

CHARLY WOHLKE AND CHRIS MCGURK

# Two Soldiers, Two Tours, Two Countries, Two Wars

*Two oral histories by Elise Forbes Tripp, adapted from her forthcoming book, American Veterans on War: Personal Stories from WW II to Afghanistan*

*Sergeant Charly Wohlke was born in Dorchester, MA, in 1983. She served in Afghanistan in 2003 and in Iraq 2009–2010 in the Army National Guard, as a specialist and then a sergeant, 747th Military Police Company out of Pittsfield, MA. Charly graduated from Westfield State University in 2006 in criminal justice. She updated her interview to say that the district chief of police where she worked in Iraq was killed by a bomb, and a policeman she knew “has reverted to kicking in doors and neglecting police steps, very sad to hear that they have taken several steps backwards.”*

## AFGHANISTAN

I DECIDED TO JOIN for college benefits. I’d wanted to be a police officer and they were talking about military police and I thought National Guard will pay for my college. I signed the papers on February 7th, 2001. I went to a semester of college, I watched the [9/11] attacks from a college dorm room—“Oh my God, I am not going to college anymore.” They told us get ready, because you’re going.

The training at the time for National Guard wasn’t as serious, guarding the state and the citizens, flooding, the Red Sox parade. It wasn’t as focused on national defense and going to die for your country. The whole focus changed. We got the call to go to Afghanistan in January 2003. There were wills to be written, people with children had to make sure their spouses had day care set, and tell their jobs that they weren’t going to be there for a year.

My first steps in Afghanistan, oh my God, what did I get myself into! Nineteen years old, I had no clue what I had in store for me. We flew into Bagram airfield and then hopped in the truck and went to Kabul, where I did my tour of duty. We were to back up the Third Group Special Forc-

es, and got to train the first group of military police that went through the Afghan National Army. We did some security with the Special Forces because when they did their raids they needed to bring women with them, [they] couldn't search Afghan women. The men weren't supposed to touch their clothes at all even if it was in a box in a corner, it's a sacred type of article, so we'd help with the questioning of the women, sectioning them off, searching them.

They raided a house [where] they had intel that some bad guys were responsible for floating IEDs down the river, and the IEDs were picked up and used to blow up a convoy. The other female and myself were toward the back because we weren't supposed to be up on the front lines of combat. They raided the house, called us, and told us that it was safe to go in, and she and I went into the room where they had the women segregated, with children and farm animals. We searched their clothing boxes, they had metal bins they kept their clothing in with locks. [We] searched their person, children, and ultimately tried to make them feel safe, because the women are so guarded there that a whole bunch of scary army soldiers coming into the house is probably terrifying for them—scary for me. We were there to do the physical searches of the women, because you can't touch women, can't search their clothes, so they would try to hide things in the women's belongings—which stopped working when [our] women joined the military.

Some of the kids we saw every day would say, "Bomb, bomb, bomb," point to where there was unexploded ordnances, old things from the Soviets even, there were land mines everywhere over there left over from previous wars. The kids would point them out for us because we'd give them water and candy. But there were some kids when you went into the areas that they didn't see us as frequently, they'd throw rocks at us, so we'd think they were throwing bombs or hand grenades. One time in my Humvee, a young boy threw big rocks that bounced through our truck and we thought it was a hand grenade so we're screaming, "Get out, get out, get out!" Our gunner's like, "What?" If it was a hand grenade he would have no legs right now. The kid was like, "Ha ha!" and ran away. There was no definite enemy over there.

In Afghanistan we'd do presence patrols through the mountains, just to let the locals know where we were, and let the Taliban know we were there, constantly driving through, they can't set them up if we're there. There were always kids bringing their sheep through the mountains or going out to play. Young kids, not in school, you'd recognize the clothing,

hand-me-downs, for example, jellies, slip-on shoes, almost everyone had them. Things you bring down to the Salvation Army, they sent them over.

In Afghanistan if we were near a mosque at certain points of the day you could hear the prayers over the loudspeaker. Religion was a big part of the community. But we were not closely involved with the religious aspect, something as simple as picking up a Koran by accident can be very disrespectful. If you picked up someone's Bible to move it, or a Torah, it's not considered disrespectful. But that book is a sacred thing. We're trying to make it more personal and political; you can't make it a religious war.

