

'A Memory that Will Be With Me My Entire Life'

VFW members reflect on their time in the Iraq War zone

Mar 22, 2023

NATHAN GRISSOM

Service: Army | **Rank:** Specialist | **Unit:** 233rd MP Company | **Location:** Baghdad | **Dates in Iraq:** April 2003-2004 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 4598, Greenup, Illinois

"My most vivid memory of Iraq was seeing the pure gratitude of a few Iraqis who were searching through a trash dump for food and items to sell. We pulled through while patrolling and tossed out what items of MREs we could spare (early in the war). Poor does not even describe what these people were going through. Their excitement and look of relief (though brief) was memorable."

THOMAS SUSDORF

Service: Army | **Rank:** Specialist | **Unit:** 2nd Bn., 3rd Field Arty | **Location:** Baghdad and An Najaf | **Dates in Iraq:** May 2003 – July 2004 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 1431, Crawfordsville, Indiana

"My most vivid memory is and always will be when 1st Lt. Colgan was killed by an IED."

SHAWN CARTER

Service: Army | **Rank:** Staff Sergeant | **Units:** B Co., 203rd MI Bn. (2003-04); Weapon Intelligence Team 6, 710th EOD and 763rd EOD, 1st Bde., 4th Inf. Div., Task Force Black Knight (2005-06) | **Location:** Baghdad Airport (2003-04), Taji (2005-06) | **Dates in Iraq:** 2003 – 2006 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 106, West Chester, Pennsylvania

"When I was with Weapon Intelligence Team 6, I came upon my first suicide vehicle bomb call. When I arrived with my team, I thought I was going to lose my lunch, the smell of the burnt flesh and

body parts we had to photograph, fingerprint and collect for intelligence value. The sergeant major on site asked if I was OK, I informed him yes. It took a minute to compose myself. My

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team helped me. Staff Sgt. Brignano (“Brigs”) took great pictures of the scene to help tell the story of what happened. Spc. Melvin Davis had our back sitting with the 50-cal watching our 6. Brigs was my right hand and helped me and the team complete the 400 combat missions and intelligence reports.”

DAVID LILLY

Service: Air Force | **Rank:** Master Sergeant | **Unit:** 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing | **Location:** Balad Air Base | **Dates in Iraq:** Nov. 2003 – April 2004 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 4692, Bryan, Texas

“Not long after arriving at Balad, Chaplain Voyt and I made a trip to Baghdad to meet with the Syrian Catholic Archbishop to visit our base for the coming Christmas holiday. The trip to Baghdad and back was not without risks but we made it safe both times. Chaplain Voyt’s safety was both my responsibility and that of the convoy soldiers who were protecting both of us. This was the only time in my entire career where I found it necessary to chamber a round in my M-16 in preparation for firing if we were attacked. Thankfully, I never had to pull my trigger, but I thought long and hard about possibly having to do so.”

BRANDON SCHINGH

Service: Army | **Rank:** Sergeant | **Unit:** 3rd Plt., A Co., 3rd Bn., 325th Inf., 82nd Abn. Div. | **Locations:** Tallil Air Base, As Samawah, Ad Diwaniyah, Al Hillah, Karbala, Al Habbaniyah, Baghdad | **Dates in Iraq:** March 2003 – January 2004 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 3329 Millbury, Massachusetts

“In April 2003, A Company was ordered to cross a railroad bridge, enter the city of As Samawah and secure three bridges. The 325th’s mission was to break up attacks from the Fedayeen who were

attacking 3rd Infantry Division’s supply lines. My platoon was given the opportunity to spearhead this push into the city. Prior to making our initial movement, our Chaplain blessed soldiers with their “last rites.” The attached picture is me, sitting up against a wall, awaiting the official word to move, taking in the moment, and thinking about the years of military training and leadership under my belt and how my first taste of combat will play out. Afterwards, we successfully completed our mission of securing the bridges, and after approximately a week, we began leapfrogging from city to city, eventually making it to Baghdad in early May 2003, where we remained until we redeployed back to the U.S.”

