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On the front for a new generation of veterans

by **patrick arden / metro new york**

JAN 31, 2008

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INTERVIEW. In his office, Paul Rieckhoff has a photo of his old Army platoon from just days before it was deployed to Iraq in the spring of 2003.

“My unit is probably a good test case,” said Rieckhoff, who now runs the advocacy organization Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. He was the platoon’s commander. “Thankfully all 38 came home alive. A couple of them are back over there.”

He singled out the determined faces. “This guy — Donaldson — is there for a third time,” Rieckhoff said. “This guy became an officer. About a quarter of my guys got divorced. Some are in college. One committed suicide a couple of months after he got back. That’s part of what drove me to start this group.”

Founded in 2004, IAVA now counts 95,000 members. Rieckhoff is also the author of the wartime memoir “Chasing Ghosts.”

You were critical of the way troops went into Iraq, ill equipped and untrained. Are things better now?

Yeah, they are. The equipment is dramatically better. The training is better. But there are limitations to what military force alone can do.

Militarily, there’s definitely progress. But the Army doesn’t issue magic wands. I couldn’t make Sunnis and Shias get along; I couldn’t fix electrical grids. I was trained in how to kill people and blow stuff up.

The thing I worry about most is the simplistic level of the argument. Everybody wants black and white, good and bad. A lot of people are against the war, but the big question is, what do we do next?

The president has said the war on terrorism is the greatest fight of our generation. I disagree. I think fixing

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America's image and repairing the Middle East are the biggest challenges of our generation.

When you returned, did you feel the war was no longer important to people?

When I got home, the biggest story in America was Janet Jackson's exposed breast at the Super Bowl. I had friends dying in Fallujah and [others] facing mammoth challenges ahead. It was frustrating. Last week, a good friend of mine from college, Josh, was killed in a helicopter accident in Texas. I found out he had been killed with three others, and I flipped on the TV, wondering whether anyone was going to cover this accident. Every channel was dedicated to Heath Ledger. Thousands of people gathered outside Ledger's house with camera phones. Guys like Josh are dying every day, and America's not paying attention.

What can America do?

Veterans issues need to be a priority. The big one is going to be a new GI Bill. The GI Bill right now doesn't even pay 50 percent of education costs. A new GI Bill can cost under \$2 billion — that's what we spend in Iraq in a week. Studies have shown that for every dollar invested in the World War II GI Bill, seven bucks came into the GDP.

We need to reform the VA to deal with new issues, like traumatic brain injury. As many as one in 10 people coming home could have a closed-head injury where they were near a blast and now they're having vision problems, hearing problems, dizziness. The VA should also include women's issues: 15 percent of vets are female, and they're really underserved.

Another issue is protecting Iraqi interpreters. We're working with human rights and legal groups and some folks in the State Dept. to try to figure out how we can provide protection for these Iraqis who've put their lives on the line for us.

In Iraq, did you know you were writing a book?

Hell no. After I got back, my girlfriend handed me a disk that had every letter I had written. She'd transcribe and blast them out in e-mails to let my friends know I was still alive. Some Vietnam vets I admire pulled me aside and said, "You have some good stories — if you put them in a book, you would help people understand this war." That's

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what it was for me. I wanted people to get a grunt's understanding of what happens.

Out in the cold

Rieckhoff joined the Reserve in 1999 and went to Iraq in 2003. "Not enough pieces were put into place" to support National Guard and Reserve soldiers, who account for nearly half of the forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rieckhoff said. "Their families are isolated."



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