The Afghan men didn't know what the heck to make of us women. I took an old T-shirt, ripped it up, and tied it around my hair so they couldn't see it. If I was up in the turret I had my goggles on, I had my face mask, you didn't know if I was a girl or a guy. But when we had an MP on the street, [once] we had a truck that was with us break down, and we had to pull security, there was a large group that began to get larger and larger.

I didn't see any weapons, but the group was getting closer to us, and I said to the person in charge I don't like it, and he said raise your weapon. So I raised my weapon, a M249, a large weapon, I had it inches away from this guy's nose and I was telling him in Afghani, "Get away, go, get back," and he laughed at me. I had a real gun, real bullets, you can see the bullets because they are linked together, and he laughed at me because I am a woman. Okay! What do I do now? [laughs]

You can always tell in the eyes. Not his, mine, because I wasn't in the turret, I didn't have my goggles on in the street. I have a high-pitched voice, I sound like a child. I'm sure he thought some young girl was telling him what to do. I didn't really have cause to shoot him, he didn't have a weapon, he wasn't hurting me. The interpreter started screaming and yelling at them, one of the male MPs started to come over to help me out. I've never had any issue being female in the military, I pull my weight just fine. But at that point I wasn't a military police officer, I was just a girl that guy was not taking seriously.

The little base that we were in was like a fried egg, where our area was the smallest area inside the base [of the] Afghan National Army. We were completely surrounded by the Afghan National Army, so there were men everywhere. The Afghans would whistle, shout, or snap their teeth, put up their fingers, it was constant, it was just part of living over there and you had to have thick skin.

[*Was there harassment from US troops?*] Our guys? Not for me, [or] the other women I was with, it was like having sixty older brothers. They definitely looked out for us. The vests are not shaped for women, there's no arched breastplate, so my vest would sit out a little bit. I used to stand with my thumbs on the side of my vest just to help the weight, and an Afghan National Army reached in and grabbed me before I even had a chance to respond. He was taken into custody, kicked out of the military, and off of me. I thought they were taking very good care of us.

It was explained to the [Afghans] that were going to be working with us directly, they're going to have women in the US military, this is how you're to treat them. I was a woman, but they knew the customs and courtesies of our military. At first, we had to explain because they thought we were prostitutes that just came along with the United States Army, we were just there for the guys. They didn't understand why we had guns, so it had to be clarified for them.

Being a female, try staying clean and maintain your dignity in a group of all men. We would be out for twelve hours a day doing our patrols. If you're a guy and you have to go to the bathroom in the mountains, the world is your urinal. But us, "someone hold this," get out of the truck, it's not easy at all. If we were in the mountains, there were some places that were lined with rocks painted white on the inside and red on the outside. The best you could do was get out of the Humvee and stay on the white side of the rocks, the red side was a minefield so you stay away. A lot of the area we would drive through was abandoned so you could get out. "Don't turn around, I'll kill you!"

When we went through our training in Fort Dix, they assured us that the Afghans would be stupid, that they would have no education, you had to baby-talk them. That was totally inaccurate. The man that I worked with had the equivalent of my degree, he'd gone through college, he had military training as well, the military academy, I would say he's more educated than I am, especially in what he's seen of the world. Their education levels are much higher than we give them credit for.

I missed my family but I didn't want to go home. You get used to knowing exactly what you're doing the very next day, who's in charge of you, what you're expected to do. It was nice to feel that you were in charge too. Even though I was a specialist I had some authority.

## IRAQ

I GOT ENGAGED, got married, bought a house, two dogs, got my veterans job here. My unit was activated again. [My husband and I] ended up in the same company, same platoon, the Iraqis got a huge kick out of us. They didn't really know what to do with us at first as a married couple, you usually don't meet a man's wife [and] I was ultimately team leader, I was in charge of troops. "Well, I'm married, this is my husband." They go, "No, no," and the interpreter would [say], "Look at the name tapes, "Woehlke." I'm sure they've seen Smith, Jones, and Bennett, but "Woehlke," to have on two people next to each other, they believed it!