KEVIN PRICE

Service: Army | **Rank:** Sergeant | **Unit:** HQs and HQs Co., 2nd Bn., 28th Inf., 172nd BCT | **Location:** Forward Operating Base Kalsu, Babil Province | **Dates in Iraq:** December 2008 – November 2009 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 4709, Conroe, Texas

“While deployed as a 25U (Signal Support System Specialist) in Iraq, I was commonly tasked with setting up retransmission stations throughout our area of operations. I would

commonly fly, or convoy from camp to camp setting up these retrans stations, which helped our infantrymen maintain fluid communication with one another while out on mission. In the photo I submitted (see page 24), I am high above FOB Kalsu setting up an antenna for this purpose.”

DIANE DOTY

Service: Air Force Nurse Corps | **Rank:** Lieutenant Colonel | **Unit:** 332nd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron | **Location:** Balad Air Base | **Dates in Iraq:** 2009-2011 | **VFW affiliation:** Department of Indiana

“Aeromedical evacuations entail flying around Iraq to forward operating bases and picking up wounded warriors and moving them to higher levels of care. It’s the greatest and most rewarding job in the military. There was one mission that stands out. ISIS coordinated a massive bombing in Baghdad. The devastation and wounds were more than the medical facilities in Iraq could manage. My crew was tapped to fly wounded Iraqi civilians to Spain to receive treatment. This was roughly an eight-hour long mission. Some of the issues were the language barrier, cultural differences, the majority of wounded had never ridden on a plane, and we would have to take a tactical takeoff. One Iraqi civilian came up to me and stated he could speak English and he would translate for us. He helped us explain concepts like turbulence, aircraft temperature and meeting the needs of patients. When the mission was over, he came over to me and said, ‘The Iraqi people on this plane want to thank you and your angels for all the care, comfort and love you have shown us.’ It was by far the best mission of our career.”

JASON PETERSON

Service: Army National Guard | **Rank:** 1st Lieutenant | **Unit:** 4th Plt., A Co., 164th Eng. Bn. | **Location:** Balad Air Base (LSA Anaconda) | **Dates in Iraq:** October 2005 – November 2006 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 3817, East Grand Forks, Minnesota

“In May 2006, our M1114 gun truck ran over an IED. In this case, it was a pressure-detonated 155 mm artillery shell on Route Heather, southwest of the north gate to Anaconda. The front of our truck was torn apart, but luckily the crew area remained intact. The front of the vehicle was lifted vertically and nearly tipped backwards before coming back down. My gunner suffered a fractured neck, and the driver and myself suffered TBI from the detonation. The rest of my patrol engaged two enemy targets that were overwatching the ambush point, and nearby Apache gunships also engaged after we painted the target with illuminating rounds. That’s a memory that will be with me my entire life.”

PAUL PASSAMONTI

Service: Army | **Rank:** Major (Chaplain) | **Unit:** 10th Brigade Support Bn., 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Div. | **Location:** Baba Gurger, Kirkuk | **Dates in Iraq:** September 2007 – November 2008 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 9191, Killeen, Texas

“My most vivid memories are the mass casualty situations where people I knew were either killed, wounded, dismembered, or all of the above. Also, having to notify units of the deaths of their comrades. I visited units all the time, but when I came with the whole command staff to motor pools unannounced, people went to their knees as the commander told them who was killed in battle. That and a missile that hit the container behind mine while I was asleep — it killed nine Sri Lankans who were members of the cooking staff, all of whom attended my weekly services that I did for them at 2 a.m. so they could attend.”

DR. JOHN S. ALLERDING

Service: Army Reserve Medical Corps | **Rank:** Colonel | **Unit:** 399th Combat Support Hospital | **Location:** COB Speicher, Tikrit | **Dates in Iraq:** Dec 2006 — March 2007 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 8586, Perrysville, Ohio

“The massive degree of trauma that we treated in our emergency treatment facility and the professionalism, compassion and team cohesion of all of the unit members of the 399th CSH is what I remember about my service in Iraq. This was a Reserve unit attached to the 2nd Medical Brigade and on a year-long deployment to Iraq. Many of our enlisted medics were employed in non-medical careers as civilians, but you never would have known that from their stellar performance of saving lives and treating trauma patients. It was a privilege to serve with them.”

TODD STAWICKI

Service: Army | **Rank:** 1st Lieutenant | **Unit:** C Co., 2nd Bn., 16th Inf., 1st Inf. Div. | **Location:** Shirqat | **Dates in Iraq:** Sept. 2009 – May 2010 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 2347, Netcong, New Jersey

“My most vivid memory was the impact that I could have at a young age. I was a 25-year-old platoon leader, and I was responsible for 39 soldiers, their development and their lives. We partnered with an Iraqi army battalion, two Iraqi army police stations, local politicians, and the sons of Iraqi sheiks to try to build a better future for Iraq.”

