



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR

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# THE CALL TO ARMS

MICRONESIANS IN THE  
MILITARY

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*Francis X. Hezel, S.J.*

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## **The Cost of War**

This past year has been a tough one for Micronesians serving in the US military. Skipper Soram, a Pohnpeian, was killed by a car bomb in September 2004. Within days of his death, a Palauan Marine, Ngirmidol Meluat, lost his life in a roadside bombing. Some months later Steven Bayow from Yap, who had served in the Army for 16 years and was already looking forward to retirement, was the victim of an attack. Within the last twelve months, three islanders have been killed in Iraq.

But the tally doesn't end there. Two others lost their lives during the first year of the war in Iraq, and a number of enlistees have

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been wounded. The most celebrated of the injured is probably Hilario Bermanis, Jr, who lost both legs and an arm in a grenade attack in June 2003. Bermanis made national news in the US when he was presented with the Bronze Star by an Army General, granted full US citizenship, and was visited during his convalescence at Walter Reed Medical Center by President Bush and his wife. Young Bermanis, who was serving in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division when he was maimed, became an instant celebrity. When he returned to Pohnpei some months later, he held the place of honor, seated in a wheelchair and fitted out with prosthetic limbs, at the Independence Day celebration sponsored by the US Embassy in FSM. His example of heroism was cited again and again—by the head of the Office of Insular Affairs at Interior Department, by representatives of the US State Department, and in congressional committee hearings on the new Compact funding provisions. For many Americans and Micronesians, Bermanis came to symbolize the commitment of those hundreds of Micronesian islanders in uniform—as well as that of their governments—to what the US government and many in Micronesia would call the global war against terrorism.

Bermanis's maiming, tragic as it was, strengthened the case to be made for extending the Compact funding for another, 20-year

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## **New Videos**

### Going Yellow




*In this video drama a daffy family, with the help of a karat-crazed Texan, slowly begins to realize the benefits of adding yellow local foods to their diet.*

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### Island Government: Making it Work



*The dreams of past island leaders can only be realized if we make good government happen. But how do we deal with the cultural tensions along the way? This video portrays the dream and the obstacles in a lighthearted way.*



deep feelings and resulted in strong comment, as well they should, for both offer an unsparing glimpse of the darker side of military service today. They also remind us that young islanders who choose military service today commit themselves to serve a government that is waging a war that has taken lives and will continue to do so.

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Still, between 50 and 100 young Micronesians join the military each year, so that the total number of Micronesians in the Armed Forces now exceeds 1,000. Surely, there is no mystery about their motives for enlisting; nor is there any doubt that these motives are reasonable, perhaps even compelling. Given the limited educational opportunities and job prospects they have, their choice makes a good deal of sense. The package they're promised by military recruiters is undeniably attractive. But is this the best that their country—their own country, not the one they swear to defend—can offer them?

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*We would like to acknowledge the valuable help of Anna Maria Joanis in researching this article during her stay on Pohnpei. Many thanks, Anna Maria.*



period to his island nation. The provisions of the Compact, after all, made it possible for young islanders like Bermanis to enlist in the military from their own islands. Bermanis paid for the hero's status conferred on him with three of his limbs, but five men from the region paid an even higher price—their lives. An article in *USA Today* on war casualties, headlined "From tiny Pacific islands comes out-sized sacrifice," shows the comparatively high death rate suffered by troops from these islands. While the average death rate in Iraq for individual states in the US is 5 per million, the figure for Micronesia is 25 per million, or five times the US rate. The death rate for Guam, at 20 per million, is only slightly lower.

### ***To Fight or Not to Fight***

The recent deaths have sparked a heated discussion, perhaps even a debate, on whether Micronesians ought to be joining the US military. In an article published in *Pacific Magazine* last January, former FSM president John Haglelgam reflects on his reactions while watching a local telecast of Skipper Soram's funeral service on Pohnpei. "It was a US military funeral in a foreign country; and it was completely out of place in the serene and peaceful surrounding," Haglelgam writes. "Duty, honor and country," the commander of the military honor guard barked as the flag that had draped the

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coffin was being presented to Soram's family. But whose country was Soram serving? Haglelgam asks. While acknowledging the real benefits the military offers young Micronesians, Haglelgam points out that the motto so proudly barked out by the commander has "a ring of irrelevancy" for FSM citizens. Meanwhile, parents, family and friends are "left alone to deal with the psychological impact of the loss of their loved one," the author reflects. Young people will inevitably be wooed into military service by recruiters who, as part of their job, "must paint a rosy picture of military life in the US Armed Forces and emphasize only the benefits offered." Yet, the island governments should at least remind those young people who enlist of the real dangers involved, Haglelgam urges, even while informing them that "they are not serving their own country" as members of the US military.

