

Military Enlistment

The Unspoken Bargains



A POTC Publication



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When you enlist...

... you make three unspoken bargains with the military. These bargains are not in your contract but are part of the fundamental agreement you make when you sign on the dotted line.



- You give the military the right to retrain you and overcome your resistance to killing.
- You give the military the right to determine who and under what circumstances you should kill.



An F-16 from Central Command (CENTCOM), the command responsible for the deaths of over 100 children in the bombing of an elementary school in Iran (2026)

- You accept the real personal risk of death and serious injury.

**Do you know your
red lines?**

Bargain #1

You give the military the right to retrain you and overcome your resistance to killing.



For anyone who enters into the military, this process begins in basic training. Overcoming the resistance to killing can take many forms such as marching cadences, unit imagery, and even generalizing language for the enemy, such as “terrorists.” These are all tactics to dehumanize the enemy a military trainee will eventually face. A dehumanized enemy is easier to kill than a humanized enemy. **Sacrifice is expected; killing is glorified.**

Military researchers who interviewed soldiers immediately after combat in WWII discovered that **not all soldiers shot to kill the enemy**. Ret. Lt. Col. David Grossman, a military researcher and speaker on the psychology of killing notes that, “Inside the brain of most healthy species is kind of this **hard-wired resistance against killing your own kind**.”¹

When you go to Basic Training, the military will put you through a training regimen to overcome your inborn resistance to killing so that you will shoot to kill the enemy during combat. As described by Grossman, “a man-shaped silhouette pops into the field of view. You hit the target. The target drops. It’s a stimulus-response.”²

Lt. Col. Pete Kilner describes the advantages of this kind of training.

“The pop-up target techniques are very stimulus response. We want our soldiers...to be faster and more lethal than the enemy... **We don't need moral deliberation if you're in a close firefight**.”³

The military doesn’t want you to deliberate over whether the act of killing is justified or not. In combat, you may be forced into a situation where you have to choose between the lives of your friends and the lives of civilians, who are commonly caught in the crossfire in urban environments. The military strives to remove any hesitation to blindly follow orders.

Questions to consider:

- Do you think people are born with a natural resistance to killing others? How is this resistance a good thing for society? What would our lives be like if we had no moral conscience to restrain us?
- Do you trust the military to undo your resistance to killing in Basic Training? Do you want to feel comfortable with the idea of taking a life? Do you think you would be able to say “no” or pull back if pushed to do something that violated your beliefs?
- For what purpose might you allow yourself to be trained to kill?
- Do you think being trained to kill would inhibit your ability to believe in your own goodness or see the humanity of other people?
- How might being trained to kill affect your moral judgement after military service?

Resources:

Ben's Story

Chapter 2: Boot
Camp

Chapter 6: Killing
Haunts You

Winter Soldier Testimony: Killing Changes You

Mark Twain *War Prayer*

*I saw the Taliban dressed in black
That's my e-tool in his back
I was the one he did not see
U.S. Army Infantry*

*I saw the Taliban dressed in red
That's my bullet in his head
I was the one he did not hear
U.S. Army Engineers*

*I saw the Taliban dressed in brown
It's me who shot him to the ground
I was the one he did not hear
U.S. Army Engineers*

*I saw the Taliban dressed in white
Now he's got me in his sight
He was the one I did not see
U.S. Army Infantry*

Basic Training Marching Cadence

Notes:

1. The Voices of War Podcast: Lt. Col. David Grossman, On Killing, Combat, Sleep, Blind Spots, and Everything Else In Between, <https://thevoicesofwar.com/26-ltcol-dave-grossman-on-killing-combat-sleep-blind-spots-and-everything-else-in-between/>
2. Ibid.
3. Soldiers of Conscience Interview: Pete Kilner, October 16, 2008, <https://archive.pov.org/soldiersofconscience/interview-pete-kilner/>

If unable to click the links in the resources, you can follow the following links:

- Ben's Story
 - <https://mcc.org/resources/bens-story-war-peace-and-call-follow-jesus>
- Winter Soldier Testimony
 - <https://youtu.be/ZL9gUoHf58c>
- Mark Twain's War Prayer
 - <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/19-american-empire/mark-twain-the-war-prayer-ca-1904-5/>

Abu Ghraib



**My Lai
Massacre**



Guantanamo Bay



Bargain #2

You give the military the right to determine whom and under what circumstances you should kill.

