

## WORCESTER TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

### 'The Unmaking of a Marine'

#### Tour in Iraq left ex-Marine questioning the mission

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Tyler E. Boudreau describes his decision to leave military service as follows: "In 2005, after 12 years of active service in the Marine Corps and with growing reservations about the war, I relinquished command of my rifle company and resigned my commission. It struck me that, in our headlong pursuit to deliver freedom and democracy and to expel an oppressive regime and combat terrorism, we had inadvertently lost sight of the very people we'd been deployed to help."

Mr. Boudreau was a captain at the time, an officer who as a teenager in 1989 had enlisted in the infantry for a four-year stint. Committed to a military career, Mr. Boudreau had enrolled at Worcester State College in 1994 and joined the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps at the College of the Holy Cross. Upon graduation in 1997, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant. He returned to the infantry as a platoon commander and served in Iraq in 2004. He was preparing to deploy to Iraq again in 2005 when he resigned his commission.

"I just had to get out," Mr. Boudreau, 37, said by telephone one recent morning from his home in Leeds. "It was my time to move on."

In the four intervening years, Mr. Boudreau has hardly left the military or Iraq behind. Rather, he is making his mark through intelligent, reflective writings and activism aimed at enhancing cross-cultural empathy and communication. He published his first book last year. This year, his opinion pieces on war, veterans and Iraq have appeared on the op-ed page of The New York Times and in The Progressive magazine.

Mr. Boudreau's book, "Packing Inferno" (Feral House, \$16.95), is an uncompromising narrative of his experiences in Iraq and his struggle to deal with the human consequences, both in the Middle East and, later, at home. His writing is vivid, detailed and filled with emotion.

The book's title refers to his having discovered that, among other books, he had packed Dante's "Inferno" when he was deployed to Iraq, in what appeared to be a prescient move as the months went by. Mr. Boudreau writes this about a few tense moments when he and his men had to decide what to do when a truck heading in the wrong direction barreled toward them on the shoulder of the road:

Pulses jumped and our voices grew sharp and edgy. I leaned out the window and aimed my rifle at the truck. We struggled to see inside it, to spot some kind of clue that might tell us with any certainty whether or not the driver was a suicide bomber.



My heart was racing. I was breathing hard as it drew closer and closer. Fire? Don't fire? It was so difficult to know what to do. Will we live? Will we die? This could be it. And the truck drew closer still. And still we couldn't seem to come up with a decision. There was no one to ask. There was no manual to reference. There was no time to think it over. There was only now, the moment, and we had to decide. In the end we resolved to hold our fire, and I was glad we did. The truck floated quietly past us without exploding into a million bits of fragmentation in our faces. We stared, agog, at the passengers, a family of four or maybe five crammed into the cab staring back at us, all agog as well.

After leaving the Marines, Mr. Boudreau, his wife, Suzanne, and their sons, Jake, 5, and John, 7, returned to Massachusetts. Mr. Boudreau worked in construction for a while, but he couldn't escape the Middle East.

"It was difficult," Mr. Boudreau said. "I was still consumed by my thoughts and feelings about Iraq - wanting to think and talk about them."

Mrs. Boudreau got a job with the Veterans Administration, and Mr. Boudreau stayed home to watch the children and write. Mr. Boudreau had kept notes while in Iraq; his intention was to write a novel. That didn't work out, so he moved on to an analytical essay. "I didn't attempt to get it published," he said. "It was an uninspiring piece of writing."

Producing "Packing Inferno" was a painful process of write and rewrite. The material came from letters and thoughts that he had repeated over and over to others or in his mind, as well as from the notes Mr. Boudreau had scribbled.

At the same time, Mr. Boudreau became involved in other activities connected with veterans and the war. He spoke in area classrooms with the Amherst-based Veterans Education Project. Then he became aware of the Iraq refugee crisis. Last August, he traveled with another veteran and a reporter and photographer to Jordan, where substantial numbers of displaced Iraqis are living.

"I did feel - and do feel - that it is this country's primary obligation to do something," Mr. Boudreau said. "There are other countries - like Jordan and Syria - putting forth a lot of money and time and effort, and they had nothing to do with initiating this."

The two veterans talked to Jordanian officials and Iraqi refugees. The trip proved illuminating. Much to his surprise, Mr. Boudreau encountered refugees who told him the U.S. invasion of Iraq was "the best thing that ever happened."

"There were a wide range of opinions," he said. "We didn't expect that. It made me very aware of relating to people and trying to bridge gaps and build community."

Mr. Boudreau returned home motivated to help make those connections. He formed the Collaborative Revolution, a nonprofit organization aimed at developing community awareness through humanitarian projects. Mr. Boudreau is now engaged in organizing "The Other Side," a cross-country bike ride in which he and another veteran will pedal from coast to coast this summer while other participants will join in for shorter portions of the trip. The purpose is to share ideas with individuals and organizations and, in that way, reconnect with people across the country, he said.

But writing is Mr. Boudreau's true mission in the life. His piece for the Times is about the controversy over recognizing post-traumatic stress. He proposed that, rather than a Purple Heart, those suffering from psychological wounds of war be awarded their own type of medal. He suggests it be called a Black Heart.

"The current stigma of post-traumatic stress would likely prevent many soldiers from wearing the medal initially, but its mere existence would help crystallize in the American - and American military - consciousness one of the more obscure human costs of war," he writes.

Published late last month, Mr. Boudreau's essay "To Kill or Not to Kill," grapples with the contradictory orders

given members of the military to be prepared to kill, yet reach out in friendship.

Mr. Boudreau noted that many people who write on war and the military cover issues of high-level policy. He said that he views himself as having expertise on what occurs at the human level. His next book will be about how policies associated with armed conflict are irreconcilable with human nature.

"The human piece is the foundation for all of these big policy issues," Mr. Boudreau said. "No matter how complicated and sophisticated it gets, if it doesn't resonate at a human level, it's not going to work."

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