

# HEALING IN THE FACE OF HORROR

## A Combat Medic's View on a Year in Iraq

*Bucks County resident and artist Dave Massimini recently returned from a year-long tour of Iraq. As a combat medic, his view of the war was up close and intimate from the front lines yet far enough removed to garner a wide perspective of the conflict. dtown sat down with Massimini to get an inside look at the day-to-day realities of military action in the Middle East.*

Dave Massimini first joined the armed forces right after high school. "A lot of my family is in the military, so it was something I wanted to do," he says. He was on active duty from 1992 to 1996, participating in psychological operations in Haiti, Kenya, Rwanda and Kuwait. "We did a lot of civil affairs stuff, helping countries get food and water and preparing leaflets and propaganda."

After his discharge, Massimini worked a variety of jobs, ranging from plumbing to deejaying at clubs. He also lent his graffiti-influenced art to a crew that created custom designs for sneakers. "We were pretty well known, and I did a lot of work on commission for celebrities like Nas, Justin Timberlake and the Red Hot Chili Peppers," he recalls.

But after his crew dissolved, Massimini grew unhappy with the jobs he was working: "I ended up working in a machine shop. The pay was good, but the work was crappy. I didn't want to get stuck doing it forever."

Finally, Massimini decided to return to the armed forces. "I couldn't say exactly why I wanted to go back, but after 9/11, a lot of us who got out wanted to go back in," he says.

Massimini enlisted in the Pennsylvania State Guard in 2008 and signed on to become a medic. He volunteered to go to Iraq but was surprised at how quickly he was deployed. "I came straight out of medical school and got thrown right into the job," he says. "There was no period between school and the job where I could practice."

Massimini shipped out with the 56th Striker Brigade, a unit noted as being the first National Guard forces to be deployed without assistance from the Army. Fortunately, he says, "I wasn't needed as badly as you would think."

According to Massimini, the war was far from its most intense period by the time he arrived. "I thought it would be a lot worse," he says. "We had some casualties, but our guys were well trained. We were lucky." Out of the 5,000 servicemen with Massimini during his tour, only 2 were killed in combat. "That's pretty amazing, especially for a National Guard brigade. You could take that many people down the shore and lose more in a bar fight," he laughs.

### Anytown, Iraq

For his yearlong tour, Massimini was stationed at Camp Taji in Tarmia, a small village north of Baghdad. "We were at the cradle of civilization, in Mesopotamia, right along the Euphrates River," he says.

And while Tarmia is about the size of New Hope, the similarities between the two end with their dimensions and river-side location. "It was pretty desolate," Massimini recalls. "Everything was made of earth, and even the largest buildings were only two or three stories. Most



people didn't have electricity or plumbing, and most of the water for the houses was just gravity fed from large containers on the roof."

The climate was smoggy, dusty and temperatures could near 130 degrees F. "There was no sanitation, just trash everywhere," he continues. "You'd see kids just walking through garbage in the road."

During his year in Iraq, Massimini's unit performed over 400 missions. Their main duties were to protect their base from attacks, capture high-value targets, seek out and destroy planted explosives and weapons caches and provide security for weekly meetings between local governing bodies.

As a medic, Massimini was responsible for keeping his brigade healthy and tending to injuries. "It's a pretty big deal, making sure no one gets really sick," he says. "You're in a different country with different illnesses, and so many things can go wrong. All my guys came home healthy."

His unit's assignments also included official work with the town's population. "We opened a couple school and provided security," he continues. "We gave away 1,000 soccer balls and backpacks to the kids. The people there were decent, working-class people. They seemed fairly happy and had never known a better life. It was just like any other community except that they didn't have the resources to build a good society."



Over time, Massimini and his brigade became well acquainted with the local population, offering general medical help while on patrol. "It was a small town, and since our forces have been there for so many years, a lot of the kids had learned English," he says. "After a while, people would recognize us and come to us for medical assistance. For the most part, they were appreciative of us being there and wouldn't hide too much when we questioned them."

### Living With War

Even as "normal" as things could seem, the threat of terrorist attacks launched toward both Massimini's base and the town always loomed. Due to its location between northern Iraq and Baghdad and its proximity to the Euphrates, the area around Tarmia was host to Al Qaeda meetings and weapons shipments along the river.

"The area was a hub for terrorism," says Massimini. "They would try to bomb our base by shooting mortars. They'd miss us because it was small, and they would take

hasty positions: just running up, shooting and running off."

More common were strikes in the crowded marketplaces and the neighborhoods where people lived. "You would hear it from inside the base," he says. "The walls would shake, and you'd see the explosions. The Quick Reaction Force would be sent out to the scene. They'd let us know what was going on and what needed to be done."

Once he arrived on-site, Massimini would provide aid and assist with transporting victims to hospitals in Baghdad. "It felt good to get out there and take care of the locals," he says. "I liked getting my hands bloody. We saved quite a few Iraqi lives."

Massimini says he never thought twice about charging into a battle zone or disaster area. "It's just my job," he says, in a stoic, matter-of-fact tone. "It's like firemen. They don't think about running into a burning building, they just do it. They're heroes, but it's just second nature to them to throw on their gear and get in there."

However, part of Massimini's motivation to run into any given situation was the boredom that quickly came to mark his day-to-day tasks. There may have been much to do, but many missions weren't exciting or even fast-paced. "There were times when we'd sit from sundown until sunrise using night vision, just watching and waiting," he says.

