

## Back From Iraq

More than 15,000 Minnesota soldiers - National Guard, Reserve and active duty - have been deployed to global hot spots since 9/11. For most of them, as was true for their fathers and grandfathers coming home from earlier wars, the euphoric family reunions were the sweet, easy part of their homecomings.

What follows is tougher: First, a kind of emotional decompression from combat to civilian life. Then the challenge of getting on with work and making a living.

It can be a difficult and sometimes lonely undertaking. Employers worry about hiring them, knowing the military could call them away again. Some come back with injuries that make it impossible to return to their former jobs. And many come to realize that even the best of re-entries to the work-a-day world require serious attitude - and adrenaline - adjustments.

"I had one young woman who went from working in a nursing home to making life-and-death decisions as one of my turret gunners," said Maj. Jeff Howe, Minnesota National Guard. "I can't believe she's going to be satisfied when she goes back to changing bedpans."

On this Memorial Day, read the stories of four soldiers who returned to Minnesota.

## Starting Over

There are some jobs where an individual is for all practical purposes irreplaceable: A dentist who spent years building a practice for example, or a rancher who runs his own cattle, hay and trucking operation. Without them, their enterprises go dark.

Michael Sams was that rancher. His National Guard unit in Wadena left in October 2004 for security duty at a base about an hour north of Baghdad. Before he left, he sold off, piece by piece, 131 head of cattle, a team of Belgian work horses, farm machinery, a three-truck hauling operation and 200 acres near Pequot Lakes.

"When I sold my cattle, that was one of the saddest days of my life," Sams said.

Sams bought a smaller place near Staples before he deployed. But a law meant to protect soldiers nearly backfired on him, he said.

A banker balked at lending Sams money toward the new place, Sams said, because the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act of 2003 caps loans at 6 percent for soldiers away on military duty. The bank wanted 9 percent. Sams said the loan ultimately went through, but less than two weeks before his deployment.

A run-in with another bank happened after Sams got back from Iraq last December. He applied for a loan to buy a new semitrailer truck and two trailers, to get back into trucking.

"The first question they asked me was, when was I going back to Iraq?" Sams said. Were they worried about the 6 percent interest? Or lending money for a truck that might not have a driver for long?

"Of course, they didn't exactly say," Sams remembered. He ended up financing most of the equipment through a loan from a family member.

Sams, 39, is determined to stay in the Minnesota countryside, though he's not certain he can ever get back all that he once had.

"Towns are noisy to me, and there are too many lights. You can't see the stars," he said.

"That ranch was a lifelong goal of mine that ended up getting flushed. There's no payment for it.

"But I've never considered myself a quitter, so I'm going to try."

### **After the Burns**

Even with the latest in battlefield medicine, some injured veterans won't be able to go back to their old jobs. Some never will work again.

Michael Mills of Freeport doesn't know what's ahead for him.

Mills was part of the National Guard unit in St. Cloud sent to Iraq in the summer of 2004. Early June 14, he was a passenger in a truck hit by one of the "improvised explosive devices" that insurgents have scattered to deadly effect. The explosion ripped a hole in the fuel tank, and the truck was engulfed in flames.

Mills landed in the burning fuel. The impact broke a foot, hip and shoulder; the flames left third-degree burns over 31 percent of his body - his right hand, his left hand and arm, his left leg and his face.

Within three days, he was at Brook Army Medical Center's burn unit in San Antonio. He's been in treatment and physical rehabilitation since then, undergoing skin grafts, range-of-motion exercises and serial casting to straighten his fingers.

Mills, 41, is home on leave with his wife and two children. He still needs surgery to repair his shoulder and rebuild his nose and left ear.

Before he left for Iraq, he tended paper rolls on presses at Nahan Printing in St. Cloud. His first wish is to go back to operating those presses, but loss of his thumb and little finger on his left hand may have ended working the press.

Second-best is anything else at Nahan.

"They tell me I have a job to go back to, whether it's in production or not," he said. "I stop in every once and a while to talk to them, to update them."

But the military has declared Mills 100 percent disabled, ending his Guard career and possibly any civilian employment. If that happens, he is already making a list of volunteer possibilities: his children's school, maybe the VA hospital in St. Cloud.