The training officer that I worked with, they exchange a lot of gifts, so I would bring him some candy. I found out he had children so I would bring him some small toys. Once I brought him makeup for his wife, he opened up. [laughs] Vitamins were huge, vitamins for sixty days was just \$1.99, inexpensive for us but it was relationship-builders. He would tell me how his son wasn't feeling well, and he couldn't play with the other children. "I suggest you bring these to your doctor and see if it's okay to take." The doctor said, "That's great, take them." Before I left, I brought him a year's supply of vitamins. It helps them see we were really there to help, we weren't just there for my job.

Just before we left, [my husband and I] had to go out to the Baghdad police station and say goodbye to a gentleman. He'd invited us into his home, we'd met his children, I had a picture taken with his wife, which is a big deal. Just before we left he gave us his Koran. To us, the highest point of respect that you could ever get, because we understand that's what runs their lives. We looked at the interpreter, is it okay for us to take it? It's at home on my mantel, it has its whole separate section, we understand how important it was.

There was a raid, the Navy SEALs (I'm not sure, the 82nd was [also] over there, the CIA, but it was not connected to us), and they killed the mayor's son. He was not the suspect, it wasn't intentional. The police station shut down and wouldn't let us in for a little while. When the army did something, it's the whole army. If [Iraqis] hear about a soldier that murdered somebody, that's the whole army. They don't see that as an individual person who did that. The Guantánamo Bay issue didn't come up, and even Abu Ghraib they never mentioned, but they were very upset about things that happened across the whole country. [That] directly affected our working and ultimately could set us back a whole month in our own interests and information.

I think we did help a lot, we did make a difference in a lot of those guys' lives. But we didn't, in my opinion, make enough difference in their world for us to be there. They could have done without us. But with us there they had additional training to help them and they have a little bit more trust in the Americans now, because we were there to build relationships with them and ensure that they were doing everything that they needed to be doing over there. It was all report writing, smiling faces, and drinking tea.

[*What will happen?*] I honestly don't know. Because when we left Afghanistan, we thought we were done, this isn't going to go on much longer. Iraq was won years ago, but it's not a stable country yet. I think if America does leave it right now we'll be back there soon. They don't have the same infrastructure that we have, where you can put your trash in a barrel outside your house, someone will come and get it. Or you can turn your water on and it's going to work, and if it doesn't work you have a phone number and they will come down and they will fix it for you. It makes a huge difference. Now these guys don't have places to pick up their trash, so they have to burn it in the back yard or they dump it and it pollutes the water. Now these people are getting sick and they don't have health care. Now they are mad at the government because there's no health care, there's trash everywhere, and they don't have any water. Something as simple as having trash picked up can affect the whole dynamic of the entire country.

We went on a mission out to one of the remote areas and dropped off school supplies, candy, and coloring books for the kids. This guy came up to us and through my interpreter said, "We don't want this crap, take it back, we want water." We had hundreds of bags of things for the children. "We don't want this, give us water or go away, don't come back." How do you respond to that? "I am sorry, sir, I don't have any ability to give you clean drinking water. You get the brown water out of the river and have a nice day." There's nothing we can do with that, and it's a huge problem.

[Under Saddam] there was a lot more fear, but there was also the knowledge that the food would be coming and they'd be able to provide for their family. That was mentioned quite a bit from the locals. We'd go and ask how are we doing, what's going on, what do you need? It was such a violent time and they still think it was better with Saddam. You could say I don't like Saddam and you could go to jail, they wouldn't have to tell your family where you are.

I took a class in gangs in school, and you can take the gang leader away and there's always someone who will step up. It's not going to change the

gang, it's not going to change the dynamics. Like the Mafia, you may be able to take the boss out, but somebody's going to step up. Unfortunately, if you can't change the entire group, you can't change the leader.

