

Listening to the G.I. Voice at Fort Lewis

Coffee Strong

By ZOLTAN GROSSMAN

The early morning scene could be at any one of the innumerable coffeehouses in the Pacific Northwest. Two baristas serve steaming mugs of espresso, while their co-worker produces graphics on a computer. Another employee plays Rachmaninoff on the piano. Customers are sipping their coffee as they read the morning newspaper.

Yet at second glance, both baristas are Iraq War veterans wearing t-shirts against the war. One served in Iraq as an Army machine gunner, and the other as Marine machine gunner. The guy on the computer was an Army counterintelligence agent in Mosul, and the guy playing the piano was a private first class in the Army National Guard. Most of the customers are wearing khaki fatigues, and reading about their imminent deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan.

This is COFFEE STRONG, a new G.I. coffeehouse just outside the gates of Fort Lewis, the largest Army base on the West Coast. It is located in Lakewood, Washington, between Olympia and Tacoma. The coffeehouse—whose capitalized name spoofs the recruitment slogan "ARMY STRONG"—was opened on Election Day 2008 by G.I. Voice, a local veteran-led nonprofit project. It is only the second G.I. rights coffeehouse to open in the country since the Vietnam War; others have opened in New York, Texas, and Virginia.

COFFEE STRONG is modeled after the G.I. coffeehouse movement from the 1960s, as described in the book *Soldiers in Revolt*, and the documentary *Sir! No Sir!*. But G.I. Voice is using 21st-century outreach tools to connect with soldiers and their families, such as computers for soldiers to access the Internet without Army interference. The historic project also started a website at <http://www.GIVoice.org>, and is planning a radio webstream to connect with military personnel using music and culture.

The goal of the G.I. coffeehouse is to provide soldiers, their families and recent vets a place away from the base where they can learn about resources available to them, meet with G.I. rights counselors, and access alternative information. It holds weekly movie nights, and hosts speakers, hip-hop, punk and folk concerts, and other events. The response from soldiers visiting the coffeehouse has so far been overwhelmingly positive.

G.I. Voice is independent of any other organizations or political parties, as an autonomous expression of the community of soldiers, veterans and their families adversely affected by the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Anti-war veterans often feel unrepresented both by mainstream veterans' groups that support the wars, and peace groups that do not understand the experiences and grievances of soldiers. Through G.I. Voice, they are organizing among themselves to speak for themselves, and to provide servicemembers and their families with a place to freely express themselves.

G.I. Voice addresses issues of concern to soldiers--such as repeated "Stop-Loss" deployments to war zones, command abuse, repression of constitutional rights, sexual harassment and rape, health and safety conditions, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Yet the purpose of G.I. Voice is not to reform the military into a more effective fighting machine. Instead, the group maintains that once servicemembers are actively struggling with their command around issues of working conditions, they will start to see the connections between the occupation of other countries and their own oppression in the United States.

G.I. Voice Director Seth Manzel spent a year deployed in Iraq in 2004, assigned to the 1st Stryker Brigade from Fort Lewis. He wrote in the local newspaper Works in Progress, "For soldiers and their families to engage in resistance requires them to stand up for soldiers' rights. The mere act of standing up for one's rights in the Army is enough to slow down a unit's deployment times. The Army could not function if it delivered on all its promises to soldiers and their families. In this way a moderate message (stand up for G.I. rights) could have a radical effect on the military. We don't need to indoctrinate people in the military. If we inform them of their rights, they will come to anti-war conclusions on their own."

Fort Lewis spokesman Joe Kubistek said the Army is aware of the coffeehouse, but acknowledges that since it is a legal business, the Army will not restrict soldiers from going there. Kubistek added, "We don't have a position on the political views of an outside individual." Manzel jokes that "if they blacklisted us, it would be the best publicity we could get." He asserts that G.I. Voice does not want to push its political views on customers, saying "We're anti-war, but we're not 'in your face' about it."

