

A young U.S. veteran's untold story about Iraq

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WASHINGTON: Josh Stieber didn't feel much relieved when he heard the news the last U.S. combat troops were pulling out of Iraq by the end of this month.

Though "grateful for every little bit" of progress, the 22-year-old U.S. Army veteran says he is still cautious not to "celebrate and think that everything is over with, as the reality is "pretty far from that."

Stieber, who served in Iraq for 14 months, is too familiar with the reality of the war.

The eldest son of a salesman and a health worker, and born and raised in the Maryland section of the Washington D.C. area, Stieber recalled he saw a "big hole" in the ground after a hijacked jetliner crashed into the Pentagon in the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. in 2001.

Stiever joined the army right out of high school in 2006 at the age of 18 to "make sure something like 9/11 never happens again."

He was sent to Iraq with the 1st Infantry Division in February 2007. But what he experienced there was disillusionment and frustration. As part of the U.S. troop surge in 2007, he witnessed one of the most violent stretches of the Iraq war.

"We went into it thinking we would solve all this problem and make the world a better place, but realized early on we didn't seem to be helping the problem," he said.

"For the most part, we are making it worse," he added.

After finishing his mission in Iraq, Stieber went back home in 2008, but he couldn't help thinking about what the military had done to families and neighborhoods in Iraq - kicking down doors and ripping through houses to search for "insurgents," and detaining people, sometimes for no reasons.

"What if a different army comes in and takes me or takes my dad away?" he would ask himself. "I know I wouldn't want it," he said, and this brought on a huge question about the war.

Then he became an anti-war activist.

For six months last year, with such a question in mind, Stieber walked and cycled around the country, from Atlantic Maryland to Pacific California, talking about peace and non-violent alternatives with folks and youths he met along the way, hoping, in his own words, to spread

the lesson he learned in Iraq.

It might well be a sense of closure for Stieber, when earlier last week, the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, left Iraq in a move that many saw as symbolizing the end of the U.S. combat operations in that country, while the formal change in mission is set for Sept. 1.

However, Stieber says the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq was merely a beginning. "A lot of the soldiers are probably gonna end up in Afghanistan sooner or later."

"There are still 50,000 troops that are being left there (in Iraq), and (they) might not be specifically combat units, but definitely combat trained, and prepared to use that (training), and there's the increase in private contractors," he said, with a look of concern on his face.

Washington says the 50,000 U.S. troops would remain in Iraq to conduct support and training missions. The last batch of U.S. troops is scheduled to leave Iraq by the end of 2011.

However, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, Ray Odierno, said last week that the United States could maintain a military presence in Iraq after the 2011 deadline "if the government of Iraq requests some technical assistance."

As the deadline for withdrawing combat troops looms, Stieber said it would be easy for people to forget about the impact the war had on U.S. soldiers and on Iraqi people alike. He wants to remind people of the horror of the war, and make sure such things never happen again.

"Something a lot of people don't think about is just the many lives that have been affected on both sides," he said, recalling friends who end up going to psychological institutions because of post traumatic stress disorder as a result of the war.

"Some of the things we saw there, and the way that a lot of people in Iraq was treated, and so many of them were forced from their homes, and the things that went on in their lives," he said.

"I hope people would not think that combat troops are gone, and we don't have to worry about Iraq any more," he added.

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