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Breaking the Chains of Command

Anarchist Veterans of the US Military

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January 26, 2016

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Contents

Introduction	5
Reasons for Enlistment	7
Path Toward Radicalization	10
Encountering Anarchism	20
Resistance	23
Lessons	30
A Note on Methodology	35
Author Biography	36

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often labeled as “anarchist,” and for the purpose of this project, it was necessary to clarify certain parameters regarding which politics or philosophies would be included. The first was the political identification. I only included veterans who considered themselves “anarchist” or “antiauthoritarian.” However, since those labels include divergent and often contradictory philosophies, self-identification was insufficient and other criteria seemed necessary. It is not my goal to define “anarchism” or conclude a specific anarchist tendency as the only acceptable anarchist identity. However, there are general principles that seem essential to any philosophy described as “anarchist”: opposition to the state, opposition to capitalism and belief in non-hierarchical/anti-authoritarian social organization. The military veterans who participated in this project have broad and diverse political perspectives. Some identify strongly with a particular anarchist tendency, some are “anarchists without adjectives,” others primarily identify with the anti-authoritarian analysis and a number of them are still exploring and evolving in their political identity. The quotes and descriptions represent the political viewpoints of the interviewees at the time they were interviewed. As political perspective is not static, some of their analysis may have developed or shifted or they may articulate the analysis differently now.

Author Biography

Brad Thomson is a writer, legal worker and anarchist living in Chicago and can be contacted at bradjaythomson@gmail.com. He has been active in a number of radical projects, including groups opposing policing, state repression, and militarism. He works as a paralegal and investigator at People’s Law Office, dealing with cases of police violence and providing legal support to radical resistance movements and individuals criminalized for their political activity. The research and writing of this essay was

“War is the health of the State” – Randolph Bourne,
written during WW I

“Mutiny is the conscience of war” – Common
trench graffiti during WW I

Introduction

War and military occupation are among the most overwhelming demonstrations of state power. Rooted in an anti-state analysis, the anarchist position on geopolitical power struggles between nation-states is unequivocal opposition, especially in reference to international interventions by the US military. The logical conclusion might be that anarchists should categorically oppose the individuals who are part of the institution of the US military: the troops. Similarly, it may follow that those people who make up the military and veterans would be among the most hostile toward anarchist ideals and action. However, through my involvement in anti-war movements and anarchist circles over the last ten years, I have encountered a surprising number of anarchists opposed to the US military who are themselves US veterans. For many of them, their experience as GIs (“Government Issue,” a nickname commenting on the fact that service members are treated as government property) played a significant role in forming and developing their anti-authoritarian and anarchist analysis. What follows is based on interviews with a number of anarchists and anti-authoritarians who also happen to be military veterans.

The perspectives and experiences of these veterans should be listened to and understood by civilian radicals for a number of reasons. First, recognizing the US military as one of the most hierarchical and authoritarian institutions, anarchists can learn a great deal about coercion and authoritarianism by deconstructing and analyzing the social organization of the mil-

itary. People who have lived through and participated in both overt and covert examples of hierarchy have a wealth of experiences to share. Those who now embrace a political analysis that specifically examines and critiques those forms of authority are in a position to provide a great deal of insight that could be of use to anti-authoritarians.

Secondly, in opposing state power and capitalism, it is essential to examine, understand and oppose the role of the military in the US and abroad. Anarchist civilians have the potential to confront this militarism by supporting the resistance of active duty soldiers and service members. In realizing this potential, it is essential to understand the various forms and examples of GI resistance.

At the time of this writing, there are still tens of thousands of US troops in Afghanistan, and there will be a continued military presence in the country into the foreseeable future. There are also “military advisors” stationed in Iraq and air strikes occurring in Syria with debate about the need for “boots on the ground.” My goal in highlighting the voices of these veterans is not to present any of them as the definitive analysis of militarism or to excuse the role they played in supporting state power. As can be seen in the interviews, all of the interviewees are acutely aware of the role they played in supporting what they now actively oppose. There was variety in the military experience of the vets who participated in this project, including service in all four major branches—Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force. Most, but not all, deployed and some deployed multiple times. Four deployed to Iraq, one to Afghanistan and one to Guantanamo Bay as a military prison guard. The interviewees include veterans who served Active Duty, along with members of the National Guard or Reserves. Their jobs within the military ranged from infantry to medics to helicopter technicians to cryogenics workers. All of them served during the era of the US “Global War on Terror,” some enlisting prior to 9/11 and others joining years later. Several of the interviewees

As discussed above, these forms of resistance can include work slow-downs, sabotage, time theft, refusal of orders, going AWOL, along with publicly refusing deployment. A common theme among the interviewees was recognizing moments during their enlistment where they could have resisted and likely would have had they known of existing networks of support.

As Crystal describes considering refusing to deploy: “And I thought about not going. I really did think about just not going, but I didn’t know about any of the resistance movements or the GI resistance movement and I didn’t think it was possible.” Joyce describes a similar impulse to refuse to go on their second deployment: “If I had had any inkling of encouragement or a supportive community, I probably wouldn’t have gone back. But I just felt like it was just me and I was in it alone.”

It is crucial for anarchists to examine these possibilities and develop strategies to foster and encourage resistance. Understanding the experiences of anti-authoritarians who have gone through the military can help civilian anarchists recognize the possible forms of resistance and how to identify and support individuals and actions consistent with anarchist praxis.

As Seth articulated: “The military has mechanisms built into it that could slow down the system, it was pretty clear from the get go not only did these things exist but the will to utilize them was there.”

