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## My Experience as a Jewish US Army Physician in Iraq

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My journey to Iraq began four days after 9/11, when I put in my application to join the Pennsylvania Army National Guard (PAARNG). For my parent's generation I think a defining moment was the assassination of JFK. Everybody I've talked to remembers exactly what they were doing, where they were, when they first got the news. For my generation, 9/11 seems to be such an event. My wife and I had just moved to Philadelphia from San Francisco. When we heard over the radio what was happening all around us, in NYC, Washington D.C., and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, we diverted to Penn, where I'm an internist and nephrologist, and volunteered to go to NYC to help out. The situation was obviously very chaotic and it turned out there was really no way that an individual could effectively contribute. In the case of 9/11, as everyone knows, they really didn't need volunteers as everyone either was killed or survived with relatively minor injuries. I decided then that if, G-d forbid, another terrorist attack occurred, or if there was a natural disaster, I wanted to be able to help out, and to do that I had to be part of an effective organization. Hence, my application to the PAARNG. It actually took two full years for my NG application to be processed, partly because two of my recruiters ended up being sent to Iraq themselves. On November 13, 2003, I finally raised my right hand and swore in. In September of 2004, I received orders to deploy to Iraq.

I served as a Field Surgeon at a Forward Support Hospital in Camp Liberty in Baghdad, Iraq, as part of Charlie Company, 199th Forward Support Battalion, 256th Brigade Combat Team, which is a Louisiana National Guard Brigade that was deployed in Iraq and which tragically had many soldiers whose families were severely impacted by Hurricane Katrina and then Rita. Thankfully, the 256th BCT finished their year-long tour in September and are either home or on their way home now. During my tour from March through July of this year, I saw and experienced some amazing things, some terrible such as treating blown up bodies from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and some wonderful, such as participating in the rescue of the Australian hostage, Douglas Wood. I know that the war effort is controversial and that there are good people on all sides of the argument, so I really don't want to get into the geopolitical aspects except to say that if a decent society can be realized in Iraq, and I think it still can, it will be a great thing for America, for Israel, and, indeed, for the Iraqi people. And if that happens, the real heroes will be the young American soldiers who go out on patrol day after day, in very difficult conditions. What I think is a very appropriate topic is to offer some reflections on what it was like for me to be a Jewish Soldier and Physician in Iraq, and what I took away from those experiences. First of all, healing is a very Jewish thing. Whether it is healing the world, as in *tikkun olam*, or helping to heal our fellow man. Every Shabbat during the Musaf service we read how G-d "*somache noflim*," "*supports the fallen*," and "*rophe cholim*," heals the sick." So, I believe in a very real way that helping to heal is holy work. Now that's not to say that Physicians are gods, though some Physicians may think that. But seriously, I do feel that my job in Iraq was a very Jewish job and I

made a very conscious effort to treat all my patients equally and to the best of my ability, whether they were American soldiers, Iraqi civilians, Iraqi army soldiers, or detainees.

More specifically, I felt that Judaism impacted me at every stage of my deployment, in ways large and small. For example, the night before I left, we made a video for the kids where I told them what I hoped for them and how much they meant to me, in case I didn't make it back. Obviously it was a very emotional video and at the end I told my wife that if I got killed in Iraq that I wanted to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. When Lisa asked me why, I answered that among the crosses there, if it had to be, I would want there to be more stars to let people know that Jews also fought and died for our country. Thankfully, of course, the video was not needed.

The very next day when I arrived at Ft. Bliss in Texas for pre-deployment training and to receive equipment, I had to make a decision about what to put on my "dogtags". Dogtags contain your name, social security number, blood type, and religion, and you're supposed to wear them at all times, even when you're not on duty. I'm wearing them today. The question that came up, was should I list "Jewish" as my religion on the dogtags? Some of my fellow soldiers recommended not to in case I was captured. Some of my Jewish friends decided to list "Catholic" or "no affiliation," which was a reasonable decision, especially in light of WWII events--for example, my cousin Stanley Malamut who lives in Philadelphia was a navigator on a bomber and was shot down over Nazi Germany. During WWII, your religion was listed on your dogtags by a letter abbreviation, "H" for Hebrew. Stan was brought before his Nazi captors and when he was asked about the "H," he told his interrogators, who were apparently new on the job, that it was his blood type and, luckily, they believed that and never found out he was Jewish. I, however, decided that I would go as a Jew.

