

A Year Ago in Diyala with the Greywolf Brigade

David Sutherland

Editor's note: we're pleased to publish this Veterans Day reflection by Colonel David Sutherland. To his thoughtful words, we would merely add here's also to the many Iraqi patriots shaping their country, and the countless others making do as best they can amidst the bravery of their countrymen and ours.

One year ago today, November 11, 2007, our Brigade Combat Team began its redeployment from Diyala province, Iraq, back to Fort Hood, Texas. As we remember our veterans, I think about those brave men and women who participated in the surge operations that led to improvements seen in Iraq today.

The Greywolf Brigade began its deployment to Iraq in October 2006. Our formation consisted of approximately 5,000 of our nation's finest men and women from all branches of our Armed Services, Department of Defense civilians, Department of State, and other interagency and Coalition partners. For 14 months, they poured their hearts and souls into the mission – a mission that required we bind-up the wounds of the innocent and reestablish rule of law, while at the same time combating a depraved enemy, devoid of human decency.

No one, to include myself, was able to fathom the reality we were about to face as we deployed to Diyala province – a complex area of Sunni, Shia and Kurd, that quickly became the primary battleground of the fight faced in Iraq. Reality, however, struck quickly at my base's aid station during the first week of our deployment.

I held a little girl in my arms, recognizing the facts. She was five years old and had been shot in the face. She had been shot and her family killed simply because her father was a policeman. This was the reality of al Qaeda -- a reality my Troopers and I had just begun to face as the terrorist network worked to destroy the families of the security and government officials so the people lose their will to support progress.

My team in Diyala fought day in and day out to destroy the terrorists and bring peace to an area plagued for years by violence, destruction and neglect. Going places no man or woman should ever have to go and seeing sights no man or woman should ever have to see, my Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen remained dedicated to their mission and determined to accomplish that which they were sent to do.

Al Qaeda was carrying out attacks across the province. The terrorist network in Iraq imposed its will in the province through fear, death, torture, and intimidation. The atrocities committed by al Qaeda in Iraq and Iranian-sponsored Special Groups cannot be adequately described, but were witnessed daily by our men- and women-in-arms. It is important to know that our enemy is ruthless, inhumane, and capable of the most depraved forms of torture, mutilation and killing of innocents that could be imagined. As we encountered these grizzly tactics, we felt as if we were looking into the depths of hell.

Yet in the toughest of environments, the courage, charity and goodness of our team shone through like bright lights in the midst of darkness. Their capabilities are indescribable – their sacrifices are great.

Heroes such as Private First Class Steven Cornford, Command Sergeant Major Rodney Harris and Staff Sergeant Donnie Dixon showed great courage and leadership under fire.

Staff Sgt. Donnie Dixon of Miami, Florida, was a member, more importantly a leader, of my Personal Security Detachment; and had been a member of my Bradley Fighting Vehicle crew since my assumption of command in July 2005. Highly respected by his peers and subordinates, Dixon was a quiet, yet strong leader and warrior. He embodies all that is the American Soldier.

September 24, 2007, Dixon and several other members of my PSD were providing security while I met with provincial and local leaders about reconciliation. Following the breaking of the fast for Ramadan, a suicide bomber detonated on the front steps of a mosque, about three meters from where I was standing. The blast killed 24 citizens and wounded 37 people, one of whom was Dixon.

Dixon's first concern was me. Although wounded, he ran to my location, uncovering me from the bodies and body parts of the dead and wounded. After helping me up, Dixon was the first to take the lead and gain control the situation. The entire time I could feel his watchful eye making sure I was safe. After evacuating Donnie to the aid station for treatment, he again displayed his tenacity. Rather than rest and recover, he was anxious to be returned to duty so he could get back into the fight with his team. That was the type of Soldier, leader and man Dixon was.

Five days later, Dixon was back by my side as he always was. We were conducting battlefield circulation in Muqdadiya, Iraq. As several members of my PSD and I were leaving a company command post, we came under fire from a sniper. The sniper fired towards our formation, killing Donnie immediately.. As I wept, I held him in my arms and hugged him, thanking him for his service and his sacrifices. Posthumously, he was awarded two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star Donnie left four children and a wonderful wife. He made the greatest sacrifice while making life better for people he didn't even know. He knew they needed him just as his family needs all of us now. There is no greater sacrifice.

This experience was repeated 109 times during our deployment; sometimes daily. The friends and comrades-in-arms left behind often only had time to fight, eat, grieve, and cry. Some are unable to get the smell of blood and burning flesh or hair out of their systems and yet, they went on. Having a Soldier die in your arms while looking into your eyes as other Soldiers feverishly

try to get him unpinned from the wreckage created after an IED strike is reality and leaves lasting nightmares -- yet we continue and we fight to accomplish our mission.

During our tour in Iraq, our formation received 146 awards for valor in combat and 277 Purple Hearts. Many made the ultimate sacrifice and epitomize the kind of character we find cited in John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." These are my heroes.

Our Soldiers are willing to make these sacrifices because they believe in the cause of liberty. They knew our mission to secure, stabilize and begin the healing process in Diyala was necessary and just. They have committed themselves to a lifestyle and set of values bigger than themselves. They are willing to pay any price, even to the laying down of their own lives if necessary, in building and defending institutions of freedom.

This day we remember not only our Soldiers' sacrifices, but also that of their families'. Military families are vital to our success as they provide never-ending support and encouragement, all the while facing their own fight. Maintaining the home front, they remain as brave and as strong as their service member, for their service member.

On Veterans Day, we all need to understand that the families cope with fear, they cope with loss; the entire time their service member is deployed, they are waiting to exhale. Our military families are the cornerstone of our strength – their sacrifices are also great.

It is the spirit and perseverance of our service members and our families that drives us and motivates us to do what we do – serve, lead, care and commit to making the most of wonderful relationships, wonderful opportunities and a wonderful life. At this time, given our National Interests in the Middle East Region military service, and a willingness to participate in something greater than us as individuals is still critical. It continues to be a dangerous world.

Extensive security tasks remain before us as we achieve our objectives in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, defeat the al Qaeda network, and build greater partnership capacity. We need a great cadre of Veterans to support a region of secure, stable, independent, peaceful and responsibly governed states, where the freedom and dignity of the peoples of the region are protected.

Whether at Gettysburg, Omaha Beach or any other famous battle in the history of our nation, American men and women are doing the same thing our ancestors have done – fighting courageously and bravely, refusing to quit or leave a fallen comrade.

On this Veterans Day, allow this Veteran to say, 'Thank You' to the American people for your support, your love, and your commitment to our living, our fallen, and their families who have sacrificed the greatest. God bless each and every one of you, God bless our families, God bless the members of the United States Military, and God bless America.

Colonel David Sutherland was the commander of the 3d Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, deployed to Diyala province, Iraq from October 2006 to December 2007.

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