DANIEL SCHRUBB

Service: Marine Corps | **Rank:** Master Sergeant | **Unit:** 1st Marines, 1st Marine Div. | **Location:** Baghdad to Babylon | **Dates in Iraq:** March 2003 – August 2003 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 12205, Bulverde, Texas

“At the time of my deployment, I was a staff sergeant and a combat camera team leader/videographer leading young Marines as we made history and captured it at the same time. We were on the front lines with the various battalions of Regimental Combat Team

One (3rd Bn., 1st Marines; 1st Bn., 4th Marines; and 2nd Bn., 23rd Marines) so we captured a lot of the action that these units saw. One vivid memory, early into the invasion, is of receiving enemy mortar fire right after bedding down for the night. I had just shed my MOPP suit (protection against chemical or biological weapons), climbed into my sleeping bag and started trying to get comfortable. Then, BOOM, we started taking indirect mortar fire. Crazy as it seems, my first thought after I realized what was happening was, ‘Should I get dressed first, or just run for cover?’ I got dressed REAL quick, grabbed my weapon and headed to the nearest foxhole.”

ELIZABETH GRAYBILL

Service: Army | **Rank:** Sergeant 1st Class | **Unit:** HQs and HQs Co., 18th MP Brigade | **Location:** Camp Victory, Baghdad | **Dates in Iraq:** March 10, 2003 – Feb. 17, 2004, and Nov. 30, 2004 – Nov. 7, 2005 | **VFW affiliation:** VFW Post 6558, Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania

“There are so many vivid memories of the Iraq War zone. I guess what I remember best were all the beautiful palaces that were there on Camp Victory.”

IAN HEWLETT

Service: Army | **Rank:** Sergeant (E-5) | **Unit:** 2nd Plt., B Co., 1st Bn., 18th Inf., 1st Inf. Div. | **Locations:** Tikrit, Samarra and Mosul | **Dates in Iraq:** March 2004 – February 2005 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 8467, Meadows of Dan, Virginia

“Outside of the camaraderie and absolute devastation when we lost another comrade, my most vivid memory would be the first night/day of Operation Baton Rouge in Samarra. It was an intense engagement as we retook that town. Lt. Col. Sinclair and Command Sgt. Maj. Pallister were at their finest, and we pushed through the town and took our sectors. The most impactful memory is finding shelter in a nearby house as an AC-130 hit a warehouse in the next block — I’ll never forget the sound of it firing down nor of the destroyed city block after we hit the rooftops before moving to the next block of houses.”

RON BUFFKIN

Service: Army | **Rank:** Colonel | **Unit:** Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) Field Team | **Location:** Camp Victory | **Dates in Iraq:** February – November 2006 | **VFW affiliation:** Department of Virginia

“I was commander for the JIEDDO Field Team. We had detachments in Baghdad, Tikrit, Mosul, and Ramadi. One of our missions was to imbed teams alongside ground combat units to provide tactics in countering IEDs, and to learn best practices from the unit. So, we saw a lot of combat all over. The year I was there in 2006 was the deadliest year for American KIAs and WIAs from all our years in Iraq. One night, I was waiting to catch a Blackhawk helicopter ride from a 101st Airborne Division FOB near Tikrit back to Camp

Victory. In the darkness were other soldiers from different units also waiting for helicopter transport to other camps around Iraq. Suddenly, two blacked-out Blackhawks swooped into the landing pad with wounded 101st soldiers. On the second bird was an American soldier, killed in action from the same engagement as the wounded. The awaiting medics called it a “fallen Eagle.” Without any command or prompt, all of us on that helipad came to attention and rendered a silent salute as the medics carried the dead soldier past us. It was a somber tribute to sacrifice and duty.”