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Two months later, Willie Kostka, director of the Conservation Society of Pohnpei, followed this up with an impassioned article appearing in *The Kaselehlie Press*. Although Kostka admits that he is disturbed at the casual way in which young Micronesians seem to talk about war, with a disregard for the effects it could have on them, his issue is less with the way young people flock to join the military than with the war itself. The Iraq War, he maintains, is a

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"preemptive act that goes against the core values of Christianity and our Micronesian culture." A cavalier attitude towards war, "an activity that usually results in the death of another human being," is unacceptable, in his view. "True Christians do not fight aggressive and/or preemptive wars," he argues. The present war also violates Micronesian norms inasmuch as islanders traditionally "only fight or draw blood for two reasons: land and blood"—that is, when family land is being seized or the blood of a relative has been wantonly shed. Kostka writes that "he does not know of a single Iraqi trying to take my family land or who has killed a family member." Does anyone else?

Kostka writes in a graphic and feeling way of the horror of war:

Imagine the long dark nights, the eerie sounds of sirens and gunfire, the roar of the jet fighters and helicopters, the bombs. Then imagine your little family, your own children, crowded in the corner of your little house, and you looking at the fear in their little eyes, their little pale lips, and the silent tears coming down their little cheeks, with little trembling hands trying to grab onto you for security... Then the big bang, with the door ripped from its rusted hinges and falling right into your living room, with half a dozen uniformed men with big guns storming into your house and pulling you away from the trembling little hands of your babies. You are dragged a few feet away and you can hear the terrified cries of your babies, and you are powerless.... Then imagine a young Micronesian man standing in full military uniform pointing a gun at your head. How unchristian! How un-Micronesian!

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It may be pointless to ask who's to blame for the flight into the military. We might better ask what we intend to do about it. Many Micronesians who have spent years in the military would argue that their career choice is the best thing that has happened to them. They point to the job and educational opportunities that they otherwise would not have enjoyed and speak with pride about their years in the military. Their personal experience and the testimony they offer can not be dismissed. A number of them have returned to the islands and lead productive and happy lives at present.


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Yet, those enlisting in the military today pledge allegiance to a government that is now at war in the Middle East. It is a war that is not of Micronesia's making, and a war that a growing number of Americans would prefer to disown. Their opposition to the war in Iraq is not motivated simply by the loss of life that American servicemen and Iraqi civilians suffer each week, but is rooted in the conviction that the war is wrong. Some oppose the war as a tactical mistake, either because it was undertaken for the wrong reasons (no weapons of mass destruction were ever found) or because it resulted in a quagmire that is suspiciously similar to Vietnam (US forces, once involved, cannot be withdrawn in the near future, regardless of the loss of life and damage to the US's international reputation). Others, myself included, find no justification in making a preemptive strike against a nation, no matter how nasty the ruling regime might have been. War has always been, in the best American tradition as in the moral teaching of Christian churches, a final resort, a response to an assault that cannot be parried in any other way. Those of us who recall the shock of Pearl Harbor, the unprovoked attack that brought America into World War II, and lived through the fear of the Cold War, in which a single preemptive strike could have led to the destruction of millions, would be very slow to condone preemptive action on any grounds.

The two FSM citizens who have written on this subject wrestle with points that must be seriously considered. While John Haglelgam's essay offers a hard look at the anomalies of Micronesian enlistment in the US military, Willie Kostka's poignant article points to the ethical dilemmas of islanders participating in what he and many others regard as an unjust war. Both articles have stirred



son or daughter met death and by the honor in which they share. There is the consolation of the solemn funeral with the gun salute and the folded flag presented to the family in front of a packed church.

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***For those who may have felt that they were drifting through life, there is the sense of stability that the military offers.***


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The benefits of military service are real, and so are the dangers. But what alternatives do young Micronesians have today? Should they stay home and help grow a local economy in the hope that this may provide the financial security they hoped to obtain from the time they first entered school? Should they join the legions of fellow islanders who are heading overseas to take jobs as dish-washers or fast-food cooks or gas station attendants?

