

Traveling Soldier

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**February, 2010
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“If The American Public Knew Half Of What’s Going On In Iraq And Afghanistan, We’d Be Out Of There Already”

From the editors: Nick Mottern, Director of Consumers for Peace.org and a contributor to *Truthout*, visited the Fort Drum area in November. This excerpts from a report he wrote what some of the soldiers and military family members had to say.

Mottern was stationed in Vietnam in the early 1960s.

He handed out an article he had written opposing the war in Afghanistan and “a small fold-out card on GI rights that contains the number for GI Rights Hotline (877-447-4487). The hotline provides counselors for military people who have questions about conscientious objection, harassment and discharge from military service, among other things.”

December 12, 2009

by Nick Mottern, *Truthout* Op-Ed [Excerpts]

A black woman in her 40’s told me that her husband was about to leave for his fourth deployment, to Afghanistan.

She indicated that he believes this war is a total waste of time.

I gave her a copy of the article and said that if corporations want to run gas and oil pipelines through Afghanistan they should hire their own army. As I said “hire their own army,” she picked up on the phrase like a musician picking up on a riff and finished the sentence with me, saying: “Hire their own army.” I told her that *Army Times* did not want to run the article in an ad, and she said: “Oh,” as in “Oh, really.” I asked her if she would like to take copies to hand out, and she said she definitely would. She also took a GI rights card.

A 25-year-old woman with her 17-month-old son said that she and her husband were married when they were 18. He immediately went into the Army, and they came to Fort Drum.

She has a five-year-old daughter born nine months after they were married and while her husband was in Afghanistan. He did two tours in Afghanistan, and on his last tour he broke his back when he jumped out of a helicopter wearing a backpack that was too heavy.

He returned to Fort Drum in 2007 and is still being treated for the back injury, and he has PTSD. Her husband is due to be released from the Army shortly; she said the Army kept him in to give him treatment for his back.

She has no use for the Army and can’t wait to go back home to the West Coast. The soldiers are “just numbers” to the Army, she said.

She took copies of the article and the cards to hand out.

A 20-year-old woman, with a pretty, open face, said that her 41-year-old father had been in the Army since he was 18 and that he had been at home for only one of her birthdays.

She said that she has a “friend” in Afghanistan now, and as the conversation developed it was clear that she was intending to marry this 21-year-old. She said that he and his friends do not want to be there, are completely fed up.

She wants him home and, she said, she does not want her life with him to be like what she experienced growing up.

I made the comment to her about the corporations needing to hire their own army if they wanted access to Afghanistan, and she looked directly at me and said: “Thank you!” She took the several copies of the article and the card.

An Army sergeant in his mid-forties, honorably discharged, had been in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has PTSD and is getting private counseling. The message he got from command on his PTSD was: “You’re faking it.”

I asked him how he got his news and whether he read *Army Times*. He said he read it from time to time. Of news organizations generally, he said: “They don’t give the total

information ... If the American public knew half of what's going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, we'd be out of there already."

He was clearly agitated as we talked, and at one point a woman with him tried to reach for his elbow to usher him away, but he stayed to finish the conversation.

A 35-year-old Army veteran, recently discharged, said he had been in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said he has PTSD, is taking medication for it and is getting counseling. Then he said, in a very direct, surprising way: "I had a horrible dream last night."

He said he is fed up with the Army's "bullshit." I asked him if he had always felt that way, and he said: "I was gung-ho when I joined up ... kill 'em all." Now he wants no part of the Army. He said that the Iraqis and Afghans should look after their own defense. The Afghans have the idea that the Americans should do all the fighting, he said.

His tour in Iraq was much worse than the one in Afghanistan; in Iraq, he said, he saw friends blown apart.

Movie Review: Brothers

December 14, 2009

By Chuck Vinch, *Army Times* [Excerpts]

A hard-charging Marine officer goes down in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan and is presumed dead. He leaves a beautiful, loving wife, two adorable little girls — and a younger brother just out of jail, the latest misstep in a life spent as his family's delinquent, black-sheep shadow.

But the younger brother finds an inner reserve of untapped responsibility and steps into the void, helping his widowed sister-in-law with home repairs, with mentoring the girls ... and eventually, with a little bit more.

