

A Soldier Speaks: Zechariah

Iraq combat veteran talks about his motivations for joining the army, the horrors of war and the anguish of returning home.

By Celina R. De Leon

08/08/05 "AlterNet" -- -- Zechariah, 25, of Lynnwood, Washington, enlisted in the Army when he was 21, and was deployed to Iraq from March 2003 to January 2004 with the 173rd Airborne Brigade as a medic.

Zechariah grew up in a military family; both his mother and father were medics in the Army. Zechariah wanted to work in the medical field as a nurse, but couldn't afford school. So he signed up to be a parachute infantry medic for the job experience, money for school, and a little adventure.

He spoke to AlterNet about the war, his hopes and fears, and the hard road ahead.

What were you told were the reasons for the war in Iraq when you first began your duty?

The only thing that we had really heard was that Saddam was hiding weapons of mass destruction and we were going to go and oust him and find them.

I knew about the gassing of the Kurdish population in northern Iraq and was scared of being attacked while on the ground there with chemical and biological weapons. I highly doubted that they had any type of nuclear weaponry though, so I wasn't worried about that. I think if Saddam had that stuff, he would have shown it off with either a test or public display. He was a pretty arrogant person, in my opinion.

Did your beliefs change once you were participating in the war?

I think my beliefs had changed once we were on the ground. 

Within days we had seized all of the oil fields in northern Iraq and our primary mission was to protect them. Bush had said this war wasn't about oil, but there I was defending oil fields at all costs in the middle of Iraq. A lot of the piping and workings of the fields had been destroyed by the fleeing army and before we even started to help the people by fixing the power or water supplies, they had construction crews trying to get everything up and running on the oil fields.

They say this war isn't about oil. How about they go and trade places with one of the soldiers that would love to come home, and see what's going on around the oil refineries and see how much work is being put into them and how little is being put into restoring power and water. My brother just got back [from Iraq] and said they still only have power and water for maybe five to six hours out of the day.

I also worked with a lot of the local hospitals. The whole time we were there, the hospitals kept getting worse and worse. They never had any supplies or new machines installed. Even some of the more simple machinery, like X-ray machines, were never replaced. Every time I went into one of the hospitals I almost emptied my aid bag so they could have sterile catheters and needles. I couldn't believe my eyes to see that they were having to reuse these supplies because they couldn't get replacement equipment. They didn't even have soap.

All of this helped me to see where the priorities in this war were. Obviously, not in the people.

How were some of your experiences interacting with local Iraqis?

We lived in a normal house in a neighborhood that was pretty helpful. They always told us that as long as we protected the neighborhood, they would do all they could to help us. Whenever we got attacked, some of the neighbors would normally know where they came from. They also gave us tips whenever they happened to hear of something weird going on. We worked pretty heavily with the Turkmen [Turk] populations and the Kurdish populations. Both were very friendly.

We personally re-supplied three schools in a Turkmen [Turk] neighborhood through family donations and personal contributions for the help they gave us in finding weapons, caches, and insurgent hideouts. They invited our whole platoon to a dinner and dance put on by the school of elementary-age students for our help. My brother said they aren't friendly to U.S.

forces anymore. I'm sure we wore out our welcome in the past year.

Did you ever express dissent? Did any soldiers express dissent or not agree with the reasons for the war once they were actively participating in the war?

I never expressed any dissent towards anyone above me or towards a mission. My squad leader and platoon sergeant were both really outspoken people and when a command or operation came down to us, they were really good about saying that was a stupid or suicidal mission and find someone else to do it.

One mission in particular changed even our Company Commander's (CO) views. We were ordered to do a mission that was not Army protocol and would be dangerous if done that way. We were forced to do it and we lost three soldiers in two minutes. After that our CO was very vocal and active in how missions would be done.

Orders would come down from some officer sitting in an office that had never left the wire and had no idea how the city and its people and the insurgents work. After that night, our Commanders and Platoon Sergeant were really good about "making slight" changes to plans so that it would be more safe for their men. They would get in trouble, but it came down to the fact that they planned on seeing their families again.

How did you maintain your strength to finish your service when you found yourself questioning the war?