In signing up for the military, our young people are simply doing what hundreds of American citizens from economically depressed areas in the US are doing to better their lives. In his recent controversial movie "Fahrenheit 911," Michael Moore returns to his home town of Flint, Michigan, to interview a group of black young males who discuss with enthusiasm their intention of joining the military. Moore, unsuccessful in his staged effort to interest US congressmen in encouraging their sons to join the service, points out that since the closing of the large auto plant in Flint there are few job prospects for marginal young people in town. Military service can be the only option for people who see life at home as a dead end.

### ***The Dilemma***

The cost of a military career on the injured and on families, like Skipper Soram's, who have suffered the loss of a loved one, has been undeniably painful. Island governments, too, may pay some of the cost, as they watch their sons and daughters raise their right hands at induction ceremonies to swear an oath of loyalty to a government that is not their own. Perhaps they may feel that they have failed these young people, who leave to join the military because they are unsure that there are jobs for them at home. Yet, are leaders in the islands any more responsible for the lack of economic opportunity here than the city council of Flint, Michigan, is for the job shortage there?



These articles drew an equally passionate but mixed response. In a letter to *Pacific Magazine*, Hibson Palik of Kosrae chided Haglelgam for his "discouraging comments" at a time when all Micronesian soldiers need "our salutes, our prayers for protection, and our thanks for their service." Why? Because they are fighting "to protect and preserve the democratic principles and freedom" that everyone in the FSM enjoys.

"This is just a part of the global war on terrorism," one individual writes in the MicSem forum discussion. "Somebody's gotta do it." As another poster in the forum puts it, "the Army's goal is to save you and me from the bad guys out there." He goes on to point out that the US military is entrusted with the responsibility of protecting Micronesia's sea lanes and territory. Shouldn't we be ready to assist? he asks. Furthermore, he argues, "Why not learn from the US

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military" so that we are prepared to set up a military of our own someday? Another respondent, moving beyond the arguments that military service is helping the islands, suggests that Micronesia's support in this war is repaying a debt to the US. He says that he intends to keep doing what he feels is right: "serve the country that freed my ancestors and everyone else's."

Not everyone agreed. Why should Micronesians make up for the shortage of recruits, one person asked, "if no American is willing to stand up for their own freedom and way of life?" He concludes his posting with the admonition: "Stop glamorizing war!!!" Another poster who identifies himself as a "vet" echoes this message. Military recruiters, when they return empty-handed from their assignments in the US, "are turning to make up the shortfall...in Samoa and Micronesia." While admitting the need for jobs that islanders face, he urges that Micronesians "get an education or work hard to create income, but do not go to war!"

### ***Beyond the Debate over War***

For all the force with which they are expressed, judgments for or against the war in Iraq probably play little part in determining whether islanders join the military. In the "Street Talk" feature of



*Kaselehlie* Press just after the US had invaded Iraq, five of the six Kosraean high school students interviewed claimed to be against the war in Iraq. Even so, Kosraeans are turning out in record numbers when US recruiters make their visits to the island. During the last two years, 28 Kosraeans were inducted into the service, topping every other island group in the region except Palau.

Recruitment in Micronesia has been high in the islands for some years now. Last year alone (2004), 94 young people were sworn into military service in FSM, Palau and the Marshalls; and presumably still more islanders were inducted in various parts of the US. With a hundred or more young Micronesians joining the Armed Services every year, the total number of those serving in the military must be impressive, given the relatively small size of the island populations. While the exact number is unknown, even by the US military itself, the estimates sometimes cited for each nation—possibly 800 for FSM, 200 for Palau, and perhaps 100 for RMI—do not seem unreasonable. The total number of Micronesians from the three nations serving in the military is almost certainly at least 1,000, perhaps even as high as 1,500.

The lure of the US military is not new; Micronesians have been entering military service for years. Back in the mid-1960s when I was teaching at Xavier High School as a young Jesuit scholastic, our graduates would head off to college in Guam and the US almost to the last individual. After a year or so we would begin to hear reports that one or two of them had drifted into the military. In those Trust Territory days, non-citizens could enlist only after a year's residence on US soil. Two of our Xavier graduates, a Palauan and a Chuukese, vanished for years, only to reappear recently with comfortable retirement packages and stories to tell about all the places they had been. Another, John Kintaro from Palau, never made it back alive. After his helicopter was shot down over Vietnam in the early 70s, his remains were sent back for burial with military honors in the presence of his widow and small children.