The base had internet connections, movies and "way too many girl scout cookies for any human being" to help pass the time, but ultimately, it wasn't enough to fill the downtime he and his unit endured. Massimini even found the time to put his art skills to work by painting murals of each platoon on the base. "Gunfire breaks the monotony, and you get to a point in your tour when you almost want something to happen," he says

But even when the boredom was shattered by realities of war, digesting it mentally proved an equal challenge. "The decompression is worse than going in," Massimini explains. "That's when you start to think about what just happened, and everything starts to settle in."



His last mission, the day before he was set to leave, was the worst of his time in Iraq. "A bomb exploded in the market, and when we got there, a bunch of kids had shrapnel in them," he recalls. "We got there quickly and they all survived, but it was horrible to see all those kids screaming. That sticks with you."

### Friends and Enemies

Even though he took pride in putting himself in danger to help Iraqis in need of medical care, Massimini was also aware that some of them were responsible for the attacks he witnessed. "We knew some of the locals were involved with what was going on," he says. "The guy we'd hire to guard a road during the day could plant a bomb there at night."

The same held true for the local police force and militia. "There were a lot of people from Saddam's [Hussein] old army living in town, and they made up half the police force," says Massimini. "Some had some animosity toward us, but they never displayed it too much." The Sons of Iraq, the local militia, were also "on the fence" about the U.S. presence in the country: "We were all supposed to be working together, but we caught a few [people on the police force and in the militia] placing bombs."

Addressing the situation was often frustrating for Massimini and his fellow soldiers because the unit's hands were tied. "We couldn't go after someone even if we suspected what they were up to," he says. "We'd have to whisper in their superior's ear and hope they'd take care of it."

Complicating matters further were clashes between the police force, militia and the Iraqi army. "There were rivalries and even a few firefights among them," explains Massimini. "They really didn't like each other, but they managed to work together because we were there helping them."

And despite the seeming distrust and acrimony harbored by opposing factions, Massimini says his unit got to know the army and police better than anyone else in the town. "Overall, we became quite good friends even though they'd beat us 11-1 in soccer, playing barefoot on the rocks," he laughs.

It was his perspective on the war and his enemies that enabled Massimini to perform his job alongside people who could have been working against him. "I never really saw it [working in accordance with Al Qaeda] as terrorism," he says. "They were poor, and to them, they were working a job just like we were. The money they'd be paid to plant a bomb or whatever was what would feed their families."

According to Massimini, as National Guardsmen, his unit was "more liberal" than the regular military units they were replacing. "We weren't super militant. That wasn't our job," he says. "We were more about public relations. We got a good feel for the locals and were able to get a lot out of them during questioning because we were kind to them. I tried to put myself in their shoes. They weren't westernized, and they were very religious. That's all they knew. It's their

country, and we invaded it. I'm not anti-American, but I could understand their point of view."

### Coming Home

Massimini arrived stateside after his tour ended last September. He's involved with the local art scene again, putting on two exhibitions and planning another consisting of his artwork and photos he took while in Iraq. However, that doesn't mean things immediately returned to normal for him.

"Coming home is like slamming on the brakes," he explains. "When we were there, anything could happen at any time. You'd go to sleep, but a bomb would go off and you'd have to wake up, head to the scene, stay there for six hours and then maybe get another hour of sleep before you had to get up again for your normal duties."

And getting back on a "normal" schedule isn't easy to do. During our interview in January, he said his body was still hard-wired to wake up every hour on the hour, four months after he last saw Middle Eastern soil. "Post-traumatic stress disorder is a reality, and everybody deals with it in their own way," he says.

Massimini notes that the military offers programs for people to maintain their mental health after their time in combat, but also says that he and others don't have much faith in their effectiveness. "A lot of people see them as a joke," he says. "How can someone who didn't experience what you did possibly help you? It's better to talk with your friends that were over there with you."

And while Massimini never sought help after his experience – "I'm not traumatized by anything," he says – the comfort with which Massimini recounts his time at war resonates with an air of detachment. He reflects on even the most horrific instances succinctly, never showing much emotion.

Toward the end of our conversation, Massimini plays a video on his laptop. Shot by Al Qaeda members and aired on the Al-Jazeera television network, it depicts a bombing on a fort near where Massimini was stationed. Set against tense, ominous Arabic music and chanting, the professionally edited clip shows footage of the intended target and suicide bombers saying goodbye to their loved ones in preparation of their impending death.

Not long after, we see the actual attack. Through shaky footage shot with a handheld camera, men with machine guns storm the compound in broad daylight, yelling and firing sporadically. "They're drawing fire," Massimini explains, as U.S. soldiers turn their attention toward the attackers. "Now watch this guy."

As the terrorists duck behind walls, popping up occasionally to fire off a quick round, a vehicle races toward the building.

"Here it comes," says Massimini calmly.

Suddenly, the building explodes in a huge fireball. The men captured on the video stop firing for a moment to cheer. The video cuts to a split screen of a speech by former President George W. Bush next to a picture of Osama Bin Laden. With slick production qualities, it looks like a news report you'd see on CNN or even "Entertainment Tonight."

"The footage is sent to Al-Jazeera, and they air it after the attacks," says Massimini. "Then, clips like these are used for recruitment DVDs. Eventually, they make their way to our soldiers, and we hand them down to the next group so they know what's going on."

Abruptly, albeit calmly, he closes the screen. "Whatever," he concludes. "They can all go to hell." 

To check out some of Massimini's art, go online [www.davemass.deviantart.com](http://www.davemass.deviantart.com)