We also had a Jewish community in Baghdad. It's estimated that there are 1,500 Jewish soldiers in Iraq, and we had our share of "Landsmen and Landswomen" at Camp Liberty, which is probably the largest base in Iraq. Around 15 soldiers would show up for services on Friday night, and there were presumably many more Jews, just like here, who didn't go to services. I was told that there was even one Jewish General on base, although I never saw him at services. In June, we got a full-time Rabbi, Commander Schranz, who is a Navy Chaplain, and I'm still receiving his "congregational" e-mails. Very sadly, I recently found out from Rabbi Schranz, that one of our "Baghdad congregation," SGT Howard Paul Allen, Zichrono Livrocha, a good man, a 31-year-old AZ National Guard soldier and father of four, who I worshipped with at Camp Liberty, was killed by an IED that was detonated under his vehicle on September 26th, just two weeks ago. Two days later, Airman First Class, Elizabeth N. Jacobson, Zichrona Livrocha, only 21 years old from Riviera Beach, Florida, who was stationed at a nearby base, was also killed by an IED. On a happier note, the congregation at Camp Liberty is growing, and they've even had a few Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations for Jewish soldiers who never had one and wanted one. On October 8th, PFC Jeremy Schlieve and SPC Hannah Bartley celebrated their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs at the Chapel.

In April, shortly after I arrived in Iraq, I experienced a unique Passover Seder. It was held in a magnificent marbled room in the Al Faw Palace on Camp Liberty. This palace was one of over 100 that Saddam built while his people were starving and this particular palace commemorated his great "victory" over the Iranians. I am sure that Saddam wouldn't be happy if he knew to what use his palace was put. The first Seder was conducted by Rabbi Colonel Bonnie Koppel, a reserve Chaplain who had just flown in from Mesa AZ. She was great and even managed to bring us real wine. She said that she had hidden three bottles in her luggage, but two were confiscated by the authorities in Kuwait. General Order #1 forbids alcohol in theater; however, exceptions are made for religious events, assuming that you can get it past the local authorities. At the Seder, there were boxes of Kosher-for-Passover army MREs, which stands for "meals ready to eat," for the soldiers.

I also discovered that the US Armed Forces sponsors a series of diversity programs each month, and April is Holocaust Remembrance Month. The motto of the program is, "Changing human relations one day at a time." Each unit of brigade size (4,000 soldiers) sponsors an event, and I was asked to be the narrator for the 256 BCT commemoration. I was

extremely honored to participate, and it was very moving for me. After all, soldiers wearing the same uniform had defeated Hitler and liberated the concentration camps, and here I was in that uniform leading the Shoah commemoration for 6,000,000 Jews, including many members of my wife's family. Lisa's grandparents barely made it out of Berlin before the war. Poems were read and the stories of several victims of the Holocaust were told and candles were lit in their memory. Then 1LT Erin Sadownik, who is the child of Holocaust survivors, shared her story. The vast majority of the people who participated were not Jewish, but everybody, including myself, learned a lot. I have to say that the army is truly the most diverse institution in the country, and I served closely with all kinds of people that I never would have met otherwise. As I mentioned, I was attached to a Louisiana National Guard Unit, whose soldiers probably hadn't met many Jews so I also tried to be a good ambassador for the Jewish People. Everyone knew I was Jewish, I don't know how, and they frequently asked me questions.

Not a day goes by that don't I think about my friends, and all the other soldiers, serving in Iraq and elsewhere who are risking their lives so that we can live and worship freely, as we're doing today.

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## Keeping Military Marriages Strong

By Leslie Brody

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John Loureiro used to love staying out late with his wife and friends. Not anymore. Since returning home from a year in Iraq, the National Guard staff sergeant fears crowds and often feels pessimistic and tense. He jumps at loud noises--a summer fireworks display sent him flat against a building.

His wife, Sarah, changed, too. She was assigned to Guard service in Teaneck and grew more independent as she paid their bills and ran their household alone.

"After a year of being apart, we're totally different people," said John, 29. "We can't step back into the old roles."

Hard readjustments have plagued returning troops for ages, but they are new to most Guardsmen. Due to the terrorist strikes and the Iraq war, the National Guard has faced its biggest deployment since World War II. Members who used to drill for one weekend per month and protect citizens against storms, riots and local emergencies have been called to active duty for as long as two years. Now, many spend a year of that overseas.

