

Volunteering for duty

Veterans of the Iraq war try to complete their mission in a new way - charity

By Anna Badkhen | February 15, 2009

NORTHAMPTON - In April 2004, Marine Captain Tyler Boudreau sat in an abandoned mansion on the southern outskirts of Fallujah and watched the city's residents turn into refugees.

US Marines had surrounded the rebel Sunni city in preparation for an assault, and before the battle began, the American troops ordered Iraqi women, children, and elderly residents to leave. In one day, as many as 70,000 people fled.

"You'd kind of see them. With bags," Boudreau recalled last month, his chopped sentences clacking like rifle shots. "Hand luggage, stuff strapped on their backs. Women in their black outfits. Going away. Who knows where." One elderly couple walked slowly on either side of the road, holding an enormous white sheet stretched between them. He watched them circumnavigate the mansion, then fade into the surrounding farmland.

Four years later, back in Massachusetts, Boudreau began to see reports about the millions of Iraqis displaced by war - crowding into relatives' homes, subsisting in tents and lean-tos pitched in putrid landfills, living in limbo in other Middle Eastern countries or squatting in abandoned houses. The reports brought back memories of the stream of people Boudreau had seen fleeing Fallujah. He felt complicit in the humanitarian crisis.

"Throughout the war we displaced one-fifth of the population! We did. We asked them to go. There's no getting around that we were responsible," said Boudreau.

Remorseful and angered, the retired Marine, who now lives in Northampton, did something extraordinary: He decided to help Iraqis hurt by the war he'd fought. He began raising money to distribute food to displaced Iraqis in Jordan, and started a nonprofit, Collaborative Revolution, that organizes social events for those who had made it to America.

Boudreau is one of an increasing number of Iraq war veterans putting time, energy, and money not toward typical veterans causes, but toward helping Iraqi civilians. Army captain and medic Jonathan Heavey, who also served in Iraq, cofounded a charity that helps Iraqi children get medical treatment abroad. William Dennis Brown Jr., a retired Navy Seal from New Jersey, is planning to run across Iraq to help foster cultural understanding, and raise money for Iraqi schools and hospitals.

This kind of outreach may seem surprising in a war that teaches many soldiers to see every civilian as a threat: a farmer could be a guerrilla fighter, and a woman on the street can bomb a convoy. But it also suggests a new response to the war: An idea that the troops' responsibilities don't end when they deploy back home.

"It seems like almost every week we hear from another veteran who's started on some program or NGO," said Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq war veteran who founded the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, which says it has more than 160,000 members and supporters. "They want to give back and make something right."

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Traditionally, charities founded by veterans have benefited other veterans. The best-known example, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was founded by veterans of the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection to secure healthcare and other benefits for the vets.

Over the years, veterans have also sometimes launched relief efforts to benefit the civilian victims of the wars they fought, usually well after the hostilities ended. In 1981, a paraplegic Marine lieutenant and Vietnam War veteran named Bobby Muller led a delegation of veterans to Vietnam to help the two countries reconcile, and encourage the United States to lift its economic embargo. But such examples are rare. The Iraq veterans are, essentially, forging a new path - trying to help civilian victims and survivors of a war that's still going on.

"It took, like, a decade for World War II veterans to galvanize. It took Vietnam veterans five or six years," said Rieckhoff.

Boudreau wasn't so patient. Last August, he traveled to the sparse rental apartments of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Jordan's capital, Amman, where he and another retired Marine, Luis Montalván, distributed food to refugees living on aid agency handouts and rapidly dwindling savings. Two months later, he helped bring together Iraqi and American children living in the Albany, N.Y., area for a day of painting, chess, and talking. He wrote a book about his military service, "Packing Inferno," and uses the public readings at libraries and community centers across the country to educate Americans about the refugee crisis.

Some members of the military don't even wait for their deployments to end. Heavey was serving as an Army surgeon in Baghdad last year when he felt that he had exhausted the military's resources to treat Iraqi children, and with another American medic, Captain John Knight, launched a nonprofit foundation, Hope.MD.

