

Committed to peace

An interview with a former Marine



Editor's note: Nick Seney, who attends Pineview Mennonite Church in Vassar, Michigan, served two tours of duty in Iraq (from the invasion in 2003 till mid-2003, and from February to October 2004). He now believes in nonresistance. Nick answered the following questions in an email interview with Vicki Sairs.

Tell me a little about your views on the military growing up, and how you decided to become a Marine.

Most of the men in my family served in the military. I grew up listening to stories of military life and always took it for granted that I would join the military after high school. I read lots of books on war and felt that the Marines were tougher than the Army. I think it was like one-upping my Dad by joining the Marines.

Roger [Roger Hazen, the pastor of Pineview Mennonite] has told me that you wanted to be married in uniform, which was a bit of an issue what with the whole Mennonite/Anabaptist thing. What was it like for you

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to be in the military and realize that not everyone in your church was on the same page? How did people respond to your decision to go into the military? What was that like for you?

I only occasionally went to the Mennonite church that my fiancé attended. We knew that we wanted Roger to marry us, and it came as a bit of a shock to me that he objected to my wearing my uniform in the church at all. I had never heard that there were Christians that objected to war. Many people in the

church did support my decision to join the military. We don't have many ethnically Mennonite members, but Roger held firm that he could marry us in the church if I

didn't wear my uniform, or he would allow me to wear my uniform if we were married at a different church.

Tell me about your time in Iraq. What was it like for you? What was it like for the people around you – both Americans and Iraqis? You did two tours – what happened that made you change your mind about participating in the military?

My time in Iraq was filled with long stretches of boredom, punctuated with moments of stark terror. Initially there seemed to be support for our effort to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein. It didn't take long for an insurgency to continue a fight the Iraqi army lost. I was exposed to people who lived in such poverty they were unable to clothe their children. People who used the Euphrates River as a sewer, to wash clothes, and for cooking and drinking water. By my second tour the insurgency knew the game. They were very effective at harassing us by launching rockets onto our camps or setting up Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). We grew frustrated because we caught very few people doing this. Civilians lied about insurgent activity for fear of what the insurgents would do to their families, but all that we recognized was that we couldn't



Nick Seney with his wife Amanda and his two sons, Ashton, 5, and Nathaniel, 2.

rely on them. A callousness for civilians developed, to the point that we thought very little about their safety and only thought of our own.

What did you hope to do in Iraq as a Marine? How did that compare to what you were able to do?

I don't know what I hoped to accomplish as a Marine. A safe and secure Iraq, I guess. A place where civilians could live a normal life. That was replaced by only a thought of going home and all of my buddies making it with me. I fought for the man on my left and the man on my right. I fought because to not fight back would mean the death of one of my friends. I did not fight for flag or country. These are high ideals that have no place in combat. I fought so that I would live.

How did it feel to come home? What was it like?

Coming home was such a relief. We had made it. No one died. Mission accomplished. My wife had our first son while I was deployed and he smiled at me when I picked him up. I was overcome with emotion at seeing him and my wife again.

When and how did you change your mind on nonresistance?

I did a lot of Bible reading while in Iraq. I began to think that the message that I had heard from pastors and chaplains both, the idea that it is OK to fight in self-defense and in the name of your country, didn't jive with what I was reading in scripture. I began to think about the men that I had killed—how they no longer had a chance to repent of sin and turn to God. I began to look at the Iraqi fighters and civilians as being just as loved by God as I and my friends were, to see that their lives also had meaning and worth. I came to the conclusion that it is not self-defense to shoot at someone when you have joined the military, because you have knowingly put yourself in a position where someone may try to kill you.

How did your Marine friends respond (to your decision to become nonresistant)?

I came to this conclusion after I was discharged.

How have your civilian contacts and friends responded?

It doesn't often come up. It is more likely to come up when I meet other Christians at the university that I attend and they want to know what makes an Anabaptist different from their denominations. They usually want to test me with "what if" situations where it seems that violence must

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be used. I try to reason with them and show them what Jesus had to say about the subject.

What are your thoughts on how the church and Christians in general should respond to war? How should they respond to soldiers in their congregations and outside of their congregations (as in, what's helpful)?

Christians should respond to war with prayer and action for peace. Prayer must be an essential in all that we do. We can also exercise our right to write our elected officials and tell them our

beliefs. We need to be ready to defend why we believe in waging peace with those who disagree with us. We need to move past emotion and reason with people.

Congregations should respond to soldiers with love. We should not turn our backs on those who see things differently than we do. Pray for them and encourage them to read Jesus' words themselves. Give them a book showing the nonresistant perspective.

Many CMC churches downplay Anabaptism in the interest of being seeker sensitive. They don't want to turn people off. What do you think about that?

I don't think that we should downplay the Anabaptist message. If we believe that this is the message that Jesus gave us then we need to preach it without fear. I also think that now with the current wars being seen in such poor light that the message that we are committed to peace has a resonance with unchurched people.

If you could see the perfect response to war and violence from your brothers and sisters, what would it look like?

Christians need to be committed to peace. That doesn't mean that we promote peace only when it is easy to do so. If no Christian took up arms, nations would find that they cannot field the armies that they want. I want to see Christians pray for their enemies, give God more control of the situation and quit trying to solve it themselves, and stop being so concerned with the kingdoms of this earth and be more concerned with the Kingdom of Heaven. **BB**

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