To help soldiers cope with the enormous strain on their marriages, the National Guard spent \$5 million this year on weekend retreats for marriage enrichment. These programs aim to teach the Loureiros and other couples how to listen to each other, fight fair and keep their private conflicts from escalating.

There's also a public purpose: The military argues that tranquil families make for stronger troops and boost retention in the voluntary forces. The National Guard hopes to stave off a spike in divorces suffered by the Army recently; some attribute the surge to the intense pressures of combat and long separations. Pentagon figures show that 10,477 active duty soldiers got divorced in fiscal year 2004, or about 4 percent - almost twice the rate in 2001.

The National Guard began its push for marriage education this year, following the Army's lead. This year, about 11,000 couples in the Army National Guard attended marriage education, as did an additional 12,000 couples in the active duty Army and the Reserves.

Chaplain Col. Glen Bloomstrom, an Army official who helped develop the marriage education push, believes such help is critical for soldiers not only after deployment, but even before. "If I have soldiers deployed and worried about the future

of their marriages, they can't concentrate on the mission," he said. "They will have a high level of anxiety and could be dangerous."

Healthy marriages also can help stave off post-traumatic stress, which afflicts 15 percent to 17 percent of soldiers returning from Iraq, he said. "The greatest antidote to PTS," he said, "is having a safe attachment to launch from and return to."

More than 5,000 New Jersey Army and Air National Guard members have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany and other missions designated to fight terrorism since 2001. Most served abroad, and over the next three months more than 1,000 are expected to come home. After their giddy welcome with champagne and kisses, many are likely to face a rough reentry.

Some find it daunting to get back in the whirlwind of hands-on parenting, with children who have changed dramatically. Some grapple with severe injuries. Many find it hard to compromise over the kitchen table after living by a rigid chain of command.

Just ask Staff Sgt. John Betz. He was in charge of nine men in Iraq while his wife raised his teenage son in Mantua.

"When I'm overseas, I'm the boss, no questions," Betz said. "When she's home, she's the boss, no questions. You have these two personalities that collide when I get home."

'Couples meetings'

One recent autumn Saturday, 20 couples sat in rows in a windowless meeting room at the Sheraton Hotel in Edison. Some held hands. Nobody wore a uniform. Each couple had a copy of "Fighting for Your Marriage," the textbook for the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, widely known as PREP.

Guard Chaplain Kevin Williams exhorted the group to set aside time every week for "couple meetings" to discuss thorny problems. If it's your partner's turn to talk, listen without rebutting and rephrase what you hear. Don't rehash the past.

"Have the humility not to argue about whose memory is better because all our memories are faulty at best and slanted," Williams said. Some lingo had a military twist. "Hold your fire" in a quarrel. Obey "rules for engagement." "Gun" for intimacy.

"This is what we should be gunning for," Williams said. "When I come home from work, I should be able to talk to my friend, not just my lover, and say 'this is what's really going on.'"

Merely showing up took guts for some - or nudging. "I was very hesitant," said John Loureiro, who got back from Iraq in February. "I thought this was for people about to get a divorce."

His 25-year-old wife, Sarah, had heard the retreat was a good tool for helping caring couples reconnect. To entice them, the Guard offered it for free, including meals and hotel expenses, and the weekend counted as paid duty. More than 100 New Jersey couples took advantage of five retreats this year.

John welcomed the break. He called himself "shellshocked" from his year in Balad, Iraq. His base north of Baghdad was among those hit most heavily by mortar attacks. Several trailers near his own were destroyed.

"My whole outlook on life changed, seeing all the stuff I saw there," said John, a specialist in chemical, nuclear and biological weapons. "I definitely became more pessimistic. I'm not as relaxed as I used to be. Out there in a war zone, your life's in danger every day. I took it a little too personally."

John's first few weeks back in Roselle Park were like a honeymoon; the couple had been married only a year when John was sent overseas, and their reunion was sweet. But soon friction developed. He went back to night classes at Kean University, but felt drained of the academic motivation he'd had before going to war.

He had trouble sleeping and instigated fights over little things. Once he needled his wife because she didn't put water in a dirty frying pan to keep the grease from sticking: "I was stressed and feeling angry and upset, and I'd pick on something she'd done."

Sarah tried to be patient. As a staff sergeant at the Family Assistance Center in Teaneck, she knew her husband needed time to heal.

"He went straight back to work and school and now it's hitting him," she said. "He's starting to get burned out."

