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Newsday.com

After Iraq, vets air their doubts

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Special to Newsday

12:04 AM EDT, October 12, 2007

Amid talk of soldiers returning from Iraq to battle traumatic brain injuries, lost limbs and a beleaguered Veterans Administration, the leader of a national group of veterans said last night that the recent controversy on contract security workers is the latest example of an illogical war in Iraq.

"This stuff is just shady on so many levels," said Paul Rieckhoff, the executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and the author of "Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: a Soldier's Perspective."

The former platoon leader of a unit serving in central Baghdad spoke to a group of about 50 people at the Book Revue in Huntington. He was joined by two other Iraq veterans who are critical of the war.

"There are at least as many contractors as we have troops on the ground," Rieckhoff said. "It smells bad, it's wasteful and it's not good for America."

One of the largest contractors working in Iraq, Blackwater USA, provides security for State Department employees. The company has been under fire since a group of its employees shot and killed a group of Iraqi civilians on Sept. 16, Iraq officials say. Blackwater says they were under fire.

Rieckhoff said that one of the primary reasons that the U.S. uses private security firms is that those workers are not counted among the war's casualties.

"You don't have to report the Blackwater deaths," he said.

Also at the bookstore last night was former Army specialist Colby Buzzell, whose startling online dispatches from Iraq three years at once drew the ire of his military commanders and interest from publishing companies.

Buzzell and fellow Iraq vet Jason Christopher Hartley spoke about the boredom they experienced in between firefights. Buzzell, a contributing writer at Esquire magazine and the author of "My War: Killing Time in Iraq," said he watched movies on a laptop and would bid on items on Ebay.

"It's boring as hell," said Hartley, who wrote "Just Another Soldier."



His comment drew a rebuke from a Vietnam War veteran in the back of the room.

"There wasn't too much boredom out there," the man said of his time in the conflict.

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