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ARTS & CULTURE

May 9, 2007

The Known Soldier

Iraq veteran Paul Rieckhoff returned home and began telling the world what he saw.

by *Valley Haggard*

Richbrau Brewing Company may be an unusual venue for a literary event, but the featured author is far from your average literary guy. A former Wall Street analyst and football coach, Paul Rieckhoff, the author of "Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier's Perspective," may be a trendsetter for a new genre of nonfiction memoirs by veterans of the Iraq War. Darkly funny, scary, unflinching and deeply personal, "Chasing Ghosts" rises above the droves of speculative Iraq War analysis already lining the shelves of academia.

After a year in Baghdad as a first lieutenant and infantry platoon leader for the U.S. Army National Guard with 38 men under his command, Rieckhoff returned home to New York's East Village, founded Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and began the television circuit.

With high praise from former Vietnam vets, foreign affairs correspondents, Chuck D. from Public Enemy, author Chuck Palahniuk and comedian Al Franken, Rieckhoff's account of the catastrophic failures of our nation's latest war appeals to a varied readership. Style spoke with Rieckhoff about returning from Iraq, writing a book and what it's going to take to heal on a personal and a national level.

Style: *You had conflicted feelings going into the war. If you knew then what you know now, would you do it again?*

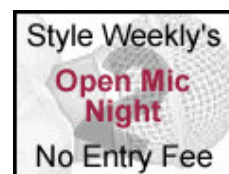
Rieckhoff: I would. But that's a better question to ask the president. Maybe I would have planned better; I would have brought more Arabic lingual books and less bullets. But what if Bush and the American public knew then what they know now? There's this duality existing within a lot of us right now. Wanting to serve our country, thirsting for adventure, but you don't get to pick the wars. Iraq is what my generation is stuck with.

What is the main message you hope your book conveys?

I hope it shows from a soldier's perspective how screwed up this whole thing is and the enormities of the



After serving in Iraq, Paul Rieckhoff wrote his chronicle "Chasing Ghosts" to tell stories of the war and to let people know how "screwed up this whole thing is." He did get a free statue out of the deal, though. [Visit the "Chasing Ghosts" website](#)



problems that lay ahead. Bush says this is the war of our generation, but I think cleaning up the mess is the war of our generation. How hard is it to rebuild a neighborhood? It's so much more complex than the black and white representation of the media. I hope the emotion in the book helps break it down to a human level.

So many people are coming back from Iraq with severe trauma. How have you been able to return and do so many positive things?

I have my own issues. I'm not unscathed. Not everybody comes home with an amputation, but no one comes home unchanged. I'm lucky to have great friends and family. And the work at IAVA is therapeutic for me. It's important for the people that we're educating, but we're also helping ourselves. And writing a book like this forces you to become incredibly candid and vulnerable. That's been therapeutic too.

What do you think it will take to heal from this war?

I think it's going to take a lot of time, a lot of understanding and education. And also a lot of resources. Taking care of people when they come home is going to take money. You can't nickel-and-dime people who are coming back from war. Being an Iraq vet in a bar is like being the only black kid in a class. You feel like you have to represent the whole demographic. But it is our responsibility to help educate and heal.

The book is incredibly detailed. Were you writing it in your head as you were living it?

I think so. I was writing it in my head, but I was also writing letters home to my girlfriend about two to three times a week. An upside to the rigor of the military was I was also doing patrol logs. And I had a good group of thoughtful, articulate guys that I could bounce things off of. And then when I got home, I found out my girlfriend had transcribed all of my letters into e-mail. By the time I got back, people I didn't even know, friends of friends, had heard some of my stories. That's one of the things that encouraged me to write the book. People were hungry to hear the personal stories. It seemed no one else had visualized or put actual people in the moment. Chuck Palahniuk said, "I write books for people who don't read books," and that's what I've tried to do too.

Considering your background in Wall Street, football and the military, did you ever imagine you'd write a book?

No, but I think it's important to tell this story, because it's not just my story. I tried to think of ways to get this in front of people who may not be otherwise involved in politics. Last week I spoke at a Henry Rollins show. I've gotten e-mails from all these kids who tell me this is the first book they've read in their lives. I poured my heart and soul into it — otherwise, what would have been the point? It's been an incredible experience. **S**

Paul Rieckhoff will be at Richbrau Brewing Company May 15 at 5:30 p.m.

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