

Thursday, July 3, 2003

INDEPENDENCE DAY IN IRAQ

The Fourth of July is one of my favorite holidays, typically a time not for reflection on this country's independence but rather a time for fireworks, barbecues and beer.

For much of my life I spent this holiday with my extended family, particularly my cousins, lighting bottle rockets and watching my uncle and his friends play with firecrackers that sounded like bombs.

This Independence Day will be different for two reasons.

First, the United States was — and really still is — at war with Iraq. Second, and more importantly, my cousin, Neil, is serving in Iraq as an Army medic.

Neil, 21, was a college student like you and me. He attended Clark Community College in Vancouver, Wash., and the University of North Dakota, hoping to be a pilot one day. The last time I talked to him, he was thinking about pursuing a career in medicine.

In one sense I'm relieved that, theoretically, he should avoid much of the fighting. In another, I'm worried for his well-being. As of Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Defense reported that 203 U.S. troops have been killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Since May 1, when major combat was supposed to have ended, 65 U.S. troops have died.

While it's impossible to know how the young soldiers in Iraq are handling the situation, I recently began to understand how Neil is dealing with it through letters and photos he has sent to the family.

"Don't worry about me, as I am in a pretty safe compound and the area isn't that dangerous," he wrote. "Though I am sure the media says otherwise, I am actually more scared of the wild dogs and spiders than anything else."

A Vancouver, Wash., native, the biggest thing Neil had to worry about used to be rain. Now, he writes, he has to deal with average temperatures of 117 degrees Fahrenheit and highs of 130 F. Looking at the pictures he sent, I can only imagine how hot that actually is. The pictures may be worth 1,000 words, but I'm glad to get the details behind his experiences, too.

"In most instances I haven't been able to take pictures of stuff I would like," he wrote. "And I guess Middle Eastern people think if you take a picture of them we own their soul or some crazy thing. That brings up another funny thing: Since we all wear sunglasses all the time (obviously), the Iraqi people think we are so high-tech, they think all of our sunglasses have X-ray vision. It is the funniest thing when you look at them, especially women, as they try to cover themselves or turn away."

Not all of Neil's stories are so light-hearted, however. As a medic, he sees some of the worst of the war has to offer.

"I think with everything I have seen and dealt with out here, I could work in any emergency room in the country, though I don't believe that's what I want to do," he wrote. "It's hard to see people in such pain, though I like the faith and trust they put in me. I never really had that feeling until we started making house calls to two Iraqi kids who are 7 and 10, who were playing with ammunition deserted by the Iraqi army."

"Both kids suffered second- and third-degree burns to the face, ears, arms and feet — pretty much all the exposed areas. One of the kids was actually sent to the hospital; he would have



Courtesy

Specialist Neil Schmidt, a former college student, now faces 100 degree temperatures and homesickness while stationed in Iraq.

been better off if he never went. Our first couple visits, the 10 year old wasn't there, however. I think they realized we could offer better treatment than the hospital."

Despite the good deeds Neil is trying to do in Iraq, being so far away from home is taking its toll on him. He has his way to deal with it, but others, it seems, can't quite handle it all.

"It's hard not being in constant contact for better or worse, as I miss talking to all of you, though to be honest I try not to think about it most of the time," Neil wrote. "I've seen what that can do here, people seem to be going crazy and just moping around."

"The other night we had a guy who almost committed suicide. He was locked and loaded, ready to shoot himself, until his platoon sergeant slipped in and stopped him. They brought the guy down to us. We found out that the guy is basically a loner and everyone in his unit picked on him, plus he doesn't have contact with his family. At first I thought it was just some dumbass who is trying to go home, but after talking to him I realized he is in fact deeply troubled — probably has been his whole life."

Neil enlisted with the Army early in 2002, not because of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, but because he always had an interest in the military and, ultimately, because he became a little lost on life's path. Everyone in my family has noticed a change in Neil

since he joined the Army, and I'm curious what he will be like when I see him again.