JAY BACHAR

Service: Army Reserve | **Rank:** Staff Sergeant | **Unit:** HQs and HQs Co., 352nd Civil Affairs Command | **Location:** Baghdad | **Dates in Iraq:** April 2003 – March 2004 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 304, Annapolis, Maryland

“My most vivid memory is helping 16 of a remaining 29 Iraqi Jews leave Iraq and go to Israel. My unit was approached by an Israeli NGO who informed us that there were 29 Jews still living in Iraq and could we assist in getting those who wanted to go to Israel out of the country. We then took them to the NGO airstrip (different from Baghdad Airport). This was done on the sly so as not to offend the Iraqis or some of our coalition partners. So, at each checkpoint along the way, I had to stand in the doorway of the bus so that when a Gurkha guard wanted to inspect, I was standing at the door so that they couldn’t see or go in. One of the Jews leaving was a 99-year-old woman! We got them on the plane without issue as our unit also controlled the NGO airport.”

JIM STEARNS

Service: Army | **Rank:** Major | **Unit:** HQs, 450th Chemical Bn. | **Location:** Camp Slayer | **Dates in Iraq:** April 2003 – May 2004 | **VFW affiliation:** VFW Post 7110 New Braunfels, Texas

“We would get attacked almost every evening. Typically, a few mortar rounds supported with small arms fire. One evening, all hell erupted all around us. Every gun in Baghdad seemed to be firing wildly into the air with countless small explosions and mortar rounds exploding all around us. So much so that the two star general who was on our Forward Operating Base was evacuated by his personal security team. His orders to us, as he was leaving, “Find out what the hell is going on and let him know!” It took us a few hours to figure out the reason for this sudden explosion of activity. Once we did, we were all in disbelief. Seems the national Iraqi soccer team had won a match. That’s right, NOT an attack but celebratory gunfire for their national soccer team win!”

RANDALL LIBERTY

Service: Army | **Rank:** Command Sergeant Major | **Unit:** 2nd Bn., 4th Bde., Iraqi Assistance Group | **Location:** Fallujah | **Dates in Iraq:** September 2004 – September 2005 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 6924, Fairfield, Maine

“In September 2005, our tour was ending, we were lying on the Landing Zone on Camp Fallujah. My 10-man Military Transition Team and I had just completed a year tour embedded with an Iraqi infantry battalion in Fallujah. A Marine Corps CH-46 “Chinook” helicopter flew in, dropped its tailgate, we loaded up and lifted off. I watched the sprawling lights of Fallujah fade away as we flew toward Baghdad and to our freedom bird back home.

COLIN TUNNEY

Service: Marine Corps | **Rank:** Lance Corporal | **Unit:** Echo Btry., 2nd Bn., 10th Marines, 2nd Marine Div. | **Location:** Al Asad | **Dates in Iraq:** Summer 2008 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 161, Port Jervis, New York (Junior Vice Commander)

“During my first deployment with the Marines, I saw my first sandstorm come along, menacing our base. It looked like a huge wall of dark moving undulating clouds of tan. I remember all I could think about, other than finding some cover, was the motion picture ‘The Mummy’ and how I thought it was just Hollywood exaggerating the grandeur of a ‘real life’ storm!”

RICHARD KENNON

Service: Army Reserve | **Rank:** 1st Sergeant | **Unit:** 1411th Civil Affairs Co., U. S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command | **Location:** Forward Operating Base Kalsu | **Dates in Iraq:** June 2009 – June 2010 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 4548, Jacksonville, Ark.

“My most vivid memory of my time in the Iraq War zone was teaching an art class to children at an Iraqi elementary school that our unit oversaw the construction of.”

RAY JOHNSON

Service: Army | **Rank:** Chief Warrant Officer 5 | **Unit:** 2nd Bn., 224th Aviation (assigned to Marine Air Group 16, 3rd Marine Wing) | **Location:** Al Asad | **Dates in Iraq:** Feb. 4, 2006 – March 3, 2007 | **VFW affiliation:** Post 660, Savannah, Georgia

“I remember the dust storms, a persistent wind during the summer months over the months of June and July, blowing incessantly and lasting an average of 1-15 days. The heights of the dust clouds ascended from 3,000 to 8,000 feet. Visibilities were near zero in a Shamal (Arabic word for “North” because the storms come out of the North) dust storm. Flying operations come to a halt.”

This article is featured in the March 2023 issue of VFW magazine. Submitted photos of the veterans featured above can be found in the original article [here](#). The article was written

and compiled by Tim Dyhouse, senior editor-in-chief, and Tina Clark, administrative assistant for the VFW magazine.