



A Voice for New Veterans

VHP Records Experiences of Troops Returning Home from Ongoing Wars

By Mark Hartsell

Todd Walton returned from a year-long deployment in Iraq and found himself scanning the highway overpasses in Nebraska for snipers and looking for improvised explosive devices on the streets of the small town he called home.

“It finally hit me: This is Kearney, Nebraska. That is not an IED,” said Walton, who shipped to Iraq in 2003 as a sergeant with the Nebraska National Guard.

The return home required many adjustments, large and small – getting to know his family again, talking in sentences rather than military lingo, remembering that civilians must pay for gas and, to the amusement of his wife, getting used to a world of consumer options again.

“She’d kind of look at me and laugh,” Walton said. “But you’d ... open the fridge, and there’s choices here. You know?”

Walton’s story is one of 1,600 from veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq contained in the Veterans History Project (VHP) of the Library of Congress.

Congress created VHP in 2000 to record, preserve and make accessible the firsthand remembrances of America’s wartime veterans.

The legislation required the project to first capture the stories of older veterans, and for good reason: The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that about 1.7 million World War II veterans still are alive and that their numbers will shrink by 1 million over the next five years.

Collections donated by veterans of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars make up the vast majority of the VHP archive. The project, however, is preserving more than the stories of just



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A group of Marines in front of Saddam’s palace.

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those who fought at Anzio, Inchon and Khe Sanh.

VHP also is recording the experiences of a much younger generation of fighting men and women – the veterans of Mazar-i-Sharif and Tora Bora, Fallujah and Baghdad.

“It’s natural that people would want to tell their stories now, having just come out of it,” said Bob Patrick, VHP’s director.

The interviews and photographs offer a way to begin to understand the impact of the Iraq and Afghan wars on the country and on the soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen who fought in them.

Researcher Larry Minear used 85 of those collections as the foundation of his book “Through Veterans’ Eyes,” an exploration of the experiences of the soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“VHP represents a treasure-trove that deserves the widest-possible utilization as the nation begins the necessary task of reflecting on the longer-term significance of its Iraq and Afghanistan experiences,” Minear said.

The war in Afghanistan, which began nearly 10 years ago in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., is now the longest in U.S. history. The war in Iraq soon will overtake Vietnam as the second-longest war in the nation’s history.

The VHP interviews with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are different in some ways from those given by their older comrades.

For one thing, the events still are fresh.

Before giving interviews to VHP, World War II veterans had 60 years to think, read and talk about their experiences in a war that’s been thoroughly explored by scholars and in popular culture.

The veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan don’t yet have the benefit of historical perspective – the consequences of those wars won’t be fully understood for many years. VHP encourages veterans to interview again years later, when the passage of time may provide a new outlook.

“For a lot of them, it’s so fresh that they haven’t had a chance to distill it and look



Army 1st Sgt. Thomas McMurtry (right) poses with an Iraqi family in Al-Mukhtar.

at it historically: What’s the outcome? It’s not over yet,” Patrick said. “In hindsight, they may have a different perspective of what they went through.”

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan created new dynamics waiting to be explored and understood.

Women play a greater role in the cur-



Army Capt. Drew Larson in the cockpit of a Blackhawk helicopter in Diwaniya, Iraq.

rent wars – and are present in higher percentages in VHP’s Iraq and Afghanistan interviews than in other conflicts.

The current conflicts also are the first long, modern wars fought by the U.S. military without the draft.

“This is probably the first all-volunteer army that we’ve sent on an extended war,” Patrick said. “There may be a whole new look at what that meant.”

And advances in medical technology and military equipment and practices help soldiers survive at greater rates – but also send more back home disabled.

“We’ve armored them so well: They’ve got great flak jackets, they’ve

VHP, by the Numbers

The collections contained in VHP, by conflict (as of 9/6/11):

World War I	326
World War II	46,498
Korean War	10,211
Vietnam War	12,961
Persian Gulf War	2,382
Afghanistan and Iraq	1,600
Other	206

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got great helmets,” Patrick said. “Whereas in the past, if they would have gotten hit or blown up, they’d die. Now they lose an arm or leg or suffer this traumatic brain injury. It’s a whole new ballgame for treatment of these folks.”