There is an exciting opportunity for anarchists to support service members who have the will to exploit these mechanisms that will slow down, disrupt and ultimately abolish US militarism.

A Note on Methodology

This piece is the product of an on-going project of interviews with anarchists and anti-authoritarians who are veterans of the United States military. A wide array of perspectives are

These anarchist veterans are well positioned to counter the claims that enlisting in the military guarantees a career or increases your long-term employment opportunities. The majority of the interviewees are unemployed or underemployed. None of them that received military training that has resulted in a career in the civilian sector. Of those who deployed, nearly all of them struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) or Military Sexual Trauma (MST) that has impacted their ability to go to school or hold a job. Few receive adequate treatment or benefits from the military for these diagnoses. Some, but not all, have received the GI Bill or other financial aid they were promised. Those who did not receive an “Honorable Discharge” are not able to get these scholarships and face challenges getting other benefits or finding employment. Arguably, the individuals who received unfavorable discharges are in a worse position than they were before joining the military, as they have fewer job prospects and still cannot afford an education.

The voices of these anarchist veterans can also play a crucial role in helping civilians understand the effectiveness of GI resistance. According to a number of radical histories, organizing and resistance by service members played a critical role in weakening the strength of the US military during the Vietnam War. Given that historical precedent, along with the experiences of these interviewees and numerous other examples of GI resistance having a tangible impact on the ability of the military to wage war, it is crucial that anarchists explore GI resistance as a strategy to oppose war, occupation and militarism.

Supporting GI resistance can be an effective form of anti-war action that is in line with anarchist principles of direct action. While much of what passes for anti-war activism are symbolic protests or appeals to politicians, GI resistance allows for action that directly confronts the apparatus of the military.

became Sergeants by the time they were discharged—the highest rank any of them achieved. All interviewees were enlisted. None were Officers.

Reasons for Enlistment

Coming from all over the country and from a variety of backgrounds, they joined the military at different times and for different reasons. A significant common thread is that they came from working class backgrounds and overwhelmingly named financial reasons as their motivation to enlist. This is important to recognize because there is a cultural perception, including within the Left, that people join the military based on patriotism or nationalistic pride and therefore soldiers and service members are necessarily conservative or reactionary. It is true that a substantial portion of the military’s fresh recruits have a right-wing and nationalistic perspective, it is absolutely not true of everyone who enlists. In trying to comprehend and oppose the lure of the military, it is necessary that we understand how and why people join.

As one of the interviewees, Crystal Colon articulates: “Most of them are people that just want money for college, or medical care or have a family and need money—they feel like the military is the best way to take care of that. So it’s not so easy to just say, ‘just don’t do it.’” Crystal was 17 years old and described herself as “just some dumb high school kid” when she signed the contract with the Army. She was fairly apolitical at the time and the political implications of enlisting did not play a role in her decision. She joined during the war in Iraq. She recognized that deployment was possible but felt she had few options and allowed herself to believe the false promises from the recruiters: “I didn’t want to go to college, I didn’t want to get a job, I didn’t want to stay with my parents. The Army was basically like, ‘Here! Take a bunch of money! Go to Germany

for a couple of years, it will be great!’ Of course that’s not what really what happened but at the time it was appealing.”

Several interviewees were only 17 when they enlisted and almost all of them were very young, either in high school or just out of high school. Several of them were just graduating high school and interested in going to college. They saw the cost of tuition as a barrier to continuing their education and the military as an option to cover expenses.

Veteran David Van Damm was a high school student who wanted to go to college. He had decent grades and test scores so his high school guidance counselor encouraged him to apply for expensive liberal arts schools that he could not afford. He didn’t know what scholarship options were available and decided to enlist in order to get the GI Bill.

Like Crystal, David was susceptible to the misleading recruitment ads. He was a well-meaning teenager who considered himself liberal, cared about the environment and wanted to help people. He was compelled by a recruitment video promoting the Navy’s humanitarian work following the massive Tsunami in 2004. Mistakenly believing he would be able to do humanitarian missions, make money for school and have a way out of his troubled home life, David joined the Navy. Others graduated high school and did not want to immediately go to college. With few jobs paying a living wage available to high school graduates, they saw the military as an employment opportunity. Jason Hurd joined the Army three months after graduating high school.

He said: “I knew I didn’t want to go to school immediately, I was really tired of school and all the stress that comes with it. I just started talking to these recruiters fairly regularly, and before you know it I was like, ‘Yeah, this sounds good.’” Jason joined the Army in 1997, so there was little perceived risk of deployment. It sounded like a simple job that would get him out of his parents’ house, guaranteed a paycheck and could get him money for school, if he eventually decided to go. Another

and subjugate another people, which only underscores the distinction between authoritarian and egalitarian structures.

In addition to these lessons about the nuances of hierarchy, coercion and authoritarianism, the voices of these vets can also teach other anarchists about the possibilities for civilians to build a strong movement against US militarism that embraces the strategy of resistance by service members. As the experiences of these interviewees demonstrate, economic position and lack of access to viable employment or affordable education are principal reasons that individuals join the military. It is therefore essential to incorporate a strong class analysis into any anarchist critiques of militarism and any movements opposed to war and occupation. At this historical moment of staggering unemployment and rapidly increasing tuition rates at universities around the country, it is important to acknowledge how this relates to militarism. Considering the continued presence of the US military throughout the world and the volatility of US foreign policy, there is a strong possibility that there will be recruitment drives in the near future. If that occurs, there will likely be massive numbers of young people who are unemployed, underemployed or desperate for an expensive education who will be susceptible to the false promises of the US military. If this happens, it is important for radicals and anti-military activists to confront and counter this recruitment.

In developing the arguments to convince young people not to join the military, it is crucial to incorporate this awareness of class and the economic motivations of so many recruits. Moralistic, ideological and political arguments against the military are valuable, but are insufficient for many who feel desperate for work or affordable education. Appeals against joining the military should include non-military options for scholarships, job training and employment opportunities (when available), but more importantly counter-recruitment should dispel the myths of the economic advantages of joining the military.

ination inherent in authoritarian social structures, the experiences of these veterans demonstrate the inefficiency of hierarchy. Not only is hierarchy oppressive, it simply does not work. There is a myth of hierarchical, authoritarian institutions functioning quickly, efficiently and effectively and that even if they cause undesirable social relations, they are necessary in order to complete tasks. However, these veterans routinely described the inability of their units to complete tasks and missions in spite of, and often as the result of, the rigid, authoritarian structure.

In describing the Army Rangers, Graham said, “Being in one of the best units of the military and seeing how incompetent people could be, how much waste there was, how much ignorance there was, how we were doing counterproductive things and we couldn’t change it...it’s so rigid and inflexible, to the point of ineffectiveness.” If the structure of one of the most elite, highly-trained units of the United States military leads to incompetence and ineffectiveness, then this dispels the widely held belief that authoritarian structures are necessary or even beneficial.

Obviously, the US military successfully effectuates missions and wages war throughout the world. However, as these veterans can attest, on closer examination, one can see that the missions are flawed and less successful than they first appear. Further, considering the massive amount of human and financial resources at the disposal of the US military, it is inevitable that it would fulfill missions, regardless of its structure. One can only imagine the capacity of an organization with millions of members and billions of dollars and what that organization could accomplish if it were organized in a non-hierarchical, egalitarian way that acknowledged each individual’s autonomy and decision-making power. It is almost unfathomable that such an organization would come to the decision to take collective action to invade, occupy

factor was the false promise of applicable job training provided by the military. In particular, Joyce Wagner describes wanting to work in the male-dominated field of mechanics:

“It seemed like a good way to get into a more traditionally male job sector that I didn’t think was available to me as a girl in high school. I was really interested in being a mechanic, which didn’t happen, although it’s sort of similar. But that was another big motivation, because I thought if I had that skill through the Marine Corps, it would be really tough and bad ass and people would respect me in the civilian world and I could get a job... but obviously that didn’t happen.”

Those who were not immediately out of high school were still quite young. The oldest age of enlistment for any of the interviewees was 23. Seth Manzel was married with a one year old daughter and had few marketable skills. He felt the need to find work and saw few other options as a 23 year old married parent, so he enlisted in the Army infantry.

Seth was fairly aware of the international situation when he enlisted and was somewhat critical of the US government and its foreign policy, but those critiques were not intense enough to prevent him from enlisting.

Seth describes: “I was aware of the war in Afghanistan – it seemed misguided but I was willing to go. I heard the drums beating for Iraq. We hadn’t invaded yet but it was pretty clear that we were going to. I was opposed to the idea, but again I didn’t really have a lot of options as far as skills that could transfer to other jobs.” Very few of the veterans I interviewed mentioned nationalistic or ideological support for US militarism as a consideration when joining. Graham Clumpner was one of the few interviewees who enlisted primarily because of a desire to further the politics of the US. As a teenager, he disliked

George W. Bush and didn't consider himself a Republican, but he believed in an interventionist foreign policy. A few days after 9/11, at the age of 17, he chose to join the U.S. Army and become an Army Ranger out of a desire to "be part of history."

Skippy joined the Army Reserves at a young age and described patriotism as a motivation, but added that it was only one of many reasons he enlisted:

"So when I joined, in all honesty, I was very, well, the way I would put it now is indoctrinated...your thinking is that this is your country, you're giving back, it harkens on those strings, and then there's the more pragmatic side – How am I going to pay for college? I've got these problems, my family didn't plan well, financially, so... I've gotta take care of my own, and how am I going to do that? So the military presents itself as an attractive option when you're young, and you're looking to prove something to yourself as well."

It is valuable to understand the factors that led these young people to enlist. By recognizing these factors, anti-military activists can be better positioned to support movements and actions countering military recruitment. In addition, it is important to recognize that service members and veterans are not monolithic in their worldview. There is diversity of political thought within the military and there are opportunities to engage service members to encourage radical thought and resistance.

Path Toward Radicalization

Recognizing the trajectory of these veterans toward an anarchist analysis can help civilian anarchists understand how

At the same time, there are examples of informal hierarchy within the military, where individuals are subordinate to others based on social relationships that are not articulated as explicitly as military rank. The clearest examples of this are white supremacy and patriarchy. All of the interviewees described the racist subjugation of "the enemy" or residents in occupied lands, and that also translates to racism toward people of color within the military. Similarly, sexism and patriarchal domination are rampant within military culture, demonstrated by the high number of sexual assaults, harassment and abuse directed toward service members who challenge the gender binary system in any way.

These forms of societal oppression occur simultaneously with and in relation to the formal hierarchy of military rank. As Joyce articulates: "I don't think that it would be possible for the military to exist without hierarchical oppressions. Additionally, if these systems ceased to exist, from the most local to the most global level, there wouldn't really be any purpose for war since war is about oppression at its root."

Recognizing the ways that formal and informal hierarchies often exist simultaneously, sometimes occurring on parallel tracks, sometimes overlapping with one another and sometimes exacerbating each other is critical in developing a broader analysis of hierarchy or authoritarianism.

One of the things to learn from the experiences of these vets is the understanding that it is easier to resist clearly defined authority and the visible forms of coercion that uphold it.