Heavey's inspiration was a toddler with a life-threatening heart defect: Early in the surgeon's 13-month deployment, an Iraqi doctor showed him the boy's medical file and explained that local hospitals couldn't help the boy. They got electricity and water only sporadically, and many of their qualified professionals had fled the war-ravaged country. Strict rules barred Heavey from treating the child in his own clinic: military hospitals in Iraq rarely treat civilians. For two months, the surgeon tried to get the boy and a guardian US visas to travel to a civilian hospital in the United States, but while they waited for the bureaucratic hurdles to clear, time ran out. The boy died.

"Kids slip through the cracks," said Heavey, who, when he is not deployed, is a physician at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Heavey and Knight hired an Indian company to create a website, and used it to raise \$20,000 in contributions to help Iraqi children travel abroad to be treated. They huddled with Army lawyers to make sure that their charity work wouldn't violate the regulations of their military service. They recruited civilian doctors in the United States and Turkey via e-mail to treat the children for free. And they did most of this work while deployed to Forward Operating Base Justice, a former headquarters and barracks of Saddam Hussein's intelligence services, and the site of Hussein's execution.

They returned to the United States last December and are now working on bringing their 12th child - a boy with a congenital obstructive hydrocephalus - for brain surgery to the University of California, Los Angeles.

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Heavey essentially launched a charity from his laptop on a dust-caked military base in Baghdad - a technical achievement that also suggests why this war is so different for the military personnel fighting there.

An average American stationed in Iraq today will return from his mission - be that trying to rebuild a school, or breaking down the gates of suspected insurgent hideouts - and eat dinner in the mess hall under a giant flat screen TV tuned to CNN, or Fox News, or the BBC. Then he'll go to his room, turn on his laptop, and e-mail his friends back home and catch up on more news. Vietnam veteran and writer Tim O'Brien once wrote that he walked through the village of My Lai several times in 1969 without knowing anything about the massacre of civilians that had taken place there a year earlier. This can't happen in Iraq, where most of the service members have almost as much access to news as they would back at home. It's fair to say that anyone deployed in Iraq is keenly aware of the civilian toll of the fighting.

By the same token, reaching out for help has become much easier. Charity work doesn't have to wait until the troops are back home. "Today, you can make a targeted impact in a way you probably couldn't 25 years ago," Rieckhoff said. "You can start an online campaign, and you can raise \$1,000 for an Iraqi family, and you can send it to them by PayPal, and they can have it by the end of the week."

To a large extent, the veterans doing nonprofit work see it as a way to finish their mission by other means. They deployed to Iraq hoping to change life there: stem the insurgency, end the violence, rebuild schools and hospitals, replace a totalitarian state with Western-style democracy.

"The job I was doing over there, I'm very proud of it," said Brown, the Navy Seal from New Jersey, who battled Iraqi insurgents in Baghdad, protected senior Iraqi politicians, and helped detain suspected terrorists.

But the way Brown sees it now, fighting terrorists is only part of the battle. "We need to reach out to the Iraqis and we need to explain who we are and what we're really about," said Brown, who has since retired and now studies law at Rutgers University.

To do that, he decided to run across Iraq - more than 500 miles from Dohuk in the north to Basra in the south. The run, he hopes, will foster intercultural understanding and raise money for Iraqi schools and hospitals.

Brown's idea reflects the increasingly complex nature of modern war, in which good will can be as effective a weapon as an M4 assault rifle. As Hussein Dizzaye, a young Iraqi from the northern city of Irbil, put it in an e-mail interview,

such work can "show the true side of the Americans for the Iraqi people, that side they didn't get the chance to see" when the troops were patrolling their streets.

Brown and others trying to help Iraqis in their own country face all the struggles and limitations of doing charity work in a war zone, the absence of security and the lack of basic infrastructure. Repeated visits by Americans in uniform - even if they are doctors - can also backfire, putting families in danger of punishment by anti-American militias. Brown himself is concerned that the security he'll need for his run will send a mixed message - "If he has all these guns around him," Brown said, worrying about how Iraqis will see his run, "how is this a gesture of peace?"

The veterans' spontaneous efforts are unlikely to end the conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and more than 4,200 Americans over almost six years. But their proliferation may help chip away at the anti-American sentiment in the war-torn country, and encourage others to join the cause.

"Here's an American guy who was in the military," said Brown, "and he's coming back without a weapon."

Anna Badkhen has reported extensively from Iraq for Salon, the Christian Science Monitor, and other publications. She lives in Massachusetts and is writing a book about war and food. ■

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