

Traveling Soldier

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“ After four and a half years ... Iraq is still just keeping your fingers crossed and praying that you don't die or end up permanently disabled from an IED”

This is a statement from an Iraq Veterans Against the War member currently deployed in Baghdad who wishes to remain anonymous. It was sent via email to Garrett Reppenhagen, Chairman of IVAW, former sniper in the First Infantry Division, and author of anti-war letters that appeared in *Traveling Soldier* using the pen name Heretic. Reppenhagen writes:

Hopefully with an increased effort in the movement we can end this illegal occupation and bring our brothers and sisters home soon.

Here is the entire message:

By now we've all heard about the latest “successes” in Iraq out of the mouth of the Bush Administration's latest puppet and scapegoat, General David H. Petraeus.

General Petraeus was right to make the distinction between Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in Iraq since we now know that Al-Qaeda was not an entity in Iraq prior to the invasion.

He left out that it is our involvement in Iraq that is the reason that Al Qaeda



never seems to have problems meeting their recruiting goals.

Also, mentioning Al Qaeda is a sure way of tying Iraq to 9-11, an important link in the minds of many Americans, even if not actual fact.

General Petraeus even mentioned that the number of ethno-sectarian deaths have dropped in Baghdad. What he failed to mention is that elements of Al Qaeda in Iraq and Jaysh al-Mahdi have employed the tactic of force moving populations to create Shia neighborhoods free of Sunnis and vice versa. Iraqi people are becoming increasingly afraid of leaving their

neighborhoods to venture out into their country.

The permanent Iraqi Police checkpoints make it difficult to navigate the roads without bribe money and if you're a Sunni, you just might not want to be caught at the checkpoints. The Iraqi Police have been known to casually look the other way while Sunnis get kidnapped or (*continued on page 2*) even while bombs are planted for “Coalition” forces. He also failed to mention the cherry picking of evidence in order to base his lies on his interpretation of fact. (*continued on page 2*)

General Petraeus mentioned the number of Iraqi Security Forces are growing, but said it was “amid continuing concerns about the sectarian tendencies of some elements in their ranks.” This was good because those “some elements” are estimated to hover around eighty percent. The Iraqis I speak with on a near daily basis can’t count on the Iraqi Police for anything and don’t trust them with their security.

In the Sunni neighborhood of Dora, the Iraqi Police are known to blare from their vehicles to the local population that if they are real men, they will come out of their homes and face the police. When a police force openly declares war on its population, that’s security! That’s democracy! None of our law or policymakers even asked what we are doing to quell this sectarianism within the security forces. Is it too hard to tell them that we are doing nothing to fix that particular problem? The Iraqi Police, after five years, still don’t have the logistical means to fix any of their equipment that breaks down. The training of sectarian police, the supplies that they use... that’s all being done at American taxpayer’s expense.

General Petraeus mentioned that the local people of Anbar have risen up against Al Qaeda. Isn’t that what the anti-war crowd has been saying for a while now? That the Iraqis can be trusted with their own security?

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It may be tenuous, and I’m sure that even these local tribal leaders would still rather see their country free of Americans, but it goes to prove that no, the Iraqi people don’t need us to solve their problems for them.

There’s another lie debunked straight from the horse’s mouth! Maybe Dave will join Iraq Veterans Against the War.

The General also told us, point blank, that for all the extra troops and



strategy and time and money and blood invested, that violence levels are back to where they were at... summer of 2006?

Is he joking?

The average Iraqi knows that America can’t keep them safe. It’s true that the security improves when Americans are in the immediate vicinity, but the minute we turn a corner, that security is gone.

Weapons of mass destruction, Saddam, the military has accomplished everything it set out to accomplish.

It’s time to give the Iraqis the freedom we originally promised them.

They’re proving that they can be trusted with their own security. What the General failed to mention is that it wasn’t the surge that sparked the Iraqis taking control, it was the talk of withdrawal. Up until now, the Iraqis haven’t had to take control or risk their lives because we were willing to do that for them, now they’re understanding that play time is over.