Rigid, formal hierarchies like the military contain explicit roles, rules and expectations that create many opportunities to resist in ways that reclaim agency and autonomy. Informal hierarchies and unofficial coercion become harder to recognize, analyze and oppose. While informal hierarchy and de facto positions of authority are often quite opaque, the role of anarchists is to identify, expose and oppose all forms of authoritarianism. In addition to articulating the oppression and dom-

Lessons

The structure and culture of the U.S. military provide an excellent case study in hierarchy and authority. Far too often, anarchists define themselves as being “non-hierarchical” or “anti-authoritarian” without articulating what they mean by hierarchy or authority. David Graeber describes how the term “hierarchy,” “is often thrown about so casually that when an author uses it, it’s very difficult to know precisely what they mean. To say that a set of items is organized into a hierarchy, after all, is merely to say that those items are ranked in some way.” In reference to social organizations, this “ranking of items” refers to people, with some individuals being positioned above one another. Authority, as a concept, refers to the delegation of responsibility, power or control to certain people for a variety of reasons. Authoritarian forms of social organization embrace and legitimize hierarchy, granting individuals or groups higher up in the hierarchy the ability to exert control over those below.

Murray Bookchin described hierarchy as, “a complex system of command and obedience in which elites enjoy varying degrees of control over their subordinates.” This description articulates an authoritarian system in which certain people within the hierarchy have more power and capacity to subjugate those below. When discussing this complex system, it is useful to deconstruct and delineate between forms of formal hierarchy and informal hierarchy.

The military is a clear example of formal hierarchy, where each individual is provided a rank defining their position. There is a clear chain of command, with Lieutenant above Sergeant, which is above Private, etc. Everyone functioning within the organization understands the relationship between themselves and others; who they are subordinate to and who is subordinate to them.

to relate to service members in a way that encourages GI resistance.

There were a number of different paths that led these vets toward anarchism and there is diversity among their experiences; some became anarchists while they were still enlisted and others were not radicalized until after they were out. Rarely is there a single experience that galvanizes one to “become an anarchist.” It is hard for anyone to identify the specific moment when they adopted a particular political analysis or philosophy, and it is especially true for these interviewees. These vets didn’t go from “Good Solider” to “Anarcho-Syndicalist” overnight or decide to denounce US militarism in a single moment. It was a process of reflection, questioning and continued exposure to new ideas over time. These vets came to anarchism through a combination of lived experience, books, zines, articles and ideas introduced to them by friends or activists. Many of these veterans had first-hand experiences in the military that exposed them to oppression. What they experienced or witnessed while they were in the military acted as a catalyst in shaping what would become an anti-authoritarian analysis.

For some, living within a rigid, hierarchical structure was a radicalizing experience. The US military depends on authoritarianism demonstrated externally over the people of occupied territories, but also internally over service members existing within the military’s chain of command. Several of the interviewees became opposed to the authoritarianism they experienced as lower enlisted service members before they identified the military’s role as oppressor in Iraq or other parts of the world. Jason Hurd describes experiencing this abuse and hostility from higher-ups within the military:

“Four years after my initial enlistment, I was really tired of the Army. I had already realized just how oppressive it was, how inhumane it was. And this

isn't even about war; this is just about the higher-ups to the lower enlisted. I really did not like the environment I was in. Respect definitely did not flow down the chain of command, it was only expected to flow up the chain of command, and I really didn't like that. It reminded me of my father, who was very authoritarian person, because he was a Marine in WWII and that mentality followed him for the rest of his life."

For many, including Jason experiencing the restrictive, rigid existence inherent in military life was significant in developing their opposition to the military. While he certainly wouldn't have identified as an anarchist at that point, the flagrant authoritarianism of the military initiated an anti-authoritarian impulse in him that would eventually evolve into an anarchist analysis.

He went on to say: "I really learned what the Army was about. And that's just a process of being talked down to and treated like shit over and over and over. And finally it clicked: This is not right, and this is what the Army really was about." The structure of the military relies on the complete control of soldiers and service members. As Crystal Colon explains, every aspect of active duty life is either directly or indirectly determined by the military:

"I joined the Army thinking that I was going to be able to control my life, that I would be able to go out on my own and make all these great sort of adult decisions. No, that's not AT ALL what happens in the military. They control everything. Where you live, where you go to work, where you sleep, what your job is, what you do, if you live, if you die, whether they're going to put medicines in your arms, ... there's nothing that you control in your own life on active duty."

tance with coordination between civilian anti-war activists and radical service members agitating within the military.

Many of the vets I spoke with went on to organize active duty service members after they got out of the military. One successful example of veteran led organizing of active duty service members is Coffee Strong, a GI coffee house off-base Joint Base Lewis-McCord in Lakewood, Washington. Seth was one of the co-founders of Coffee Strong, which has been strongly influenced by anarchist theory and practice. Collective meetings were run by consensus, most collective members were anarchist veterans and for the first few years, an anarcho-syndicalist flag hung on the wall of the coffee shop.

Coffee Strong is another example of the role anarchist civilians and radical anti-war movements can play in supporting GI resistance. Seth and some of the other veteran collective members became active with Port Militarization Resistance, a radical direct-action anti-war group based out of Olympia, Washington. Also, several of the vets involved with Coffee Strong attended Evergreen State College on the GI Bill and became involved with Students for a Democratic Society and other radical student organizations. Many of the volunteers at the coffee shop have been civilian anarchists from Olympia and the Advisory Board has included prominent anarchists such as Noam Chomsky and the late Howard Zinn.