When I left Iraq, I couldn't wait to get home, couldn't get done fast enough. I want to go back and be a wife with my husband as opposed to a fellow military police officer. You're wearing the same thing every day. I'd had enough walking down a gravel road to go to the bathroom. As soon as we got home, we put a new roof on, had the driveway redone, did the stairs, ripped the office apart, insulated the area, rewired, sanded the floors in the guest bedroom. The bathroom we retiled, repainted, all the fixtures, I took the first shower only two months ago. [laughs]

After six years, I reenlisted. There's a big bonus and we bought the house. When my husband reenlisted, he bought my engagement ring and a motorcycle. I would not have the things I have now unless I'd joined the military, a job I love [working with veterans], I wouldn't have gone to Westfield State [College], I needed the GI Bill. My contract is up in 2013. As far as I know, the National Guard has two years of down time after a deployment, but I still have those six months after. I hope to have kids before then and not go.

You don't have to agree with what was done, but the troop doesn't get to decide where they go, what they do, they're there to serve their country because their country asked. It's not their fault if it is something that you don't agree with. These guys that came home from Vietnam, there were no thank-yous and there was actually the complete opposite, where everybody turned their backs on them. It should never happen again. Something as simple as a thank-you is a wonderful way to let the troop know that you do care. I appreciate the acknowledgment that I took time out of my life to serve my country, but you don't have to thank me.

[*And if someone is against the war?*] For an American you have a right to say that. That's why there is a military, we fought for the right for people to not want you there. Even the people who hate the troops, well, I don't agree with it, I don't like you for saying it, but you have the right to say it because you're American. You can say that and somebody is not going to pick you up and put you in a deep dark dungeon and torture your family.

We've gotten off track and we need to worry about our country and where we're going. We have a caseload of over 260 here [Springfield, MA, population 156,000], it tells you that we're not okay in this country. These benefits in this office are not for millionaires. The caseload is so big

it tells you straight out that the economy is not good and our veterans are not all well yet.

As you return, you go through the health checkup: "I'm fine, don't ask me any more questions, I'm not sick, there's nothing wrong with me. No, I don't want to harm myself, no, I'm not going to kill my family, yes, I sleep fine, and no, my dreams aren't scary. Just get me out of here and get me home to my family." We had a lot of troops who came back from Iraq who were not okay, didn't know how to get back into society.

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## AFGHANISTAN

I WAS THERE FROM JULY of 2003 to May of 2004. To me it was a very humbling experience. Coming from a Western culture where you can wake up at any time in the middle of the night, walk into your bathroom, have running water, have electricity, to a culture that is basically in the Stone Age. Everything they rely on is by generator or battery. They heat their homes with firewood. Any time we went into a house while we were on patrol we were always welcomed in, they were always offering us chai [tea]. The average Afghan male is five foot six, and the average American male is six foot. We must have looked like giants walking around with all this body armor and equipment. They were very curious [about] us, but it was a very cautious curiosity. It took them a while to feel comfortable enough to really talk with us.

The kids had no fear. "Mister, mister, Pepsi," or they wanted a soccer ball. The only thing we had were pens, something as simple as a pen would seem amazing to them. A good 80 to 90 percent of women wore burkas, they were completely covered, head to toe. We tried to stay respectful of the culture, we didn't approach a female if there was a male member of



the family present—there was no need to have conversations with them. Especially when we were out on patrols, we were with village elders who were males. If you did come into a household doing a search, the females would be ushered into another room.

For all the wonderful experiences I had in Afghanistan, I can for the most part truly separate the anger we felt for those who perpetrated 9/11 from the Afghan people. I was very struck by their resiliency, their fortitude. They get up every day and go about their lives in an environment and time that was very chaotic. They understood what happened on 9/11, shockingly enough, a lot of them did. [But] they were completely suspicious of who we were, why we were there, they asked us a bunch of questions. Those that had never seen a Westerner before fell in love with digital cameras, they thought it was the coolest thing in the world that we could take a picture and show it on the screen to them.

Two major events shaped my time in Afghanistan. The first one happened on September 29, 2003. Part of my company, Alpha Company, moved from Orgun-E to a firebase called Shkin [Paktika province], four miles from the Pakistan border [South Waziristan]. All-over Taliban, one of the major crossing points from Pakistan. There was a tribe, the Waziris, they were along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, a lot of them were Pakistani military who manned checkpoints right by Shkin firebase. At night, they were emplacing rockets that were launched at our firebase. During the day, these were the guards that we were working with. Every day we were getting into ambushes and firefights.

