

In search of 'the meaningful life'

Mission Continues helps returning veterans reconnect with their community through service



Robert Britt

Robert Britt is a writer, photographer and U.S. Army veteran with two deployments to the war in Iraq. He is currently serving a six-month fellowship with Street Roots and The Mission Continues, a nonprofit that connects post-9/11 veterans with service work in their communities.

BY ROBERT BRITT
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

It's been five years since I left Iraq. Five years since I stepped off that flight carrying me and hundreds of others from the Middle East to rural Kansas, an unloaded rifle slung across my back and an empty pistol on my hip. Five years since I stepped off the plane and had a general greet me with a salute at the bottom of the gangway.

Five years and I still don't feel like I'm home.

I returned to Portland just a few days after I returned that salute, but the years that followed brought me no closer to home.

Friends greeted me with the same trite comments about the war and its politics.

The new manager at the restaurant I worked at before my deployment told me there was no room on the payroll to hire me back. Classmates accused me of having blood on my hands in the middle of a college course.

All the while, I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. My frustrations led to destroyed relationships, slumping grades and financial problems.

I felt lost. I felt alone. I felt farther from home than I did in Iraq.

It wasn't until I connected with a nonprofit called The Mission Continues that I truly began my journey home.

Started in 2007 by Eric Greitens, a scholar, humanitarian and Navy SEAL, The Mission Continues challenges post-9/11 veterans to engage with and improve their communities through nonprofit service work. Feeding off the same desire to serve a greater purpose that drove most veterans to the military in the first place, it harnesses that selfless service and applies it to the community level through six-month fellowships.

For me, it was the perfect fit.

Greitens founded The Mission Continues by donating his combat pay from his last deployment to Iraq, where he served as the commander of an al Qaeda targeting cell in Fallujah. During the deployment, a truck bomb laced with chlorine gas exploded outside his barracks, completely shearing off one of the building's walls and injuring him and others.

After returning to the states, Greitens went to Bethesda Naval Hospital outside Washington, D.C., to visit some of those wounded in the attack and Marines wounded elsewhere in the war.

"When I asked Marines in the hospital what they wanted to do, they all said 'I want to go back to my unit,'" he says. "That wasn't going to be possible for all of them, but they all wanted to find a way to continue to serve. I knew how much they still had to offer to



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ERIC GREITENS

Above, Eric Greitens on a tour of duty in Iraq. Inset, Greitens today, now the chief executive officer of The Mission Continues.



their communities and our country."

Greitens also recognized that in addition to saying thank you, what the veterans needed to hear was, "we still need you." The best way to welcome them

home, he thought, was to treat them as assets and to challenge them.

"When we challenge them to find a way to continue to serve," he says, "it lets all of them know both that we have tremendous respect for them, and that we're going to be with them every step of the way as they become successful citizen-leaders here at home."

Since early 2008, when The Mission Continues awarded its first fellowship, more than 500 veterans have served as Mission Continues fellows at a variety of nonprofits around the country.

Already having earned a doctorate from Oxford, served as a Rhodes scholar and White House fellow, done humanitarian work in China, Rwanda, Bosnia and elsewhere, Greitens — once the commander of a Mark V Special Operations Craft detachment — was now heading what would become a leading veterans nonprofit. In 2008, he was awarded the President's Volunteer Service Award.

"For me, part of the motivation has been to try to find a way to mature myself and also help others unlock their own potential to be of service," Greitens says. "I think that when we engage in outer service it also leads to inner growth."

Greitens says there are three major concerns regarding the reintegration of veterans.

The first is that the country has yet to get to know this generation of veterans. Less than one percent of the population serves in our military, and when many get out of the service they flock to areas of high concentration of veterans.

"There are many people who might have great respect for this generation of veterans, but simply don't know them," Greitens says. "When you get to know this generation of

veterans and you see what they are capable of, then people really get to understand what the whole generation has to offer."

The second concern is to ensure that as the veterans come home, they successfully reintegrate and build purposeful lives again.

"A lot of times people focus on issues such as post traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, unemployment, even suicide, and they worry about those problems," Greitens says. "We found at The Mission Continues that when veterans come home, when they successfully reintegrate — when they're waking up every day doing meaningful and purposeful work in their community — that's the foundation upon which they build a successful life here at home. Many of those other challenges can be addressed once we've built that foundation."

And finally, Greitens says that we need to establish the legacy for post-9/11 veterans.

"We don't yet know what the future is going to hold for this generation of veterans," he says. "When you think of the World War II generation, that was a generation that when they came home, they really helped to build the country. When you think about the Vietnam generation, that was a generation that came home and struggled to transition successfully here at home."

"Ten years from now, I want people to look back and when they think about this generation, they are thinking about men and women who went overseas, who served in the U.S. military, and then came home and found ways to use the skills they had to actually build purposeful lives again and contribute to our communities and our country here at home."

As he writes in "The Heart and the Fist: The Education of a Humanitarian, the Making of a Navy SEAL," his 2011 New York Times bestseller, "A good life, a meaningful life, a life in which we can enjoy the world and live with purpose, can only be built if we do more than live for ourselves."

Nearly finished with my Mission Continues fellowship here at Street Roots, I feel closer to home than I have since leaving Iraq. I'm not quite there, but I once again feel like a part of the community and I'm once again living with purpose.

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