

Ex-soldier now fights concept of 'just' war

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ELMIRA — Wars will continue as long as the members of the armed services are willing to surrender their consciences to their military commanders, asserted Dr. David Wiggins, a conscientious objector to Operation Desert Storm.

"I think war is caused by soldiers who are willing to follow any order regardless of the justice of it," the former U.S. Army captain told the *Catholic Courier* in a phone interview from Elmira College, Thursday, Nov. 14.

Wiggins talked to the *Courier* prior to speaking on the subject of conscientious objection at the college's campus center that evening. During the day, the former parishioner of St. James Church in Waverly also spoke to classes at the college and at Notre Dame High School, 1400 Maple Ave.

His visit to the area was sponsored by a number of organizations, including the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry and Peaceworks, a non-sectarian environmental and peace organization.

A "distinguished" graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1984, Wiggins applied for C.O. status in February, 1990, six months before Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Despite the fact that a group of Army attorneys recommended Wiggins be discharged as a C.O., his application was denied by the Army's C.O. review board in August, 1990, on grounds that his reasoning was "political," rather than "moral."

Wiggins, a combat medic, was then sent to Saudi Arabia in December, 1990. After he undertook a series of actions designed to protest his deployment, his Army career ended in April,

1991, when he was court-martialed and dismissed from the service.

Wiggins currently faces a \$25,000 fine for his insubordinate actions while in the Army, and he said he must pay it by April, 1992. In addition to appealing the decision made against him, he has also offered to pay back the government for his education and to work in public health service.

In his speech that evening Wiggins emphasized that no war can truly be considered "just."

"There is no justification for war," he said during his speech at the campus center Thursday night. "Some people will order others to do anything." For example, he pointed out that Adolf Hitler "was no more harmful than any other bad guy until people like me followed his orders and carried out the killing."

It was a desire to follow the lead of the United States government that inspired him to join the Army in the first place, Wiggins noted.

"I wanted all my family and friends to brag about me risking my life to defend their freedom," he said.

But it was precisely the lack of "freedom" that he experienced at West Point that began to change his mind about the military, Wiggins said. Although he acknowledged the need for commanders to occasionally discipline soldiers, his superiors — more often than not — abused their authority, Wiggins charged.

"Say somebody had a bad test," Wiggins told the *Courier*. "They would often come back and find the nearest (underling) and berate them."

"In West Point cadets, I saw that the world is full of people willing to abuse power for satisfaction and personal gain," he wrote in his C.O. application. "Many others ambivalent about using



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Dr. David Wiggins, a conscientious objector to Operation Desert Storm, answers questions during an ethics class at Elmira College Nov. 14.

power, will do so if convinced it is necessary to defend their freedom or themselves from a leader's displeasure."

Wiggins said he gradually realized that all armies consist of a variety of people, many of whom are decent-minded, but who are held together by a common fear of punishment for disobeying the orders of their commanders.

Attending medical school from 1984-88 further convinced the young soldier that the Army threatened freedom rather than protected it, he told his Elmira College audience.

"I met many immigrants and many people ...," he recalled, "(who) told me how U.S. policy and intervention had hurt their nations before; how their democratically elected governments had been purposefully undermined by the U.S.A. ..."

The gulf war just such an example of U.S. interventionism, Wiggins argued. For example, he said, rather than fearing the Iraqis who were occupying Kuwait, the Saudi Arabians made the U.S. troops feel they should be "grate-

ful" for being allowed onto Arab territory in order to defend U.S. interests in oil production.

"It was quite obvious to the (U.S.) soldiers there that the reasons we were there were to protect the corporations' interests," he said.

Wiggins protested his own deployment to the gulf with a 28-day hunger strike, which he ended when the Army placed him in a hospital and told him he would be "force-fed" intravenously to save his life. In addition to his hunger strike, Wiggins also delayed a military convoy to the front by standing in front of vehicles and stripping himself of his uniform.

Wiggins is currently splitting his time between speaking on anti-war issues and working as a general practitioner in the emergency room at Garrett County Memorial Hospital in Oakland, Md.

He acknowledged that some of his critics contend that if all soldiers adopted his attitude, it would be impossible for any nation to successfully fight a war.

"That's just what I want," he said.

Announcement hints 3 schools will close

ROCHESTER — A Nov. 19 announcement of a meeting that evening on reconfiguration of Northeast Quadrant Catholic schools made no reference to three quadrant schools.

That omission generated media reports that the quadrant governing board plans to close schools at St. Stanislaus, St. Cecilia and St. Thomas the Apostle parishes. Last month, the board's strategic planning committee recommended closing the three schools.

The *Catholic Courier*, which went to press for this edition several hours before the meeting's 7 p.m. start time, could not confirm those reports. The meeting was scheduled to take place at Bishop Kearney High School.

In its press release, the governance board said the meeting was intended to outline the 1992-93 configuration, which "includes Pre-K through 6th-grade programs at Christ the King, St. Ambrose, St. Andrew's and St. Margaret Mary."

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