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Culpeper soldier glad to be home

Allison Brophy Champion - Staff Writer
Culpeper Star Exponent
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U.S. Army Sgt. Edward Burak, 26, wasn't born when the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Nevertheless, as a teenager in Culpeper in the '90s, he felt a sense of injustice for the American soldiers who returned home to a less than warm welcome.

"I felt like I wanted to do something to pay those guys back," said Burak, mentioning 'Glory Denied' - a book he read as a 16-year-old about Jim Thompson, a POW in Vietnam for nearly nine years.

"He came home and got spit on. The only way I could justify doing something was to join up. It was more for the people I didn't know."

Last year he got his chance to pay those guys back with a 12-month tour of duty in Iraq.

Burak's mother, Kathy Burak - transit manager at Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Service Board in Culpeper -wasn't aware of her son's mind-set on the Vietnam War until after he returned from Iraq in March. Mrs. Burak did, however, remember his keen interest in the Vietnam-era motion picture "Born on the Fourth of July."

"He always wanted to do the service thing," she said, describing her Eddie as a 'wild child' but also as a 'momma's boy.' "He felt like even if you don't agree with this war, he wanted to do something for them."

In 1997, after earning his GED, Burak joined the Virginia Army National Guard based in Fredericksburg. For six years he trained as a combat engineer stateside, "pretty much blowing stuff up," he said. Burak - then a guard at Coffeewood Correctional Center - also spent a month in Germany for more training in combat maneuvers.

All the while, he was itching to go active.

"There's a lot more discipline in active duty," said Burak. "I spent my whole six years trying to go active."

In the meantime, because of the deafening training exercises, Burak began to lose some of his hearing.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Burak volunteered for and was accepted into the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas. Mrs. Burak recalled the phone call that fateful day from her son.

"He said, 'Mom, what's going on?' He told me was leaving for Fredericksburg to help with the Guard," she said. "He just felt so strongly about it."

By October 2001, Burak was at Fork Knox in Kentucky for four months of training. In early 2002, he and his wife, Tennie, moved with their infant

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daughter to the base in Texas.

It wasn't until two years later that Burak's unit - the 1st Squadron 7th Cavalry Regiment - got the call to serve in Iraq. On March 10, 2004, they shipped out.

A keepsake in perilous times

When his big sister, Heather Burak of Culpeper, heard the news of her brother's impending deployment, "It was extremely difficult," she said. To get her thoughts in order, Heather composed a poem that began, "Why little brother, must you go; I want you home more than you know; I know serving your country is what you want to do; But I can't stand the thought of losing you."

Burak read the poem only once, he said, before placing it in his wallet. "I kept it with me the whole time," he said.

The desert landscape in the Middle East was "absolutely nothing as far you could see," said Burak. From Kuwait, it was a four-day drive to their base in Iraq - the southernmost camp in Baghdad at Ferrin-Huggins.

The insurgents knew about the 1st Cavalry Division, Burak said, from the first Gulf War in the early '90s.

"They wanted to test us, see what our limits were," he said. "The first couple of months, we went through hell."

The "hell" Burak referred to came in the form of "IEDs" or improvised explosive devices - handmade booby traps used by insurgents to target American military convoys.

"We took a lot of beating," said Burak. "The first one I hit was on the third mission I went on, after about two weeks in Iraq."

During his year overseas, the Culpeper soldier and his unit came in close contact with a total of four IEDs. Three times, Burak was knocked unconscious and thrown from the vehicle.

Though he said he was not seriously injured - "a little bruise on my neck" - Burak's hearing worsened. And one of his good friends, Staff Sgt. Rene Ledesma, was killed.

Targets in a time of peace

Besides patrolling the desert and offering protection, the 1-7 also visited Iraqi schools, said Burak, to hand out supplies and sweets. But even during the "peaceful" missions, they found themselves the target of insurgents.

"Seven soldiers lost limbs and more than 30 civilians were killed as we opened up a water treatment plant near Baghdad," he said.

Burak was also the target of good intentions from home while away in Iraq. He was adopted at AnySoldier.com by a Cincinnati-based youth hockey team. Besides mailing him a care package with new boots, the hockey team regularly e-mailed Burak. They mostly wanted to know about tanks, he said. The team also put him and his family up this month in Ohio for a relaxing getaway.

When Burak's unit got word that they'd be heading home in March, he said he was ready.

"I always wanted to give a little back to my country, and now I'm done," he said. "I'm done."

Asked what he missed most about America, Burak laughed lightly, saying, "That's easy - my wife and kids." He now has two children - a 4-and-a-half-year-old daughter and a 3-year-old son.

Ears took a beating

He's also missing a substantial portion of his hearing, though Burak isn't one to complain. In his left ear, he has lost about 80 percent. His right ear is at about 40 percent.

Burak brushes off his hearing loss with, "Everything I've ever done has been loud," but because of his injuries, "They'll kick me out," he said of his Army service.

On Monday, Burak and his family traveled back to the base in Texas. In the coming weeks he will appear before a medical review board and likely be discharged. He said he's unsure what career path he wants to pursue after the Army, adding, "maybe an electrician."

One thing's for sure - Burak is coming back to Virginia.

"As close as possible to my family in Culpeper," he said.

Mrs. Burak, who arranged to have her son interviewed by the Star-Exponent, said he was wary of the attention.

"He says, 'You know, I'm back, but they're still all over there,'" she said.

"I'm just holding on to him every chance I get."

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