I questioned the war from the start so the whole thing was hard. Especially after watching one of my really good friends that I had trained day in and day out with for the past three years die while I was trying to do all I could to make sure he made it home to his wife and for what reason? Kyle saved my life that night by taking fire that was intended for me. After Kyle's death, I just counted the days. I didn't really care anymore. I was saddened to know that so many more were going to have to experience what I had done and seen.

Before that, I thought about what I was going to do when I got home. Daydreams, lots and lots of daydreams. I'm really into motorcycles so I read lots of motorcycle magazines and made lists of parts to buy with my pay and mapped out rides that I wanted to take -- anything that would take my mind off of the frustrations of being there.

After six months of being there, I knew that we were fighting a people that would never give up and we could never beat. I didn't blame them either. One of the Turks put it into perspective for me. What if one day, here in Seattle, I looked up and there were Iraqis falling out of the sky in chutes invading the U.S. He asked what I'd do. I thought about it and I'd be doing exactly what they were doing to us over there.

Were you ever informed of an exit strategy while you were on active duty?

An exit strategy? They couldn't even figure out what day we were going home, let alone the whole entire military. We initially went, being told to only take enough supplies for 90 days. Three months later, we were told another month, then another month, and another. Finally, seven months into it, we were told that they had no idea as to when we were going home. At about the 10-month mark, they finally said that we would be doing a full year and the good news was we only had two months left.

This game of when we were going home wreaked havoc on the morale of the troops about as bad as being attacked day in and day out, and living off of MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] for a year -- they have a shelf life of something like 14 years I think.

How do you feel about the need for an exit strategy now?

I still feel just as strong about the need for an exit strategy as before. We are not going to win this war. The longer we are there, the more people are going to join the fight against us. We asked detainees why? Most said because they had lost a family member. So, if we figure that most families are three to four people and every time we kill one insurgent, they recruit two to three new members that may have not hated the U.S. until they lost a family member by their hands. It's the same as if they invaded here. Most households have a weapon in the house. That's millions and millions of weapons and people that are willing to protect their family and country from foreign invaders. They won't give up until we are all gone off of their soil.

Do you remember your feelings on your last day of active duty?

Yes. I still feel them every time the topic of Iraq comes up, or it pops into my mind. I felt elated to have survived, but then I felt guilty for surviving when so many in our unit hadn't made it home. Three of these were personal friends. I sat on the flight out

of Iraq and asked why was I chosen to make it and why were these guys not allowed to go home. I thought before I went to Iraq that I would come home feeling like a hero. All I felt on that flight home was shame, guilt, and sadness. I still feel the same a year later.

What do you think about Secretary Rumsfeld's projection that we could be in Iraq for another 12 years?

I think he needs to spend some time over there and see how out of control it has gotten in just two to three years. If he thinks that we are going to somehow magically regain control of that country, he really has no idea as to the severity of the situation over there.

Also, within two to four years they won't have a large enough army to fight anything with the enlistment and re-enlistment rates that I'm hearing. I got out and I will never go back there. My brother is getting out also because of the mess over there. I took an oath to defend my country when I enlisted. Iraq has nothing to do with defending my country. I didn't sign up to defend someone's personal interests, whatever it may be.

How was your homecoming back in the states?

My homecoming was surprising. It started in Italy where we were booed and had eggs thrown at us. We weren't allowed in the cities after dark. It was kind of like still being in Iraq.

The U.S. was a different story though. I don't tell people about it, because I'm ashamed of it. I had friends that would say stuff at bars when I got back and I would get free covers and free drinks all night. I also got a huge discount at Car Toys when my mom said I had just got back and was restoring an old Bug as a project to relax some.

The amount of support that people show towards the troops is insane. But there are a lot more who don't support us than before the war started and are pretty vocal about it, like it's our fault. I had to go to Ft. Lewis (near Tacoma, Washington) and I had to be in uniform. Some lady saw me, and ran up to my car and yelled at me for killing innocent Iraqis and threw her gum at my car. For one, I was a medic. I never killed anyone.

I've had two other times where someone saw my old unit sticker in my car and yelled at me for signing up and supporting the Army. I want these people to know it's not a soldier's choice to go to war and I wouldn't have signed up if that person would have been willing to pay my tuition. I didn't want anything to do with

this war. Afghanistan, I can understand trying to get Bin Laden, if that's what we were doing there. But, Iraq, all of the soldiers I went with felt pretty good about going there at first. Six months into it, almost all of us thought this was a bunch of crap.