Coffee Strong can serve as an interesting and powerful model for an anarchist-inspired project that is accessible to active duty service members and allows for anarchist civilians to play a significant role in supporting and fostering GI resistance.

“So we wrote this to our ma’s and told them to give this information to their representatives. We started soliciting our representatives. They finally got us to a meeting, right, where we met at the office...and we teleconference because he was in DC at the time, and we were on leave and were there, he told us that he had received all these letters from concerned moms and that he wanted to talk to us personally about it, and that’s why he was ready to meet with us, teleconference style.”

While Skippy and some other soldiers in his unit were taking these actions based on an opposition to the war in Iraq, they were organizing with other soldiers in their unit who were less concerned about the international political aspects. The unit had been deployed to Fork Polk for quite some time and many of the soldiers were tired, frustrated and desperate to go home, rather than deploy overseas for at least another year. Skippy and the others who were organizing this resistance strongly relied on “Broken Joe Syndrome” where service members are exhausted, burnt out and extended beyond capacity. In this type of situation, service members are significantly less willing to make sacrifices for a military that they don’t feel is taking care of them.

One of the critical aspects of this story is that one of the soldiers had a civilian partner who was active in the anti-war movement. The partner coordinated with activists she knew and mobilized letter-writing and call-in campaigns on behalf of the unit. This demonstrates the remarkable potential for activists, radicals and anarchists to support direct action resistance within the military.

As a result of organizing, a unit of over a hundred people did not deploy. This situation is important to examine because it was a successful example of organized, collective GI resis-

As described by Jason and Crystal, military life for lower enlisted service members means being on the receiving end of the repression intrinsic in the military hierarchy. Restrictions and a general abuse of life are true for everyone enlisted in the military. However, the degree of repression people face depends on the specifics of their situation, including rank, position or job within the military, race, gender, active duty or reserve status, and whether they were personally retaliated against or otherwise targeted by the command.

One of the interviewees who experienced significant military repression first-hand was Brandon, an Air Force veteran. Brandon faced a Court Martial for “dereliction of duty” where he was convicted and sentenced to 15 days in confinement. This experience had an impact on his understanding of injustice. He explains:

“I think my time in confinement gave me perspective...and it gave me more views on hierarchy than it did on imprisonment. The tools that [guards] Smith and Tucker had against me were this maximum security cell, the ability to do these wall locker inspections, the ability to not allow me to leave my cell. These were the tools that they had because of the position that they were in and all I had were cheeky jokes and witty come backs.”

Brandon articulates very clearly how this subjugation of service members serves a role to further the military’s subjugation of people throughout the world: “They take steps to break down every part of you until you’re exactly what they want you to be and they make you kill and fight and stay far away from your family and live in places that are obscure to you and they destroy your mind until you become the monster that they find useful.” Chris Arendt joined the Michigan National

Guard, was assigned to an artillery unit and trained for a cannon crew. The unit was informed they were non-deployable, so it came as a surprise when they received deployment orders to Guantanamo Bay. After receiving extremely rudimentary training on handling detainees, the unit was reassigned as prison guards.

“Basically the military provided a really rigid visual of the authoritative archetype of how people act when they’re given certain positions and certain roles. And Guantanamo was a really phenomenal case study of a place to see this happen. Also all of this imposed in our authority over the detainees and the very loose authority given to us in that we all, from E1 to E9 became gods to each and every block, because you make your own rules each and every day. If you want to kick these people’s fucking teeth out, if you bring that to work, go to town.”

This experience had a powerful impact on Chris. He was on the receiving end of harassment and abuse from superior officers and he witnessed the racism and abuse other service members exercised over the inmates. He also came to recognize his own role in the system that oppressed these detainees. When he would make attempts toward developing relationships with some of the detainees, he was then moved to a different position with limited direct interaction. He also came to understand that whatever gestures he made to support the detainees could be easily overruled by those higher in command and that his attempts couldn’t change the fact that these men had been taken from their homes and families to be locked up in what Chris refers to as a “concentration camp.”

Chris’ experience demonstrates that service members are repressed by the military structure while simultaneously acting in a role that contributes to the oppression of others. For a

Louisiana where they did training exercises for units preparing to deploy to Iraq. Members of their unit began seeing signs that they would be the next unit to deploy and they did not want to go, nor did they feel prepared.

Skippy and a few other soldiers in the unit had political reasons to oppose the deployment. Their anti-war position was informed by a developing anarchist analysis and their understanding of the destructive impact of the US occupation. They were also aware that their unit was not adequately prepared for deployment and recognized that most of the unit would agree. They began agitating within their unit, appealing to other soldiers that the unit was underprepared and would be sent on a suicide mission. Skippy describes having received orders to deploy to Iraq and not having the equipment available to train, “Gunnery didn’t have the practice because all the machine guns were deadlined. They didn’t work anymore. They were broken and old, they needed to be replaced, and so they just had these little red flags on them. We would kind of fake it, and that’s not enough – to go to a real war zone, just faking it. So we certainly built up that case.”

Skippy and others in his unit maximized the impact of the deadlined equipment. Some of the members within Skippy’s unit began intentionally failing to qualify during exercises for deployment. The strategy was that if the essential equipment wasn’t functioning and they were not passing the qualification tests, the military would face difficulty in deploying them. Skippy and some of the other soldiers in his unit understood that in order to effectively implement this strategy, their command would need to feel external pressure to hold them to their own protocol. They did this by reaching out to civilian friends and family members and encouraging them to contact politicians to inform them that the unit was not properly trained and had not met the standards that the Army said were necessary to deploy:

never considered credible, I was never taken seriously...Those kinds of double standards made rules and authority seem really dumb, so resisting rules and authority also became a way to resist the war, in a way, while I was there.”

