

GI SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT:

GI Special will resume with the 3.23.05 issue.

The article below will explain the temporary suspension, in the paragraph mentioning GI Special.

Anti-War March Attracts Thousands

Mar. 20, 2005 By JONATHAN FINER, THE WASHINGTON POST

Here at the heart of one of the nation's most deeply rooted military communities, nearly 3,000 peace activists, war veterans and their family members gathered Saturday to call for an end to the Iraq conflict on the second anniversary of the day it began.

They marched beating drums and chanting slogans through quiet suburban streets to a wooded park a few miles from Fort Bragg, which is home to the Army's 82nd Airborne Division and the U.S. Special Operations Command.

Among the dozens of speakers who declared their opposition to the war, the loudest applause and only standing ovation were for Michael Hoffman, who served as a Marine artilleryman during the invasion of Iraq and who last July founded a group called Iraq Veterans Against the War.

"Two years ago today, many of us standing on this stage were ready to wage destruction on Iraq," said Hoffman, 25, wearing the top of his desert camouflage uniform and a pin that said: "Bush lied."

"We know that the only solution to the problem that we have created is to end the occupation now," he said.

In Fayetteville, home to a small but entrenched peace activist community, organizers said the protest was the largest gathering of any kind since 1970, when a few thousand antiwar activists converged in the same park to protest the Vietnam War.

The protest leaders - including representatives of several of the most prominent antiwar groups to emerge since the Iraq conflict began - said they selected this town along the Cape Fear River because so many of its approximately 125,000 citizens have personally felt the impact of the ongoing conflict.

More than 10,000 soldiers from Fort Bragg are serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, and since 2002, about 80 service personnel with ties to the region or its bases have been killed, according to the Fayetteville Observer.

"It was important to come here because there is hardly a single family in Fayetteville that does not have some connection to the military," said Lou Plummer, a local activist and veteran of the North Carolina National Guard. "When you're at church, when you're in the grocery store, when you visit your children at school, there will be someone there who is on active duty, or with a family member on active duty, or a veteran of the military."

Plummer's son Drew was discharged from the Navy after deserting his unit last year. On Saturday afternoon, both men addressed the crowd, which the Fayetteville Police Department estimated at more than 2,800 people.

Across the street were a few dozen demonstrators who objected to the antiwar message. Some were members of local military families, while others said they had traveled to Fayetteville as part of a group organized by the conservative group Free Republic through its Web site.

"You're traitors to our country. Go home! You don't belong in Fayetteville," shouted Tammy Harris, who waved a small American flag, as did her four children, as the demonstrators paraded past.

Chris Dodds, 36, an Army veteran who lives just outside of town, held a sign that read "Protest policy in D.C. - Support the military in Fayetteville."

"All we are here are families, and they should be supported. There's no policy being made here. They should take the protests somewhere else," Dodds said.

The speeches began when the procession reached Rowan Street Park just after midday.

Pat Elder, an antiwar activist from Bethesda, Md., laid out 100 cardboard coffins draped in U.S. flags to symbolize the war dead. Another organization distributed dozens of "peace parasols," black umbrellas adorned with painted messages. Earlier, costumed puppeteers danced to drumbeats in a dramatic interpretation of the Pablo Picasso painting, Guernica, which depicts the Spanish Civil War.

Celeste Zappala, 58, of Philadelphia, wore a sandwich board with a large photograph of her son, Sherwood Baker, a Pennsylvania National Guard sergeant who was killed in an explosion in Baghdad last April.

A co-founder of the group Gold Star Families for Peace, composed of family members of servicemen killed in Iraq, she said the rallies force the public to pay attention to the human cost of the conflict.

"It's really important for people to understand that those who lost children and spouses are devastated, and you can't just turn off the war when you turn off the television," she said.

Others who spoke included Daniel Berg, the father of Nick Berg, a civilian contractor who was kidnapped and beheaded in Iraq last year, and Camilo Mejia, a deserter who turned himself in to military authorities last March. He said he had served nine months in the brig at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and was discharged last month.

Many speakers directed their remarks to soldiers still serving in the military.

"There is nothing more important today than building links and giving aid and comfort to the members of the armed forces who are turning against the war in greater numbers," said Thomas Barton, a union organizer from New York and the editor of GI Special, an antiwar e-mail bulletin.

"The rebellion in the armed forces of the United States will stop the war," he said.

Joshua Despain, who said he deserted his army unit soon after it returned from Iraq in April of 2004, drove 11 hours from Panama City, Fla. to be at the rally. He was discharged from the 82nd Airborne and now works as a security guard.

"Basically, after a while I didn't buy any of it," said Despain, 23, who wore jeans, his uniform top and a red military beret. **"I saw the Iraqi people as no threat and couldn't see why people were getting killed for this. I wanted to share what I had been through with the others."**

Asked for a reaction, Major Rich Patterson, spokesman for XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, said, "Some of our fellow citizens are concerned over the conflict in Iraq , and it is important that they be able to peacefully express that concern."



Vietnam: They Stopped An Imperial War

(From [http:// www.gifightback.org](http://www.gifightback.org))