On September 29th, one of my sister platoons was out along a place called Losano Ridge, named after an Air Force forward air patrol who was killed in 2002. The Losano Ridge was the main skirmish area between us and the insurgency. The one platoon that was patrolling along Losano Ridge, and they started coming under active fire. This day the fire seemed a bit more intense, it seemed to not dissipate after a while; normally, they would shoot and run. They were using mortars (they drop the munitions down the tubes) [so] this is what is happening to the platoon. They called back to the firebase and asked for backup. I was the first platoon, we rolled out, jumped in our Humvees, and went out to the ridge line to help.

I was an E-6, staff sergeant, the senior squad leader in the company, but I was also the senior squad leader in my platoon. I was in charge of dismounting, walking along the ground with my squad, getting into the area that the vehicles couldn't go. So this day, my company commander, and my platoon leader said, "Sergeant McGurk, can you dismount, we're

going to walk this ridge line and see if we can pinpoint where the enemy fire is coming from, and if not, we'll hop back on the vehicles and go back to the firebase." At this point, all the enemy small-arms fire had stopped, so it was quiet. We were like, fine, there's nothing going on.

We found a little compound where somebody had been the night before, there was some freshly brought firewood, fresh footprints, strings, and wrappers. I called that back to my company commander. We pushed forward a little bit further, one of the lead elements in my squad surprised three fighters that were hiding in a bush. He immediately opened fire and they returned the fire at him, if I remember correctly, he killed one, and wounded one of the others. As soon as that happened, pardon the French, all hell broke loose. We had actually triggered an enemy ambush.

There were eleven in my squad and we were being engaged by 60 to 100 ACMs, or anti-coalition militants, that's what we call them. We were pinned down. We were taking extreme enemy fire, RPGs, hand grenades. At the initial onslaught of the ambush, one of my soldiers in my lead team was shot three times by a sniper. It hit him below the body armor. When that happened, the lead team leader started yelling for a medic. The medic came running down a good quarter mile. I was EMT-certified at the time, and the two of us started working on Pfc. Evan O'Neill, from Haverhill, MA [1st battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division]. He was one of the first combat deaths from Massachusetts in Afghanistan. The doctors said even if he was shot and fell on an operating table, chances are he wouldn't have survived because one of the rounds hit his descending aorta so it shot off.

I'm able to tell it, not with less emotion, but I manage to get through it. I have first-responder training, we go out and tell stories and give training to police and teach them how to de-escalate a situation when working with veterans. One of the stories I used to tell is this, and I used to find it very difficult telling it. The reason it stuck with me, I'd never lost a soldier in combat before. I was the last person with him along with the medic when he passed away.

His words, it wasn't like you see on TV, you see people screaming for their mother, this very dramatic scene, but it was almost serene and peaceful. He was more worried about the fact that he'd let the squad down, if the other guys in the squad were okay, not once was he worried about himself. He was a nineteen-year-old kid dying and making sure that the rest of the squad was okay. That's something that stays with me forever. After that, being a leader, you start questioning what if I did this, what if

I did that, you play the “what-if” game. Quite honestly, after Afghanistan and before Iraq, I drank heavily. I was self-medicating, trying to forget a lot of that stuff. To this day, it’s still a pretty raw point for me, but it’s something that through my therapy through the VA, and through my other counselors, I’ve learned to deal with it and learn from it.

I didn’t talk about it for the longest time. I was very closed off. Then I realized that after coming home, getting out of the military, my fellow brothers and sisters in combat were being killed. It was the number of people, five more were killed in Afghanistan today, or six more were killed, we’re real people, with real families, we’re not just some pawn in a political game. We actually bleed red blood, and when we tell these stories to first responders you tell them these are the reasons we ask you to give a little bit more thought to what you are going to do with a veteran in a crisis situation. It’s because these are the thoughts and the demons that haunt people.

[Another situation] was pretty similar, typical, almost equal to the 29th. We had an OGA team, meaning “other government agencies,” that operated out of Shkin firebase. These were civilians, CIA contractors that were former Navy SEALs, former Green Berets, former Delta Force, Force Recon, you name it. They were training the local Afghan militia forces in guerrilla warfare tactics, they were becoming the Green Berets of the Afghan National Army.