Resisting rules and authority can be steps toward resisting the military’s war effort itself. Joyce demonstrated this with the incident when the Iraqis did a sit-down strike. Joyce’s responsibility was to force them to go back to work and Joyce refused to do so. Actions like these have the potential to actively disrupt the military’s ability to effectively execute missions in order to wage war and perpetuate occupation.

As Seth Manzel says, “There were definitely levers of power that people could pull that could shut down the works of the military pretty quickly. Regardless of whether they were high ranking or low ranking...the military had mechanisms built into it that could slow down the system.” In exploring GI resistance, it is important to acknowledge this point. It is far too easy to perceive the military as a massive, singular unit that functions smoothly and efficiently. In reality, it is a system made up of countless entities interfacing with one another. Each branch of the military is a bureaucracy that often functions in an archaic manner and depends on tens of thousands of service members doing their job properly. This provides ample opportunity for intentional actions to disrupt the functioning of the unit, often undetectable to those in command.

Seth describes, “A driver could deadline a vehicle so it’s not fit to be used and people did that pretty regularly. It wasn’t that they necessarily had these higher political ideals in mind, but it was very effective at preventing units from doing the training that they needed to do to be qualified to deploy to Iraq.”

Skippy’s experience in the Army Reserves can serve as an excellent case study for the potential of organized resistance within the military. Skippy’s unit was stationed at Ft. Polk,

number of the veterans I interviewed, recognizing this fact was enlightening and a crucial step for them in developing an anti-authoritarian analysis. Acknowledging their role in repressing others pushed them to comprehend that the problem was not individual officers or soldiers behaving in an abusive way, but that the military itself is an institution that relies on abuse and repression.

Crystal repeated her frustration and opposition to being constantly subjected to someone else’s control: “Literally people are telling you what to do 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. You have no sort of control. I mean they could come knock on your door at four in the morning, throw your shit everywhere and say they were looking for cigarettes or pot or porn or whatever.”

Crystal described that after the military promoted her to Sergeant, she found herself being in complete control over other people, which she became averse to. “Eventually when I got promoted I got put into situations like that where it was me exerting that control over other people and I didn’t like that and that kind of led to realizing that this is how the entire military functions. This is how the whole system functions and nothing about it is ever going to change.” This experience of exerting control over others enlightened Crystal to understand that it wasn’t simply the individuals in her chain of command who were authoritarian or domineering. She came to recognize that the hierarchical system of the military created roles that mandated coercion and control. As a result, she began to develop a broader and more holistic critique of the entire structure of the military that went beyond her frustrations about her personal experience.

Graham Clumpner was an Army Ranger who had a very similar experience. For years, he witnessed the abusive, hostile attitudes from the higher-ups and Non-Commissioned Officers and swore he would never behave the same way if he were ever in their position. However, a change occurred

when he was promoted to Sergeant during his deployment to Afghanistan and assumed responsibility over a small squad of soldiers. “Looking at hierarchy and how shitty it is to be in that hierarchy and then what happened to me when I got promoted..I became an abuser. I was already an abuser of prisoners and people of Afghanistan, but I took that on and did that to the people who were under me.”

This experience of recognizing one’s role in the oppression of others was fundamental in the radicalization of all the veterans I interviewed. It furthered their understanding that the problems of the military weren’t simply the result of one commander or a particularly poor foreign policy. As these individuals began to understand and oppose the oppression and destruction caused by U.S.-led wars and occupations, acknowledging and recognizing their own complicity in that oppression was a critical step toward developing a systemic critique of militarism.

This realization manifested itself differently for each service member, depending on their individual experience and their proximity to the suffering caused by wars and occupations. Some never deployed and their distance from the destruction and death meant their role felt less direct. Those who deployed saw the oppression and injustice of war first hand and personally saw the individuals and communities who were being oppressed. Some who deployed saw and directly participated in the “front lines” of the wars—engaging in raids, capturing detainees and getting into firefights—which had a profound impact on their understanding of oppression and the coercive role of militarism. However, the import of these experiences was not always immediate. It often took time for them to process these intense, traumatic experiences and begin to understand both their opposition to them and their own complicity.

Graham deployed to Afghanistan twice, the first time from 2004–2005. At the time, he fully believed in the mission, “There were a lot of things that happened in the military that I didn’t

“In confinement I would fight my own little battles against them. When it was bed time, I would get in my bed and close my eyes and lay real still and as much as I would want to, I wouldn’t fidget, so they thought that I was asleep. And in the morning, even if I woke up earlier than I was supposed to, I’d lay in bed until they came in and had to wake me up and make a bunch of noise. I would make them wake me up personally. Then one day, one of the guards made some comment about how I sleep better in prison than he does at home. So that was a victory.”

While actions like these may appear nominal or insignificant, in such a highly controlled environment like active duty military, they serve as reclaiming agency. Jason Hurd explained how these gestures were opportunities for him to reclaim what little control he had. Jason explained that his refusal to follow certain military rules was a way to combat the disrespect and repression he experienced. He describes his attitude and actions: “I wouldn’t shine my boots, I started letting my hair grow out beyond regulation, I would show up without being shaven, I’d let my uniform get wrinkly, I would put my hands in my pockets. Walking around with your hands in your pockets in the Army is a big no-no. They jump on you really quickly for that. They hate it.”