"I am really glad to be here — though it does suck — every time we go through a town or city just seeing the happiness on the Iraqis' faces is worth it. The people stand at the edge of the street cheering us on, giving us the thumbs up, blowing kisses, etc. — though I have seen them do it for Saddam as well," wrote Neil, who was recently promoted to specialist.

"I fear this is how they act to everyone that has power. Still, I feel the people are sincere. I have read reports of influential people trying to take control of cities and ultimately the country. I fear that if our pullout is too soon we will be back here again for Desert Storm 3."

It's for that reason I support the war effort. No operation goes smoothly or as planned, so I understand the need to stay and ensure whatever it is we're ensuring in Iraq.

The simple fact, though, is the war is being fought by people like you and me — kids trying to enjoy life.

"Today is Saturday," Neil wrote, "which really doesn't mean a whole lot, though we joke around as if we were in the position to actually go out to the bars."

Here's to hoping our troops will soon be out of Iraq and out of harm's way, to which I will gladly celebrate this Independence Day.

Contact the editor in chief at editor@dailymerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.



Brad Schmidt
 Of chief concern

Loans not option for all GTFs

I would like to respond to Dan Weiner's letter on graduate teaching fellow health insurance ("Health care loan could mitigate health care costs," ODE, June 4). While well intentioned, Mr. Weiner does not fully understand the health needs of GTFs at the University.

First off, most GTFs make a salary that only minimally covers their living expenses. In order to supplement their income, many GTFs already take out loans. These loans may be added to an already substantial student loan debt from their undergraduate degrees.

It makes no sense to further cripple GTFs under a massive debt load so that they can buy health care that is already provided to other University employees.

Also, the idea that an advanced degree will automatically guarantee a higher salary is a myth. USA Today reported on May 20, 2003, ("System wastes Ph.D. brainpower") that the job outlook for new Ph.D.s is increasingly poor. Many graduates, especially those in the humanities, face the prospect of entering the contingent academic labor force, bouncing from institution to institution as visiting professors with poor salaries and few — if any — benefits. Very few graduates will receive the high-profile, high-paying academic jobs that Mr. Weiner seems to believe are awaiting us upon graduation. The prospect of having to pay for

a health care loan, on top of student loans, while working as a contingent academic laborer is very, very frightening.

The simple fact of the matter is GTFs are employees of the University. Nationwide, graduate employees and contingent faculty are responsible for about 30 percent of the credit hours offered at universities. They come at a substantially cheaper cost than tenured faculty. The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation is committed to ensuring that GTFs receive adequate health care so that they, and the University, can continue their mission of providing a quality undergraduate education without worrying about sickness or massive loan repayments.

Chris Goff is a sociology GTF and is president of GTF.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Conserve the riverfront

As a University student and frequent bike commuter, I am quite concerned about upcoming industrialization of the beautiful riverfront bike paths near the University. Conservation of the natural riverfront area is crucial to improving livability in east Eugene.

Has the city considered the impact of converting a large area that functions as an alternative transportation network to a car dominated grid like the rest of town? Increased runoff, industrial accidents and fewer reasons for people to utilize alternative transportation will result if the area is developed.

In the past, citizens of Eugene have rejected paving the area and it is time they do it again — especially since taxpayers would foot the bill. Instead of research development, the University should plan to quickly address the three "areas of concern yet to be addressed" on the Riverfront Research Park land. Since

1991, Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality has been monitoring these sites — it's now time to do something about them.

Shame on city councilors who have voted in favor of this Riverfront Research Park urban renewal corporate giveaway and the defense-related nanotechnology complex it may impose on east Eugene.

The University's east campus low-income family housing area is also scheduled to be replaced by this intense research.

Bryn Anderson
 sophomore environmental science major
 University OSPIRG Willamette Coordinator

Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submission must include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.