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Young fill SOA protest ranks

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COLUMBUS, GA
High school junior Ben Stracquatanio certainly looked out of place among the myriad peace activists gathered along Benning Rd. Sunday as part of the annual SOA Watch rally and mock funeral procession.

The St. Peter Prep junior was sporting a T-Shirt with the message: ?Peace Through Superior Firepower.?

Stracquatanio, 16, traveled with 15 of his classmates from Jersey City, NJ to join other Catholic high school and college students who make up a huge percentage of the folks who come to the gates of Army Post Ft. Benning each fall to protest against the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of the Americas, SOA), a US Army training school for Latin American soldiers.

?I?ve always had a very militaristic view of the world,? Stracquatanio told NCR. ?So I came to learn more about the other side and hear more about the people who had died through this program -- tortured, executed, disappeared.?
Stracquatanio, and the other students were there under the tutelage of Erich Sekel, St. Peter?s assistant director of campus ministry. Stracquatanio doesn?t dispute the charges of torture and murder attributed to SOA graduates, but he still plans to join the military after he completes college.

?I do not feel that the (SOA) should be closed necessarily but definitely reformed,? Stracquatanio said. ?I think more reforms are necessary.?

Sekel, 28, in his second year at St. Peter, calls himself a pacifist. Sekel said his father was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, and was prosecuted for his refusal to fight.

?I see no benefit to violence,? Sekel said as five of his students looked on. The students ?came down to learn ... In the end my job is to bring awareness to social issues. That?s why we brought them down.?

The educational plane trip to Georgia hopefully will help the students ?learn to see the other side, to understand what happens outside the mainstream media," Sekel said. ?If that happens, I have done my job.?

Stracquatanio appears to have learned a few things from his trip. Coming to Ft. Benning ?lets me see the people,? Stracquatanio said. ?They?re not statistics anymore. It?s not, ?OK, there were five dead bodies.? You see who they were. You see what t hey fought for.?

Still, Stracquatanio sees the life of a soldier in his future.
?I don?t want a military that goes out hunting down people,? Stracquatanio said. ?I want a military that fights for the people.?

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