War stories

by Paul McKellips

War is ugly. I know from boots-on-the-ground experience, first in Iraq (2006–2007) and then in Afghanistan (2011).

After 11 September 2001, I retired from the motion picture business and moved my family east to Washington, DC. I wanted to do something, to help. So I became a civilian media advisor and was sent to Iraq in July 2006, tasked with teaching Iraqis how to conduct ‘conflict communications’ as the fledgling Government of Iraq was trying to win the hearts and minds of its own people while the Iraq War raged violently around all of us.

Back home, anti-war sentiment and protests were brewing. The war had become very unpopular. Hunkered down with soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in the sands of Iraq, I can assure you that our fighting men and women were anti-war, as well. Even when your job is to conduct war, you wish diplomacy had worked.

For the first six months of my tour in Iraq, I hitchhiked around the war-torn country in Blackhawk helicopters, conducting communications training and producing media for the Iraqis and Coalition Forces. Once the infamous surge began, I was embedded with four Iraqis at a combat outpost in Diyala Province. My job was to help get an abandoned radio and television station back on the air and to teach the Iraqis how to produce independent news stories. They were free to bash the Americans or even the Iraqi government with their editorial opinions, but their news had to be factual and double-sourced.

It's emotionally difficult to describe the carnage of war I saw, photographed and experienced. I have more than one thousand photos of innocent children severely wounded by car bombs and homicide vests and of American and

coalition soldiers wounded by small arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and rockets. After one mortar attack, I handed an elderly man his arm off the pavement as I used my belt to cinch a tourniquet around an exposed shoulder stump.

On my first day in Diyala Province, Major Johnson welcomed me to Forward Operating Base Warhorse and told me which Humvee and seat I was to ride in for the short mission. Twenty minutes later, insurgents used a garage-door opener to remotely detonate an improvised explosive device beneath Major Johnson's seat, and I watched from the trailing vehicle as his body was torn apart and his children were left without a father.

I had watched in amazement as this 21-year-old with a GED from Muleshoe matter-of-factly saved the life of a fellow soldier.

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Yet, in all of that sadness, I also saw greatness on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

In February 2007, I joined a small unit for a routine, three-vehicle patrol mission. Our combat outpost was in the middle of ‘terrorist row,’ and our living conditions were spartan at best: no running water, metal garbage cans for toilets and MREs supplementing two ‘warm’ meals served out of a tent. We didn't mind getting off post.

An ambush changed all of that. ‘Bull’ was hit with AK-47 fire in the upper left region of his chest. Though he quickly resorted to gallows humor, his vital signs were crashing by the time the 21-year-old medic from Muleshoe, TX got to him. ‘Travis’ had passed the GED test to earn his high school equivalency credentials

and was accepted into the Army's medic program.

Within seconds, two soldiers pulled off Bull's bullet-proof vest and Kevlar helmet while a third cut his shirt off. Blood was pouring from Bull's chest. Travis calmly ignored Bull's dying jokes, pressed on the wound and then filled the bullet cavity with ‘combat clot,’ a powdery substance that immediately stopped the bleeding.

Another soldier got on the radio and called for a MEDEVAC, and Bull was carried to an open patch of sand as his band of brothers secured the perimeter with M4s drawn. A yellow smoke grenade was popped to screen us from attackers and mark our location for the helicopter crew, and within minutes, Bull was on a Blackhawk headed for the tent hospital known as the Balad Trauma Center.

I spoke with Travis that night. At the time, I was a 48-year-old Dad, and I had watched in amazement as this 21-year-old with a GED from Muleshoe matter-of-factly saved the life of a fellow soldier, sending another Dad back home to his children and a husband to his wife. I wanted to know what made Travis tick. How did he learn to have such presence in the middle of unfathomable chaos?

Travis told me that he was trained in a live tissue goat lab, where goats were anesthetized and then inflicted with a combat wound before medics-in-training would rush in and try to save them. The once-wounded goats were humanely euthanized after they were stabilized.

Unlike training on a mannequin or a simulator, in the goat lab, Travis felt every heart beat and saw more blood and liquid pouring out of the goat with each pulse. He was just as focused on saving that goat on a green hillside in America as he was on saving Bull on the bloody sands of Iraq.

Live tissue training is not popular. It's ugly. War is ugly. But I suspect Bull and his family are grateful for both the goat and the GED medic from Muleshoe, TX.

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