Most of the twenty or so Xavier graduates who entered the military during those early years were Palauan. Although we never understood the reason for the attraction, the appeal was undeniable. The 33 Palauans, on average, who have been enlisting in the military each year since 2003 are under the same spell that has enchanted many others in their islands some years back. The two men who today hold the highest traditional titles in Palau, Ibedul and



### ***The Irresistible Appeal***

Micronesians have always had a desire to roam and a thirst for new experiences, perhaps a residue of the wanderlust that drove their ancestors to island shores in ocean-going canoes. During the days when Western whalerships and trading vessels plied the seas, islanders could be easily persuaded to sign on as deck hands for a year or two. The tales that they brought back to share over the evening cookfire would have lasted a lifetime. No doubt the great exodus to college in the early 1970s, made possible by extension of federal funds to Micronesians, was more than a quest for higher education; it was also an adventure. By the late 1980s, with the implementation of the Compact of Free Association, thousands were beginning to take advantage of the provision offering them free access to the US. Emigration offered them, as it did to young people in the 1970s, adventure-plus. In this case, the "plus" was not an education, but the chance to find a job.

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***Even in Palau, where salaries are considerably higher, local salaries just can't compare with what Uncle Sam is willing to pay its soldiers.***

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Today recruiters fly in with posters of young men and women in snappy military dress, eyes gazing beyond the camera and beyond the horizon to another world. They are inviting young islanders to the military, just as sailors long ago lured them to become deck hands or stewards. Adventure and travel around the world is just a part of the appeal of what recruiters are selling, but there is much more besides. For those who may have felt that they were drifting through life, there is the sense of stability that the military offers. For those unable to control their behavior—like the islander who never had enough money to indulge his drinking habit—there is the promise of discipline. The money and the benefits that military service offers are certainly a major consideration for most young Micronesian inductees. So is the opportunity to finish college, an achievement that would otherwise be well beyond their financial means.

The military offers all this and a noble purpose as well: helping to free the world from evil, whether in the guise of dictators or terrorists. If something tragic should befall a young man or woman in the line of duty, they have the consolation of knowing that they will be awarded a hero's death. The sorrow that their family is bound to feel at their loss will be assuaged by their pride at the way in which their

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lege who can expect to earn under \$10,000—if he or she is able to find a job at all. A state police sergeant on Pohnpei can expect to make a little more than \$8,000 a year, a beginning teacher about \$6,000, and a store clerk or cashier less than \$3,000. Even in Palau, where salaries are considerably higher, local salaries just can't compare with what Uncle Sam is willing to pay its soldiers.

Then, too, there are the educational benefits for young people who have not finished college and don't see any way of financing their college degree program in the US. A US college education is no longer affordable to most Micronesians, as it was in the early 1970s when Pell Grants and other US federal programs lured Micronesians by the hundreds to US colleges for the first time. Then, a young person, with a decent counselor and a little help from the college, could piece together a funding package to cover tuition and boarding costs. Now, due to sharply increased college costs and fewer federal programs to draw on, it is virtually impossible to do so. Furthermore, Micronesian students no longer qualify for the US federal loans that enable many American students to finish college.

Imagine the reaction of a young Micronesian listening to a recruiter explain that after serving his first three-year tour of duty, this young person is eligible for up to \$35,000 in educational benefits to finish his or her college education. This must seem almost too good to be true. Young men or women who leave college after a year or two can apply their credits and finish their college degree in a University of Maryland program. This, too, is at the expense of their employer, on the sole condition that the young soldier pass the courses. The opportunity must seem irresistible to those islanders who wonder how they are ever going to be able to afford a college education.

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***A Saipanese doing recruitment remarks: "You can't beat recruiting here in the Marianas, in Micronesia."***

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All of this and the intangibles that a stint in the military confers: the discipline that is such an important part of military life, the camaraderie and teamwork that are instilled, and the skills that one can pick up along the way. No wonder Micronesia is a military recruiter's dream!

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Reklai, have both served in the Armed Forces. So have two members of the senate (Alphonso Diaz and Surangel Whipps), while the current vice-president (Camsek Chin) is a retired Army colonel who served on Kwajalein for two years shortly before his retirement.

The record goes back even beyond that, however. Frank Semens from Pohnpei enlisted in the military within a year of graduating from high school on Guam in 1953. He served 22 years as a Ranger and with Special Forces in Vietnam before becoming a drill instructor. Upon retirement he returned to Pohnpei with full retirement benefits, which provide him a pension that is larger than the governor's salary. Another Pohnpeian, Leo Falcam Jr, joined the Marines not long after his graduation from Xavier High School and, as Colonel, he is now commander of the military base on Okinawa.

