



**R**utgers may seem a world away from the war in Iraq, but for the five veterans profiled here—and the estimated 200 other Rutgers students, staff, and alumni whose college and professional careers took an unexpected detour to the Middle East—military service has been a defining experience. Four Rutgers alumni have died since the fighting began (see sidebar on page 30). And students currently enrolled in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) surely keep a

you sign on, plain and simple.”

All five of the veterans joined up before the world changed so drastically on September 11, 2001. They all decided to partner college studies with military service. Those who were part of ROTC, a means to an education and valuable skills, owed the armed forces four years of active duty service and four years of Individual Ready Reserve status. A similar arrangement holds true for those soldiers who joined a branch of the National Guard or Reserves.

But economics was not the only concern of these veter-

ans; loyalty was an overriding incentive to serve. “I knew if I didn’t go, then someone else would have to take my place,” says Lorraine Derowitsch LC’04, a specialist in a National Guard medical supply unit. Orlando Velez NCAS’07, a sergeant in the same unit, adds, “I never questioned going because my

unit is a second family to me.”

Not every soldier was eager to recount his or her experiences. Velez was angry and resentful when he returned; people didn’t seem to fully appreciate that he gave a year of his life to his country, he explains. And National Guard sergeant Francis Roettger CCAS’06 feels that media reporting is one-sided and provides a disservice to the American people. “I can’t seem to read an article that makes me feel like there is hope for Iraq,” he says. “I saw schools that had opened and Iraqis putting their lives on the line to vote. Americans have not seen the progress firsthand.”

But in Iraq, the soldiers shut the nay-saying out and got on with the work. “Even if you’re not in grave danger, deployment is hell,” contends Nussbaum. “You have no privacy, no time to yourself, you’re always hot, sweaty, and carting 30 pounds of gear around. The toilets are dirty, the food mostly sucks, and the work can be extremely tedious.” Politics, for the soldier on the ground, is a distraction. “The larger political situation wasn’t an issue over there,” says Justin Schmidt NLAW’08, a Marine captain in the Reserves. “Every day I had the same thought, ‘Do my job to the best of my ability and let me and everyone in my unit make it to the end of the day.’ ”

## Iraq taught these Rutgers students and alumni lessons they will never forget

By Bill Glovin

keener eye on the situation in Iraq than do their classmates. “I give people who join ROTC now a lot of credit, because they know they are likely to see action,” says Army captain Mark Nussbaum CC’01, an Iraq War veteran. “In hindsight, I’m not sure I would have made the commitment.”

Nussbaum was in Kuwait when the war was launched on March 20, 2003. Within weeks, President George Bush declared the country had been liberated. On May 9, the United States and Great Britain laid out a blueprint for the occupation of postwar Iraq. And in January 2005, the Iraqi people elected representatives to a new transitional Iraqi National Assembly.

But the country’s slow transition to self-government has not diminished the danger for U.S. forces, as the veterans profiled here—who were deployed in 2004 and 2005—can attest. As of November 2006, more than 2,890 U.S. troops had been killed and more than 21,900 wounded. While the occupation of Iraq continues to be a highly charged issue, Nussbaum and his fellow soldiers agree that the decision to go to war “isn’t your call when





Mark Nussbaum

### Instant Karma

Mark Nussbaum knew in an instant that the moment he had spent thousands of hours training for had arrived. His computer screen showed two airborne objects coming directly toward his base, Camp Doha in Kuwait. He had between 30 and 40 seconds to decide whether to give the order to shoot them down. "I could feel my heart thumping in my chest," says Nussbaum. An Army captain, he was at the end of a four-hour shift supervising one of his air-defense teams inside a truck that had been converted into a command center. "I knew a mistake could mean shooting down friendly aircraft," he says. "It had happened before."



Nussbaum's order to shoot the objects down turned out to be the right decision: the blips on his computer screen had been Scud missiles fired by Iraqi forces from across the border in Basra. Three days later, this first-generation American received the Bronze Star Medal for meritorious service from a general who told him that his quick actions had saved lives: 15,000 people were on base that day.

