

Abby Schirmacher  
December, 2020  
JRNL 4351  
Original News Story

## **Iraq and Beyond**

*American servicemen reflect on their time in Iraq and share their experiences in the war - camaraderie, blood, fire, and even growth.*

From sleeping in a desert in Kuwait with harsh and freezing temperatures to facing near-death experiences like a mortar landing inches away, living in a warzone is no easy task. Fighting for your country? A completely different story.

The treacherous realities of conflict overseas are often taken for granted by everyday Americans. These experiences in Iraq shared by American troops and Iraqi citizens are brutal commonalities in war. Specific details unique to two individuals and their experience set the scene for the 2003-2011 Iraq War.

Lieutenant Colonel David Kaczmarek is a decorated member of the United States Army assigned to Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan in his military career. As the insurgency in Iraq began following the first and second invasion, he experienced the realities of the transition from Saddam Hussein's rule to the United States Army's role in rebuilding the country.

Lt. Col. Kaczmarek reflects on the state of Iraq at the time, where American troops had to prepare themselves physically and emotionally to deal with the realities of war. "I remember the first memorial ceremony we had for a young person who was killed in our organization... I still

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remember his name. Never met him, but I just remember that was a very impactful time at that first memorial ceremony,” he says.

Stewart Elliott, Director of Military Affairs at the University of Colorado Boulder, served as a Navy Seal. During his time in Iraq, Elliott was assigned to special operations command with General McChrystal. He worked day and night in combat and remembers the relief of getting on a plane home after this deployment.

A typical day in Iraq was often different than an everyday citizen would expect. Military leaders strived to establish an environment that was comfortable for the men and women deployed overseas. Many bases featured mess halls similar to a cafeteria in the United States, and offered mail services and meaningful events like Thanksgiving dinner to boost morale. Bases farther from zones of conflict may be equipped with fitness centers and even swimming pools.

However, a desert in the middle east is still a war zone, regardless of additional amenities. Often, both men’s organizations faced mass casualties and the realities of war were apparent. “There’s a place in Germany called Landstuhl where they have a military hospital,” Elliott remembers. “After they stabilized you in Iraq they would fly you directly to there and just going there is heartbreaking because you have 18-19-year-old kids that are going to be permanently dismembered for the rest of their life, so that really brings it home.”

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A typical assumption associated with military forces is the lasting emotional impacts of combat, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#), about 11-20% of Veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in the Iraq War experience PTSD post deployment.

For Lt. Col. Kaczmarek, a specific moment affected his life back at home. “I remember walking by the surgical area and the door was open... I was on my way down there to donate blood. I remember seeing they had taken a mop bucket and had been using it to clean off the surgical area. Right outside the door, they literally dumped an entire bucket of bloody water. You’d think ‘ok, that’s not a big deal’ but that was one of the things, I don’t know why it set me off but it definitely impacted me a little bit. You get shot at, you go see people get shot and watching explosions but it was that that really kind of set me off,” he says.

Following this encounter he took advantage of psychological support from the military in order to cope with these traumatic experiences. He stresses the importance of these services and continues to encourage his fellow members of service to support their mental and emotional health at home. The realities of combat are harsh; therefore, it’s common for veterans to carry their experiences with them.

Elliott expands on this in his own experience. “For me, probably the only time that sense of helplessness [was] when you know you’re in a trailer and there are mortars landing all around you when you’re trying to sleep and you pray that one of those things doesn’t land on your little

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shelter, that's just things you can't control. But I think, me personally, probably had some sleep stuff and some anxiety after continually going overseas. Obviously a lot better now but back in the heat of it, definitely stress will get you after a while," he says.

At the same, strong camaraderie held the troops together. Service members find a sense of belonging during their time overseas. Surrounded by those who are sharing a unique experience, many build strong connections to their fellow peers and develop a new understanding of life in serving their country. In the Iraq war specifically, 18-19 year old men and women served their country with little life experience but a passion for their work in one way or another. Young people may join the army for numerous reasons; lack of a specific career path, promise in the GI bill following their service, or a discovered calling in military combat. Regardless, the lessons they learn are valuable and instill strong ethical reasoning and problem solving skills later in life.

"What it comes down to is the individuals that you're there with. You're never going to get closer to a group of people and you really care about people when you're part of the same team and going through the same experience together. It really galvanizes people," says Lt. Col. Kaczmarek. Similarly for Elliott, "The camaraderie is really good. I was a Navy Seal so [it was] a pretty specialized group that I worked with."

Despite many unfortunate circumstances of war, experiences in Iraq lead to growth and opportunities for these veterans. Both men continued their careers to focus on different aspects of

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military service and continue to bring awareness to the importance of the men and women who fight for our country.

Lt. Col. Kaczmarek is an ISSP Military Fellow in the Fletcher School at Tufts University, and is currently enrolled in several courses including Role of Force in International Politics, Civil Resistance, International Security, and Foreign Relations of Modern China. His knowledge of foreign affairs and international relations is extensive. Everyday, he is surrounded by wonderful people who share similar passions. This makes his work feel worthwhile.

Elliott, a Boulder native, returned to Colorado to raise his kids and ended up back at CU Boulder. He started the Veterans and Military Affairs program which now resides in the newly established CASE building. The program offers scholarships and student aid from VA work-study funding of about \$3 million including \$1.5 million in support from the Anschutz Foundation.

Especially in regards to the Iraq War, we tend to forget the ultimate sacrifice that members of the military made in serving our country during such desperate times. Americans go about their everyday lives, often unaware of the circumstances overseas. Today, many troops remain in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc. Though domestic news is more widely discussed, the state of America abroad continues to be largely relevant for American servicemen and women.

“The individuals that went there and fought there, it’s sometimes difficult. In conflicts like that you have the support of the nation as much as you do, but not at the level that you would have

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seen as the Second World War. Those types of conflicts being an all-volunteer force, it doesn't necessarily affect the population as much," Lt. Col. explains. "The American public can continue to live their lives... they are able to do that because they don't necessarily have to worry about their external security. That's because of those younger volunteers that are out there every single day that decided to give up part of their lives for kind of a greater cause... for those young people to be able to make those decisions and be able to put their lives on the line I think is extremely important."