The OGAs were extremely good at intelligence-gathering, helping us with information, and [could] pinpoint where some high-value targets were. My platoon became the security element for the team that operated out of firebase Shkin. Anytime they went on a long mission they asked us to come along and act as a blocking force for them. So on October 25, 2003, the OGA team was down fifty kilometers south of Shkin, operating in an area near the Pakistani border. They had intel about some bad guys that were crossing the border, so they went down there themselves, trying to find these guys. They wound up getting into a pretty bad ambush.

When that ambush kicked off, one of the OGA guys was killed immediately, a couple of the Afghan security forces were killed, a pretty intense firefight. They called back to the firebase and asked for our platoon to come back them up. We drove the fifty kilometers, we linked up with their leadership, we did a quick assessment, and then we moved on. I was a little shaky after what happened on the 29th. When we were driving down to meet up with the OGA guys, one of their guys, Chris Muller,

a former Navy SEAL, had stayed back to act as the liaison between the army unit and the OGA team. But when he heard about this heavy enemy ambush, he jumped into the patrol with us to one of the big passes from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

So Chris went with us, walking with me, and then ahead of me to one of the point guys on my squad. Some rifle fire kicked off and I remember seeing Chris lurch backward for a second, and then do this weird cartwheel roll down the hill. I didn't know what was wrong with him, but instinct took over, so without paying attention to enemy or being shot at, I was running to get to him and I rolled him over and there was a dark red stain on his shirt.

You knew immediately he was shot. He was pretty pale. Took his body armor off, cut his shirt off, he had a sucking chest wound. Being an EMT, I was trying to do everything I could, bandaging his wound and doing CPR, I didn't care if I got shot. I kept his pulse for forty-five minutes. Unfortunately, the medevac that was supposed to come was late, and because they were late, he wound up dying there. We brought him down onto low ground, we were still taking enemy fire, still trying to work on him. I'll never forget him. And I think one of the hard things for me was his name was Chris. To this day it chokes me up when I think about it.

Probably seven months ago, I had a phone call from a guy named Brandon Muller, Chris's brother. [Chris] was a civilian contractor for the CIA, not a lot was put out about what happened. Both of us were crying on the phone, it was a very difficult thing. He just wanted to know who had been the last person with his brother and how it happened and I explained it to him. I eventually am going to go out to Milwaukee and meet him, and we're going to have a beer together.

We had a lot of good intentions. We had the opportunity to do good work, and I think we failed on many levels. Last year, I testified in front of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and it was John Kerry who gave a speech in 1971 to the same committee on Vietnam. Once President Obama wanted to refocus all of our efforts on Afghanistan, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations wanted to get an idea of what people who'd been there felt. It's very easy to watch the news, but it's very different talking to someone who has been on the ground. They wanted to get an idea of what to do moving forward.

One of the things I talked about in the testimony, and one of the things that really frustrated me, was here we are building schools, building hospitals, and digging wells. It's all fine and dandy, it's really good PR, and it's

really good photo ops. But when you don't have the money to put teachers in those schools, buy books for those schools, or actually get them up and running and educate a population that has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world, it doesn't mean anything. You can have all the good intentions in the world, but if we're not actually funding these projects what are we doing? I can understand the connection to 9/11 and the fact that some of the terrorists trained in Afghanistan, but what I couldn't understand was the blatant [lack of] understanding of what we needed to do to help the Afghan people, or a complete lack of making a true effort.

It was difficult for me too, being in Iraq. I believed in the mission in Afghanistan, but I didn't believe in why we were in Iraq. We left Afghanistan prematurely. It's like when you get sick and you have to take antibiotics. You're supposed to take seven days, you take three, you feel better, but your sickness doesn't go away. We just completely dropped the ball, we just went to Iraq.

It's definitely a quagmire. If we hadn't left, helping develop a great infrastructure, helping build a government that works for the Afghan people, because I don't believe you can just shovel Western-style democracy into any country and just make it work. Afghanistan is a very tribal culture that doesn't trust the central government. Now, 2010, seven years later, you're putting troops you've deployed multiple times back into Afghanistan and it doesn't matter anymore that it had legitimate ties to 9/11. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, you put them on their fifth tour, they don't care anymore, they just want to stay alive and go home. I think the Afghan people are tired of it.