Joyce Wagner describes feeling disrespected and dismissed by others within the unit, largely due to the sexism and patriarchy inherent within military culture. For Joyce, choosing to intentionally break rules as a way to demonstrate opposition:

“I basically felt like even though I was great at my job and I actually really enjoyed working on helicopters and enjoyed the pace of emergency work...no matter how good I was—I was

refusals to deploy to collective organizing by service members to prevent movements by military units.

Brandon describes the control the military has over individuals' lives and the different ways service members respond. While some submit and adapt in order to avoid negative repercussions or to receive whatever perks the military offers, others like himself took individual actions to undermine the control exerted by the chain of command:

“One way that people would cope was by submitting and changing themselves so they would be better at being in the military, so they can get the things that they wanted to get out of the situation. But me, my way of coping with it was to buckle down and fight against them in a way that I could take control for myself whether it was beneficial or not. So I either had the option to be given control of my surroundings by submitting to them, or I had the option to fight against them and take control, but lose the freedoms that I would have had. And instead of just playing the game the way that they want you to, I chose to do the thing that was more natural to me and fight against them.”

Brandon's fights against the control of the military manifested in a variety of ways. There were small, symbolic gestures, like intentionally leaving his room messy in order to fail “Room Inspection,” or when ordered to hand a pair of gloves to his commanding officer, dropping them on the ground in front of him. He also took actions that can be described as “time theft,” the labor resistance tactic of simply not working while on the clock. When his mandated job was to study about rivet classifications in order to pass exams, he would instead go to the study room and read the novel *Watership Down*. After his Court Martial and while he was imprisoned, he continued these gestures of resistance:

process at the time that they happened. Like I shot a guy and that didn't register with me as something that should bother me until I came home physically and really it wasn't until I started having nightmares and that was two years after I was out of the military.” Crystal described the way that she shut down emotionally during her first deployment to Iraq in 2005–2006, where she was stationed at Camp Liberty in Baghdad. She worked twelve hour shifts in the motorpool, where they were sometimes mortared, but was not engaged in the daily combat of many U.S. troops. As a survival tactic, Crystal disengaged and chose not to process any of the experience while she was deployed: “You don't really have any feelings when you are there...You can't feel anything because you're not going to make it through that way. You just have to shut it all off and deal with the day to day... you don't realize a lot of what's going on until afterwards.”

Others who deployed and were in “non-combat” support roles describe moments in their deployment where they began to observe and analyze the oppression of occupation and reflect on their role within it. This was particularly true for some of the service members who had critiques of the military or the war prior to deployment.

Joyce describes the overlap between their experience, what they witnessed and how they connected with individuals oppressed by the occupation they participated in:

“I find it difficult, if not impossible to separate my personal experience in the military from the other parts of the war or other forms of oppression. I think that they are all very much connected, but I think that the experience of being in the military and especially the experience of deploying and *especially*...this guard duty that was the biggest experience...I was supposed to be guarding Iraqis from Habbaniyah who were working on base. Just

watching this shitty interaction between these dudes in the military and these Iraqi boys and men – the youngest one was like 14 and the oldest one was like 70, probably. But there were a bunch of men who were about my age, around 20, and I ended up becoming fairly close with some of them.”

For Joyce, witnessing the way in which members of the military abused and oppressed the civilians of Iraq crystalized a previously existing political opposition to war. This understanding was intensified by Joyce developing personal relationships with several Iraqi men.

Joyce continued to describe a particular incident that had a significant impact:

“When the foreman got heat exhaustion, they put him in a Humvee and tried to take him away without telling anyone where they were taking him. They wouldn’t let anyone go with him and they just took him away and told the other Iraqis to go back to work. The Iraqi workers wouldn’t, they sat down and I could not possibly bring myself to try to force them to work....That experience was extremely powerful in a lot of ways because I was able to connect directly with people who not only were being affected but had been affected by war in that area for hundreds of years.”

In speaking with Joyce, it became clear that the incident was impactful for several reasons. First of all, Joyce felt a genuine sense of affinity with several of the young Iraqi men being exploited by fellow Marines. While they previously had an abstract understanding of this exploitation and mistreatment, personally witnessing this abuse intensified their opposition to

the United States by Howard Zinn and who put him in touch with the GI Rights Network so he could explore his options for getting out of the military.

David had joined the Navy looking for excitement, hoping to travel the world doing humanitarian missions, but instead faced the mundane existence of enlisted life and was forced to face the reality that his monotonous, tedious job contributed to the suffering of others and supported a system he was growing increasingly opposed to. David found the excitement he was seeking by going AWOL (the term used by the Navy is Unauthorized Absence or “UA”). He traveled the country, worked on an organic farm, stayed at a Catholic Worker house and visited cities he had never been to before. While he was UA, he traveled to Chicago and attended a Fur Free Friday protest. He met people at the protest and afterward went with them to a vegetarian restaurant and then to a collective living space in an old warehouse. David turned himself in at Great Lakes Naval Base just outside of Chicago to be processed out of the Navy. After being discharged, he returned to Chicago and actually moved in to the collective house. Living in this collective gave him the opportunity to be exposed to more anarchist ideas, conversations and projects, which furthered his radicalization.

Resistance

David’s story exemplifies the role that other radicals, particularly civilians, can play in fostering, supporting and encouraging GI resistance. In exploring the strategic value of opposing militarism through GI resistance, it is necessary to explore how civilians can connect with and encourage that work. To do that, it is essential to examine what that resistance looks like.

Resistance by service members can take many forms, ranging from symbolic acts to anonymous sabotage and from public

“I remember wandering the city off base and there was just so much urban poor it was just insane. There are people that just need a shelter right outside the base, I’m on an aircraft carrier that costs over a million dollars just to keep it running a day...and we can’t even buy people housing. So I was like there must be a connection between the State, government, the military, with maintaining this system of oppression you know?”

