

SETTING HIMSELF FREE

Lt. Ehren Watada's refusal to be silent garners thanks BY SUZI STEFFEN

During what has become an annual protest and rally against the continuing war in Iraq, the first commissioned officer publicly to refuse to serve in that war spoke up about the courage to speak out. The rally for peace Saturday, March 17, came at the conclusion of a march from the Lane County Fairgrounds in a ceremony marking –and mourning – the four-year anniversary of the beginning of the war.

Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy began the rally by reading the City Council's resolution calling for an end to the war. She ended with a heartfelt off-the-cuff comment, saying to general applause, "Now, if only this part were true!" before reading the end of every document passed by the council, "This resolution will become effective immediately upon adoption by the City Council."

Then Eugene-area activist and diversity trainer Johnny Lake introduced Lt. Ehren Watada to the clearly adoring crowd; Lake said, "Let's make lots of noise!" and the audience, including drummers and folks waving Irish flags for St. Patrick's Day, whistled and clapped. A woman jumped to the podium to drape a local-flower lei on Watada, who grew up in Hawaii (and a contingent of Hawaiians in the crowd gave a shout-out to the state). Then Watada, a 28-year-old first lieutenant in the U.S. Army who refused to deploy to Iraq because he said that would make him party to war crimes, delivered his speech to the rapt audience. Wearing a striped shirt and jeans, he asked his listeners to act with courage and with the knowledge that their cause is just.

"I know at times we feel trapped and powerless," he said; "I've been there." But when he voiced his dissent, he said, "I realized I am free."

Watada didn't refer directly to his refusal to deploy to Iraq, but there was no doubt what he was discussing when he talked about having been afraid of what would happen if he acted. "Not only did I expect but I depended on others to act and speak on my behalf," he said, but he finally realized he had to make the right choice. Those who speak out risk serious consequences, he said, but "I was more afraid of what would happen if I did nothing." Indeed, he said, "I could not look into the judging innocence of my future children's eyes and tell them always to do what is right – except when it is difficult and except when there are consequences."

Watada's first court martial ended Feb. 7 when a military judge declared a mistrial, and a second court martial was scheduled to begin Monday, March 19 but has now been rescheduled for July 16. Watada gave one last media interview (to KOPT's Brian Shaw) just before he arrived in Eugene; his lawyers told him he shouldn't speak to the media before his second trial because the U.S. Army used earlier interviews in their case against him during the first trial. "When I'm not in the military ... " he said with an apology before entering the Many Nations Longhouse on the UO campus for a reception with local activists. "I can talk to reporters after I'm not in the military anymore."

At the rally, he concluded his speech by quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., ending finally with the statement, "We *will* overcome." The crowd clapped, cheered, and finally spent several minutes chanting, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

For more information on Watada's case, go to his mother's www.thankyoult.org and for the full text of Watada's speech, see the EW's website (www.eugeneweekly.com).

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

War Rally Unites Protesters

The March 17 march and anti-war rally brought together a cross-section of Eugeneans united in their desire to bring an end to the war in Iraq. The crowd ranged from young children in wagons to older couples. It included representatives from the Democratic Party of Lane County as well as Tobi Hill-Meyer who bore a sign reading "Sadomasochists for Peace."

Michael Carrigan of Community Alliance of Lane County (CALC), which organized the rally, estimated the crowd at 2,500 though Eugene police officers at the rally gave a more conservative estimate of 500 to 600 people.

Marchers began at the Lane County Fairgrounds, chanting slogans like "Money for schools, not for war," and "Save the soldiers, bring them home."

As the march proceeded down 13th Ave., cars were held at bay by Eugene police officers on bicycles. Driver Rob Lench got out of his car to see what was stopping traffic. When police informed him of the march and rally, he pointed out that the overtime work of the police officers came at a cost to the city, and said, "Peace isn't free."

However, there was very little dissent visible at the rally that followed the march.

A number of war veterans were present at the rally. Doug Bulski, recently returned from duty in Iraq and said his time there changed his perspective on the war. He called the war a "senseless loss of life for no reason," and said, "It's great to see so many people supporting an end to the war."

Casey Ferguson, a veteran who served in Afghanistan, agreed. He said, "The loss of life on both sides is too much." He commented that returning soldiers like himself, "are not being taken care of and are forgotten once we are back."

Others at the rally had been personally touched by war in different ways. Yuan Hopkins, who attended the rally with her son David, said, "My family has been affected by war. I'm tired of war," as she spoke of her childhood in community China during WWII.

Many attendees said they felt like the government is not listening to their opinions of the war. Jean Murphy, dressed as a leprechaun in honor of St. Patrick's Day, said of her costume and her presence at the rally, "I have no illusions that anyone in power is paying attention to a 'leprechaun for peace,' but it makes me feel better to be here." – Camilla Mortensen



PHOTO BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Yuan and David Hopkins