Then comes news that the officer is very much alive and coming home after months as an insurgent prisoner. When he returns with deep physical and psychological scars inflicted during his captivity, pre-existing family fault lines begin to quake with Richter-scale intensity.

Sounds like fodder for a typically maudlin matinee on the Life-time Movie Network. But "Brothers," a remake of a 2004 Danish film, is much more.

It's also much less — and that's meant as a compliment. Director Jim Sheridan and screenwriter David Benioff don't preach or moralize, but rather stick to a spare, minimalist key to lead a re-markably tight-knit ensemble through an intensely evocative humanist study of a wartime family at war with itself.

The cast is awesome. Tobey Maguire as Sam, the officer, and Jake Gyllenhaal as Tommy, his younger bro, obliterate their heretofore fully justified profiles as soft, marshmallowy actors.

In fact, Maguire is flat-out ferocious as a grunt rushing headlong toward oblivion out of deep guilt over a horrific atrocity his captors forced him to commit after months of deprivation and torture in Afghanistan.

As Grace, the woman caught between the brothers, Natalie Portman nails the emotional maelstrom of a young

wife and mother who thought she was widowed and then wasn't.

The great Sam Shepard also lends his talents as the boys' father, a hard-drinking Vietnam veteran with issues of his own.

For all the weighty emotions swirling on screen, Sheridan and Benioff maintain a believable tone that never feels sappy or overwrought; Grace and Tommy, for example, succumb to only one moment of weakness — a single brief kiss that leaves both feeling saddened and guilty.

That proves to be enough to light the slow-burning fuse on the family powder keg. It all leads up to a harrowing scene that starts with Sam lining up kitchen glass-ware in perfectly ordered rows during a late-night OCD binge and builds to a peak that is as raw as anything I've seen at the octoplex in recent years.

It had the crowd at my screening holding its collective breath, and actually left me a bit shaken — not something you'll often hear me say about a movie.

GI Recommends the movie Brothers

From the editors: To protect the writer, ID has been removed from this email as published here. The Military Resistance organization, which produces *Traveling Soldier*, will follow up with the writer privately. We welcome other letters from members of the armed services. '

Thank you so much.

I recommend you & everyone else see the movie Brothers.

It is a very real depiction of how the military really works.

It also demonstrates what the leadership really thinks about lower enlisted.

Sincerely Grateful,
[XXXX]

"I don't even know if our generals or commanders even believe that we can win this war... What would I be dying for? What did my unit members die for?"

December 31, 2009

By Sara A. Carter, *Washington Times* [Excerpts]

HUTAL, Afghanistan:

Villagers stared at the Americans as they made their way into a small bazaar where goat meat hung from hooks amid stands of used clothing, pots, pans and various trinkets.

For the Afghans, the big Americans in full battle gear looked like beings from another planet. At each turn of the road, soldiers on the point knelt on the ground, automatic weapons ready. The men and women on the security walk were staggered in

zigzag formation to keep casualties low in case Taliban sharpshooters were in the area and taking aim. Capt. Casey Thoreen, 30, the commander of the unit, monitored his radio for intelligence.

Fifteen minutes later, the unit arrived at a local clinic.

It was empty and ominous looking with an open gate.

Villagers in the bazaar began to leave. Shopkeepers closed their shops, throwing tarps over their goods. Children who had been cadging the troops for candy and pencils scattered.

"A suicide bomber is in the area," Capt. Thoreen said after receiving a radioed intelligence report. "We've got to move, now!"

It's an especially difficult security situation for the men and woman assigned to the small Combat Outpost Rath in the heart of Kandahar province's Taliban territory.

"We haven't been back here since a suicide bomber took the life of several of our guys," said Staff Sgt. Daniel

Paul Rabidou, 24, of San Bernardino, Calif., who was on protective duty that day.

"You never know out here, who's around what corner. We've lost some good men, and we need more out here to get the job done."

But several said the dangers aren't worth it.

"I have a child back home and a wife," said one soldier, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution from his unit.

