



Oral History: Geoff Pletz

By Kristin Farrell

An Oral History Committee as part of the Warrior to Citizen Campaign – organized by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs is recording the experiences of Iraq Veterans from across the state of Minnesota and the different branches of service. These interviews will be collected and may be compiled into a traveling exhibit in the future. As an employee of the CDC, Kristin Farrell is serving as the project coordinator for the oral history project.

In early January, I sat down to conduct an oral history interview with 1st Lieutenant Geoff Pletz, a member of the Army National Guard and an Iraq Veteran. I was most interested in his experiences in Iraq, was it was like to return to his citizen life, and how his views on citizenship had changed during his service abroad. Although, I had met Geoff on a previous occasion, I knew relatively little about him and his personal views. The interview provided an open space for discussion of his changing views on both Iraq and the United States.

Shortly before he was deployed, Geoff earned a degree in biochemistry from the University of Minnesota. As an active member of the Army National Guard since his sophomore year in college, he had been trained extensively, including Army Ranger School and Air Assault training. In Iraq, Geoff was an infantry platoon leader and although not yet 26, was commanding over 40 soldiers of all ages. His service in Iraq also included a “Brigade-level” support mission where he had a large degree of personal responsibility and what he characterized as, “hectic, with a higher degree of danger.” After a 22-month deployment which came to an end last August, Geoff is now re-entering the job market as an employee of the state of Minnesota.

Geoff talked of “being tested and proven worthy,” through his experiences in the Army’s schools and his encounters in Iraq and that they increased his “credibility and confidence” while leading a platoon of soldiers. During the interview, his pride, his confidence, and his leadership abilities were apparent.

As Geoff shared his impressions of current-day Iraq, he related eating lunch with Iraqi families or playing soccer with the kids in a town close to where he was stationed. He also talked about his frustrations at the extreme poverty and hatred of others he witnessed while living in Iraq. He talked about the government’s role in the lives of Iraqi people, lamenting that “the government made it impossible to get anything done,” that “they would build schools or clinics but wouldn’t pay the doctors or teachers, or even resupply the clinic.” He left Iraq more appreciative of the government in the United States and what remains possible for citizens in a functioning democracy and bureaucracy.

Upon returning to Minnesota, Geoff said he had a relatively easy time transitioning back to civilian life but he did share the sense of being a bit “overwhelmed” at seeing family and friends immediately. He related that upon return his life was “wide open- no job, no place to live, no car, but enough money,” and that he realized that he needed to have a schedule and in his words, “be productive” with his time. He characterized the transition from a highly-structured environment to one with many decisions, as containing some “difficulties” for vets who may return to changed relationships and life choices. In re-acclimating, Geoff found a place to live, and even though he wanted to take his time finding the right place to work, he started volunteering at the Veteran Affairs Hospital in the physical therapy area and getting involved with other community groups including the Warrior to Citizen

Campaign. He found in many of these activities, which he continues now, six months later, a space to “center himself and to focus” on where he is going.



Through his personal story, Geoff illustrated the ways in which his view of democracy and civic engagement had changed during his service abroad. He said, “I had done some volunteering prior to my service in the Army, but it was mainly through school,” and that he was always an “advocate of public service in the past, but now I am more willing to go and participate.” At other points in the interview Geoff alluded to his new confidence pushing him “to take action” rather than to be just an observer. He referred his belief in contributing to a “community caring” approach and a desire to maintain this country as “a good place to live.”

Geoff pointed out that although our democracy includes the electoral process which can be cumbersome and frustrating, a commitment to the process is important to maintaining a functioning democracy. Geoff himself seems committed to being more involved in what happens in this country after serving for it- he reported that he finds himself now more aware and concerned about “America’s foreign policy image” as well as more conscious of taking care of the environment in which he lives.

As I wrapped up the interview and thanked Geoff for his time, I was struck by his clear ability to lead groups and relate to others. During our interview he had been candid, confident, and had a clear vision of how he wanted to live his life going forward. I couldn’t help but think about what a powerful citizen he had developed into, and that his stated desire, “to make a difference” is likely to happen for him. His resilience, as well as his belief in the role he can play, speak to the great contributions that all veterans can make to the country they have already contributed so much to.

In trying to determine other ways Geoff viewed the process of democracy after his experience in Iraq, I asked him a few questions about current policy issues and the Presidential race. He talked about being skeptical of the elections and feeling as though he couldn’t fully support anyone because they all seem to narrow, “too scrutinized, and too concerned about trying to please everyone”. Geoff talked about his belief of the President being a “Great Moderator” – someone who needs to be able to bring a lot of different people together and who is able to listen to advice and make their own decisions. Speaking about his experience both in Minnesota and in Iraq, he said “when leaders are forced to be very polarized- politics can’t be very realistic.” At the end of our discussion, Geoff concluded that although the electoral process in our democracy has flaws, that he supports the process because of the outcomes it has produced.

Kristin Farrell is a Citizens League member. She works as office manager and oral history project coordinator at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship of the Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota.