

What the News Didn't Tell You

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I spent most of my time in Iraq behind a desk as the Chief Logistics Planner for the Kansas National Guard, 287th Sustainment Brigade, moving people and supplies across southern Iraq. Our work space would remind you of the NASA control center, with work stations in rows, each a little higher than the one in front, big screens on the wall displaying mission-essential information, maps, and the news. The news was almost always on, which helped keep us in touch with what was happening in the world around us. It also broadcasted news of the war in Iraq. At times, it could be very disheartening to hear the stories that were almost always less than accurate. What was even more frustrating was never seeing reporters touch on the good news; there was plenty of it. I saw this firsthand while working with a special section of our own brigade that helped local communities become stronger and more self-sufficient.

We were all encouraged to get involved as a way for us to get to know the people living in the communities and see all the good happening around us. This was especially important for the soldiers whose jobs exposed them daily to danger and the ugly side of the war. It was important to their wellbeing to see and be part of the positive. To this day, I never pass up an opportunity to tell these stories. The American people deserve to know we made a difference and that our efforts were not in vain. I want America to know that her sons and daughters were heroic in their efforts and that my brothers and sisters in arms made progress to keep the fight off of our soil. Whether you are a supporter of the war or not, one fact remains constant: we were there. To us, it didn't matter how we got there. We were there and had a job to do. I truly believe, based on my own personal experience, that we have made a difference and saved lives. We

influenced young Iraqi men to use their talents constructively and earn an honest living instead of becoming insurgents. I'm proud to have been part of it.

In my down time, I volunteered for many projects, like the "Read Iraq" program where we visited local elementary schools and read to the kids learning English as a second language. These visits were very important to our mission of earning the hearts and minds of the locals. Little did I know, this would be the most rewarding and emotional experience I would have during my deployment. The kids taught me more than I taught them. On February 3, 2009, we arrived at the Al Soonobar elementary school. The school had approximately forty-five students, four teachers, and one head master. The building was made of mud and had to be rebuilt every two years. There was no electricity or running water. The kids were very proud of their school and eager to have visitors read to them. I chose to read the book *One Fish, Two Fish* by Dr. Seuss. I would cue the kids to yell "one fish" when I held up one finger and "two fish" when I held up two fingers. I was so moved by their hunger to learn. They were proud of their school, which was below the standard that we allow even our pets to inhabit. They didn't seem to mind that they had nothing. They didn't know any better.

We left the books for them, which they accepted as treasures. It reminded me of how spoiled we are as Americans and just how much we take for granted. I wished everyone I knew could experience what I experienced that day. I wanted my kids and family to get involved as well. I wanted to do more. I enlisted the help of my kids and co-workers back home. I sent emails and pictures telling about my experience and asked them to send books and school supplies. The response was awesome. I received several boxes filled with books, supplies, and toys that I was able to personally deliver. It was also a way for people at home to directly impact the lives of the people of Iraq. And it helped me show my kids the importance of being a part of something much bigger than themselves.

My favorite part of visiting the schools was seeing the students' excitement as we approached. They ran alongside the convoy laughing and waving. People

came out of their houses to wave as we passed by. We were always greeted by the local Sheik who offered us chai before going into the classroom. The kids couldn't wait to get started. The second time I visited, several of the kids proudly read to me. I could feel a lump in my throat as I watched them, thinking of how resilient and strong they were to endure so much and yet find joy in the simple things which I had put little thought into. I wondered if, just by my being there that day, one of the children might be discouraged from becoming an insurgent.

I read more to the kids and went through a stack of flashcards that my family sent. I was especially proud when they knew exactly what to say when they saw a picture of a foot. After the reading lesson, we passed out the school supplies and toys. Every child received a stuffed toy cat and immediately started laughing and making cat noises. They were just like our kids. We spent the rest of the afternoon coloring and playing soccer. As we were coloring, I remember looking up and seeing several soldiers sitting next to a child, all of them lost in the moment. For that afternoon we forgot we were at war. For that afternoon there was no hate and we were all the same. For that afternoon we all missed our kids a little more. I was beginning to see that no matter where we live or what life throws our way, we are all the same. We all want to feel important and to be loved. These kids deserved a future just like ours do.

Spending time with the students, much of our communication came through laughter and affection. But the critical task of bridging the language barrier—whether with the students, farmers, or local officials—fell to our interpreters. It was my job to ensure they were paid and protected while on missions. This experience enabled me to put a face and name to Iraq and to develop a personal bond to this country. I grew to know these guys and their stories. They shared with me how life was before the war and how it is now. These stories reminded me that freedom isn't free and that Americans take it for granted all too often. These guys were all college graduates, fathers, husbands, and sons and, like us, loved their country. They were so grateful that we came to liberate and overthrow

Saddam Hussein. One of them even told me he loved George Bush and asked if I could personally thank him when I returned home. Requests like this always raised a lump in my throat and made my heart swell with pride.

It was very dangerous for the Iraqi interpreters. If Saddam loyalists found out they were working for us, they could be kidnapped, beaten, or killed. The same could happen to their families. Therefore, they protected their families by working far from home and keeping it a secret, even from their wives. One man told his family he found work in a restaurant several miles from home and would return on his four days off each month. Little did they know he was here with me, helping teach Iraqi children. The interpreters earned just a couple hundred dollars a month, but it was good pay compared to anything they could find in the local economy. I always asked them why they wanted to risk everything to work for the United States. One man's answer will stay with me forever: When he was a teenager, he witnessed all seven of his older brothers get killed after refusing to join Saddam's army. They allowed him to live as a lesson. He would be expected to join the army when he became of age; if not, he knew the consequences. He admired his brothers for refusing. They felt so strongly about not being a part of something evil that they would rather lose their lives. In honor of his brothers, he decided to go to college, learn English, and work for the United States. He wanted to contribute to the liberation of Iraq. Working for us was his way of saying thank you. Working with these men taught me that we are all the same. We all want to be free and there is patriotism in every country. It was only by the grace of God that I was born in the United States. I could have just as easily been born in Iraq. I am honored to have served in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In my twenty years in the military, my deployment to Iraq was the most fulfilling, impactful, and, by far, the most important mission I have ever been on. I was able to witness many milestones for that country: peaceful provincial elections, the opening of a water-bottling plant, programs to help women start businesses, new elementary schools, the start of the Iraqi Truck Company. It was

a sad day for me when President Obama declared that we would pull out. I remember thinking to myself, “What’s going to happen to the interpreters, their families, and the children of the Al Soonobar Elementary School, not to mention thousands of others wanting to be free?” It was my opinion that we should’ve stayed longer until the newly democratic country was stable. I only hope that twenty years from now, Iraq is a strong and thriving. I’ll know that those of us who sacrificed our time and lives did not do so in vain. Maybe, just maybe, I will be able to return to Iraq one day as a tourist, showing my kids or grandkids where I was as we tour the Ziggurat of Ur and Abraham’s house. Time will tell.