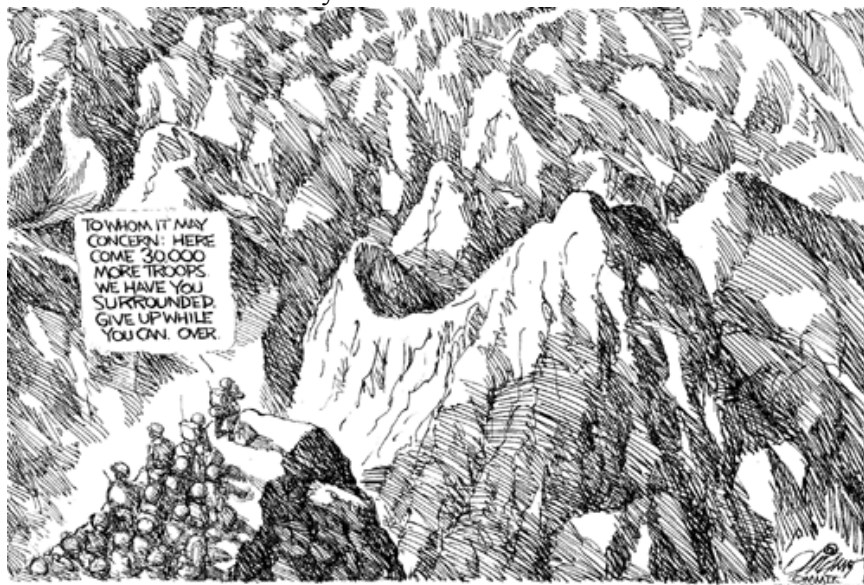
"I ran through a mine field once and survived. You know, the only thing that went through my mind was my family back home.

"I thought what in the hell am I doing this for?

"I don't even know if our generals or commanders even believe that we can win this war - if it is even a war to begin with.

"What would I be dying for? What did my unit members die for?"

Staff Sgts. Rabidou, Yost and Cross also suffer bouts of impatience



with the fight.

On Sept. 14, the three survived an improvised explosive device attack on their Stryker convoy that killed platoon leader Lt. David Wright, 25 and Sgt. Andrew McConnell, 24.

"The day after we lost two of our soldiers I had to go back to the village where the insurgents carried out the attacks," said Staff Sgt. Yost.

"I sat with the villagers, knowing full well that some of them helped kill our own men, and I had to negotiate with them. It wasn't easy at all.

"War is war, but we can't go on fighting forever.

"There has to be a way to resolve this."

“The President Knows Perfectly Well That Afghanistan is Vietnam All Over Again”

December 10, 2009

By Thomas H. Johnson, M. Chris Mason, *Foreign Policy*
[Excerpts]

As German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once said, truth is ridiculed, then denied, and then “accepted as having been obvious to everyone from the beginning.”

So let’s start with the obvious: There isn’t the slightest possibility that the course laid out by Barack Obama in his Dec. 1 speech will halt or even slow the downward spiral toward defeat in Afghanistan. None.

The U.S. president and his advisors labored for three months and brought forth old wine in bigger bottles. The speech contained not one single new idea or approach, nor offered any hint of new thinking about a conflict that everyone now agrees the United States is losing.

Instead, the administration deliberated for 94 days to deliver essentially “more men, more money, try harder.”

It sounded ominously similar to Mikhail Gorbachev’s “bloody wound” speech that led to a similar-sized, temporary Soviet troop surge in Afghanistan in 1986.

But the Soviet experience in Afghanistan isn’t what everyone is comparing Obama’s current predicament to; it’s Vietnam. The president knows it, and part of his speech was a rebuttal of those comparisons. It was a valiant effort, but to no avail.

Afghanistan is Vietnam all over again.

First, Obama noted that Afghanistan is being conducted by a “coalition” of 43 countries -- as if war by committee would magically change the outcome (a throwback to former President George W. Bush’s “Iraq coalition” mathematics).

The truth is, outside of a handful of countries, it’s basically a coalition of pacifists.

In fact, more foreign troops fought alongside the United States in Vietnam than are now actually fighting with Americans today.

