearing the name of Maria Sanchez—a Central American woman, one of thousands of Latin Americans killed by graduates of the SOA.

Allenwood Prison Camp was my third federal prison since my sentencing in Columbus, Georgia. I was assigned to a job cutting metal pipes and flat iron frames for the Allenwood Federal Penitentiary. One of the guards told us of the attack on the Twin Towers. By the end of the day the shock of the event was vibrating throughout the prison camp. By the following morning, I was called into a prison office and asked bluntly: “What does your organization think about yesterday’s attack?”

I told the prison case manager that I couldn’t speak for the School of Americas Watch, but if he wanted to know what I thought of the attack, I’d be glad to speak to the issue. I noted the horror of the crimi-

nal act and the need to find out the organizers and bring them to justice, to dig deep into the terror brought against our people.

Then I briefed the man on our own injustices: our Iraq sanctions policy and the intentional death of children by destroying Iraqi water reservoirs and sewage plants; our invasion and bombing of foreign countries since the end of World War II; and the countless CIA assassinations and government coups we have sponsored. I gave him a laundry list of nations—mostly poor, mostly people of color that we have attacked: Korea, China, Iran, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Libya, Lebanon, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, Colombia, Grenada, Iraq, Somalia, Serbia, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

I was dismissed, but five minutes later I was called back to his office and two guards were waiting for me. I was taken to a lieutenant and he ordered me around like a drill sergeant taking a fresh recruit off a bus. I asked what was going on and was told to keep quiet. I'd learn soon enough, he said. Then he marched me to a clinic and made me strip naked for an inspection by a physician's assistant.

"Why?" I asked. I was told I may have been in a fight over the events of the previous day and they were looking for physical evidence. If I didn't tell them the names of the other inmates, I would go to the hole. I told the lieutenant to send me to the hole; he would not get any information from me. "Put your clothes back on and come with me," he ordered. Through the compound we went, the lieutenant at my side—as passing inmates looked on, aware that I was under house arrest.

A woman lieutenant, tall, in her thirties, polite and friendly, began an interrogation. "Tell me about your organization," she said. "What organization?" I asked. "The organization that got you in federal prison," she said. "My organization didn't get me in prison; the United States government put me here."

Later a captain interrogated then dismissed me, telling me to go back to my unit and await movement to another prison. The deep irony of it all was that I—along with 23 others from SOA Watch—were at that very moment in prison because we had tried to stop the teaching of terrorism by the United States government to Latin American soldiers at the School of the Americas. And here I was, the only non-felon in the whole prison camp, yet the only one under suspicion for possibly being sympathetic to the 9/11 attackers! I followed the captain's orders and awaited transfer to another prison. No one ever came.

In the following weeks, my job in a World War II bomb storage bunker—cutting iron bars and frames for prison windows—changed to constructing anti-truck bomb barriers around prison entrances. My fellow workers, mostly young Blacks, felt they were the victims of a war, the so-called War on Drugs. Many of them had already served five or more years with many more years of confinement ahead of them. None of them were violent; in fact, prison camps do not accept inmates with a record of violence. “I know what terrorism is,” said one man. “It’s sending me to prison for 19 years, keeping me from my family. It’s not being able to see my little girl go off to school and not being with my boy when he goes into high school.”

How could I disagree with the men? They admitted they had sold drugs to pay for their habit or to make a few dollars on the side. I thought back to my own childhood—three boys in one bed, no refrigerator or car, and an economic depression. I stole coal from the mine owners as did most of my friends, and sold it door to door. The buyers knew it was stolen but they themselves were poor and knew a bargain. If I had grown up in a drug culture, I’d probably be selling drugs to make some cash myself. I could identify with these young men. They cried out for justice. They needed a sentence for treatment and care, not mere punishment.

Obviously, military and political leaders in our nation accept little responsibility for teaching terror. I thought about the military education given to Tim McVeigh, and how McVeigh had little feeling for the people he killed in Oklahoma City. McVeigh, a fellow decorated for his killings in Iraq, said the victims of Oklahoma were merely “collateral damage,” a U.S. military euphemism for the death of innocent people in war time.