We need to try to achieve some of the goals that we had set forth in the beginning. I had firsthand experience with a gentleman in Afghanistan. A lot of the elders still remember what we did to them once the Soviets were defeated. We pulled all funding out of the country and said thanks, see you later. We abandoned them one time, then we abandoned them again after Iraq kicked off. I think we need to do something to try to at least get some of those goals. What these goals are I don't exactly know, I leave that to the policy wonks in Washington to deal with all that.

If we just up and left, the entire Afghan population would just go, "The United States abandoned us once, they abandoned us twice, now they're doing it again, what's the point?" I don't think we would have any credibility with the Afghan people. We don't have the logistics to just pull every US soldier home in a month's time, it's impossible, not to mention the power vacuum that would be created with us leaving. Having small,

quantifiable, achievable goals, complete them and then come home. It's going on ten years in this war, and we're in the same place we were when we began. You're not going to get the tribal regions to all sit down and say I love Afghanistan, I want whatever's best for the country. The people I ran into seemed to care more for what you could do for them than what you could do for Afghanistan. Trying to cater to all the people all the time is just not going to work.

One of the biggest things that causes problems in Afghanistan is corruption. Voter fraud, people just don't trust the Karzai government. I think putting some system in place that has complete transparency in the Karzai government, rules and regulations that are actually followed, and getting the people involved as much as possible. One thing we can do to help them establish a legitimate government is to help create complete transparency where people actually do get to vote, and put people in office, put people that they want to be there.

I don't see a whole lot happening. You're not going to stop the poppy trade in the south, Afghanistan supplies 80 percent of opium. I don't know if I heard this somewhere, or maybe I had an original idea myself, but I don't understand why they don't get the world's pharmaceutical companies into Afghanistan, or bring them into another location, and have a summit to regulate the opium. [The] opium that's used in pain-killers, now it's being regulated, it's being monitored, it's being controlled, you're paying farmers to grow a crop that's actually used for benefit as opposed to just trying to burn their crop down. If you burn their crop down and you don't give them a job, what's the next thing that they are going to do? They're going to pick up a weapon, because the Taliban is paying them \$200 a week to go shoot an American.

You're dealing with a society that has been warring for the last thousand years and you cannot bring in a Western-style democracy and expect it to work. The proverbial you can't put a square peg in a round hole. I don't know if it's self-delusion or just not caring.

## **IRAQ**

IRAQ, JULY OF '05 TO JULY OF '06, my unit was based out of Camp Liberty, which is Baghdad International Airport (BIA). The first real bad day we had was September 14, 2005, the day that I heard in the news back here was one of the bloodiest days in Iraq, something like thirty-six vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) car bombs. We were watching traffic

to make sure people weren't putting IEDs into the road. There was a bridge that bridged a Shia and a Sunni neighborhood, and on that bridge Iraqi police and an Iraqi National Guard had a checkpoint. I remember watching the van roll up on top of the bridge, I turned back and looked south along the road, and I heard an explosion and looked up and it was on the bridge.

I was the patrol leader at the time because my platoon sergeant (he was E-7, I was E-6) was sick that day. So I rolled up on the bridge to help them. I remember there was an arm over there, there was an ear over there, it's no different than Afghanistan. We came off the bridge and we were setting up concertina wire or barbed wire, and put signs in front of it saying "Stop, stay away." While we were setting this wire up my Humvee started taking small-arms fire. So I ran back to the Humvee, the door was open, I went to dive in and I hit my head on the door frame. That hurt really bad and it knocked me out for a minute. One of my gunners picked me up and threw me into the truck. We went through the neighborhood and were looking for who was shooting at us.

For a long time our days were fifteen- to sixteen-hour mindless patrols. We didn't feel there were any ties to 9/11 there, you didn't feel like there was any reason to be there. Unlike Afghanistan, the people in Iraq really hated us, you could just feel the anger and disdain they had for us. It was very uncomfortable, you just didn't want to be there. Especially after Colin Powell came out and said, Yeah, we fabricated some intelligence, it was like, Why are we here?