The danger, however, was just beginning. Later that week, in his secondary role as a reconnaissance officer for his platoon, he led the relocation of his soldiers to a coalition-captured Iraqi airfield outside Nasiriya, where, earlier that month, Army private Jessica Lynch and 17 comrades had been ambushed and 11 killed. The mission brought to mind a piece of advice he'd gotten halfway through basic training, when the 9/11 attacks "changed everyone's focus and commitment," he remembers. "A crusty career sergeant told me, 'Sir, make sure your life insurance is paid in full.'"

The convoy covered several hundred miles across territory that U.S. forces had swept through but had not fully occupied. "Those were the longest days of my life," says Nussbaum, 28, "because I had absolutely no idea what to expect. I had never seen such poverty before: kids with no shoes and tattered clothes, a woman bathing in a swamp full of mosquitoes, and nomads wandering on camels." As Nussbaum's convoy got closer to Nasiriya, he saw fires raging and "could smell the deteriorating bodies of Iraqi soldiers as they lay dead in their vehicles."

For the next 45 days, he and his platoon defended the airfield from enemy rocket attacks. Frequent air-raid sirens meant that he and his men kept their gas masks close and always knew where to find the nearest bunker. "The U.S. military quickly eliminated the Iraqi air defense threat," he says. The Iraqis "didn't have our firepower, and whenever they launched a missile, it gave away their location. We were always able to find and destroy them."

Nussbaum's deployment in Iraq was three months—shortly after the conclusion of major combat operations, he shipped back to Germany to finish his service—but happened to coincide with Passover. As Nussbaum prepared to spend the holiday far from family and friends, he and his commanding officer, also Jewish, learned that their base was near Ur, the southern Iraqi village where the Hebrew prophet Abraham was born. Before sundown on the first night of Passover, the pair drove to Ur with a care package of matzo and grape juice sent to Nussbaum by Rabbi Baruch Goodman of Rutgers' Chabad House. On the outskirts of the village, they pulled over to hold a quiet seder. Says Nussbaum, now a first-year student at Brooklyn Law

“I could feel my heart thumping in my chest.”

The date, March 25, 2003, will be etched in his memory for the rest of his life. Just days before, Nussbaum's outfit, the 6th Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery, had been moved from Germany to Kuwait to prepare for the air attack that launched Operation Iraqi Freedom on March 20. His role in the initial attack, which was staged from several bases in Kuwait, was to make sure that he and his 28-soldier Patriot missile launcher platoon protected the air space over Camp Doha.

School, “It was a small miracle that the package had somehow found me in the midst of a war.”

## The Weight of the World

At 5'1" and 120 pounds, Lorraine Derowitsch felt every ounce of the 30-plus pounds of gear she carried each time she left a base during her deployment. “I wore an 11-pound bulletproof vest, a 9-pound gun, 7 pounds of ammo, and a 3-pound helmet,” says Derowitsch, a specialist with a Jersey City-based Army National Guard unit who served in Iraq from January to October 2005. “I traveled constantly in heat that was usually over 100 degrees. There were times when I sweated right through the vest.”

As a member of a medical-support team attached to Echo Company, 50th Main Support Battalion, Derowitsch was responsible for going out and inspecting kitchens, bathrooms, and food and water supplies within a 50-mile radius of her home base, a large administrative compound outside of Tikrit. In addition to the usual sanitation and hygiene issues, she says, “There were a host of other concerns: scorpions, disease-carrying insects like sand flies, the local water supply, and sexually transmitted diseases.”

Derowitsch, who signed up for the New Jersey Army National Guard in 1999, when she was still in high school, estimates that she and her partner joined more than 50 convoys in 10 months. Although the area around Tikrit was relatively secure—at the time, U.S. forces were attempting to transition control to the Iraqis—“convoys are always dangerous,” she says. “Anyone is vulnerable, and there seem to be unending tactics to attack a convoy.” Only once did Derowitsch’s convoy take a direct hit. “I was driving,” she remembers. “A roadside bomb exploded two vehicles in front of us. We heard a loud boom, and it felt like an earthquake. We saw a huge cloud of smoke and dust as the truck that was hit drifted to the side of the road and stopped.” She was initially stunned, but her training kicked in immediately. She helped her unit to secure the area and care for a civilian who had been injured.

