

Aftershock: Soldier in the family

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

The truck next to me at the stoplight had these words pasted across the back window: "I Have a Son in the Army." There was no flag decal, no "I'm proud to have" in front of the words, just the fact. I imagined that this son was in Iraq, and that this father was thinking about him as he waited for the light to change.

I could put a similar decal in my window. My son, 20, is in the third year of a four-year commitment to the U.S. Navy. Before he joined up, I didn't think much about those serving in the armed forces. Now I know a soldier, and I've met his friends and heard about their idealistic, impulsive or desperate reasons for joining the military at age 17, 18 or 19.

The military looks different when it has names and faces you know. I have had to abandon some stereotypes and a comfortable disengagement. I can no longer respond to news of military involvement with a casual "Well, they signed up for this, didn't they?" or a patriotic cliché like "They're serving their country in a good cause." War frightens me in a visceral way. I am more alert to the horrors that war visits upon these young adults, and more hesitant to endorse a military initiative.

I think, for example, about the orphan from Guatemala who came to the U.S. on foot and by train, then joined the military because it promised a quicker route to American citizenship.

Or about the impetuous and reckless high school kid who got drunk and wrecked cars, then signed up for the navy as a way out of that life. The romance with the military wore off after six months on a destroyer with 300 other men, but he learned self-discipline. Now he likes to tell people that he's the one called to the engine room when there are problems with machinery or staff, because he can solve them.

At boot camp graduation I noticed a young woman hugging a toddler. She is a single mom who seized the chance to earn a salary and then a degree through the military.

Another young man decided to become a navy "lifer" like his dad. His parents are divorced, and the navy is like home to both of them. The son is an avid reader, and

told me that while in the Persian Gulf he spent hours reading Kant, Dostoevsky and other classics.

I think of how one sailor managed to bring home gifts from his travels—pottery, jewelry, leather jackets, and bottles of wine. Since his personal storage space consisted of a six-inch high compartment beneath a bunk bed, he stored the stuff among Tomahawk missiles, firefighting suits and sump pumps.

When I think of the U.S. sending these young people to war, something doesn't fit. What were we thinking? I ask myself. Did we really understand that we condoned not some technological process, but the intentional killing of other human beings? Did we consider the impact of such a venture on thousands of young minds? I don't remember such discussions.

What happens when one of these kids realizes that he will have to kill another human being or be killed? When a young woman learns that the missile fired from her destroyer hits civilians by mistake, or when she sees an enemy's corpse and notices that the face reminds her of someone from home?

Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Ingram acknowledged the truth: "We have very young soldiers seeing ugly things they shouldn't be seeing" (quoted in the *Chicago Tribune*, April 19). "I've been around a long time and I have become hardened to it, or at least that's what I tell myself."

We expect that young soldiers will learn to put emotions aside and demonstrate the efficiency and single-mindedness needed in battle. They will become "good soldiers." That works for the short term, and may lead to success on the military maps, but then what? What happens to all the pent-up emotion? How many soldiers will become addicted to violence or to something else? How will they handle their fears and guilt? Will their nervous energy be taken out on parents, spouses and children?

In recent weeks, the media have given generous attention to the liberation of the Iraqi people. We seek out these stories in part to anesthetize ourselves and to distance ourselves from the life-stopping, gut-wrenching, spirit-emptying horror that has taken place. Some Americans call Iraq an "easy" win. I find it difficult to articulate what has been gained, and easy to name what and whom we've lost.

Only 132 killed, we say with relief. But I wait, after each update, for a sign that we regret this war, and that we also mourn the thousands of Iraqi dead.

For grieving families in the U.S., there is numbing loss. For some, there will be no son coming home this Thanksgiving or any Thanksgiving. No wife to help raise toddlers or teens. No 25th anniversary vacation. No trips to the zoo with Dad. And no more souvenirs for a girlfriend back home.

With each death we lose not just “one,” but a universe of relationships and ideas and possibilities. I grieve for the empty places, for those who weep now, for the effects of war that tear apart young adults, their families, communities and nations.