TO IRAQ & BACK
Seeking what, he's still not sure,
one Marine returns
Son of peaceniks and a young man with a mind of his own, Marine Cpl. Dan O'Brien returns to Iraq for reasons even he cannot yet articulate.

**Cover story**

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**TO IRAQ AND BACK**

by Sarah Steteville | photographed by Alex Stonehill

ON THE COVER

Cpl. Daniel O'Brien poses for a fellow Marine taking pictures in a guard tower facing the city of Ramadi in Iraq, where O'Brien served in the U.S. Marine Corps in 2007-'08.

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NEXT WEEK: Sandra Jackson-Dumont is mixing it up at the Seattle Art Museum, changing its staid image and bringing culture to new audiences.
The Return
One Marine's story of a mission accomplished, but not really over

Our version of how we came to be in this place don't agree. But it was somewhere between my desire to report from the Middle East on the fallout of the Iraq War and his interest in returning to the region where he'd served. "Practically all I learned to say in Arabic was 'Go away!"' he once confided with embarrassment.

He remembers agreeing to come because he wants to join the Foreign Service and because Northeastern University, where he majors in International Studies on the GI Bill, had been willing to pay for it. In any case, it was not our first meeting.

There is hard evidence that we were in each other's lives as young as 8 or 9. Seattle Times articles from 1988 and the profile an organization called Families for Peace, naming O'Brien, then a "battered mother," and quoting her about how to keep your children away from displays of casual violence in a casually violent culture. I'm also there - simply offering up nuggets of 6-year-old wisdom about how "little arguments start wars."

There was a small gang of us back then - Dan and I, Jessica and Nick - whose friendship solidified as we moved into adolescence. But Nick died 15 years ago, and Jessica couldn't get away from work, so here we are. A former corporal in the U.S. Marine Corps and a journalist stumbling around the Middle East, me researching Iraqi refugees and Dan producing a video blog about his travels.

A few days earlier, we'd crammed ourselves onto the back seat of a taxi and traveled the Turkish border into northern Iraq, a little known corner of the country run and populated by ethnic Kurds - the Kurdish Regional Government - that has remained relatively stable and even managed to prosper in recent years.

More than a million men and women are estimated to have served under the American flag in the Iraq War, and the vast majority have not come back to see what's become of it all. So what does it feel like for those who have been in Iraq three years after their tour, which mostly spent running convoy security between Baghdad and Ramadi?

"I don't know. It's not really the same at all," Dan says, looking out the dusty window. "It feels a lot of pressure to make a sound bite for you or something, like you're thinking. This guy hasn't said one interesting thing yet.

It's true. It seemed like just being on the same soil and breathing the same air would be an emotional experience. "Lots of places look..."
Return

A story of a mission accomplished, but not really over

By Sarah Stuteville
Photographed by Alex Stonehill

Three twin beds with misfit sheets in the farthest corner, only Dan O'Brien has been waking up there. It had been a long day waiting for the final hour to end, and the loud ceiling fan was going, the door was locked, and the man felt the familiar sense of excitement that comes with being part of something bigger than himself.

He remembers the moment clearly, the one when he first met the four Marines who died serving in Iraq in 2007. The story, these tattoos on his arm, raw, half-formed, doesn't feel like his, but the voice that sounds more like a distant echo than an echo doesn't belong to him.

"Yeah, just a minute."

Our versions of how we came to be in this place don't agree. But it was somewhere between my desire to report from the Middle East on the bloodshed of the Iraq War and his interest in returning to the region where he'd served. "Practically all I learned to say in Arabic was 'Go away'" he once confided with embarrassment.

He remembers agreeing to come because he wanted to join the Foreign Service and become a Peace Corps volunteer, but in the end, "I'm a founding mother," and quoting her about how to keep your children away from the displays of casual violence in a casually violent culture. I'm also there — simply offering up nuggets of 8-year-old wisdom about how "little arguments start wars."

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More than a million men and women are estimated to have served under the American flag in the Iraq War, and the vast majority have never come back to see what's become of it all. So what does it feel like for Dan to be back in Iraq three years after his tour, which he mostly spent running convoys between Baghdad and Ramadi?

"I don't know. It's not really the same at all," Dan says, looking out the dusty window. A minute passes. "I feel a lot of pressure to make a sound bite for you or something, like you're thinking, 'This guy hasn't said one interesting thing yet.'"

"It's true. It seemed like just being out there and breathing the same air would be an emotional experience. It's not a place I look at continuously."

At the Sulaimaniya museum, Dan O'Brien takes a moment in one wing decorated with thousands of mirrors representing all the Kurds killed during Saddam Hussein's time. For left, a tattoo on O'Brien's torso bears the name of the four soldiers from his platoon who died during their deployment in 2007. The inscription, "We were young. We died. Remember us," is taken from the poem "The Young Dead Soldiers" by Archibald MacLeish.
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like California, don't they?” I say, feeling shy. “Oh, that's very 'Iraq," he says, pointing at a cluster of men all holding empty red gas cans that glow a little in the morning sun. “Large groups of men bargaining over cans of gasoline. We used to drive by that all the time.”