Because few women serve in the Iraqi army, the country’s soldiers always seemed surprised to find her among their American counterparts. That certainly wasn’t the case on her base, which she describes as “a self-functioning town” that was home to “plenty of other female soldiers. Gender wasn’t an issue. But there were very few women in most of the other places we visited. It was a big deal when a woman showed up.” On these bases, Derowitsch believes, the spotlight was on her simply because there were so few women. Once, for example, she visited an armored



Lorraine Derowitsch

“A roadside bomb exploded two vehicles in front of us. We heard a loud boom, and it felt like an earthquake.”

division of about 1,000 men and only 10 women. But Derowitsch is quick to point out that she never experienced any inappropriate behavior. In fact, she says, the men seemed to really appreciate her conversation and the chance to get a woman’s perspective on their mutual experiences.

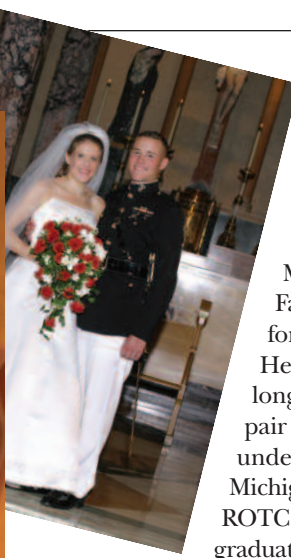
The Army’s policy that every soldier have a “battle buddy” meant that she was rarely alone. When Derowitsch was the only woman on a base, overnight stays were discouraged. On bases with few female soldiers, her partner—a man—could sleep anywhere, while she bunked in the women’s quarters or in a room by herself. “On one base,” Derowitsch recalls, “I had to get a code to open the lock for the showers in the female area.” The code, she says, was given only to women.

In situations where women were scarce, Derowitsch found that gender was sometimes an issue and that she needed to become “one of the guys” to function successfully. But there were limitations on that strategy. At her own base, Derowitsch and her comrades were sometimes allowed to peel down to a T-shirt in the brutal heat and humidity of their office. But on one base, where she was the only woman, her commanding officer, seeing her





Justin Schmidt



five weeks was spent learning Arabic eight hours a day, with homework at night.

By March 2004, Justin was stationed with the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, about a mile outside of Fallujah, at one of Saddam Hussein's former resorts. Although a newlywed, Heather was no novice at sustaining a long-distance military romance. The pair had met three years earlier as undergraduates at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. When Justin, an ROTC officer, went on active duty after graduating with a degree in liberal arts in 2001, Heather, two years younger, was still

finishing up her studies. During his first two-year deployment, in Okinawa, Japan, Heather and Justin's relationship flourished through daily phone calls and emails and occasional reunions.

With her husband now in Iraq, Heather joined a support network of military wives at Camp Pendleton and immersed herself in her graduate work on autism at the University of California in San Diego. For Heather, "working full time was my way of coping. Everyone was trying to live as normally as possible." The Schmidts were permitted a 20-minute phone conversation once a week. Emails were

soaked in sweat, barked a direct order: "Do not take your [long-sleeved] top off here."

Upon her return from Iraq, the 25-year-old Derowitsch—who earned degrees in sociology and dance from Rutgers—found a job teaching ballroom dance in Highland Park. These days she often finds herself thinking about the entire notion of war. She calls herself "a feminist" who sees the war in Iraq as "an environment heavy in masculinity that is lacking understanding, communication, and conversation. Peace is a balance of femininity and masculinity," she adds. More women in politics and the military would lead to a more peaceful world, she believes. "If women can be a filter for the cruelty of war, then that is a powerful thing."

