

I Miss Iraq. I Miss My Gun. I Miss My War.

A year after coming home from a tour in Iraq, a soldier returns home to find out he left something behind. By Brian Mockenhaupt

A few months ago, I found a Web site loaded with pictures and videos from Iraq, the sort that usually aren't seen on the news. I watched insurgent snipers shoot American soldiers and car bombs disintegrate markets, accompanied by tinny music and loud, rhythmic chanting, the soundtrack of the propaganda campaigns. Video cameras focused on empty stretches of road, building anticipation. Humvees rolled into view and the explosions brought mushroom clouds of dirt and smoke and chunks of metal spinning through the air. Other videos and pictures showed insurgents shot dead while planting roadside bombs or killed in firefights and the remains of suicide bombers, people how they're not meant to be seen, no longer whole. The images sickened me, but their familiarity pulled me in, giving comfort, and I couldn't stop. I clicked through more frames, hungry for it. This must be what a shot of dope feels like after a long stretch of sobriety. Soothing and nauseating and colored by everything that has come before. My body tingled and my stomach ached, hollow. I stood on weak legs and walked into the kitchen to make dinner. I sliced half an onion before putting the knife down and watching slight tremors run through my hand. The shakiness lingered. I drank a beer. And as I leaned against this kitchen counter, in this house, in America, my life felt very foreign.

I've been home from Iraq for more than a year, long enough for my time there to become a memory best forgotten for those who worried every day that I was gone. I could see their relief when I returned. Life could continue, with futures not so uncertain. But in quiet moments, their relief brought me guilt. Maybe they assume I was as overjoyed to be home as they were to have me home. Maybe they assume if I could do it over, I never would have gone. And maybe I wouldn't have. But I miss Iraq. I miss the war. I miss war. And I have a very hard time understanding why.

I'm glad to be home, to have put away my uniforms, to wake up next to my wife each morning. I worry about my friends who are in Iraq now, and I wish they weren't. Often I hated being there, when the frustrations and lack of control over my life were complete and mind-bending. I questioned my role in the occupation and whether good could come of it. I wondered if it was worth dying or killing for. The suffering and ugliness I saw disgusted me. But war twists and shifts the landmarks by which we navigate our lives, casting light on darkened areas that for many people remain forever unexplored. And once those darkened spaces are lit, they become part of us. At a party several years ago, long before the Army, I listened to a friend

who had served several years in the Marines tell a woman that if she carried a pistol for a day, just tucked in her waistband and out of sight, she would feel different. She would see the world differently, for better or worse. Guns empower. She disagreed and he shrugged. No use arguing the point; he was just offering a little piece of truth. He was right, of course. And that's just the beginning.

I've spent hours taking in the world through a rifle scope, watching life unfold. Women hanging laundry on a rooftop. Men haggling over a hindquarter of lamb in the market. Children walking to school. I've watched this and hoped that someday I would see that my presence had made their lives better, a redemption of sorts. But I also peered through the scope waiting for someone to do something wrong, so I could shoot him. When you pick up a weapon with the intent of killing, you step onto a very strange and serious playing field. Every morning someone wakes wanting to kill you. When you walk down the street, they are waiting, and you want to kill them, too. That's not bloodthirsty; that's just the trade you've learned. And as an American soldier, you have a very impressive toolbox. You can fire your rifle or lob a grenade, and if that's not enough, call in the tanks, or helicopters, or jets. The insurgents have their skill sets, too, turning mornings at the market into chaos, crowds into scattered flesh, Humvees into charred scrap. You're all part of the terrible magic show, both powerful and helpless.

That men are drawn to war is no surprise. How old are boys before they turn a finger and thumb into a pistol? Long before they love girls, they love war, at least everything they imagine war to be: guns and explosions and manliness and courage. When my neighbors and I played war as kids, there was no fear or sorrow or cowardice. Death was temporary, usually as fast as you could count to sixty and jump back into the game. We didn't know yet about the darkness. And young men are just slightly older versions of those boys, still loving the unknown, perhaps pumped up on dreams of duty and heroism and the intoxicating power of weapons. In time, war dispels many such notions, and more than a few men find that being freed from society's professed revulsion to killing is really no freedom at all, but a lonely burden. Yet even at its lowest points, war is like nothing else. Our culture craves experience, and that is war's strong suit. War peels back the skin, and you live with a layer of nerves exposed, overdosing on your surroundings, when everything seems all wrong and just right, in a way that makes perfect sense. And then you almost die but don't, and are born again, stoned on life and mocking death. The explosions and gunfire fry your nerves, but you want to hear them all the same. Something's going down.