Only nine countries in today’s 43-country coalition have more than 1,000 personnel there; nine others have 10 (yes,

not even a dozen people) -- or fewer. And although Australia and New Zealand have sent a handful of excellent special operations troops to Afghanistan, only Britain, Canada, and France are providing significant forces willing to conduct conventional offensive military operations. That brings the coalition’s combat-troop contribution to approximately 17,000.

Most of the other 38 “partners” have strict rules prohibiting them from ever doing anything actually dangerous. Turkish troops, for example, never leave their firebase in Wardak province, according to U.S. personnel who monitor it.

The president’s final argument, that Afghanistan is different because Vietnam never attacked American soil, is a red herring.

History is overflowing with examples of just causes that have gone down in defeat. To suggest that the two conflicts will have different outcomes because the U.S. cause in Afghanistan is just (whereas, presumably from the speech, the war in Vietnam was not) is simply specious.

The courses and outcomes of wars are determined by strategy, not the justness of causes or the courage of troops.

The reality on the

ground is that Afghanistan is Vietnam redux.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s regime is an utterly illegitimate, incompetent kleptocracy.

The Afghan National Army (ANA) -- slotted to take over the conflict when the coalition pulls out -- will not even be able to feed itself in five years, much less turn back the mounting Taliban tide.

The U.S. Center for Army Lessons Learned determined by statistical analysis that the ANA will never grow larger than 100,000 men because nearly 30 percent either desert or fail to re-enlist each year.

The ANA is disproportionately Tajik, drug use is a major problem, all recruits are illiterate, and last month the ANA reached only half its modest recruiting goal despite 40 percent unemployment nationwide.



The American media, in its own regression to 1963, simply regurgitates Pentagon press releases that vastly inflate the actual size of the Afghan military, which is actually less than 60,000 men, just 32,000 of whom are combat troops.

The strategy's other component for dealing with the Taliban, "negotiating with moderates," is also ludicrous to anyone who is familiar with the insurgents. There is no one to negotiate with, and from their perspective, nothing to discuss.

And the Taliban know they are winning.

Meanwhile, commanding Gen. Stanley McChrystal's plan to secure the urban areas (rather than the rural countryside where the insurgency is actually metastasizing) is plagiarized from the famous never-written textbook, *How to Lose a War in Afghanistan*, authored jointly by Alexander the Great, the British Empire, and the Soviet Union.

And that is why the United States is now headed for certain defeat in Afghanistan.

Obama's new "strategy" is no strategy at all.

It is a cynical and politically motivated rehash of Iraq policy: Toss in a few more troops, throw together something resembling local security forces, buy off the enemies, and get the hell out before it all blows up.

Even the dimmest bulb listening to the president's speech could not have missed the obvious link between the withdrawal date for combat troops from Iraq (2010), the date for beginning troop reductions in

Afghanistan (2011), and the domestic U.S. election cycle.

So we are faced with a conundrum.

Obama is one of the most intelligent men ever to hold the U.S. presidency.

But no intelligent person could really believe that adding 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, a country four times larger than Vietnam, for a year or two, following the same game plan that has resulted in dismal failure there for the past eight years, could possibly have any impact on the outcome of the conflict.

Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes used to say that "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

The only conclusion one can reach from the president's speech, after eliminating the impossible, is that the administration has made a difficult but pragmatic decision: The war in Afghanistan is unwinnable, and the president's

second term and progressive domestic agenda cannot be sacrificed to a lost cause the way that President Lyndon B. Johnson's was for Vietnam.

The result of that calculation was what we heard on Dec. 1: platitudes about commitment and a just cause; historical

amnesia; and a continuation of the exact same failed policies that got the United States into this mess back in 2001, concocted by the same ship of fools, many of whom are still providing remarkably bad advice to this administration.

We believe the president knows perfectly well that Afghanistan is Vietnam all over again, both domestically and, as we wrote in *Military Review* this month, in Kabul and out in the Afghan hills, where good men are bleeding and dying.

And he's seeking the same cynical exit strategy that Richard Nixon and

Henry Kissinger did in 1968: negotiating the best possible second-place position and a "decent interval" between withdrawal and collapse.

In office less than a year, the Obama administration has already been seduced by the old beltway calculus that sometimes a little wrong must be done to get re-elected and achieve a greater good.

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