Drew Larson flew medical-evacuation missions during two tours in Iraq.

“I spoke with some Vietnam veterans who talked about at a 12-hour mark they weren’t even sure whether a Medivac helicopter was coming or not,” the Army captain said in his interview for the VHP collections. “Sometimes I can have a soldier in the hands of a surgeon within 30 minutes of him being injured.”

Patrick said some evidence, both scientific and anecdotal, suggests that the act of interviewing can help veterans deal with their experiences.

The wife of a veteran who fought at Iwo Jima during World War II told Patrick her husband used to suffer recurring nightmares. After he did his VHP interview, she said, the nightmares disappeared.

“We like to think that’s just one tool in somebody’s kit in helping a veteran work through that experience,” Patrick said.

The VHP collections also reflect a desire of veterans to be better understood by the nation they serve, Minear said.

“The veterans themselves felt – and expressed this sentiment fairly regularly – that the American population as a whole was not aware of the nature of the conflicts or of the experiences to which veterans themselves were being exposed,” Minear said. “I was struck by the thoughtfulness and the candor as well as the reaching out of veterans for greater understanding by the American public.”

And veterans appreciate the opportunity to give unfiltered, firsthand accounts of what they saw and did while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Army Capt. Marissa Pelke, who served in Afghanistan.

“I think that this is great project,” Pelke said of VHP in her interview for the project. “... It kind of gives a level of clarity and honesty, when not all of your resources give you those – particularly with the media. You are always going to get a little bit of a slant, but it is the soldier on the ground who really knows what is going on.” ♦

Connie’s Story

By Mark Hartsell

Connie Spinks graduated from high school in 2000 and enlisted in the Army Reserve – a chance, she said, to see the world and support her country.

In 2004, she shipped out to Iraq, leaving behind parents, a brother, a sister and a boyfriend.

A month after arriving – and a day after her 22nd birthday – Connie set out on a convoy, riding in the middle vehicle and guarding one side of the truck with her weapon.

A little pickup pulled alongside, trying to



Veterans History Project

Connie Spinks (right) and an unidentified comrade.

break in between the trucks in the convoy – a strict no-no.

Connie warned the driver in Arabic to stop. He didn’t. She looked at him, and he looked right into her eyes.

“He looked like a normal Iraqi,” she said.

She warned again: “Stop, or I’m gonna shoot.”

But he didn’t stop, and she didn’t shoot.

The man accelerated and steered his pickup directly into the side of Connie’s vehicle – a suicide attack.

The resulting explosion left Connie with a broken femur, two fractured ankles, two broken fingers, perforated eardrums and burns to her face and hands.

She went to a military hospital in Texas for rehabilitation. Because of the burns on her face, hospital workers wouldn’t let her look into a mirror. One night, Connie turned off her

little television, looked at her reflection in the black screen and saw her injured face for the first time.

Her boyfriend couldn’t handle it: He broke up with her soon after she was wounded. She moved on.

“If he couldn’t be there for me when I was sick, then I’m better off without him anyway,” she said.

Connie earned the Purple Heart – she’s one of fewer than 300 women in history to earn the medal – and got a special thrill when actor Denzel Washington did the honors. “If he touches me, I’m gonna faint,” she told her mom. Washington pinned on the medal and gave her a hug and a kiss.

When she finally was able to leave the hospital, an officer from her unit traveled from California to Texas to give her some bad news: “Spinks, I need to tell you something. I’m going to tell you now because I think you’re strong enough to handle it.”

Two of her comrades had been killed in the attack.

Wracked with guilt because she didn’t stop

the driver before he attacked, Connie cried.

Despite all that happened, she said she feels no remorse about joining the Army Reserve – only regret about that one moment of hesitation on a road in Iraq.

“I’ve been blessed. I’ve truly been blessed,” Connie said. “So I don’t regret it. If I could do it all over, the only thing I would do differently was to shoot. That would be it.”

Connie said she has healed well – “I look real good,” she said – and that she discovered a lot about herself during the ordeal.

“I didn’t know I was strong,” she said. “I never knew that. . . . Even after completing airborne school and going to Korea and everything else, I never knew it. And now I do.”

Read the transcript of Connie’s interview at <http://1.usa.gov/ntekV5> and others like it at www.loc.gov/vets/.