#### ***What's Different Today?***

Military service has always held a certain appeal for Micronesians. But today its allure is even greater, regardless of the dangers that war holds for those who enlist. When Ngirmidol Meluat died, his younger brother announced his intention to join the Armed Forces as soon as he finished his degree program at Palau Community College. One possible explanation for his enthusiasm for the military service that took the life of his brother can be found in his sister's remark that their dead brother had "taken our name to higher places." When Skipper Soram was buried on Pohnpei, his twin brother told the family that he hoped to retake the military test so that he could enroll. In explaining this decision, his uncle simply said: "We're all proud of Skipper, and his brother wants to follow in his footsteps." Someone remarked to me after Soram's military funeral on Pohnpei that if an Army recruiter had set up a table outside the church he could have had a field day. The real danger of war may frighten parents, but not the young Micronesians who hear the distant sound of a bugle calling them even as they file from a church service laying one of their own to rest.

Military recruiters may find slim pickings in many US cities and towns due to the well publicized dangers and loss of life in Iraq, but they don't seem to have any problem finding interested young men and women in the Pacific. In a recent *New York Times* article,

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***Why should Micronesians make up for the shortage of recruits, one person asked, "if no American is willing to stand up for their own freedom and way of life?"***

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Olympio Magofna, a Saipanese doing recruitment, remarks: "You can't beat recruiting here in the Marianas, in Micronesia." In contrast to the US, where "they are really hurting," Micronesia offers such a ready supply of candidates, he says, that "I can afford to go play golf every other day."

"They have a sense of patriotism that most people just don't understand," is the way Retired Army Major Edward Camacho explains it. How else can you account for the fact that the Northern Marianas now has about 250 men and women serving in Iraq, with hundreds of others posted elsewhere? Young people join the Armed Services, in Camacho's opinion, "because they see for themselves that in the long run it will allow their loved ones to enjoy freedom and prosperity and happiness." David Cohen, head of the Office of Insular Affairs, agrees: "There is a strong sense of patriotism throughout the US territories." Indeed, yellow ribbon decals and stickers carrying the message "Support our troops" can be seen everywhere on Saipan and Guam.

But what about the rest of Micronesia—those islands that are no longer US territories? Is patriotism at work there, too? Not for one young Chuukese woman who admits that she enlisted in the military

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from Hawaii after her family discouraged her from returning home after college, but who left the service even before her term was up. "Fighting for Micronesia and the US are different," she writes in a MicSem forum discussion posting. She claims that she would fight for the US only because it is what soldiers are expected to do. On the other hand, she adds, "If I ever had to fight for Micronesia, it would be because I want to preserve everything that Micronesia stands for." She sees the former as just a job, and the latter as "patriotic."

Another forum discussant, a Chuukese who goes by the name of Saldom, writes that he "joined the Army at the age of 33 after trying other types of work to pay for schooling and other expenses." To him the "Army is just a regular job," but it is one that offers different specialized areas of work to match various personal skills. "There are cooks, truck drivers, medics, pilots, electricians—you name it and

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the Army has it." Domingo Saladier, a Mortlockese who has been with the Army for 18 years, claims that there are many reasons he has chosen to remain in the military so long. There is the discipline, "which builds character and self-worth," the sense of teamwork, and

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even the fun of trying new things. At bottom, however, he admits that he joined the Army and stuck with it so long because of the "job security and the benefits the Army has."

### ***Soldiering As a Job***

Andolin Lucios, a Pohnpeian in his early 20s, was working with us at MicSem a year ago when he suddenly announced that he was flying to Guam to take the military test. Not long after he was inducted, he was quoted in *Pacific Magazine* as explaining his decision, and that of some other islanders today. "People join because the military offers a good salary, and the physical training helps to develop their appearance," he said. Almost as an after-thought, he added, "You get to get off the island and see the world."

For young Micronesians like Lucios who are just finishing school, career prospects in the islands are not very promising. The economies of the Marshalls and FSM have declined since the mid-1990s with the final step-down in Compact funding and they have remained stagnant since then. The numbers entering the labor pool each year when they graduate from school far exceed the few employment openings that are advertised. For that reason, thousands of Micronesians have been leaving home to find jobs in the US, resulting in a yearly emigration of 2,000 from FSM, an estimated 1,000 from the Marshalls, and 300 or so from Palau.

The recruitment package for anyone joining the military today includes a starting salary of \$17,000 a year, a signing bonus of \$5,000, and other benefits, including educational fees, on top of all that. In addition, room, board, transportation and clothing are supplied by their employer (US government), so the salary is nearly expense-free. The salary alone, even aside from the benefits, is eye-popping for someone out of high school or the first two years of col-