

'Underground railroad' for Iraq war resisters has a Wakefield junction

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By Josh Clipperton

The dusty, scorching, violent streets of Baghdad are a long way from quiet, peaceful Wakefield. There are no death squads, suicide bombers or snipers on the banks of the Gatineau. But for a 22-year-old bass player recently invited to play with Mighty Popo at the village's Black Sheep Inn, the memory of the Iraqi capital is still fresh.

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on the ground once he got there was much different.

"I was told I'd be doing humanitarian work," says Burmeister. Instead he was sometimes part of a small "kill team" that would set sniper traps for suspected insurgents.

He was already disillusioned with his six months in Iraq when a vehicle he was riding in struck a roadside bomb.

No Americans were killed in the explosion, but Burmeister – a native of Eugene, Oregon – suffered a concussion and shrapnel wounds to his face. He was sent to Germany for recovery, but didn't feel he was ready to return to action. The Army disagreed.

Burmeister says he was searching the internet and contemplating filing for "conscientious objector status" to the war when he came upon a website for the group War Resisters Support Campaign, a Canadian organization that helps American soldiers seeking asylum in Canada. Burmeister was sold, first flying from Germany to Toronto, and then on to Ottawa.

"It's the new underground railroad," says Wakefield's Joel Harden who works with War Resisters as well as the Canadian Labour Congress. He's been helping Burmeister and his young family since their arrival in the National Capital Region this spring.

Harden says Canada has a history of being a safe haven for American soldiers. Although the military is now made up entirely of volunteers – unlike the Vietnam War draft years – he says his organization is important for soldiers with a conflict of conscience.

James Burmeister was a Private First Class in the United States Army, operating as a gunner at Forward Operating Base Falcon in south Baghdad.

The term "was" is important.

He eagerly signed up in 2005 upon hearing army recruiters talk about helping Iraqis rebuild their shattered country. The reality

"One of the things G.I.'s do when they sign up is swear allegiance to uphold the Constitution of the United States," says Harden, with Burmeister by his side at the former soldier's new Ottawa apartment. "Guys like James are doing that by opposing the illegal war in Iraq."

Harden says there are currently 34 soldiers officially seeking asylum in Canada, but he guesses there are at least 200 more flying under the radar.

Upon arrival in this country, Burmeister applied for refugee status.

Harden says the Immigration and Refugee Board has so far refused to discuss the legality of the war in Iraq for refugee claimants. Similar refugee claims have been tied up in courts for years, but Harden says Burmeister's case will proceed quickly after other precedents are set.

In the mean time, the former soldier's mind sometimes drifts elsewhere.

"I really want to try to get the music thing going," says Burmeister, who has played bass for 13 years, with a focus on jazz, funk and blues.

"He got on stage and he's got some serious skills," says Harden of the show with Popo. About 100 people attended the June 23 event at the Black Sheep, which was meant to both raise awareness for the resister's campaign and put a human face on the cause.

Burmeister says since he's been in Ottawa, he's only been met with opposition about his situation once.

"I got into an argument with the Bell telephone operator when I was trying to get my phone hooked up," he says with a smile.

Viewed as a deserter at home in the U.S., Burmeister's been an inspiration for at least some others here.

"For me, being a part of this campaign has been unbelievable," says Harden. "It's an honour to be able to help guys like James. I'm just amazed by their courage."

More information about the War Resisters Support Campaign can be found at www.resisters.ca.