### The Honeymoon Is Over

The newlyweds were still sporting tans from their honeymoon when they learned in October 2003 that his Marine infantry battalion would soon be going to Iraq. Justin Schmidt, a first lieutenant with two years of active duty behind him and two more to go, and his wife, Heather, had settled into their new apartment outside Camp Pendleton, near San Diego, just in time for six months of intensive preparation for his deployment. "One month of training took place in the desert, which simulated the terrain we would face in Iraq," says Justin, who is now a student at Rutgers' School of Law-Newark, as is Heather. Another

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infrequent and closely monitored. "We rarely talked about the danger," says Heather. "I needed Justin to worry about himself, not about me."

The couple's strategy was probably wise. Fallujah, a city about 40 miles west of Baghdad, had been a hotbed for violence since the British had accidentally dropped two laser-guided bombs on a crowded market early in the war. That March, four American contractors had been ambushed and murdered; their burned corpses were dragged through the streets, and two were hung from a bridge. A man standing near the corpses held up a printed sign with a skull and crossbones reading, "Fallujah is the cemetery for Americans." By April, anti-American hostility had reached such a pitch that U.S. forces moved to seal off the city. Around-the-clock military checkpoints were set up at four strategic egresses on the city's perimeter, says Schmidt, "which ratcheted up the violence a notch."

As a logistics officer in charge of transporting supplies to the checkpoints, Schmidt led his unit as it convoyed food, water, fuel, maps, ammunition, and armor for vehicles across the desert. "Vehicles in convoys were damaged by IEDs [improvised explosive devices] on a daily basis," he

says. “In my seven months, 19 marines from my battalion lost their lives in separate incidents.”

On one occasion, his platoon encountered snipers after resupplying an outpost. They had pulled over to the side of the road for some quick military Meals Ready to Eat, recalls Schmidt, when “our gunner luckily saw a tiny puff of sand dust and yelled, ‘Everybody down.’” The dust had come from a missed shot fired from an abandoned building. Schmidt called in the building’s coordinates to a nearby infantry vehicle that, he says, “lit it up.” A few minutes later, an Iraqi ambulance arrived and the bodies of two snipers were pulled out. When Schmidt’s unit inspected the building, all that was left were piles of debris and two pools of blood.

Being on base was no guarantee of safety. One night, Schmidt and a comrade survived injury when two rockets exploded in an orange fireball about 30 yards away. “We jumped for cover as we heard the whiz over our heads,” he recalls. “Marines know that more often than not, that’s the last sound you ever hear.” Shortly after his battalion returned to Camp Pendleton in October 2004, more than 200 Purple Hearts were awarded to members who had been killed or injured in the line of duty. Says Schmidt, “The fact that I’m here right now is a matter of luck and coincidence.”

With Justin’s four years of active service behind them, the Schmidts crossed the country in time for Schmidt to enroll the following fall at the law school at Rutgers–Newark and to settle into an apartment in Weehawken. Heather decided on a career change and enrolled the following fall. But they have yet to leave the Iraq War behind them. Because Justin is a captain in the Marine Corps’ Individual Ready Reserve, and can be recalled for additional active service, the couple is keeping a close eye on redeployment numbers. Justin would prefer to stay in school, but he wouldn’t hesitate to serve again if needed. “We realize that it’s a possibility,” he says, “and I know Heather would support me 100 percent, just like she did before.”

## Brothers in Arms

Saying good-bye to a friend or family member leaving for a combat zone is never easy, but Francis Roettger knew it was especially hard for his parents: both their sons were to be deployed in Iraq at the same time. “At first, my parents

were wary about both of us going,” says Francis, and they hoped that the military might excuse the brothers from serving in the same combat zone at the same time. But

Francis and his brother, Vincent, pushed. Their parents relented. The Roettger family, says Francis, “believes that the country was built on sacrifice. If you are willing to send your neighbor’s sons and daughters, you have to be willing to send your own.”

Francis Roettger joined the New Jersey Army National Guard in Cherry



Francis Roettger

“If you are willing to send your neighbor’s sons and daughters, you have to be willing to send your own.”

Hill in July 2001. When the planes flew into the World Trade Center just two months later, Vincent, two years younger, joined the same unit, a communications outfit attached to A Company of the 250th Signal Army Battalion. The Roettger brothers headed to Iraq in November 2004 and were stationed about 20 minutes apart by Humvee. The location: Tikrit, a small city at the northern point of the Sunni Triangle—and Saddam Hussein’s hometown.



