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Soldiers show their soft side

Rigors of war, even in the face of death, don't stop U.S. troops from extending a hand to innocent civilians

By Arrin Newton Brunson
Special to The Tribune

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MENDON - Brian S. Freeman was an overachiever. He graduated from West Point. He rose to the rank of Army captain. He raced in U.S. skeleton championships. He medaled in national bobsled competitions.

Even after his death earlier this year at the hands of raiders in southern Iraq, Freeman pulled off another incredible feat: He helped save an Iraqi boy with a fatal heart condition.

"Many soldiers are doing much more than the call of duty," said Freeman's mother, Kathy Snyder, who lives in Mendon, just west of Logan. "My son wasn't exceptional in that."

In fact, U.S. troops from Utah - including Orem paramedic Layne Pace - and elsewhere, sent to Iraq and Afghanistan to repel insurgents and foil bombers, are reaching out to ease the pain and improve the lives and livelihoods of countless innocents.

For months, Freeman - a 31-year-old Army Reservist with dreams of forming a Vets for Kids nonprofit to help Iraqi youngsters get medical care abroad - had snipped away at red tape and hit up benefactors to secure a visa for Ali Abdulameer so the 11-year-old could travel to the United States and undergo a lifesaving operation.

On Jan. 21, the day after Freeman's death, his 412th Civil Affairs Battalion got word that Ali and his father had their coveted visas. A few weeks later - on the day the slain soldier's personal effects were delivered from Iraq to his widow - surgeons in a New York hospital successfully mended Ali's heart.

Charlotte Freeman and her two children - Gunnar, 3, and Ingrid, 17 months - flew from their home in Temecula, Calif., to see Ali at the hospital. There, they gave him the portable video game Brian S. Freeman had in Iraq.

Snyder also visited Ali in New York, where she enjoyed watching the young Iraqi interact with her grandchildren.

The safety of Ali and his father, once they return to Iraq, worries Snyder but, she said, "they seemed more concerned about Brian's family than they did themselves."

Ali's surgery came courtesy of Gift of Life International Inc., a nonprofit that promotes peace by providing lifesaving surgeries. Charlotte Freeman continues to work with the charity as a

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Capt. Brian S. Freeman

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spokeswoman.

The program has saved more than 8,000 needy children from more than 60 countries, including nearly 300 from Iraq.

"I'm very proud of my son," Snyder said. "Brian's story is exceptional because he died, but I don't want it to overshadow the other big things that have been done."

Utahn Layne Pace knows firsthand about some of those big things.

A paramedic and fire battalion chief in Orem, Pace fought in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005 as a chief warrant officer and an Apache helicopter pilot with the National Guard's 1-211 Aviation Battalion.

"When we got to Afghanistan, several of us knew that we wanted to do more than our job, which was to fly attack helicopters," Pace recalled. "We didn't have a clue what was possible. We just wanted to do something."

Pace saw as many as 500 Afghans waiting in line each day for medical treatment at Korean and Egyptian hospitals on a former Soviet base now occupied by the U.S. military and its allies.

"They were capable and competent but, by our standards of medicine, they were nowhere near what we would expect," said Pace, a former Special Forces medic with 10 years' experience. "For the Afghanis, though, it was a godsend."

Pace's unit called on families and friends to send blankets, clothes, shoes and school supplies. Their request was answered. The result: a longer line of fathers, mothers and children seeking more help at Bagram Air Base.

Soon an online request posted by Pace on anysoldier.com boosted donations to the point that his unit was able to aid villagers they came across in Afghanistan.

"That felt good but we wanted to do more," Pace said. "We were finding a massive medical triage event every time we landed."

They also found opportunities to help and to heal on a more personal level.

For example, Pace and his compassionate colleagues helped Halima, a "beautiful little girl" whose crossed eyes prevented her from living normally, and nearly a dozen others get corrective surgery at the base hospital.

"We kept her for a week because that was the next time we flew out again," Pace said. "That was a very successful trip, but we still wanted to do more."

They did.

When Pace met Asadullah, a young Afghan with a weak heart who couldn't take more than 10 steps without collapsing, the Utah chopper pilot turned again to anysoldier.com.

Volunteers stepped forward - airlines, hospitals, doctors and Gift of Life.

"It all happened in days," Pace said. "This stuff was just coming together like you wouldn't believe. It was awesome."

Asadullah was treated at Loma Linda Hospital in California for a ventricular septal defect and recovered fully.

Before Pace's tour ended, he also helped a young man named Naeem get heart surgery at an Austin, Texas, hospital.

Pace's unit continues its rebuilding efforts. The Afghanistan Orphanage Project, a nonprofit organization, was formed to build a new home north of Kabul for 1,000 children.

The Afghani government has donated 60 acres and residents have pledged to donate their labor on Fridays to build the center, Pace said.

"This project and dream are starting to pick up," Pace said.

Even as the nightmare of war wears on.

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How to help

- * Inquiries about The Afghanistan Orphanage Project can be sent to INFO@TAOP.org.
- * Any Soldier Inc., founded in August 2003, can be found online at www.anysoldier.com.
- * Gift of Life International is located on the Web at www.giftoflifeinternational.org.



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