For those who know, this is the open secret: War is exciting. Sometimes I was in awe of this, and sometimes I felt low and mean for loving it, but I loved it still. Even in its quiet moments, war is brighter, louder, brasher, more fun, more tragic, more wasteful. More. More of everything. And even then I knew I would someday miss it, this life so strange. Today the war has distilled to moments and feelings, and somewhere in these memories is the reason for the wistfulness.

One night my platoon sergeant's truck is swallowed in flames, a terrible, beautiful, boiling bloom of red and orange and yellow, lighting the darkness for a moment. Somehow we don't die, one more time. Another night, there's McCarthy bitching, the cherry of his cigarette bobbing in the dark, bitching that he won't be on the assault team, that he's stuck as a turret gunner for the night. We'd been out since early that morning, came back for dinner, and are preparing to raid a weapons dealer. Our first real raid. I heave my body armor onto my shoulders, settling its too-familiar weight. Then the helmet and first-aid kit and maps and radio and ammunition and rifle and all the rest. Now I look like everyone else, an arm of this strange and destructive organism, covered in armor and guns. We crowd around a satellite map spread across a Humvee hood and trace our route. Wells, my squad leader, rehearses our movements. Get in quick. Watch the danger zones. If he has a gun, kill him. I look around the group, at these faces I know so well, and feel the collective strength, this ridiculous power. The camaraderie of men in arms plays a part, for sure. The shared misery and euphoria and threat of death. But there is something more: the surrender of self, voluntary or not, to the machine. Do I believe in the war? Not important. Put that away and live in the moment, where little is knowable and even less is controllable, when my world narrows to one street, one house, one room, one door.....

One, two, three, go. We push past the gate and across the courtyard and toward the house, barrels locked on the windows and roof. Wells runs up with the battering ram, a short, heavy pipe with handles, and launches it toward the massive wood door. The lock explodes, the splintered door flies open, and we rush through, just the way we've practiced hundreds of times. No one shoots me in the face. No grenades roll to my feet. I kick open doors. We scan darkened bedrooms with the flashlights on our rifles and move on to the next and the next.

He's gone, of course. We ransack his house, dumping drawers, flipping mattresses, punching holes in the ceiling. We find rifles and grenades and hundreds of pounds of

gunpowder. And then, near dawn, we lie down on the thick carpets in his living room and sleep, exhausted and untroubled.

Many, many raids followed. We often raided houses late at night, so people awakened to soldiers bursting through their bedroom doors. Women and children wailed, terrified. Taking this in, I imagined what it would feel like if soldiers kicked down my door at midnight, if I could do nothing to protect my family. I would hate those soldiers. Yet I still reveled in the raids, their intensity and uncertainty. The emotions collided, without resolution.....

[G]uys I served with are still dying, too. One came home from the war and shot himself on Thanksgiving. Another was blown up on Christmas in Baghdad. Thinking of them, I felt disgusted with myself for missing the war and wondered if I was alone in this.

I don't think I am.

After watching the Internet videos, I called some of my friends who are out of the Army now, and they miss the war, too. Wells very nearly died in Iraq. A sniper shot him in the head, surgeons cut out half of his skull—a story told in this magazine last April—and he spent months in therapy, working back to his old self. Now he misses the high. "I don't want to sound like a psychopath, but you're like a god over there," he says. "It might not be the best kind of adrenaline for you, but it's a rush." Before Iraq, he didn't care for horror movies, and now he's drawn to them. He watches them for the little thrill, the rush of being startled, if just for a moment.

McCarthy misses the war just the same. He saved Wells's life, pressing a bandage over the hole in his head. Now he's delivering construction materials to big hotel projects along the beach in South Carolina, waiting for a police department to process his application. "The monotony is killing me," he told me, en route to deliver some rebar. "I want to go on a raid. I want something to blow up. I want something to change today." He wants the unknown. "Anything can happen, and it does happen. And all of the sudden your world is shattered, and everything has changed. It's living dangerously. You're living on the edge. And you're the baddest motherf--er around."