We wind through a leather-brown, hilly landscape within a few hundred miles of Iran, talking mostly about our teen years and a vacation to the Oregon coast where we siphoned the adults' liquor stash into water bottles and smuggled them down to the beach. By hour six of what promised to be an eight-hour ride, Dan's thoughts turned back to the war. The driver's English is pretty broken, but Dan crawls into the front seat to talk to him, interested in a Kurdish take on his service.

“Want an energy drink?” he asks, pointing to one of the tiny orange bottles he gulps down every few hours — a habit he says he picked up in the military.

“No. No alcohol!” the driver answers, waving his hands in front of him. “It's not alcohol, man, it's like coffee or something. You know coffee?” Dan repeats making a cup and saucer with his big hands.

The driver takes a polite sip, tries to hide a grimace and hands the bottle back. “You know I was in Iraq before," Dan says.

“Yes?” The driver says.

“Yeah, I was in the war, you know? Against Saddam?”

The driver still smiles but says nothing.

“Guns and stuff.” Dan struggles to do a kind of gunner pantomime in the limited space. Hands wrapped around an imaginary 50-caliber machine gun.

“Ramadi, 2007/2008, I was there." "OK, says the driver, smile unchanged.

“I don't think he got what I was saying," Dan says, twisting around to look at me, "do you?"

“I don't know," I say. But I'm lying. I'm pretty sure the driver understood.

Dan still gives the same reasons for joining the military that he did back in 2005, before he'd started boot camp. He talked about wanting to make a bad situation better and said it was unfair that some people have to go clean it up when others don't.

His reasons are pretty well rehearsed by now. He's an anomaly and he knows it — describing the day in 2004 when he showed up at a Northgate military recruiter's office, in his mom's Mercury Sable, complete with War Is Terrorism bumper sticker.

Dan says he was often treated as a turncoat and a traitor, not by his comrades but by his friends back home. There is a certain liberal tolerance for poor and uneducated people who sign up for the military. But a nice, middle-class kid produced by Seattle baby boomers who marched in civil-rights protests? He was worse than ignorant or misguided — he was an apostate.

"People just tried to wear me down," he says over a beer at one of the many rooftop bars we visit. "Every day before I left for boot camp it was, 'Why are you doing this? Don't you know it's wrong? Why are you breaking your mother's heart?"

He never really answers any of those questions, but says his response to that period between when he signed up and when he headed off to boot camp was to dig in his heels.

"I was like 'What? You think you've got me pegged, well... I'm going one up, I'm going infantry, I'm going combat support, and I'm not going to skirt it.' So there is some of that in me, of people trying to label me and me being like, 'Whoa, I can do you one better.'"
In a city practically defined by political labels and in a country deeply divided by them, Dan's politics are confusing. He admits he secretly lusted after the war toys his mother worked so hard to abolish. Maybe he's always been defiant...

The winter sun sets around 4 in the northern Iraqi city of Sulaimaniya, and the now-abandoned Baath headquarters and prison, known here as the Red Security Building, glows pink in the early dusk.

Inside, Dan walks through tiny, lightless cells that once held Kurds suspected of being antigovernment rebels. He examines layers of Kurdish graffiti — dates, names and political declarations — etched, scribbled and carved up and down the hallways.

Outside, Dan crawls into a Soviet tank that sits rusting in a patch of gravel and quickly befriends the young Iraqi soldiers on duty, asking them about their military training and talking them into letting him pose with their guns in front of a toppled, bullet-pocked guard tower.

"Obviously, Saddam had to go," he says severely to me as we pass through the gates and into the growing night, still waving at our new friends...

"He told me he wanted to be part of something bigger than himself and wanted to make a difference in the world," Dan O'Brien's mother, Joyce Mork-O'Brien, says in her Beacon Hill living room, where handmade quilts and Dan's childhood drawings are on display.

There's no doubt that Dan's choice to join the Marines was hard on her. She lost friends when he joined the military. Some people just couldn't accept her acceptance of her son's choice. Her voice thickens when she talks about finding a local support group, the Oorah Moms, where, among other military mothers, she finally found solace — despite being the only liberal in the group.

She's found ways to relate to her son's choice.

"There's something in Daniel that's kind of an old-fashioned romantic," she says, her big rings clicking against a mug of tea. "He really has this kind of romantic idea about saving the world, saving people, saving cats... this kind of hero vision..."

The little tent is stifling. It's high noon, and even though it's not too hot outside, this shelter made of United Nations tarps and random discarded materials has no ventilation; it smells like unwashed hair. And people from the rest of the camp are crowding in the doorway, blocking what little light there is.

Hadi Abdul Ali, a man from Mosul who has taken refuge in Sulaimaniya is here to tell his story. Militants in Mosul beheaded his brother after he took a contract to paint a police station shared between Iraqi and American forces. The body was dumped in front of Ali's house. That's when he decided to flee with his family and his brother's children.