## FALLEN COMRADES

As we go to press, we know of four Rutgers alumni who have died in the Iraq War. Tributes to them can be read at [www.alumni.rutgers.edu/share/iraq.shtml](http://www.alumni.rutgers.edu/share/iraq.shtml).

**Sgt. Frank Carvill LC'75**, a 20-year National Guard veteran, died June 4, 2004, when his convoy was attacked outside Baghdad. Carvill, who lived in Carlstadt, had worked as a paralegal for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey in the World Trade Center and had survived terrorist attacks in 1993 and 2001.

**U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Seth Dvorin LC'02**, of East Brunswick was killed by an IED (improvised explosive device) on February 3, 2004. At Rutgers, Dvorin, 24, was a member of Delta Chi fraternity and majored in administration of justice. He married his college sweetheart, Kelly Harris, on August 26, 2003, a week before his deployment.

**Capt. Michael Tarlavsky CC'96**, a 30-year-old Special Forces officer, was killed on August 12, 2004, when his unit was attacked in Najaf, Iraq. Tarlavsky attended Rutgers on an ROTC scholarship and, during his military career, provided security for Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He is survived by his wife, Tricia, and their young son, Joseph.

**Lt. John Thomas Wroblewski RC'02**, 25, died of wounds suffered in a gun battle in Ramadi on April 6, 2004. A resident of Jefferson Township and known as J.T. to his friends and family, Wroblewski was among a dozen Marines killed during one of the deadliest days of fighting in Iraq. He left behind his wife of nine months, Joanna.

Francis, a sergeant, bunked at division headquarters, which was set up at Hussein's opulent presidential compound, complete with palaces, guest cottages, palm trees, a man-made lake with a waterfall, and an imposing statue of a military figure astride a horse. The site, protected by high walls on three sides and the Tigris River on the other, was a natural defensive location. Lookout towers in the complex offered sweeping vistas of the surrounding area. "When I was on guard duty in one of those towers," recalls Francis, "it often struck me that you could glance in one direction and see these incredible palaces and grounds and glance in another and see what seemed like endless slums and terrible poverty."

The main threat came from insurgents launching mortars over the walls of the base from across the river or from inside the city. "At first, everyone is paranoid, and you look around for the nearest cement bunker," he says. But over time, as the soldiers became accustomed to the attacks, "you get less panicky, gauge how far off they're hitting, and respond accordingly." Once, he heard a thunderous explosion when a suicide bomber detonated a vehicle filled with explosives, killing several Iraqi soldiers who were guarding a gate. Roettger found it hard to understand the motivations of someone who would "just blow himself up like that. It seems like that person isn't placing enough importance on his life."

Vincent, a specialist, was stationed at a less-glamorous-looking outpost near a former Iraqi air force base on the outskirts of the city. The brothers, who were both responsible for providing and managing communications equipment, including landline phones and computers, talked by phone once a week and saw each other about a half-dozen times over the course of their one-year deployment. During their visits, they took keepsake photographs and shared

email news from friends and family back in Medford. Their parents, especially, expressed worry and concern. "When my parents learned we were together, they were furious," says Francis.

Overjoyed when Francis and Vincent both arrived home safely in November 2005, Anne and Garry Roettger each took a week's vacation to devote to their sons. The transition back to civilian life was eased by the brothers' shared experience. Both felt that their deployment had led to positive changes in Iraq—schools opening, citizens voting—and that these successes weren't recognized as they deserved. "It helped us to talk about some of the good things that are going on there," Francis says. "We grew a lot closer because of having served in Iraq together."

Francis, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in finance in December, is headed for graduate school, while Vincent plans on transferring from Burlington County College to Rutgers-Camden. Their military service, says Francis, has given them a greater appreciation for the truth in the saying "freedom isn't free." He's also become more thoughtful of the anxiety his parents must have borne. On a trip to Hawaii this past August, he visited the USS *Arizona* Memorial at Pearl Harbor and learned that 75 brothers were on the ship at the time of the attack. Sixty-one perished.