Mortal danger heightens the senses. That is simple animal instinct. We're more aware of how our world smells and sounds and tastes. This distorts and enriches experiences. Now I can have everything, but it's not as good as when I could have none of it. McCarthy and I stood on a rooftop one afternoon in Iraq running through a long list of the food we wanted. We made it to homemade pizza and icy beer when someone loosed a long burst of gunfire that cracked over our heads. We ran to the other side of the rooftop, but the gunman had disappeared down a long alleyway. Today my memory of that pizza and beer is stronger than if McCarthy and I had sat down together with the real thing before us.....

But the memories, good and bad, are only part of the reason war holds its grip long after soldiers have come home. The war was urgent and intense and the biggest story going, always on the news stations and magazine covers. At home, though, relearning everyday life, the sense of mission can be hard to find. And this is not just about dim prospects and low-paying jobs in small towns. Leaving the war behind can be a letdown, regardless of opportunity or education or the luxuries waiting at home. People I'd never met sent me boxes of cookies and candy throughout my tours. When I left for two weeks of leave, I was cheered at airports and hugged by strangers. At dinner with my family one night, a man from the next table bought me a \$400 bottle of wine. I was never quite comfortable with any of this, but they were heady moments nonetheless.

For my friends who are going back to Iraq or are there already, there is little enthusiasm. Any fondness for war is tainted by the practicalities of operating and surviving in combat. Wells and McCarthy and I can speak of the war with nostalgia because we belong to a different world now. And yet there is little to say, because we are scattered, far from those who understand.

When I came home, people often asked me about Iraq, and mostly I told them it wasn't so bad. The first few times, my wife asked me why I had been so blithe. Why didn't I tell them what Iraq was really like? I didn't know how to explain myself to them. The war really wasn't so bad. Yes, there were bombs and shootings and nervous times, but that was just the job. In fact, going to war is rather easy. You react to situations around you and try not to die. There are no electric bills or car payments or chores around the house. Just go to work, come home alive, and do it again tomorrow. McCarthy calls it pure and serene. Indeed. Life at home can be

much more trying. But I didn't imagine the people asking would understand that. I didn't care much if they did, and often it seemed they just wanted a war story, a bit of grit and gore. If they really want to know, they can always find out for themselves. But they don't, they just want a taste of the thrill. We all do. We covet life outside our bubble. That's why we love tragedy, why we love hearing about war and death on the television, drawn to it in spite of ourselves. We gawk at accident scenes and watch people humiliate themselves on reality shows and can't wait to replay the events for friends, as though in retelling the story we make it our own, if just for a moment.

We live easy third-person lives but want a bit of the darkness. War fascinates because we live so far from its realities. Maybe we'd feel differently about watching bombs blow up on TV if we saw them up close, if we knew how explosions rip the air, throttle your brain, and make your ears ring, if we knew the strain of wondering whether the car next to you at a traffic light would explode or a bomb would land on your house as you sleep. I don't expect Iraqi soldiers would ever miss war. I have that luxury. I came home to peace, to a country that hasn't seen war within its borders for nearly 150 years. Yes, some boys come home dead. But we live here without the other terrors and tragedies of war—cities flattened and riven with chaos and fear, neighbors killing one another, a people made forever weary by the violence.

And so I miss it.

Every day in Iraq, if you have a job that takes you outside the wire, you stop just before the gate and make your final preparation for war. You pull out a magazine stacked with thirty rounds of ammunition, weighing just over a pound. You slide it into the magazine well of your rifle and smack it with the heel of your hand, driving it up. You pull the rifle's charging handle, draw the bolt back, and release. The bolt slides forward with a metallic snap, catching the top round and shoving it into the barrel. *Chak-chuk*. If I hear that a half century from now, I will know it in an instant. Unmistakable, and pregnant with possibility. On top of a diving board, as the grade-school-science explanation goes, you are potential energy. On the way down, you are kinetic energy. So I leave the gate and step off the diving board, my energy transformed.