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'I don't have will to go back to war'

After seeing combat in Afghanistan twice, a Darien man and his family are fighting the Army's call for a third tour, this time to Iraq

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January 27, 2007

Denied.

It was the only word Drew Sleezer really heard when he got the phone call this week.

Sleezer, 22, who already had served two combat tours in Afghanistan, pleaded with the Army to allow him to continue with his college education rather than return to duty.

Instead, he has been ordered to ship out for Iraq June 3. He got the news Thursday.

The Darien man was 17 when he joined the Army, delighted by a \$5,000 signing bonus and eager to fight in Afghanistan. It all looked so good: a chance to travel, to pay for college and to fight in a meaningful war after the 2001 terrorist attacks.

He made an eight-year commitment, with three years of active duty and the remainder as an inactive reservist. He said he was told the chances of his being called back after his discharge from active duty were remote.

But the ongoing involvement in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq have forced the military to dip deep into the reserve system.

Sleezer is one of 10,000 Individual Ready Reserve soldiers called back to active duty--most involuntarily, according to the Army--since Sept. 11, 2001. About 5,300 have appealed for exemptions and about half of those appeals have been granted.

For Sleezer, his new life is once again in jeopardy. For his family, a third deployment means months of torment, waiting for his return.

"I don't have the will to go back to war," Sleezer said. "I left that part of my life behind me."

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But this is what he signed up for when he begged his parents years ago for their permission to enlist before his 18th birthday. And even though he was honorably discharged from active duty in 2005, the Army is well within its rights to call him back.

Paul Rieckhoff, a war veteran and founder of Operation Truth, now called Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said the call-up of Individual Ready Reserve troops has been extensive.

"I wish this guy's story was unusual, but it's not," Rieckhoff said. "The reason they call people like him back is because the military is too small. They have a manpower crisis."

Soldiers have two choices in fulfilling the non-active portion of their Army service. The first is the Selected Reserve, where soldiers go for regular training. In the Individual Ready Reserve, they fulfill their obligation by remaining on a list where they can be called up for service. There are about 90,000 Individual Ready Reserve members and about 535,000 people in the Selected Reserve, which includes the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve.

Sleezer's military career began on Sept. 11, 2002, when he headed for Ft. Benning, Ga., and then to Hawaii for a yearlong training program.

The Hinsdale South High School graduate became a sniper, and it suited him, in some ways. He had grown up around guns. He and his father would hunt pheasants, ducks and doves.

"He was good," Sleezer's father, Ed, said of his son. "He still is."

But war is different. When Sleezer came home on leave from his first tour in Afghanistan, he was darker, edgier, family members said. He would snap at his parents and siblings with little provocation. He was a raw nerve.

His behavior seemed influenced by a pervasive sense of mortality, and he was guided by the notion that his sacrifice made him beyond reproach.

"I remember telling him how proud I was of him, but I remember feeling scared, thinking, 'Oh my God, this could break this kid,'" his mother, Sharon, said.

Sleezer agrees with his family's description of his attitude, adding that he drank too much and that petty arguments seemed so absurd.

"It's hard to separate civilian life and war in a two-week time period," he said. "Knowing that I had to go back, that the job wasn't done, I couldn't let my guard down. I remember getting into some blowout arguments with [my parents] and thinking, 'I don't care what you're saying right now.'"

At the end of his leave, Sleezer was shipped back to Afghanistan for another six-month tour.

By that point, he said, he had seen men die in battle, including three from his battalion. One was killed by a roadside bomb, another was shot in the neck and the third died when a truck rolled on top of him. An Afghani man helping the American forces was shot seven times by a rival tribe.

"We were trying to save his life, but he ended up dying right there in front of us," Sleezer said.

Though he escaped physically intact, Sleezer said the stress of what he saw in combat took its toll,

though not on the battlefield.

"At the time, it was, 'Hey, this is my job, and it's what I'm here to do,'" he said. "I wouldn't have nightmares there, but when I came down from it, that's when it started to bother me. I still have dreams, that they're coming to get me and I can't shoot back."

Sleezer won't say if he'd taken any lives during the fighting.

"We don't usually disclose if we killed people," he said. "But there was combat. I'll leave it at that."

Still, there were bright spots, like the time he helped guard election results as they made their way to Kabul for counting.

But by the time he left active duty, Sleezer had lost all motivation to fight.

"Nobody had any gas left in their tank," he said. "We didn't care about the mission anymore. It was like, 'Just send the people here to replace us.'"

He received an honorable discharge in September 2005. He assured himself and his parents there was only about a 5 percent chance he'd be called back.

Soon, the best parts of Sleezer's personality returned. He was less fretful and his "I could die tomorrow" attitude faded as he grew more focused.

He enrolled in Eastern Illinois University, determined to get a degree. Money for college was one of the military's greatest gifts since Sleezer's father suffered a debilitating stroke years earlier and was out of work for months, the family income stretched thin.

Sleezer joined a fraternity and started dating. In his mind, he had almost no affiliation with the Army.

But just after Thanksgiving, an official looking package arrived from the Army and sent the family reeling. The words Operation Iraqi Freedom only added to his mother's anxiety.

Sharon Sleezer said cancer runs in her family and when she learned she'd have to send her son off to war, it felt like another unwanted diagnosis.

She started writing letters to local politicians, appealing to anyone who might listen, but hasn't gotten help.

"I refuse to be a Cindy Sheehan, being part of a protest after the fact," she said. "This is so much bigger than Drew. But where does it start? It starts with a mom saying, 'Honey, I'll support you. We're going to fight this.'"

When is enough, enough, she asked?

"My first and foremost thought is that he's going to get killed if he goes back again," she said. "He's not the same boy he was at 18, when this all looked so glamorous."

Maj. Anne Edgecomb, an Army spokeswoman, said 715,000 Army soldiers had been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan and the surrounding regions. About 171,000 of them served in multiple deployments.

While she was sympathetic to Sleezer's situation, the Army's expectations were clear.

"Soldiers who receive mobilization orders are expected to comply with the order," Edgecomb said.
"However, the Army wants to take care of soldiers and their families."

She said soldiers who lose a first appeal can appeal again.

"Regardless of how many soldiers submit requests, we will continue to use the same standards to evaluate each request to determine if the mobilization will cause undue hardship for the soldier and his or her family," Edgecomb said.

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