'Toast emotionally'

Capt. John Waldron, a 42-year-old from Keansburg, said he came to learn to communicate better with his family. He and his wife, Joanne, faced entirely different messes while they were apart.

John commanded 77 soldiers and was embroiled in a disciplinary ordeal when five of his men were charged with illegal drug use. Joanne, meanwhile, was juggling full-time work with taking care of John's three teenagers from a prior marriage. One son totaled a car.

"The things each of us were going through were worlds apart," John said. When he came home in January he was "toast emotionally. ... I was so fried I didn't want to be in charge of anything."

Joanne said it's all too easy to displace anger at the military bureaucracy on to your spouse. When you're mad about an extended deployment, "Who are you going to yell at, the president?" she asked. "You end up yelling at your husband. You say, 'You signed up for this!' "

Some couples weren't ready to describe what they'd been through. One man had just returned from 23 months of hospitalization. He limped out of the meeting room frequently to stretch his legs; at times he winced from excruciating pain.

Objectivity needed

It's too early to say whether these retreats have prevented domestic violence or divorce. One Army survey published this summer, however, found that one month after PREP workshops, couples reported a more satisfying rapport, more success talking calmly about Army issues and more confidence in their relationships. Researchers called for a longer follow-up period, with objective tests of couples' behavior rather than self-reports.

Dennis Orthner, a University of North Carolina professor who studies military families, called PREP an excellent program, but adds a key caveat: "The couples who need it most don't go."

John and Sarah Loureiro are glad they did.

"I wish we'd come as soon as I got back," John said. It was comforting to hear the struggles of other soldiers. "It made me feel like I'm not the oddball, not the only one who is stressed out all the time."

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# “West Point – Two Centuries of Jewish Life and Culture”

By Adam R. Sasso  
2LT, US Army

The recent allegations of religious intolerance and coercion at the U.S. Air Force Academy have caused many to question the other service academies as well. As a recent graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, I was asked to comment on my experiences as a Jewish cadet. While I have no basis to compare or judge any other service academy, I can describe my memories, and opinions of Jewish life and culture at West Point.

As a college-bound high school student, I sought the challenge and leadership experience that only an academy could provide, but I'll admit that I was somewhat apprehensive about whether I could maintain a Jewish identity at West Point. When scheduling my overnight visit with the admissions department, I requested a Friday visit so I could also experience a Friday night Shabbat service at the Jewish chapel. While the chapel was hardly filled with cadets that evening, it was filled with a strong sense of cohesion and acceptance. Cadets attending services treated each other like family and truly made me feel like part of that family. The Rabbi, Chaplain (MAJ) Carlos Huerta gave an uplifting sermon that linked the proud Jewish heritage to the great task of defending America's freedom. After just one evening, I was assured that my religious identity would not be lost; rather I would develop an even greater appreciation for my faith. What I've come to realize is that this environment that allows Judaism to thrive at West Point is built upon three essential factors: an administration that embraces and encourages diversity, a solid support base of Jewish graduates and community members, and a strong camaraderie amongst Jewish cadets.

Over the past decade, West Point's administration has gone to great lengths to ensure a culture of understanding and acceptance. The "Consideration of Others" program was founded in the early 90s and was soon adopted Army-wide. The academy refined this program during the late 90s into the current Respect Program Advisory Council and adopted the Bedrock Values of "Honor and Respect". The cornerstone of the bedrock values program is the more than 50 hours of Values Education Training all cadets receive. These small group discussions give cadets an opportunity to discuss topics such as racial and religious diversity, stereotypes, prevention of sexual assault and harassment, and personal integrity, and are facilitated by staff and faculty members from all departments. This helps cadets to see their faculty not only as professors, but as moral role models as well and ensures that the same values espoused outside of the classroom are reinforced in the academic setting. The Army recognizes its role as a business focused on people, and views the individual soldier as our greatest weapon. Last year Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth Preston said, "Our diversity is our greatest strength." Both academy and Army leadership recognize this strength and also the challenges that come with it, and have since worked to promote not just toleration, but a true valuing of all cultures.