I think you create more terrorists than you train people who actually care about why you are there, or understand why you are there. It creates a hate and it creates lazy attitudes. You don't want to be there. The difference between my generation and Vietnam, it's an all-volunteer army, you aren't dealing with that draft dynamic, but you are to a degree. I worked with some of the most intelligent people I've even known, very tuned in to the political atmosphere, and why we're there. No one believed it, there was no conviction, we didn't care. We were professionals, so we did our job, you went through the motions.

Some people, this was their third combat tour already. They were tired of being away from their family. Basically it's like, "Go play in the sand in a giant oven, you're going there just because." It's a recipe for disaster. It's the fact that you have young soldiers who don't care about being there, so they might not necessarily pay attention to what they are doing. They're also not paying attention to how they are speaking and treating

people. They're angry, a little more hostile toward the Iraqi public than if they felt like they belonged there. From time to time, I acted differently in Iraq than I did in Afghanistan. I would say it was a year of disassociation for myself.

We were [having to] address the growing sectarian violence. I had a really hard time finding, every day, two or three bodies, a place called Adhamiya. It had a lot of Ba'athist Party members, that's where they used to live. Every day someone would call in and say there was someone laying on the street dead, and it was only because you were Sunni or Shia. I remember one very vividly. We found him laying on the street, probably in his thirties, coming back from the bakery, bread laying all over the ground. I remember very vividly he was shot six times in the face because he was Shia. I just don't understand that. There's not much we can do, it's a visceral hate for one another that's gone on forever. Once Saddam was taken out of power, you have the minority that had this power given to them, and the majority who had the power taken away from them.

[We are] being asked to bring a message, we're going to be heard, we're going to give some input, and actually *affect* the national dialogue. We testified [in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations] and I don't think that very much came of it. So it's extremely frustrating. You *say* you care about the troops — if you want to support the troops, listen to them. Let our voices be heard. What are our experiences in the area? Unfortunately, without going so far as to say it is some kind of conspiracy theory, the war machine is status quo, it's what the American public embraces, the government embraces to a certain degree.

I work for the Massachusetts Department of Veteran Services, the SAVE outreach team, it's a peer-to-peer program. The team works with all generations of veterans, but we try to capture Iraq and Afghanistan veterans as they return home before they slip through the cracks or don't get treatment for PTSD. We'll help any veteran but we focus on high risk, those that have mild to moderate suicide ideation, complex and compounded PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or substance abuse. We try to help veterans by accessing help, the federal and state benefits, reintegrating in normal society as much as possible.

Historically, Vietnam veterans took thirty years to proactively seek out help. My uncle was a marine, served in Khe Sanh during the Tet offensive, I can't imagine what my uncle witnessed through that night. If it was not for the Vietnam generation, my generation would not have a platform to speak on. I truly thank Vietnam veterans for their service. I went the extra



mile for Vietnam veterans because they didn't have it when they came home. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be around right now.

In the long run, you ultimately can't force anyone. We'll call the veteran, "My name is Chris McGurk, I'm an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran, I was wounded in Afghanistan, I have a Purple Heart, I know what it's like to come home and be overwhelmed with all the benefits. This is what we do, this is how I can help you, here's my contact information." I want them to take that next step. It's Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' *Empowerment* (SAVE), we want to empower them to take charge of their own mental and physical health.

I honestly think that the minute we leave Iraq, the balance of power that was before we got there is the balance of power that's going to be when we leave. I have to word this very delicately because of course it is personal opinion, but it seemed like every facet of society was corrupt. It was who you could bribe, when you get bribed, how much you bribe them. It's a string of corruption. How many times has the Iraqi government been given a chance to set up a viable government over the last three years? The only thing we could do now is begin the troop withdrawal in 2011 and just hope for the best.

*From a description of coming home written by Chris*

It has been a lot harder readjusting to a "normal" life than I thought it would be. I still have the sensation of my arms and face going numb from the crushing weight of my body armor and the restrictiveness of my helmet. I still have moments where I find myself looking for my weapon to be within arm's reach. . . . A part of my soul was left in Iraq and I know I will never be able to get it back. Even if you were never shot at, or had an IED detonate next to you, the sheer sadness and degradation that permeates the streets of Baghdad will change you in a way that cannot be put into words.