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A woman at war

28 March 2010 By Erin Stevens in Iraq

For six years I was a woman obsessed.

Several times a week since 2003, I have been reminded, or reminded someone, that one day, I would be going to Iraq. It was the ultimate goal, even when I was 17 and bragging away about how I was going to West Point and then to Iraq. Iraq was the gold standard: going there proved that you were a bad-ass.

Of course, when you are an 18 or 22-year-old at West Point, being a bad-ass is high on your list of priorities.

I entered the United States Military Academy in the summer of 2003, shortly after the initial invasion of Iraq, when everything was about tanks and toppling statues of Saddam Hussein. Our cadet leaders, juniors and seniors at West Point, insisted that one day they would go to Iraq, but in four years that war - Afghanistan, too - would be long over and we would miss the whole thing.

Along with most of my classmates, I experienced an irrational fear that I would miss the war. Missing the war would somehow make me a lesser officer, and for that matter, a worse human being. I could not miss the war.

That first summer at West Point inevitably ended and fall came and with it came chemistry and military science, international relations and German language. While in the throes of English literature and calculus, I cared less about missing the war and more about passing physics.

In my second summer at West Point, during which I spent eight weeks in the mud at Camp Buckner actually practising for war, I decided that missing the war would be a pleasure. If this was war - bug bites, sleeping in the dirt, not washing my hair, carrying 50 extra pounds on my back, smearing green, acne-inducing camouflage make-up on my face - then everyone else could have the war. I wanted nothing of it.

But the memories of that experience subsided and by the following summer I had only faint inklings of how much I hated the mud and the snakes and the shivering at night after sweating and being rained on all day. I suppose (because I haven't the experience) it is somewhat similar to childbirth; you remember it being horrible, but not clearly enough to be unwilling to do it again.

Soon enough I was a senior at West Point - a Firstie - feeling like the greatest thing since sliced bread because, lucky me, there was still plenty of war to go around. What became well known as The Surge was in its early stages as I strutted around West Point's historic grounds. Somewhere along the way, "the long war" had entered our collective vocabulary, and I began to recognise that war - any of them - would not be going away any time soon.

I knew the politics of the war well, and I practised them: ask me a question about Anbar, Baqouba, any of the battles of Fallujah, General Petraeus, Nouri al-Maliki, I boasted. I believed I knew it all and better yet, I would know even more after I went to Iraq.

During my senior year of college, a gift befell me, and I was whisked away to Ireland for a year and given the privilege of studying with world-class professors, drinking Guinness with amazing people, travelling to places of which I had only dreamed, and living the civilian college life I had forgotten about during four years at a particularly stringent military academy.

Yet, in the back of my mind, I was ready for Iraq. I told anyone who would listen how, after my fabulous year in the greenest country on Earth, I was leaving for Iraq.

This obsession only intensified as I finished my graduate program at UCD and completed the last hurdle of my military training - Military Intelligence Officer Basic Course. At my basic course, at tiny Fort Huachuca, Arizona, were 40 other lieutenants (like me!) who talked about going to Iraq (like me!) and who (like me!) were jealous of everyone who had already been to Iraq and chose (like me!) to ignore the veterans' experienced warnings that war is not sexy and glamorous but difficult and ugly.

For even when you are some of the best educated young lieutenants in America, you tend to gloss over the brutal facts of war. Even when you are being told that someone, whom you knew, you hugged, you called by an inappropriate nickname, died because his vehicle got blown up in Iraq, you mourn briefly and move on because it seems surreal and impossible.

Besides, war in Iraq, we determined, could not be fuelled by our grief but by our aggression and bad-assery, and dwelling on those we lost would not honour them. We wore bracelets and dog tags with our dead friends' names instead of grieving for them all the time.

Then, after six years of going to war being a theoretical conversation, I was on a plane headed for Kuwait. I had three duffel bags and the clothes on my back, and I carried a pink iPod for which I was mocked relentlessly. I was going to eastern Baghdad, a place that was sure to earn me a permanent place in bad-ass-land. Even better, I was about to become the Tactical Intelligence Officer for a combined arms battalion, which was, in my mind, the gold standard for military intelligence lieutenants fresh from the basic course.

Ultimately, describing what you anticipate Iraq will be like is a lot easier than describing it once you are there. There are things that I don't want to tell anyone - anything that involves blood or explosions falls into the "don't tell mom" category.

Then there are the topics I am not permitted to tell anyone about because I am bound by Army laws and regulations. There are topics that I am too lazy to talk about; anything that involves a great deal of background explanation (typically involving equipment, vehicles, acronyms, and military customs) falls into this category. So once you're actually in Iraq, there's a lot less to talk about with your friends and family than you had to talk about before you're actually there.

My e-mails mostly fall into this pattern:

Dear Mom and Dad,

Today it was hot [also substitute cold for winter months]. I ate ---- for lunch and ---- for dinner. I am really mad at [anyone who I perceive has wronged me in the past 24-72 hours]. When I get home, all I want is [steak, beer, a comfortable bed].

Thanks for sending the package full of [magazines, candy, socks].

Love, Erin

For all the boasting and badgering and deliberating I did about Iraq, you would think that I would have something more to say about it, but most of the time I don't. In the future, I hope that I will be able to detail eloquently how my battalion was both lucky and unlucky in the war.

I will be capable of explaining how we lost people and how we miss them still. I will be able to say that sometimes my reactions to certain events surprised me with a jolt of excited adrenaline rather than the paralysis of fear. I will talk about how I am both braver and more cautious than I knew and how I can believe simultaneously that I was made to go to war and how I should have been typing supply orders back in the rear echelon.

But for all the things I probably won't talk about for a long while, there are a few that I will: As it turns out, I wasn't much of a badass. The first time I heard anything explode (which was a common occurrence at our tiny bases in eastern Baghdad) I jumped approximately 8.3 meters in the air. I wilted in the oppressive heat when it was a mere 115 degrees Fahrenheit, before we experienced the real summer swell of 125 degree temperatures daily.

I did my fair share of snivelling about the occasional lack of running water. The closest I ever came to being a bad-ass was when the Scout Platoon started taking me on their patrols. But even then, I did things like step in sewage and trip over my own feet. I think they gave me credit for never passing out on them and never falling behind, but I don't think the Scouts will ever let me forget the day I fell on my face trying to get out of the truck or the time that I stepped in a mountain of goat faeces. So I guess I failed in my quest to earn a permanent place in bad-ass-land, but I don't think I want to live there, anyway. I'd rather have a beer and a pizza and fall asleep in my bed in regular-person-land.

With the recent changing of the tides in the political arena and the president's decision to direct thousands of soldiers and marines to Afghanistan, one might think that my new obsession (particularly given my obsessive tendencies) would be Afghanistan. But I find that I'm not particularly keen to talk about Afghanistan and how I'm going to go there and what I will do once I arrive.

Should the army order me to Afghanistan, I will go and perform my duties to the best of my abilities. But in the meantime, I think my new obsession will be something a little more mundane, like shoes or Italian food. Maybe sleep. I feel like I might need some of that.

Mitchell Scholar Erin Stevens received a master's degree in Cultural Policy and Arts Management at University College Dublin before graduating in 2008 as a lieutenant from the United States Military Academy, West Point. She is stationed in Iraq.

stephen.price@sbpost.ie

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