You will be told that you, as a military member, must be apolitical. But what the military is used for is highly political. It can depend on the current administration, lobbying, foreign influence, and other factors outside of your control. You will not have a choice in which operations you participate, and personal preference always comes second to needs of the military. Sometimes, even international law and regulations may come second to the mission the military will tell you to carry out.

Even if you join under an administration you agree with, political environments are always shifting in the US. Alliances can change in a matter of years.



We fight wars to win, not to defend... We unleash overwhelming and punishing violence on the enemy. We also don't fight with stupid rules of engagement. We untie the hands of our warfighters to intimidate, demoralize, hunt and kill the enemies of our country. No more politically correct and overbearing rules of engagement, just common sense, maximum lethality and authority for warfighters.

***Secretary of War Hegseth addressing generals and flag officers in
September 2025***

Even if you agree with the conflict you are participating in, some consequences of warfare are common to all conflicts. Regulations that protect the environment may be ignored to improperly dispose of substances and save a bit of time. Civilians experience minimal protection from harm when living in a war zone. Generations of people from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq have had to live with the consequences of the US military.

Hear it from the people who were there with documentaries like *What I Want You to Know* or *Earth's Greatest Enemy*. **The harm of the military continues long after the solders have left.**



Questions to consider:

- If you are sent into combat, what will you do if you find you disagree with the war, your commander, or even the Rules of Engagement¹?
- Can you give up your moral judgment in battle and allow someone else to tell you who to kill?
- If you are a religious person, what does your faith tell you about killing? Is your allegiance to a deity or something else? What happens if that allegiance conflicts with what your country wants you to do or if it conflicts with your own moral principles?



Alfred Tennyson, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'

Resources:

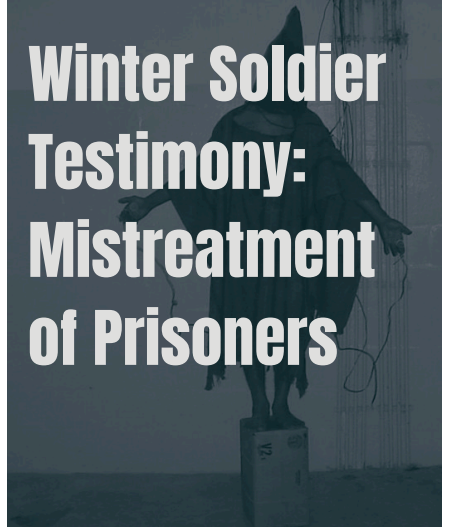
Rules of Engagement



**Winter Soldier
Testimony: Rules
of Engagement,
Iraq War**

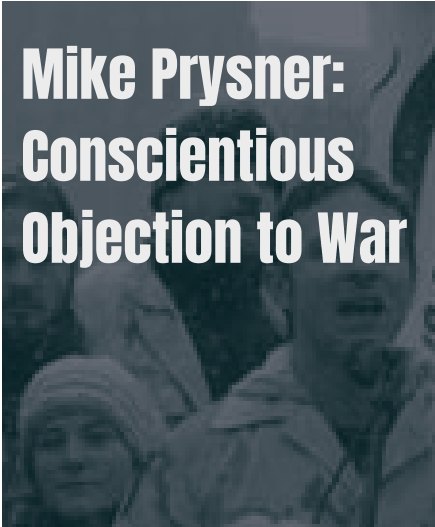


**Winter Soldier
Testimony:
Free Fire Zone**

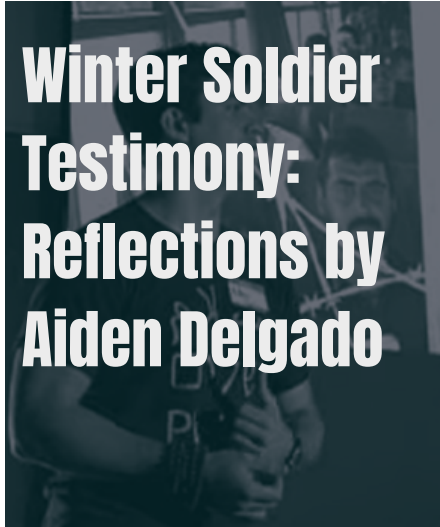


**Winter Soldier
Testimony:
Mistreatment
of Prisoners**

Conscientious Objection



**Mike Prysner:
Conscientious
Objection to War**

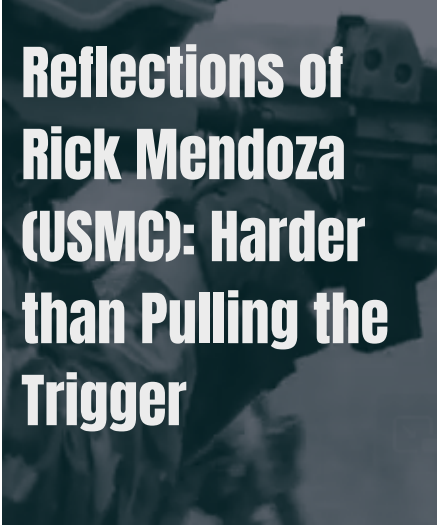


**Winter Soldier
Testimony:
Reflections by
Aiden Delgado**



**Hillel Rabin:
Israeli Military
Conscientious
Objector**

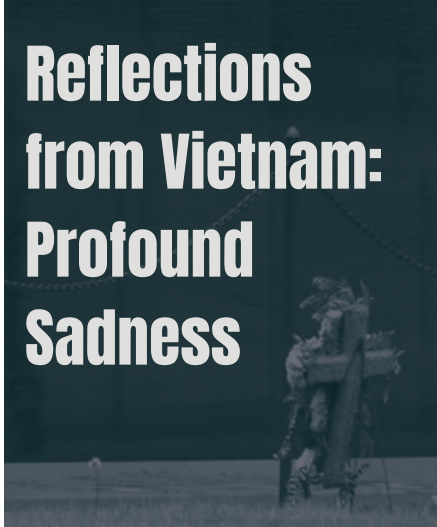
Impact of War on the Soldier: Moral Injury and PTSD



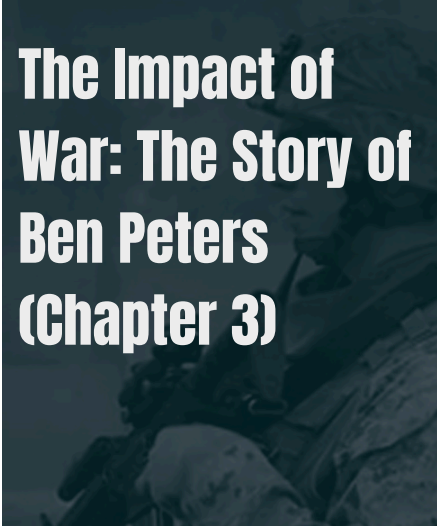
Reflections of Rick Mendoza (USMC): Harder than Pulling the Trigger



Reflections from Iraq and Afghanistan: PTSD and Moral Injury



Reflections from Vietnam: Profound Sadness



The Impact of War: The Story of Ben Peters (Chapter 3)

Notes:

1. Rules of Engagement are directives that dictate when and under what circumstances it is appropriate to use force.

If unable to click the links in the resources, you can follow the following links:

- Rules of Engagement
 - Rules of Engagement, Iraq War: <https://youtu.be/TvF-nzx0JVM>
 - Free Fire Zone: <https://youtu.be/WQSe9iBtSrQ>
 - Mistreatment of Prisoners: https://youtu.be/vAhrk_hh7o4
- Conscientious Objection
 - Mike Prysner: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DXUZBvQD4Sx/>
 - Winter Soldier Testimony: <https://youtu.be/Ea62GaGJlPI>
 - Hillel Rabin: <https://youtu.be/FmKimQK9Qtg>
- Impact of War on the Soldier
 - Rick Mendoza: <https://youtu.be/PHRQbZyo0Q8>
 - Reflections from Iraq and Afghanistan veteran: <https://youtu.be/lVyCLYJW740>
 - Reflections from Vietnam War veteran: <https://youtu.be/aU4vJqXfZ8o>
 - Ben Peters: <https://mcc.org/resources/bens-story-war-peace-and-call-follow-jesus>
- *What I Want You to Know*: <https://www.pbs.org/video/what-i-want-you-to-know-q4xnyd/>
- *Earth's Greatest Enemy*: <https://earthsgreatestenemy.com/>

Bargain #3

You accept the real personal risk of death and serious injury - physical and mental.



Even for individuals who go through only basic training, the effects can be long-lasting. Basic training encourages working through existing injuries and discourages seeking care, and mental health issues can persist even beyond training. For women, minorities, and queer people, the risks are not only limited to combat. These groups of people can experience violence **at the hands of their fellow service members as well**, from harassment, to sexual assault, and even some cases of murder.

Studies show that military veterans struggle with a number of mental health issues at rates higher than the civilian population, including **post traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, moral injury, depression, anxiety and substance abuse.**

- 15% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans experience Post Traumatic Stress each year, and 23% of veterans under the care of the Veterans Administration have had Post Traumatic stress at some point in their lives.²
- Traumatic Brain Injury can happen during training or combat. The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center reported more than 400,000 traumatic brain injuries among U.S. service members between 2000 and 2019.³
- Veterans are **5 times more likely** to experience major depression than civilians. Some veterans use alcohol and drugs to self medicate, which can lead to other problems.⁴

These difficult outcomes are not the result of a weak will or the personal fault of a veteran. Rather, military training, combat, and even other roles contributing to the military mission often expose military personnel to traumas beyond the human capacity to endure. Anyone considering enlistment should be aware of these very real risks and understand that **they cannot be overcome with bravado or a stronger mindset.**

Questions to consider:

- Do you trust the government and military to take care of your health and well-being as it makes decisions about war and deployments?
- If you are sent into combat, will you be able to protect yourself from PTSD, depression, moral injury, and other negative consequences¹? How?
- Do you understand the concept of moral injury? Would you consider yourself susceptible to moral injury?
- For what reasons or under what circumstances might you be willing to undertake these risks? Do you believe you will be serving under these circumstances for the entirety of your contract?
- What will you do if you are asked to undertake these risks for a reason you do not agree with?

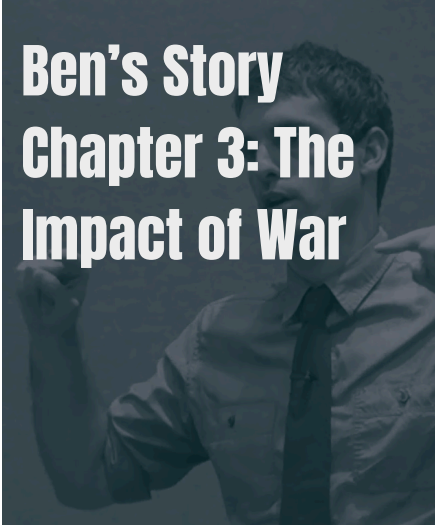


I was deployed to Iraq in March 2003 and was there until November 2003 and was with 1/10 Cavalry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division. We were taking every day people from their beds at 2-3 am and zip tying their hands and putting sand bags on their heads and taking them to processing areas. These are actions that went against everything I believed as a soldier in the United States Army.

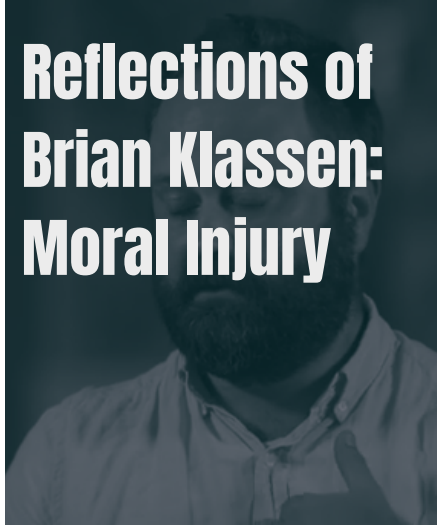
I was fully mentally prepared for fight against soldiers or fighters when they engaged us, but I never thought I would be used to terrorize the civilian population the way we were told to.

Kevin Benderman, Iraq War veteran who was court-martialed and imprisoned for refusing to deploy in 2005

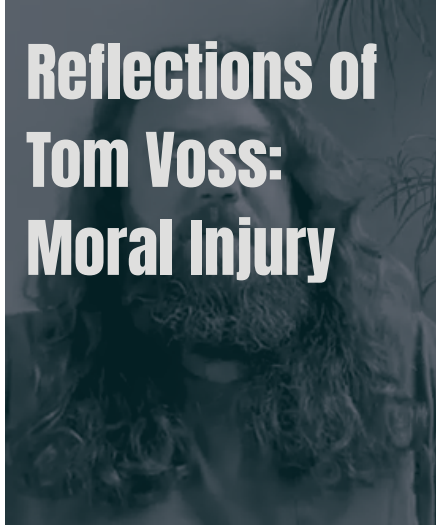
Resources:



Ben's Story
Chapter 3: The
Impact of War



Reflections of
Brian Klassen:
Moral Injury



Reflections of
Tom Voss:
Moral Injury

Notes:

1. National Institute of Health [2023], Veteran and Military Mental Health Issues, 2023, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34283458/>
2. The State of Veterans' Mental Health [2024], Mission Roll Call, <https://missionrollcall.org/veteran-voices/articles/the-state-of-veterans-mental-health/>
3. Ibid
4. Ibid

If unable to click the links in the resources, you can follow the following links:

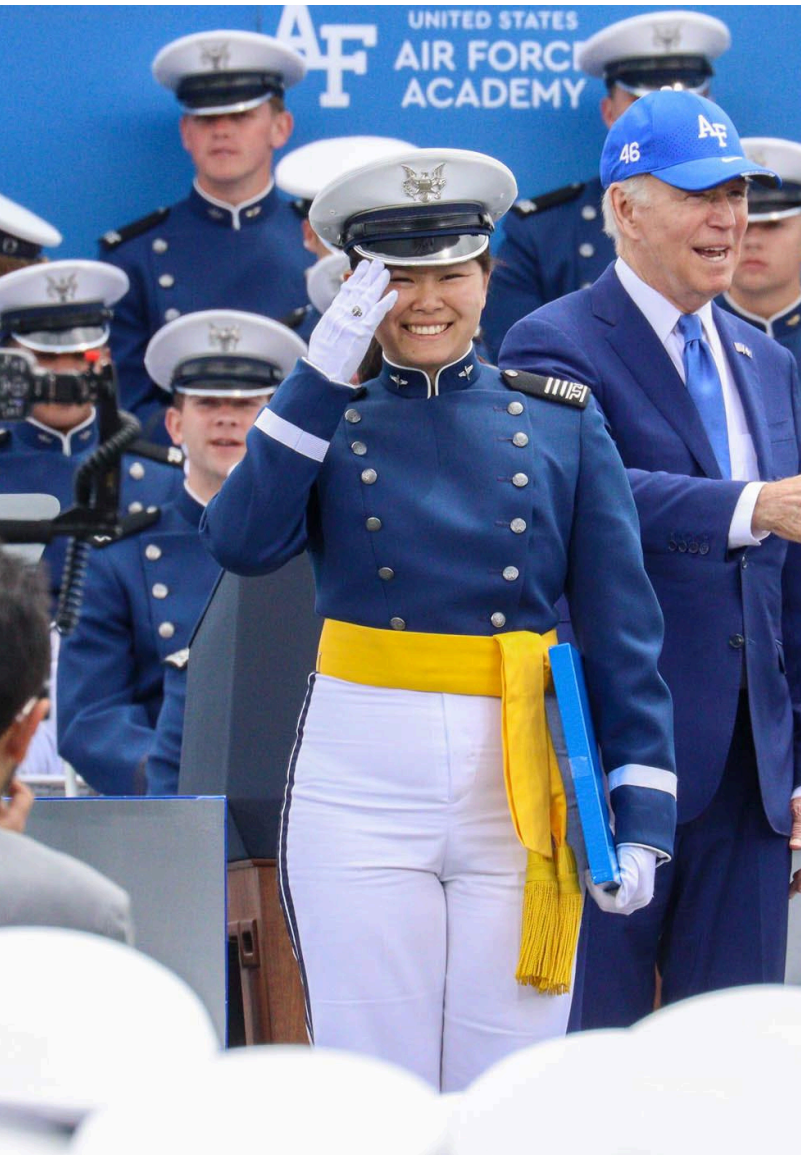
- Ben's Story
 - <https://mcc.org/resources/bens-story-war-peace-and-call-follow-jesus>
- Reflections of Brian Klassen
 - <https://youtu.be/eL49-N-z9G8>
- Reflections of Tom Voss
 - <https://youtu.be/YbaAnozuW8I>

“

Now, when [Joy] Metzler considers her decision to leave behind the military, she expresses relief. Being able to look at suffering in places like Gaza and feel horror instead of rationalizing military objectives means she's held on to a valued piece of her humanity, she said.

“Even though it's emotionally taxing, I feel very fortunate that I still have the ability to not glaze over that,” she said. “I almost lost that because of being in the military.”

Article from the War Horse, written by Hope Seck (2025)



What do you believe?

The best time to reflect on what you believe is before you join the military. Use the space below to reflect.

How do you view people of other nations, cultures, and religions?
Do you trust the government to determine who your enemy is?

All roles in the military contribute to its violent mission. How do you feel about being part of this system?

Are there other ways you could serve your community, country, or live out your values besides enlisting in the military?

If you are joining for college or technical skills training, have you considered other options for paying for these paths?

Have you considered the risks of deploying? Do you understand that even non-combat roles might be deployed?

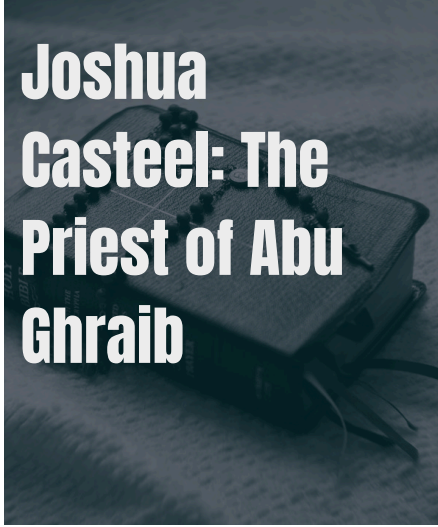
Have you listened to the stories of civilians who have been harmed by war? Would this impact your decision to enlist?

If you are asked to do something that goes against your conscience, what will you do? Do you think you will have options?

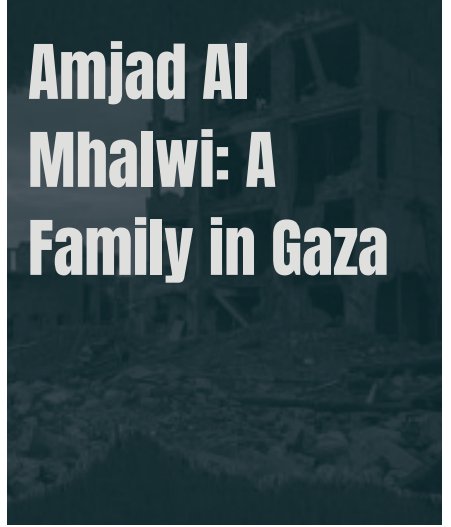
Resources:

A photograph of two men, one in a white clerical shirt and the other in a dark shirt, standing in front of a religious structure.

**The Future is
Peace: A Shared
Journey Across
the Holy Land**

A photograph of a dark book with a rosary draped over it, resting on a textured surface.

**Joshua
Casteel: The
Priest of Abu
Ghraib**

A photograph of a heavily damaged, multi-story building in a war-torn area.

**Amjad Al
Mhalwi: A
Family in Gaza**

A photograph of a protest scene with a sign that reads "RECRUITING CENTRE" in the background.

**Desmond
Mullins: Enlisting
For College**

Notes:

If unable to click the links in the resources, you can follow the following links:

- *The Future Is Peace*, by Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon
 - <https://thefutureispeace.com/>
- Joshua Casteel: The Priest of Abu Ghraib
 - <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/priest-abu-grahib-180971013/>
- Amjad Al Mhalwi: A Family in Gaza
 - <https://paxchristi.net/through-amjads-eyes-the-human-cost-in-gaza/>
- Desmond Mullins: Enlisting for College
 - <https://youtu.be/1VkKPwM7h2U>

The Agreement

Aside from these unspoken agreements, all enlistees have a written enlistment contract. In this contract you essentially agree that the military may control your life for 8 years. You may be sent on deployment even if you are a reservist or in the national guard.

If your primary reason for considering military enlistment is money for college or vocational training, please contact us! We will be happy to help you explore other options.

If you have already enlisted but have not yet gone to Basic Training, it is still possible to withdraw without negative consequences. If you are in this situation, please call the GI Rights Hotline to discuss your options. PH: (877) 447-4487.

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potc5525@gmail.com