David began looking for ways to work on issues of hunger and homelessness in Norfolk during his free time. Most of the soup kitchens and food pantries he found were part of church programs. Since David was not religious, he was interested in finding a secular group that addressed these issues. He discovered Food Not Bombs (FNB) Norfolk and eventually helped serve food every Sunday. Working with FNB helped radicalize David as it crystallized his understanding of the poverty and hunger taking place next door to military institutions that relied on massive resources. Working with FNB not only provided him an opportunity to do something he believed in, it also introduced him to a whole network of activists and individuals interested in radical thought and action. People he met through FNB began discussing anarchism and sharing books that introduced him to anarchist ideas. He describes reading CrimethInc in his bunk: “I was in the depths of this ship and reading this literature of people traveling and hitchhiking and not working and this idea of choosing your own destiny or like I could construct my own reality without someone else telling me. I could choose what I wanted to do that day versus someone telling me what to do. It was like a breath of fresh air.”

David’s desire for a more exciting and autonomous life than the military could provide was part of his developing political analysis. Friends in FNB introduced him to a member of Veterans for Peace who recommended he read *People’s History of*

the occupation of Iraq and the role of the US military around the world.

In addition, being expected to suppress the collective action being taken by these Iraqis put Joyce in a challenging position where they were forced to confront their own role in the coercion and abuse of individuals they felt genuine empathy for. It also demonstrated the potential to rebel and resist against the US military in a way that was inspiring.

Finally, serving as a guard sharpened Joyce’s evolving intersectional analysis. Over time, Joyce understood that the economic exploitation of the Iraqi civilians and their labor connected to the occupation and developed a structural, macro critique of those intersections. At the same time, Joyce was able to see how the structure of the U.S. military perpetuated these oppressions at an interpersonal level. Joyce recognized that it was the same military culture encouraging racist abuse toward these Iraqi civilians and the sexist and patriarchal oppression Joyce experienced as someone the Marines identified as “female.”

While Joyce is now able to articulate the impact of this particular experience on their political development, this understanding of interlocking systems of oppression was not something they were able to articulate until well after their deployment.

Jason Hurd, an Army medic explained that while he didn’t identify as “anti-war” when he deployed to Iraq in 2003, he did have a philosophy that in hindsight he would now describe as “anti-war.” He had already been developing criticisms of the structure of the military for years and he disbelieved the rhetoric that the War in Iraq had anything to do with the attacks on September 11, 2001 or Weapons of Mass Destruction. He still deployed, feeling that as a medic, he had a professional responsibility to provide medical care and believing at the time that his role would do more good than harm. However, during his deployment he directly witnessed

the oppression of the Iraqi people by the US invasion and occupation: “We were not bringing any sort of freedom to the Iraqis. We were oppressing them; we were making them less free. We were shooting at them as we were driving down the roads in our convoys. And my unit did that a lot. We shot at cars, we caused wrecks, and just... I mean, I don’t see how in the world the Iraqis could ever like our presence there when we were behaving this way.”

For Jason, this experience was transformative. It demonstrated the human impact of the war he previously opposed in the abstract and placed him directly in the role of oppressor in a way that challenged his previously held assumptions, pushing him toward a more systemic critique.

For others who did not deploy or personally witness the destruction of war, understanding their role in the system they opposed was a crucial step in their political development. David Van Damm was in the Navy working on a ship in Norfolk, Virginia. His job was in cryogenics, essentially working on machines that pressurized gasses that would be used for things like oxygen tanks or hydraulics on aircraft carriers. This was in 2007, during the height of the War in Iraq. David was beginning to develop a political perspective opposed to war, militarism and U.S. foreign policy. Recognizing that simply continuing to do his job in the Navy was furthering military actions he opposed prompted him to consider resisting: “I was going to be supporting it whether I was firing a gun or bottling oxygen for the pilots so they could bomb innocent civilians. So I was like ‘I’m either going to be turning a wrench or firing a gun’ but I was going to be supporting it in that way.”

Encountering Anarchism

The experiences of military life were a huge part of what radicalized these veterans, but these experiences didn’t happen

in a vacuum. The service members were being introduced to ideas that helped them formulate their developing opposition. As is typical for many young people becoming radicalized, anarchist literature played a significant role in introducing a number of these veterans to anarchist thought.

Like many of the interviewees, reading about anarchist thought was instrumental for Crystal in developing her radical analysis. While she was on her second deployment to Iraq, she was killing time online and stumbled on Zine Library where she started reading online zines about anarchism and other radical ideas. Like many young people, CrimethInc literature served as an introduction and a gateway toward other anarchist writings. She began visiting online resources for anarchism like Infoshop.org and anarchistnews.org, which exposed her to a wide array of other anarchist sites. Crystal began ordering literature from AK Press and other anarchist publishers and had “An Anarchist FAQ” shipped to the military base where she was stationed.

Similarly, Skippy was actively exploring radical ideas while he was stationed at Fort Polk, Louisiana. He began watching documentaries on social issues and reading progressive literature, most of which was provided to him by another soldier. He became interested in a more radical analysis and began reading works by Peter Kropotkin and other classical anarchists. The other soldier he was stationed with would share radical books and encourage Skippy and others to have discussions and critique the literature together. Essentially, they had a small radical reading group while stationed at a U.S. military base where troops were training to deploy to Iraq.

David was strongly impacted during enlistment by what he read and the ideas he exchanged with people in his life. The things he read and activists he talked to, along with his personal experience pushed him to eventually resist and refuse his military service.

David describes: