

OUR ADVICE

CONTACT A CO COUNSELOR on the GI Rights Hotline (800-394-9544) or at CPF **before** you approach your commander. The CO application process is complicated and often misunderstood.

PREPARE TO ANSWER CHALLENGING QUESTIONS:

Wouldn't you protect your mother?

However you answer that, remind the questioner that CO is an objection to *war*, an organized and collective use of lethal violence.

Don't plenty of Catholics fight in war?

You don't need to answer for others in the military - just yourself. You can stress that Church teaching firmly supports the refusal to participate in war. In the early Church, military service was prohibited, and many saints were martyred by the Romans for throwing down their weapons and proclaiming, "I am soldier of Christ." More recently, the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes* (#78-79) and the U.S. Bishops' *The Challenge of Peace* (#118-120) give support for COs.

Why not serve as a noncombatant?

Some take this option, but most believe that even administrative jobs serve the cause of war. A recent CO also said: "All deployments now can quickly become combat zones. With my refusal to participate in violence, I will be a liability."

CAREFULLY CONSIDER CHURCH TEACHING

Blind obedience is not an option for Catholics: in the face of war, soldiers must choose. The Church's options are nonviolence or just war analysis. Both raise tough questions. As Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) said, "Today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a 'just war'." Learn more at our site, then seek guidance and prayer.

WITNESSES

"I went to Iraq and was an instrument of violence; now I've decided to become an instrument of peace." -Camilo Mejia was the first soldier to refuse re-deployment to Iraq. He was declared AWOL. Wearing a medal of St. Francis, Mejia turned himself into authorities. He served 9 months in military prison, during which time his CO claim was rejected as "too political."

"My participation in systems of violence completely debilitates the living example I believe is my bounded duty as a Christian to offer." -Joshua Casteel, an eight-year veteran of the U.S. Army and former interrogator at Abu Ghraib prison, began his CO application in Iraq. It was approved.



"We urge a mighty league

**of Catholic
Conscientious
Objectors"**

-Dorothy Day

For more information, contact:
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CATHOLICS AND WAR

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS IN THE MILITARY



Catholic Peace Fellowship
catholicpeacefellowship.org

Each year, a small but steady number of people in the U.S. military receive legal status as conscientious objectors (COs) - those who have acquired “a firm, fixed and sincere objection to all war.” COs are either reassigned to noncombatant duties in the military (1-A-O), or are honorably discharged (1-O). In order to be legally recognized as military COs, soldiers must prove they became opposed to participating in all war after signing the enlistment contract and entering the military.

Presently, soldiers cannot legally object to a particular war; they must prove an opposition to all war. This denies the right of selective conscientious objection (SCO), despite repeated calls for that right from U.S. bishops. Nonetheless, some soldiers have chosen this path and endured the consequences of a court-martial. Other non-pacifists believe that no modern war could fulfill requirements for a just war. Thus they apply as full COs. Clearly, the 375,000 Catholics in the military have good reason to engage in conscience formation.

I placed my M-16 across my lap, and silently cried out a prayer to God. I was suddenly struck with a realization that would soon change my life. The dead and injured... were victims of war, and soldiers like me were responsible for war.
-An Army Pfc.

APPLYING TO BE A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

The information provided below is based on Department of Defense directives and our experience counseling soldiers through the process. More details can be found at catholicpeacefellowship.org

1) NOTIFYING THE COMMANDING OFFICER

After undergoing a “crystallization of conscience” in which one has come to reject war in any form, applicants must notify their immediate commanding officer that they want to apply for conscientious objector status. The unit commander (who will want to know whether they seek non-combatant status or a discharge) is to provide a CO packet. Soldiers need to advocate for their rights and not let the process delay.

2) THE APPLICATION

Applicants need to provide the following information: The nature of the belief requiring CO status; specifics about how these beliefs developed; when and why these beliefs became incompatible with military combat service; the circumstances, if any, under which applicants believe the use of force is justified; and how their daily life has changed because of these beliefs. Political statements should be avoided; this will lead to a negative ruling. Applicants must also provide letters from those who know their sincerity.

3) THE INVESTIGATIVE INTERVIEW

Applicants must attend an interview with a military chaplain and a psychiatrist to validate the sincerity and source of their convictions and to assess their mental status. Interviewers submit a written report.

4) THE INVESTIGATIVE HEARING

The reports and the application are submitted to the commanding officer with court-martial jurisdiction over the applicant (“appointing officer”). Applicants will be assigned an investigating officer from a different company to hold an informal hearing, not governed according to rules of legal

proceeding. Applicants are allowed to make a personal statement, present and question witnesses, and examine all items in their files. Applicants are entitled to be represented and to record the hearing, at their own expense. After the hearing, the investigating officer will prepare a written report and make a recommendation.

5) THE FINAL REPORT

Applicants have the right to rebut the report’s findings (usually within 5-15 days), after which the appointing officer makes a recommendation. Applicants have the right to rebut any additional evidence adverse to their claim.

6) THE FINAL RECOMMENDATION

Ultimately, the secretary of the service branch has the authority to grant CO status. The decision is usually made between six and nine months after the application. According to regulations, during this time, applicants should be assigned duties that conflict as little as possible with their stated beliefs.**

7) APPEAL OR DISCHARGE

If a claim is denied, applicants should contact a lawyer or the Board of Corrections of Military Record (lengthy processes). Applicants can also submit a new application if a further change in belief has occurred. If approved, the applicant is granted 1-A-O noncombatant status or the 1-O honorable discharge, whichever they requested.

****Regulations state that if soldiers apply for CO status after their unit receives mobilization orders, they can still be deployed. These soldiers may have to go through the CO process while at war. They can make the case, however, that to comply with regulations, they should be put “in the rear detachment”; thus not deployed while their application is pending.**