My Story

Michael Blake

Former U.S. Army Specialist Michael Blake is one of the lucky ones. His opposition to war was taken seriously by a military review board, and he was granted conscientious objector status. Now back in civilian life, Blake plans to earn his degree in elementary education, so that he can teach history in a way that does not glorify war.

I always wanted to be a soldier. As a child, I would set up my Army men to fight battles on the living room rug. My friends and I ran around the yard, shooting and yelling to our hearts' content. Everyone got to be a hero and kill the bad guys. And no matter how many times you died, you still got to come home for dinner at the end of the day.

In fifth grade, I read a book about the Civil War called *The Boys' War*. It fascinated me that the armies of the North and the South had recruited ten-year-old boys. The idea of a child my age participating in a war shocked me, and it also caught my interest. I felt—even at that young age—that war would probably be a terrible thing to be involved in, but the subject captivated me.

In high school, I still had an intense interest in war and history, but most other subjects bored me. I wanted to be free of the social games that dominate so many teenage lives. I wanted to graduate and build

a new character from the ground up, with real experience. I wanted to be strong, disciplined, honorable, and respected. I wanted to travel and do things that I'd never forget.

Uncle Sam must have read my mind, because I saw some recruiting commercials that told me I could have all those things and I could serve my country while I got them. All I had to do was sign my life away. Of course, recruiters don't call it that. But you sign a binding legal document that requires you to stay in government service for as long as the government decides to keep you. When wartime comes, all bets are off.

The Marines contacted me first, but they seemed too gung-ho and elite. I thought the Air Force and Navy wouldn't provide enough of a challenge. The Army seemed the most likely choice for me: they provided the best enlistment bonuses and the widest choice of jobs, and I thought their basic training would build my character. My Army recruiter reassured me about all these things and the job specialty that I was choosing.

I believed that if I picked a noncombat job, I would not have to be directly involved in combat (my recruiter assured me of this, too). I envisioned a fantasy battlefield in which there was a "front line" and I was behind it, doing the duties of a supply specialist in relative safety. I liked the image and signed my life away, two months after I turned eighteen.

In basic training, I was surprised to meet many people in their late twenties and thirties. Many of them had joined not because they loved their country, but simply because they needed a job. But regardless of the reasons we were there, we all now belonged to the government and had to be reprogrammed to do its bidding.

The drill sergeants broke us down and rebuilt us in a nine-week blur of pain, desperation, submission, and eventual deliverance. I learned how to kill—not by firing a weapon, but by learning how to execute an order. All the pain and mind games were to get us to obey any order, without question. I myself would follow any order, from sweeping a floor to firing a weapon, without any second thought. I realize now why it is so easy for a soldier to do terrible things—because he or she has been trained to obey or suffer the consequences.

At Fort Carson, Colorado I was assigned to a tank unit—and soon realized that my noncombat supply job would be very close to combat. In Iraq we would be leading fuel or supply trucks over long distances

to make rendezvous. Whenever somebody in our unit needed food, water, ammunition, supplies, or fuel, we would get it to them. I realized that I would be spending a lot of time on roads I didn't know, bringing supplies to far-flung outposts. My concept of a front line was fading fast.

In April 2003, I deployed to Iraq. My unit arrived a few days after Baghdad fell. Ours were the first American faces that people saw in many of the towns we went through, on our way from Kuwait. They came out of their homes to greet us. They were very curious about our equipment and what we wore, but mostly about our intentions. They seemed happy to be rid of Saddam Hussein, but they were cautious about having us in charge. Men with guns often behave alike, no matter what uniform they are wearing or what flag is on their shoulder.

Interacting and talking with the locals was discouraged by our chain of command. We had to have constant awareness of our surroundings and the possibility that the people around us could be hostile or dangerous.

After a few weeks in Iraq, I started to see the Army for what it really was—a brutal killing machine—and I was just another cog in that machine. I became sick of the destruction and senseless waste of human life. Every raid and ambush and mortar attack simply led to another act of violence in reprisal. I didn't see anything in black and white anymore—it was all grey. The good guys and the bad guys didn't exist, and neither did the front line.

By the end of my yearlong tour, I realized that I could no longer do my job in good conscience. No matter how insignificant my role in the vast machine, I could no longer carry it out.

Upon my return to Fort Carson in March 2004, I began researching different types of discharges and discovered conscientious objection. I gathered letters of support and spent months working on my application, before submitting it in July 2004 (on the third anniversary of my entering the service).

Most of the officers in my company knew that I wasn't trying to slink out of Iraq duty, because I had already been there. And they knew I wasn't just trying to get out early, because I only had a year left in my contract. Even if I could get approval for the discharge, it would take most of that year to get it.

I was reassigned to duties away from my unit—away from the day-to-day chaos, and disconnected from anyone else in my unit who

might be thinking about objecting. In February 2005, I received an honorable discharge and all of my veterans' benefits. And I can never be called back into service for any reason.

Now I feel obligated to shed some light on conscientious objection, and the fact that mine is one of the few stories to come out of this conflict with a happy ending. There are many reserve and guard units facing two years of mobilization. Citizen-soldiers with jobs and families—soldiers who signed on for one weekend a month and two weeks a year—are being kept overseas for up to 18 months. Every active-duty division is in some stage of the deployment process, whether they are in Iraq or Afghanistan, have just returned, or are about to go. So, within a 36-month period, a soldier can spend more than 24 of those months in a combat zone. Many of them are doing so right now.

But the biggest secret of all is the stop-loss program. Under stop-loss, the government can hold soldiers with certain job specialties (or all soldiers, if they so choose) indefinitely. All branches of service have implemented the stop-loss, but the Army's far exceeds all the rest. This program stands in sharp contrast to the idea of a volunteer military: you're not a volunteer if you're being held against your will, are you?

Godspeed and safe return to all my brothers- and sisters-in-arms in Iraq, Afghanistan, and all over the world.

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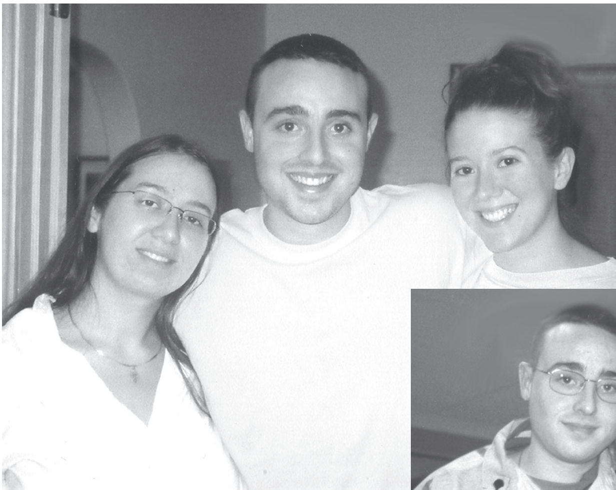

Michael with sisters and mother