He wants to offer help where he knows it's needed.

"The biggest thing I've learned from this is don't take life for granted," Mills said.

### **Is That All There Is?**

For some veterans, the hardest part of re-entry is finding meaning in regular jobs after the 24/7 adrenaline rush of combat.

"I know a lot of it is me, that I've changed," said Jeff Howe of St. Cloud, who spent a year and a half commanding a 250-soldier transportation unit in Tikrit. "Most of us have come back with some challenges, some baggage."

The unit had members from as far away as California. But 200 of the soldiers were members of the Minnesota National Guard - including Mills, the printer from Freeport.

"We were the hunted, the easy targets," Howe said. In 13 of 15 runs between Tikrit and Kirkuk last June, the group came under attack. The soldiers figured they avoided 60 to 70 explosive devices. One man, New Yorker Manny Hornedo, was killed. Thirteen were wounded.

Everything they did felt important, every decision could affect a part of history.

The unit came home shortly before November. For Howe, 46, coming home meant returning to his wife and four children in St. Cloud.

It also meant a return to the job he'd left, as a building official and fire marshal for suburban Waite Park, where he feels simultaneously underwhelmed and overwhelmed.

"I have a hard time figuring out the importance of a lot of things," he said. "I make a decision about how one guy is going to build one house. There's got to be bigger challenges."

At the same time, he often feels lost because of changes made while he was gone.

The feeling that he doesn't know what he's doing - after civilian and military careers where he was always, proudly, the go-to guy - makes it hard for him to have much confidence in his future.

"I can't be the go-to guy because I don't have all the answers," Howe said. "Now I have to figure out how to be that guy, or figure out how to live with not being that guy."

He's easing back into the job, and the city has been supportive and understanding, he said.

"But they don't know how much to give me at one time," Howe said. "They've never gone through this before. I've never gone through this before. There's no handbook on it."

Iraq stays in his mind's eye.

"Not a day goes by that I don't think about some of my soldiers who got wounded, or Manny," he said. "Every day is Memorial Day for me."

### **College and More**

Some returning vets parlay their military experiences into new careers. Andy Davis calls it "post-traumatic growth."

Davis joined the Army 10 days after he graduated from St. Peter High School in 1999.

"I knew I wanted to go on in school, but at the time I was sick of it and I wasn't focused," he said.

Three stints in combat fixed that. As an Army Ranger in special operations, Davis was among the first to go into the mountains of Afghanistan after 9/11. He went back in the summer of 2002, patrolling for drugs and weapons on the Pakistan side of the border. And he was among the soldiers who defended the Hadithah dam, in northern Iraq, from insurgents who wanted to blow up the strategic installation and flood the Euphrates River basin.

In the summer of 2004, he came home and enrolled in the University of Minnesota to study geography and political science. After seeing some fellow veterans drop out, he started Comfort for Courage, where veterans could come for help in dealing with feelings of alienation.

At the same time, he took a job at Minnesota Wire & Cable Co. in St. Paul, a maker of sophisticated wiring systems. Owner Paul Wagner wants to expand the market for the company's products from mostly medical uses into military applications.

For instance, the small, coiled cables used in breathing monitors for premature babies have been supersized and now can alert Israeli soldiers to mechanical problems in their tanks.

"It's a plus to have access to someone who's been on the battlefield, the kind of people who will use your equipment," said Wagner.

Davis, 25 and newly married, appreciates the job, but plans to go to law school.

"You go in the Army for six years, you get shot at, you get sick of seeing weapons," he said.

He's also entering politics. He lives in North Mankato, and has the Republican Party's endorsement for a Minnesota House seat.

His frenetic energy level is a carryover from combat. "I stopped sleeping my second year in the military," Davis said. "I rarely sleep more than three hours a night."

He spoke of another combat legacy: Witnessing the first free elections in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I was standing on a street in Kabul, in full gear - my body armor and my weapon - and I saw an old woman looking out a window at me," Davis said. "She said, 'You, American, you make sure I can vote tomorrow.' We forget that just the right to vote is amazing."