In typical military fashion, they’ve boiled everything down to numbers, but only the numbers that the military cares about. The number of Iraqis who have

left their country to seek a better life somewhere else are not definitively known nor is the number of Iraqi civilians killed since the invasion. General Petraeus has said before that there is no military solution to the problems in Iraq and it’s becoming increasingly more clear that we’re just staving off the inevitable.

All the American and Iraqi blood being spilled in Iraq is just a stall, a stall for sectarian political reconciliation that has, at best, a fifty-fifty chance of working. Oh, and he left out suicides which, for the Army, have reached a quarter-century high.

General Petraeus didn’t disappoint when he said more time was needed. Of course it is! There’s no money to be made in ending the war!

And Iraq has been very good for his career while simultaneously ending 3,700 other soldier’s careers and ruining a countless number of wounded soldier’s careers.

The General said he would offer another assessment in March 2008, whistling his favorite tune “the next six months will be critical.”

Did he fail to mention that there is still no end to the war in sight?

The surge was the wrong answer and sent the wrong message.

Prior to the surge, there was not one soldier I could find who thought the surge would be a good idea.

We all knew that it would just add more sitting ducks into this complicated equation.

The numbers don’t tell us that for the American combat arms soldier, after four and a half years of conflict, Iraq is still just keeping your fingers crossed and praying that you don’t die or end up permanently disabled from an IED or [knowing] that as long as we are still in Iraq, that the light at the end of the tunnel can’t shine through.

It is important that the anti-war crowd know that it should not lose heart or give up the fight just yet.

We’re having our own “civil war” at home with the soul of our country at stake.

" We risked our lives so the Army ... could throw a rose colored lens onto a news camera "

I must say, this past week has been quite exciting. On the morning of August 25, half my company convoyed in filthy and battered Strykers from Baqubah to Taji, our final mission of the deployment. Taji was our second home in Iraq and our springboard into Baghdad during the winter months. Now it acts as a staging area to get equipment, vehicles and men home next month.

Every trivial action was exhilarating when you realize it's the last time you'll ever do it. Loading a magazine, chambering a round, catching a warm desert breeze in your face going down the road for the final time. The air of finality is intoxicating, and you can feel it in your bones and see it in the face of everyone around you. A great burden was lifted as soon as we pulled into the wire and safety of Taji. We flew from Kuwait to Mosul on July 21, 2006, 72 hours after my twenty-first birthday. We ended operations on August 25, 2007. For exactly 400 days we held onto our humanity the best we could, sometimes forgetting we had it. The day we got to Baqubah and a Stryker had already been destroyed by an IED, I was on a rooftop with a bird's eye view of everything around. Rockets and tracers were going overhead and buildings were catching fire. I



looked at the carnage happening below, with my heart in my throat, and repeated in my head, *how are we going to get out of this? How are we going to get out of this?* I didn't even know my friend was dead yet.

But everything that has a beginning has an end. After 400 days, we're done. Over with! For my French readers, *Le Fin*. In a few short weeks we'll return home with happy, yet heavy, hearts. Thanks to the recent *L.A. Times* article that quoted me and likely brought you here, my readership has grown exponentially. And with it, come the doubters and naysayers who question the accuracy and integrity of my writing (a soldier who doesn't spew administration talking points? Has the whole world gone *bonkers*?!).

All this attention is new and strange to me, so I googled myself to see what is out there. I came across a message board thread on a military website titled: *Army of Dude: Is Alex Horton a real*

person? Why, yes. Yes I am. I am not a figment of someone's imagination and I'm not a fiction writer. I wish I was that creative. In light of Beauchamp's recent adventures, some have sneered that I should write for *The New Republic* (a shot at my supposedly doubtful credibility). I'm not sure my word means anything on the internet, but if you're really adamant about busting me, blogosphere, give it a try!

I'm glad to have a bigger forum than a week ago, regardless of the critical fallout. The intention of this blog from day one was to chronicle my experiences in a way for people to understand and interpret what was going on beyond what was being filtered, distilled and spat out of the mainstream media. When the deputy prime minister came to Baqubah for the first time a few weeks ago, an envoy of officers followed. Captains, lieutenant colonels and generals all took part in the tour of the local shops and visits with the residents. We were ordered to stay out of any pictures taken. Why? To falsely show that the Iraqi Army was in charge and we were on the sidelines.