Perhaps nowhere else in the country is there such a stark juxtaposition between a large military base community and large progressive anti-war communities, in nearby Olympia and Tacoma. In this area, we see and hear the Iraq and Afghanistan wars almost every day. It is impossible to miss hearing the howitzer fire booming on the Fort Lewis artillery range, seeing the giant C-17 transport planes from Baghdad or Bagram landing at McChord Air Force Base, or overlooking the PTSD exhibited in local car accidents, robberies, bar brawls, domestic abuse, and sexual assaults.

The Iraq War has increased the polarization between the local communities, but also increased opportunities to work together—since both communities actually care that there's a war going on. Pro-war and anti-war demonstrators have clashed on the Interstate-5 overpass at Exit 122, which the Lakewood City Council renamed "Freedom Bridge" to honor the pro-war group's presence. The overpass and the gates of Fort Lewis (and of the Army National Guard's Camp Murray) are only a few hundreds yards from the G.I. coffeehouse, on Union Avenue behind the Subway franchise.

Over the past two years, large direct actions at the Ports of Olympia and Tacoma have protested the movement of Stryker armored vehicles to and from Iraq. Manzel's concern is that soldiers understand the reasons for these actions, and that anti-war protesters understand that G.I.s are not their enemy. He says of the new G.I. coffeehouses, "I think this is going to be a real link between the peace movement and soldiers on the bases that these are outside of." Port protesters have noticed some Stryker soldiers flashing peace signs when their officers are not watching, even if a smaller number of soldiers have instead flashed "half a peace sign."

Fort Lewis has become a national center of G.I. dissent against the Iraq War, as it was during the Vietnam War. Lieutenant Ehren Watada was tried in February 2007 for being the first commissioned officer to refuse to deploy to Iraq. Peace activists staged a "Citizens' Hearing" tribunal to present Watada's case that the war is illegal. (His court martial ended in a mistrial, and has since won most of his legal case, but the Army has still not allowed him to resign his commission.) Other Army refusers, such as Sgt. Kevin Benderman and Spc. Suzanne Swift, have been jailed for a time in the harsh Fort Lewis stockade. G.I. Voice recently hosted a training of active-duty members of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) who are organizing within the armed forces rather than seeking to leave the military.

G.I. Voice points to a new relationship between the growing G.I. movement and the larger civilian anti-war movement. Peace groups can support and do outreach to GIs, working with Iraq War veterans who best understand best how to communicate with the younger military generation. Peace activists could also educate themselves about issues of concern to soldiers, to open respectful dialogue with G.I.s and their families, as a step to working together. The G.I. Rights Hotline (800-394-9544) is a first stop for military personnel and families wanting to explore their options.

Fort Lewis is scheduled to deploy 10,000 more troops later this year, including three Stryker Brigades to Iraq and Afghanistan, making this a critical period for G.I. organizing in the area. The few other G.I. coffeehouses in the country have struggled to open their doors or to keep them open. Although COFFEE STRONG has an advantageous location next to the region's busiest fast-food joints, it has competition from the Starbucks on post.

Any kind of support would help the nonprofit G.I. coffeehouse stay open as a "safe space" for soldiers and their families. For more information, contact G.I. Voice, P.O. Box 99404, Lakewood WA 98496, or on-line at <http://www.GIVoice.org> or <http://www.CoffeeStrong.com>. (Tax-deductible contributions can be made on-line, or with checks made out to "Seattle Draft & Military Counseling Center" or "SDMCC").

As the German poet-playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote:

"General, your tank is a powerful vehicle.
It smashes down forests and crushes men.
But it has one defect:
It needs a driver....
General, man is very useful.
He can fly and he can kill.
But he has one defect:
He can think."

Zoltan Grossman is a member of the faculty in geography at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, and a longtime peace and justice organizer. He is a civilian board member of [G.I. Voice](http://givoice.org) (givoice.org), and co-organized the [Citizens' Hearing on the Legality of U.S. Actions in Iraq](http://wartribunal.net) (wartribunal.net). He can be reached at grossmaz@evergreen.edu or on his website at <http://academic.evergreen.edu/g/grossmaz>