McVeigh’s execution came shortly before I was moved from the Atlanta Penitentiary to Petersburg Federal Prison in Virginia. My seat mate on the prison bus was a veteran of the Tet Offensive. He had loved the excitement of the war, but hated the U.S. government for what he was forced to do against the Vietnamese people. He went to prison shortly after returning from the war.

Then he went straight for 27 years—before robbing a bank with a sawed-off shotgun. “I learned how to handle myself in the infantry but it never paid well. Now was my chance to get some bucks. I bought a new Harley and drove it all over Florida and Louisiana and visited every beer joint and whorehouse I found. Then I handed myself in. I found Jesus.”

Maybe it was sheer coincidence or maybe the Spirit was telling me something, but weeks later, on the next 12-hour bus trip—my legs in irons, hands and arms in block cuffs—I sat next to a clean-cut but angry-eyed man of about 32 years. He said nothing for hours, but when he began his soliloquy he stared straight ahead and talked non-stop for a very long time. I had told the young man nothing of my School of the Americas Watch connection, but he had a lot to tell of his Ranger experiences.

He claimed he was one of the team that “kidnapped Manuel Noriega” in Panama. Were his tale and the other military ventures made up? Perhaps, but I don’t believe so. He was not proud of what he had done. His voice and demeanor was one of shame and anger. Twenty years younger than my previous bus partner, his missions were all in Central and South America. He rattled off countries his Ranger team had hit: “Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia.”

“What did you hit?” I asked.

“Buildings, villages. We had briefings before each mission.”

“What did you do on these missions?”

He snapped his head my way and glared. It was one of the few eye-to-eye contacts we made.

“Take out objective,” he snarled.

He then stared forward and told how his team usually jumped from landing helicopters but sometimes parachuted into target zones. He said they had Latin American officers with them, but that the only role those officers had was to observe and question the occasional prisoners. We talked about how he felt after his experiences. He said it was only after leaving the Army that he began a deep examination of his actions. I hesitated to ask him why he was in prison, but when I did he calmly turned toward me.

“I robbed a bank,” he said with a smile.

Meeting and sharing a seat with bank robbers was coincidental, but there was irony in their military experiences and their resulting hatred for the military. Professional psychologists might read their comments as compensation for their criminal behavior. But I heard their stories as confessional: two pensive men in chains acknowledging their sins. I sat back and thought about my own military experiences during the Cold War.



Gilroy and friend place machine gun near the Czech border.

I was with a combat infantry team that never saw combat. We thought we were ready because we trained constantly in the mountains of Austria and along the Czech border in Germany. We knew that if the Russians did come, they would roll over us. None of us wished for war but we often said that, if it came, we were ready to die. We had been programmed by our parents, school teachers, church, media, and government that the Godless Russians had a design on Western Europe and, once they secured that, conquest of the United States of America would follow.

It wasn't until after my infantry experience that I began to question the United States' motives and actions. As a high school teacher in the '60s, I began to assist students who (unlike myself when I was a high school student) began to ask why we were killing people far from

our homeland, people who posed no threat to us. Some of my students became conscientious objectors, a few went to Canada, many went to Vietnam—and five of my young men came home in body bags. I knew I had to speak for these young men. They became my epiphany, my reason for war resistance.

About ten years ago, some of my students asked about those who had gone to Vietnam from our high school. “Some of them sat in the same seats you are sitting in,” I told them. On their own, my students of the '90s found the names of the wasted high school graduates who once sat in their seats. They raised money, purchased a huge granite boulder, and had a West Virginia foundry forge a brass plate that listed the names of the young men and these quotes:

WAR LOVES TO PREY UPON THE YOUNG.  
*Sophocles 450 B.C.*

OLDER MEN DECLARE WAR, BUT IT IS THE YOUTH THAT  
MUST FIGHT AND DIE.  
*Herbert Hoover 1944 A.D.*

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Jack and Helene Gilroy, December 2001, shortly after Jack's release from Allenwood Federal Prison Camp