## Home Sweet Home

*"Momma, momma, can't you see?  
What the army's done to me? Made me lean, made me mean.  
Turned me into a fighting machine."*

As Orlando Velez, a Rutgers-Newark senior majoring in theater and English, chanted the poem in his role as Soldier Boy in a campus production of *Road* this past April, he marched in place for emphasis. The original 1986 play centered on a desperate working-class town in Thatcher-era England, but the cast members and director had rewritten the script to portray life in present-day Newark. Velez based the character of Soldier Boy on his own experiences in Iraq only months before.

Writing, rehearsing, and performing *Road* was therapeutic for Velez, a sergeant in a Jersey City-based New Jersey Army National Guard medical company, and helped him get through some difficult days. He'd started the semester only weeks after returning from a one-year deployment in Tikrit, and the adjustment back to a college career that had been interrupted by military service was tough. A psychologist had told members of his company that they may not have realized in Iraq the degree to which tension and edginess had become part of their everyday lives. Those emotions, they were told, would not simply disappear once they came home.

"He might as well have been talking directly to me," says Velez. "I had trouble focusing in class, problems sleeping, and suffered from anxiety attacks." During his first week back at school, he was asked to speak about his Iraq experiences in front of a journalism class and found himself "tearing up and getting real emotional. I had

road rage and was angry with classmates who complained about papers that were due, or the weather, or their parking problems.”

Velez found that people were curious about his deployment, but he sensed their disappointment if he didn't talk about “how I kicked down doors. If you don't have a dramatic story to tell, most people don't care or appreciate what you did. After a while, I didn't even want to talk about it.” A member of a medical-supply team attached to Echo Company, 50th Main Support Battalion, Velez helped to fill orders and deliver medicine and equipment to both the U.S. and Iraqi armies. Working “long, hard days,” he is proud to have “played an important role in providing the proper items to medics in the field so that lives could be saved.”

Velez's path to military service began in North Bergen, where he grew up a few blocks from the Jersey City Armory and found himself admiring the drills. His father had served in Vietnam, and, as a boy, he thought the photos of his dad in a Marine uniform “looked cool.” He signed on for an eight-year commitment to the National Guard in 1998. Following the invasion of Baghdad in April 2003, he sensed his unit would eventually be deployed. But it wasn't until November 2004 that he shipped out to Iraq—in advance of his unit, which he had come to consider his “second family.”

The advance team's job, explains Velez, was to lay the groundwork for a smooth transition and effective operations once the full unit arrived. “But to my surprise, they didn't follow until several months later,” he says. The

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tedium of long weeks without his comrades and too many nights spent “watching the movie *Dodgeball*” was punctuated by the occasional mortar shell whizzing over the wall. He remembers one coming so close “that my bunkmate's laptop went flying off the table.”

The tension began to drag on his spirits, and Velez knew he needed to improve his outlook. “I began looking at Iraq as a learning experience, something that would help me grow as a man,” he explains. His attitude improved, which helped him do his job better and made him more pleasant to be around. A sense of direction



Orlando Velez

returned when his full unit joined him in January. Velez knew the base's routine, the demands of the job, and the realities of a soldier's life in Iraq—knowledge he could share with his comrades. “I was now the experienced guy, reassuring them that it was going to be okay.”

Ten months later, released from deployment, his unit transitioned out of Fort Dix just in time for the Halloween festivities. Velez and some of his buddies headed straight for Manhattan to experience—in uniform—Greenwich Village's costume parade. “We were in a real celebratory mood,” says Velez. “It was surreal in the sense that just a few days before, we had been in an extremely serious environment in the desert.”

Now that a year has passed, Velez can look back at the mental roller-coaster ride that was his transition back to the normal routines of college and family. After starring in the Rutgers/NJIT production of Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett* in October, he's feeling more like his old self again and is thankful to be getting on with his life. “I never got a real sense of purpose over there. All I cared about was getting medical supplies to people who needed them and that me and my buddies all got home alive.” □

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