When people yell at me about the war, I tell them, 'I am right there with you but you're yelling at the wrong person.' If a soldier says he doesn't want to fight in the time of war, desertion or disobeying a direct order from an officer are punishable by death by firing squad or by the officer that made the order. I doubt that this would happen in this day and age, but it's there [in the books] and it's scary. Either that or you just go to jail, no questions asked.

School has been the most interesting place. People will argue Iraq in certain classes. Most of the time I keep my mouth shut, but every now and then I hear a comment that gets me fired up so I say something to defend the troops. They aren't the ones who make the decisions. They just follow orders and do what they can to make sure they get home in one piece. I think I have opened some people's eyes as to what is going on. I try to explain it impartially and let them make up their own minds as to whether it's bad or good. I just want to make sure they know what really goes on.

How are you doing now?

I have nightmares almost every night involving Iraq and those that died. I have been working with someone that specializes in war PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. She has helped me understand the dreams and keep them from being triggered. They don't bother me in the daytime anymore. I wake up, think that was another bad dream and then go on with my day. For a couple of months I would only sleep for two to three hours a night and I finally decided I couldn't do this anymore.

I've been going to school knocking out all of the prerequisites for the RN [nursing] program at one of the local community colleges and restoring a vintage VW [Volkswagen] Bug. I should be applying [to go to school] this fall depending on how my summer courses go.

Are you getting the services you need to transition back into civilian life?

Yes, but it is getting harder. For some reason the funding for my PTSD counselor has just been stopped and I have to go and meet

with her to figure out what hoops I have to jump through now to get it reactivated again. It's supposed to be free for two years but about every two months things change and it gets cancelled and I have to do something different to go back and meet with her.

Have you been reconnecting with old friends and family members? Do you miss any fellow soldiers you met in Iraq?

I am back here with my family. As to old friends, I've found that I like to keep to myself. There are a few that I see every now and then, but I'd rather just hang out with my brother and my girlfriend who has gone to some of the meetings to understand what's going on with my head at times.

I have heard from a few of my old Army buddies, but it's weird. I can't explain why yet. I just know that when I talked to the guys that were my brothers while in Iraq, I feel like a traitor or ashamed. Being their medic or "doc" was the best feeling in the world, but when soldiers die in your care and my platoon watched as I tried to do what they were counting on me to do, I felt like I lost their respect.

I did do good things. One of the guys I worked on lost his right arm, but had it successfully re-attached and almost full use of it again. But just losing that one in front of everyone made me feel detached from them. I miss them, but I couldn't look them in the eyes or spend an evening drinking with them if I ran into them. I feel like a failure in their eyes, I guess.

Looking back, is there anything you wish you knew, that you weren't told?

I think the hardest thing that I know now that we were never trained for was the loss of friends, and to see them go in front of you. We train as if [we're] machines with no emotions, but once it happens and you see every thing unfold in front of you, with people you know better than your own family, it is really destructive to your emotions and morale. I remember after Kyle was killed, I sat in my sleep space and cried for almost an hour praying that this would end and I was on my way home over and over. I know now that it's easier to work with those that you have no emotional ties [to]. If I had to go back, I would tell the platoon that I got assigned to that I don't want to know anything about you. I'm here as your medic and that's it. It is really hard to work on those you know. I can do a better job of putting you guys back together if I don't know you.

Is there anything you would like to add?

I keep hearing that the troops' morale is high over there. When you have a high-ranking officer standing next to you prepping your answers, it's hard to speak your mind. We weren't allowed to talk to media unless a Major or above was with us to prep our answers and screen certain questions.

I couldn't tell you of a single soldier that was excited to be in Iraq having rockets shot at them and IEDs blowing up their friends on a daily basis. Some of these guys are on their third or fourth tours over there. Do you really think they are excited to be in the 130 degree desert, living off of MREs, missing their children being born, watching friends die, praying they aren't next.

President Bush, like Cheney, obviously has no idea as to what is going on over there and doesn't care. This whole thing about taking the fight to the terrorists has got me mad. He already proved to us and himself that Iraq wasn't a threat and that they had no WMDs and he is still trying to say they were terrorists and we need to stop them. They weren't terrorists until we killed off parts of their family. Now they are terrorists because they have lost something that the U.S. took from them, parts of their families.

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