Will he go back now that the war is officially "over"?
"No. Never. I could never go back there, I'm too scared," Ali says. "Bad things are still happening there every day." He pantomimes holding his brother's headless body. Across the crowded tent, a bar of sunlight has made its way through the cloth flap on the low door and Dan is turned toward it. He doesn't even seem to be listening.

Back at the hotel, I want to talk about the war, about the little family that will never go home and all the families like it. Dan is joking, telling stories about the Marines. I start in.

"Don't you think there's something we could have done to stop the stupid war?"

"No. I mean, what more were we supposed to do?" he replies.

We've been dancing around this conversation for days. I've been feeling weird about taking him to northern Iraq, to the one tiny enclave in a devastated country where it's possible to believe that the war is over and won. Where you can visit Saddam's empty torture chambers and feel good that the bad guy is gone.

Maybe Dan didn't want to be challenged on this trip, to see a different side of things. He seems more adamant than ever before that the war was right.

"Don't you feel guilty?" I finally ask, angrily.

"No, I don't," he says with just as much force. "I don't dwell on bad stuff all the time, I'm not like that."

Dan may not dwell on the bad stuff, but he can't entirely escape it, either. A few weeks into our travels together I notice that Dan often disappears suddenly. He's suffering anxiety attacks, or "losing it" as he calls it. Now 29, Dan is wary of worn-out veteran clichés and jokes more than once that he doesn't want to come off as a PTSD basket-case, always quick to remind me that he hardly suffered at all compared to platoon mates who died or were injured.

But the more he tells me he's not affected by his time in the military the clearer its impact on him becomes...

A little squall has settled over Beirut, and Dan and I have taken refuge in a snooty café perched above a steely colored Mediterranean Sea where the waiter serves us cappuccinos with an open scowl.

"I got to the point where I was feeling sick all the time and just really didn't ever want to do anything," he says of his decision to seek counseling through the Veterans Affairs Department.

Many of Dan's fellow Marines think the roadside-bomb attack that killed their platoon mates was a result of an informant amid the Iraqi soldiers Dan often worked with.

"In the military, they teach you that if you just follow orders nothing will go wrong. It messes with you, makes you think you can control things you can't."

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From left, cartoonist Sarah Glidden, former Marine Cpl. Dan O'Brien and journalist Sarah Stuteville sit on top of the ancient fortress of Van in Turkey, near the borders with Iran and Iraq. The group stopped in the city of Van for a few days in mid-November to meet Iraqi refugees before traveling overland from Istanbul to northern Iraq.

Outside the museum, O'Brien clamber onto a decommissioned Russian tank and chats with Kurdish soldiers on guard there. O'Brien, who drove convoy security between Baghdad and Ramadi three years ago, once confided that about the only thing he learned to say in Arabic was "Go away."
The Return

A young Dan pickets along with his mother, Joyce Mork-O'Brien, and Seattle school teachers on strike in the late 1980s. "We took a contingent of students and parents to Olympia to show solidarity with the teachers," Mork-O'Brien recalls. "This wasn't the first protest rally I took Dan on, nor was it the last."

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DAMASCUS IS beautiful. A dreamy combination of ancient city, sophisticated metropolis and Soviet holdover. It snows for the first time in years while we're there, and all the men we worry are government informants — with their leather jackets, black mustaches and formal pointed shoes — slip in the slush and throw wet snowballs at each other.

Dan is enchanted and wanders the market all day, making friends with the little Arabic he picked up in the military, eating fat waffles dipped in chocolate and buying trinkets for his girlfriend back in Boston.

Later, we go to meet a former colonel in Saddam's army. Now he's an informal spokesman for Iraqi refugees in Damascus, especially the wealthier ones. The colonel is openly furious about the U.S. invasion of Iraq. We sit in a cafe sipping tiny cups of grainy black coffee while he chain-smokes and lectures us about the war, relishing the rare opportunity to yell at a couple of Americans.

Dan speaks up. "I was a Marine in the Iraq War."
The colonel is taken aback. "I was in Ramadi in 2007."

Through 20 interviews over a month together, Dan has hardly spoken a word. He's only told a few people about his service since the taxi driver at the border and the soldiers at the Red Security Building.

"I don't think any U.S. soldier who was in that war should be able to sleep at night," the colonel snarls. More harsh words about President George Bush and the war and the U.S. military follow. The colonel seems grandiose and pompous compared to the everyday folks we've been talking to, but Dan is listening.

He tells the colonel his reasons for going to Iraq. He tells him that his friends died there. Finally, the conversation pauses. I stand up, signaling I want to go.

The city, cheerfully bundled against the weather, flows around our tense little knot.

Dan walks out stiffly in front of me, and the colonel approaches him again outside. Gently, he reaches for Dan's elbow and says under his breath, "Don't worry, son. I know what it's like to be a soldier."

Sarah Stateville and Alex Stonehill are co-founders of the Common Language Project, a nonprofit journalism organization based in the University of Washington's Department of Communication.