

After more than a year in Iraq, Lance Steidl is home at last

By Jennifer A. Gritt
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Officer Lance Steidl admitted that watching his unit's work be destroyed and not knowing friend from foe was one of the worst aspects of his deployment with the 432nd Civil Affairs Battalion to the northern part of Iraq last September.

"That was very frustrating," he said. "We would go into the city and do some really good things and hand some stuff

out and then that night someone might rocket your base or do something to try and kill you."

But despite these challenges, Steidl believed that the work of the Civil Affairs Battalion was both meaningful and necessary. "Without government, security, law enforcement — how do you run a city? How do you have a general way of living?" he asked.

Steidl pointed out that the U.S. recon-

struction effort being carried out by units like his was about rebuilding hospitals and schools. "You can't just go into an area, blow everything up, and then leave, and leave a country in ruins."

Although Steidl recognized the need for U.S. service members to help rebuild Iraq, the fact that he had another life waiting for him back in the states was not easily forgotten. When April of this year finally arrived and it was clear that the

432nd was going home, Steidl was suddenly faced with the emotional and psychological challenge of returning to civilian life. The several weeks it took to get back into the States and go through the debriefing process were not easy.

As Steidl explained, upon being redeployed to Kuwait, the 432nd had to spend weeks going through and cleaning equipment. The army was very

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tion in Iraq. In October, Steidl and other unit members were injured when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb northwest of Al Rutha.



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particular about cleaning all equipment in order to deter the possibility of bringing back any foreign microbes into the States. "Those really were some long days," he said.

When the 432nd finally reached the U.S., they had to go through a screening and debriefing period at Ft. Bragg as well. "There was a lot of paperwork," Steidl said about the process of reintegrating into civilian life. When the time came to head home to the Fox Cities, Steidl admitted that he was still grappling with the transition.

"I was nervous because I've been out of this job for a little better than 14 months," Steidl recalled. "I wasn't worried about my employer not hiring or taking me back, I was worried about learning law enforcement again as a civilian versus how you had to do things as a soldier."

Steidl admitted that at times getting back into the routine of civilian life wasn't easy. "It was kind of lonely," he revealed. "I went through (a time) where I felt like I should go back to Iraq because I felt guilty. There were soldiers still there, and a lot of them are getting killed now. I didn't feel like I fit in too much here at the police department."

Steidl quickly added that Fox Valley Metro Police Department personnel were "really good at making me feel real good about coming back."

Despite the positive reinforcement he was receiving, Steidl was reluctant to talk about his experiences in Iraq at first. "I really didn't want that to be the main focus in my life when I got home," he said, "where people were constantly asking, 'So what did you do in the war?'"

But when students from area schools began writing letters inviting him to come and speak about his experiences, Steidl realized the importance of sharing what he had gone through with others. "As more and more time passes," he said, "and I'm getting that better separation from the army back into my civilian polling and regular life, I don't mind talking about it."

Now when groups invite him to speak, Steidl points out: "I'm more than happy to tell them because my feeling when I got home was such that — even if somebody didn't believe in the war — they certainly took care of the guys and gals coming back, and made them feel like they did something worthwhile."

When asked how he felt his service in Iraq has changed him, Steidl took a moment to reflect. "Well, I know it's made me a better person," he replied. "As far as policing is concerned, I was a team sergeant in Iraq so I had to take care of other troops, and I think it is just going to give me better leadership skills here with some of the younger guys that I'm working with now."

When asked if he felt the transfer of power back to the Iraqi people would be successful, Steidl said: "I really don't know. There's so much that happened since I've left now. Southern Iraq has become pretty much a war zone. And all the cities that we were in ... (where) we were loved, we're witnessing ... a huge digression."

"I'm hoping the transfer of power stops all of this," he said, and that all the work the 432nd accomplished will not be further eroded.

As for how he'd feel if he were to be called up again in the future Steidl did not hesitate: "Every time I was in Iraq and I thought 'What am I doing here?' I'd get a glimpse or another e-mail or another photo of 9-11, and — I don't know if Iraq was all about terrorism — but I do know that every time I saw that, I was proud to be in the service. And I was proud to do what our country asked and that we were doing the right thing being wherever we had to be because I know a lot of people that day suffered quite a bit."

But for now, Steidl is enjoying the daily grind of civilian life and getting back into some familiar hobbies such as weightlifting and riding his Harley. "I've been riding that a lot," he said. "That's really been a big escape since I've been home from the war... And actually, it's been exciting getting back to work. We've got Harleys here too!"