In the last month of the deployment, on one of our few days off, we risked our lives so the Army, at some level, could
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throw a rose colored lens onto a news camera for the benefit of...I don't know who.

Later on that day, a two star general got on our truck to be escorted back to the base. The captains and colonels around him talked about how Diyala was really shaping up and that Baqubah would be a shining example of the surge in no time, thanks in part by the 1920s! This was great for me to see and hear, because I finally got it. It took me fifteen months, but my epiphany was complete. Generals see Iraq in a unique way for two reasons. One, they take the word of anyone under them, which will almost always be positive no matter what. I doubt many have the guts to tell a general that things aren't going exactly as planned. And two, they view Iraq in quick spurts with over-the-top security measures. I took a picture of the mob next to the deputy prime

minister's SUV, and there was an entourage of no less than fifteen American and Iraqi soldiers in a span of ten feet. Needless to say, the two star was well protected. We've walked the most dangerous streets on planet earth with less people. Surprise, some of us have a different perspective on the way this country is going.

I'm not a radical or an extremist, as you might think. My biggest fans are in my platoon. The most common thing I hear from them is, this is what I've been thinking the whole time. So my thoughts and ruminations aren't entirely unique. I just simply have the attention of people to tell it to in the country we left behind fifteen months ago.

President Eisenhower warned of the growing military industrial complex in his farewell address. Since Dick Cheney can now afford solid gold oil derricks, it's safe to say we failed Ike

miserably. After losing two friends and over a dozen comrades, I have this to say:

Do not wage war unless it is absolutely, positively the last ditch effort for survival.

I was a struggling senior in high school when the invasion took place, and I supported it. I was mesmerized by the way we raced across the desert and took Baghdad in less than a month. War was a sleek, glossy commercial on TV, and we always won at the end. It's easy to be for a war when you have absolutely no connection with it. Patriotism lead me to believe what we were doing was right and noble. What a difference a deployment can make.

The public can do something about this. It doesn't have to be a hopeless cause forever. Write your Congressmen, go to a rally, read as much as you can about Iraq to see it for what it is: a place men go to lose their minds and their lives. And most importantly, love your children. Teach them that war is not honorable, it's no plaything cast with an indifferent hand. It's the most terrible thing man ever brought to the world. My generation didn't learn from Vietnam, but the next one can learn from us. The memories and spirit of Chevy and Jesse compel you, America. *Do not forget your fallen sons.*

- Alex Horton

August 29, 2007

<http://armyofdude.blogspot.com>

"The Army Is Worn Out"

August 12, 2007

by Peter Beaumont, *The Observer*

Lieutenant Clay Hanna looks sick and white.

Like his colleagues he does not seem to sleep.

Hanna says he catches up by napping on a cot between operations in the command centre, amid the noise of radio. He is up at 6am and tries to go to sleep by 2am or 3am. But there are operations to go on, planning to be done and after-action reports that need to be written.

And war interposes its own deadly agenda that requires his attention and wakes him up.

When he emerges from his naps there is something old and paper-thin about his skin, something sketchy about his movements as the days go by.

The Americans he commands, like the other men at Sullivan - a combat outpost in Zafraniya, south east Baghdad - hit their cots when they get in from operations.

But even when they wake up there is something tired and groggy about them.

They are on duty for five days at a time and off for two days. When they get back to the forward operating base, they do their laundry and sleep and count the days until they will get home.

It is an exhaustion that accumulates over the patrols and the rotations, over the multiple deployments, until it all joins up, wiping out any memory of leave or time at home.

Until life is nothing but Iraq.

Hanna and his men are not alone in being tired most of the time.

A whole army is exhausted and worn out.

You see the young soldiers washed up like driftwood at Baghdad's international airport, waiting to go on leave or returning to their units, sleeping on their body armour on floors and in the dust.

Where once the war in Iraq was defined in conversations with these men by untenable ideas - bringing democracy or defeating al-Qaeda - these days the war in Iraq is defined by different ways of expressing the idea of being weary.

It is a theme that is endlessly reiterated as you travel around Iraq.



US marine asleep at his base in Falluja, Iraq.
Photograph: Nicolas Asfour/AFP/Getty images.

"The army is worn out. We are just keeping people in theatre who are exhausted," says a soldier working for the U.S. army public affairs office who is supposed to be telling me how well things have been going since the 'surge' in Baghdad began.

They are not supposed to talk like this.

We are driving and another of the public affairs team adds bitterly: 'We should just be allowed to tell the media what is happening here.'

"Let them know that people are worn out. So that their families know back home. But it's like we've become no more than numbers now."

The first soldier starts in again. "My husband was injured here. He hit an improvised explosive device. He already had a spinal injury. The blast shook out the plates. He's home now and has serious issues adapting. But I'm not allowed to go back home to see him. If I wanted to see him I'd have to take leave time (two weeks). And the army counts it."

A week later, in the northern city of Mosul, an officer talks privately. "We're plodding through this," he says after another patrol and another ambush in the city centre.

"I don't know how much more plodding we've got left in us."

When the soldiers talk like this there is resignation.

There is a corrosive anger, too, that bubbles out, like the words pouring unbidden from a chaplain's assistant who has come to bless a patrol.

"Why don't you tell the truth? Why don't you journalists write that this army is exhausted?"

It is a weariness that has created its own culture of
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superstition. There are vehicle commanders who will not let the infantrymen in the back fall asleep on long operations - not because they want the men alert, but because, they say, bad things happen when people fall asleep. So the soldiers drink multiple cans of Rip It and Red Bull to stay alert and wired.

But the exhaustion of the U.S. army emerges most powerfully in the details of these soldiers' frayed and worn-out lives. Everywhere you go you hear the same complaints: soldiers talk about divorces, or problems with the girlfriends that they don't see, or about the children who have been born and who are growing up largely without them.

"I counted it the other day," says a major whose partner is also a soldier. "We have been married for five years. We added up the days. Because of Iraq and Afghanistan we have been together for just seven months. Seven months ... We are in a bad place. I don't know whether this marriage can survive it."

And it is not only the soldiers that are worn out. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to the destruction, or wearing out, of 40 per cent of the U.S. army's equipment, totaling at a recent count \$212bn.

"Modern war is exhausting," says Major Stacie Caswell, an occupational therapist with a combat stress unit attached to the military hospital in Mosul.

"This is a different kind of war," says Caswell. "In World War II it was clear who the good guys and the bad guys were. You knew what you would go through on the battlefield." Now she says the threat is all around. And soldiering has changed. "Now we have so many things to do..."

"Not only that," says Caswell, "but because of the nature of what we do now, the number of tasks in comparison with previous generations - even as you are finishing your 15 months here you are immediately planning and training for your next tour." Valentine adds: "There is no decompression."



National Guardsmen Like Impeach Bush/Cheney T-Shirts

Thanks to Dennis Serdel of Vietnam Veterans Against The War who sent this in this report on Labor Day.

HELLO PEACE LOVERS,

What a wonderful day we had on the south side of the Mighty Mac Bridge today.

Weather: PERFECT

Peace demonstrators: 12-20 at any given time.

Folks from Traverse City, Petoskey the U.P., Cheboygan, and near Gaylord attended.

I haven't heard the "official" estimate of number of people crossing the bridge today, but it almost always is 30,000 or so.

There were peace folks in place for the first persons to cross the bridge, which included the Governor's group.

My sister and I walked the bridge and were about ten minutes behind the governor.

Okay now for the "notes" I've put together for the response we received.

As expected many people show no reaction at such things.

There were however, hundreds, maybe thousands who gave thumbs up, peace signs, applauded us, said "woo", and others thanked us.

Some specific comments included: from a little old gal about 4 feet tall, about 70 years old; she said to me..."IMPEACH BUSH, TORTURE CHENEY".

Several of the National Guard whispered as we crossed the bridge, "I like your shirt and the message" to my sister (we were both wearing Impeach Bush/cheney T-shirts).