Jewish graduates are quick to remind others that Jews have been at West Point since its founding in 1802, as one of the two members of the inaugural class was Jewish. More than 200 years later, Jewish life at our "rockbound highland home" along the Hudson continues to flourish. One need not look further than the very grounds of West Point to see the immense Jewish presence that exists. In fact, three of the major buildings were funded by Jewish graduates (Lichtenberg Tennis Center, Lou Gross Athletic Facility, and the Jewish Chapel). This philanthropy has allowed numerous opportunities for Jewish cadets that might otherwise be lost. Celebrations for all Jewish holidays and several trips with the Jewish choir to outside congregations and universities are some of my favorite memories of my time at the academy, made possible largely by outside funding. The Jewish cadets also receive immense support from the JWV, who consistently host Oneg Shabbats and other events, and give cadets an opportunity to interact with the great heroes of earlier generations. But the support of graduates and the community goes much further than monetary backing. The West Point Jewish Community Council, chaired by Col (Ret) Lewis Zickel, class of 1949, is made up of the Academy's Jewish officer, cadet, and civilian leadership. The committee meets monthly to discuss plans for upcoming religious events and any issues facing the Jewish community. Having been a part of several of these meetings, I can attest to the

genuine concern felt by all of its members for ensuring that Jewish cadets receive the assistance and resources necessary to support a vibrant religious observance.

While the importance of a supportive administration and community cannot be overstated, the heart of Jewish life at West Point is found in the camaraderie between cadets. As a “plebe”, or freshman, I was treated like a younger brother by the upperclass Jewish cadets who would often help explain to my cadet chain of command why it was important for me to attend services on significant holidays, even if it meant missing training events. Not wishing to call attention on myself, I might not have taken advantage of these opportunities. As an upperclass cadet, I found myself filling this role for the Jewish plebes. Some of my best friends at the academy were fellow Jewish cadets. Before graduation, each cadet decides where he or she would like to have their commissioning oath and 2LT bars pinned after graduation. Four of my Jewish classmates and I couldn’t think of a more perfect place than the Jewish Chapel. The chapel has been like a second home for us and gave us the opportunity to spend our last minutes together at West Point before heading off in our separate directions. But the impact of Jewish life reaches much further than the Jewish cadets themselves. Every year several non-Jewish cadets experience a Friday night service, attend a Passover Seder, or sing with the Jewish choir. Many of these cadets are invited by Jewish friends, and still others come just out of curiosity of another culture. This experience is a wonderful way for non-Jewish cadets to gain an appreciation and understanding of Judaism, and is made possible by the welcoming invitation and hospitality of Jewish cadets. The impact this has is even further reaching as each of these cadets will one day be an Army officer, potentially in charge of Jewish soldiers.

This is not to say that issues of intolerance never surface, but West Point has made great strides during its two centuries of history. Formal Jewish services were nonexistent until 1934, and, until the 1970s, cadets were required to attend a Sunday worship service. Just two summers ago, the administration attempted to limit Friday Shabbat services to 30 minutes for new cadets in basic training, citing the fact that Sunday worship only lasted half an hour. The JCC and Chaplain Huerta were not afraid to stand up to academy officials and explain that the Oneg after services is just as important as prayer in fulfilling the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Over the years, Major Huerta has been one of the strongest role models for myself and so many other Jewish cadets in teaching us to never be afraid to stand up for your faith. His recent deployments to Iraq make him a shining example of the Jewish soldier, serving both G-d and country.

People often ask whether there is anti-Semitism at West Point today. To this I answer that the biggest problem is not necessarily anti-Semitism, but rather ignorance, since many cadets come to West Point having never met a Jew. As a new cadet during cadet basic training, I experienced a prime example of this. On Sunday mornings, after breakfast, the company would hold a formation for church services. Those not attending church would move to the rear of the formation. A cadet cadre member came to all of us and told us, “you’re all a bunch of heathens, and your blatant lack of religion disgusts me.” I can’t begin to describe the anger and frustration I felt over the comment, but dared not say anything. Later that day I told my roommates what had happened and they told my squad leader for me, who in turn told the company “respect representative,” a member of the Respect Program. As this was clearly inappropriate and unprofessional, the cadre member was required to make a formal apology to the company. The fact that I mattered enough to cause this to happen was truly astounding to me and inspired me to become a part of the Respect Committee. This past year I was given the honor of serving as the chairperson of the Respect Program and worked to ensure that religious tolerance was a significant part of the program. I’ve come to realize my important role as a Jewish leader at West Point has prepared me for the even greater challenge of being a Jewish leader in the Army and will do all I can to ensure the religious needs of Jewish soldiers are understood and fulfilled.

[Editor’s Note: Adam Sasso graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point, NY, in 2005 and is currently a medical school student at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, MD, after which he will serve as an Army physician.]