

To Baghdad and Back: SoCal veterans on the Iraq War, 10 years later (Photos)

Josie Huang | Take Two | March 18th, 2013, 9:05am

SLIDESHOW

1 of 7



Oscar Baretto, Jr.

As an Army specialist during the invasion in Iraq, Oscar Barretto (third from the left in the third row) trained other soldiers how to protect themselves from chemical warfare.



Bobby Yen served as a military journalist embedded with other soldiers. He stands outside Tal Afar - Forward operating base, which was later toppled by a car bomb.



Josie Huang/KPCC

Oscar Barretto Jr., who was deployed to Iraq for the invasion of Baghdad, for the first time shows photos of his war time service to his children, Esperanza, 12, and Jeremiah, 10.



Josie Huang, KPCC

Oscar Barretto has recurring nightmares of his time in Iraq, but is still glad that he was able to serve his country. Ten years later, he makes sure to keep his uniform pressed.



Josie Huang/KPCC

Leilani, the youngest of Oscar Barretto's three children. A fourth child is on the way, and Barretto says he's grateful he'll be present for the birth. He missed the arrival of his second child because he was deployed in Iraq.



Josie Huang/KPCC

Bobby Yen was in the Army Reserves when he was called up to Iraq. He served for a year as a military journalist embedded with other soldiers. Upon his return, he resumed a career in video game design.



Bobby Yen

Bobby Yen, an Army Reservist serving in Iraq in 2003, with other members of his unit, and their Iraqi interpreter, wearing black.

Today, we begin a series about the 10-year anniversary of the Iraq War. KPCC's Josie Huang takes a look back at the first year of the conflict through the eyes of a couple of Southern California veterans and at what life, post-Iraq, is like for them.

At dawn in Iraq, on March 20, 2003, the first U.S. bombs fell over Baghdad. While the rest of the world watched "shock and awe" on TV, Oscar Barretto, Jr. of Simi Valley was positioned within earshot. Barretto, then a 25-year-old Army specialist, was part of the first wave of troops deployed to invade Iraq.

His unit arrived in Baghdad the month before, joining a convoy that spanned the length of several football fields and traveled at night to escape enemy scrutiny, though sandstorms were unavoidable.

RELATED: [The war in Iraq: A decade later](#)

Barretto was specially trained in chemical warfare — detection, decontamination — and it was his job to teach other soldiers and Iraqi civilians how to protect themselves. He was proud to serve his country — the country's leaders, he said, were going off the information that they had at the time — but the timing couldn't have been worse.

His second child — a boy — was scheduled to be born any day. Barretto's only consolation was that he would see him when his tour was over.

"That gave me the boost to last through the whole war," Barretto said.

So close, yet so far away

Ten years later, Operation Iraqi Freedom feels both distant and fresh, say some of the soldiers who were first to arrive for the ground invasion. The intervening years have added perspective.

The eight-year conflict would claim the lives of close to 4,500 troops and more than 100,000 civilians by its official end on Dec. 15, 2011. It would shake up the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and pit Americans who believed in the mission against those who felt they had been misled.

A little more than half of the country would come to believe that the Iraq War was a mistake, polls show today. But even during that first year in Iraq, some troops began to harbor doubts, said Hollywood resident and former Army reservist Bobby Yen, who was called up in 2003.

"In the beginning everybody was hard-charging and motivated, and they thought we'll find the weapons of mass destruction," Yen said.

But as time wore on, Yen said, morale took a hit. Soldiers began to question the basis for going to war in search of WMDs — for example, when they were no longer asked to bring their masks with them on patrols, he said.

Even historic moments, Yen said, did little to boost spirits.

"You know, like, we're allowing them to have their own election, now they're writing their own constitution, now we captured Saddam," Yen said. "But after a while, like the threat of death, you start getting inured to it all, and you just start thinking about going home."

Battles on the homefront

Upon their return, veterans found a country ill-prepared to deal with their numbers and problems. As of last month, about 600,000 veterans were still waiting for the Department of Veterans Affairs to process their disability claims.

This worries advocacy groups such as the nonprofit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. IAVA's Jason Hansman said that waits are preventing veterans from getting the care they need for issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Left untreated, Hansman said, such issues can raise the risk of suicide.

"The suicide rate is still high — much higher than certainly people that are dying in Afghanistan due to combat," Hansman said. "In January, the Army alone reported 33 potential suicides among active duty and Reserves."

UCLA psychiatrist Patricia Lester, who works with veterans and their families, said a large number of veterans suffer from "invisible wounds of war." Studies put the rate of PTSD at 19 percent among post-9/11 veterans.

"Then when you combine the numbers of traumatic brain injury, it's probably upward of 30 percent of folks coming from their combat experiences," Lester said.

Lester attributes these numbers to multiple deployments and the type of battles being waged.

"It's really an urban warfare and everybody has some level of exposure," Lester said.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, insurgents used improvised explosive devices, making no distinction between troops that were combat and those that weren't.

Getting help

Oscar Barretto said he feels fortunate he's been able to see a VA counselor about the nightmares that strike once or twice a week.

It's like, he said, "I'm going through a reenactment. Like it's happening all over again. Are we getting attacked? Or I see bodies or I see blood."

His wife, Jennifer, is relieved that the nightmares' frequency have decreased, but she doesn't know how else to respond than to stay quiet when Barretto wakes up and bolts up in bed. He would "start socking the air and sometimes just start talking, or mumbling stuff or (say) to kill something."

As for Yen, he said that he has never sought treatment for PTSD, because he thought his experiences were comparatively light. Still, he finds himself unnerved by how clearly he remembers his tour.

"When you're asleep," he recalled, "and there's a mortar attack you wake up for a second, and then you go back to sleep. If there's another mortar attack, you wake up and then you pull your armor on top of yourself, then you go back to sleep. If you don't adapt, then you lose it a bit."

Jobs. Jobs. Jobs.

Yen returned Stateside in 2004, and left the Army Reserves to resume a career in video game design. He now works out of an airy, modern house in Hollywood that he shares with his girlfriend, a cat and dog.

But the return to civilian life has not gone as smoothly for many other veterans. As a group, veterans have higher rates of unemployment than the general population.

Jason Hansman of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said that in January, the rate of unemployment for veterans nationally was 11.7 percent, compared to 7.9 percent for the general population.

Hansman said former military members sometimes have trouble selling their skills to civilian employers.

"You get discipline, you get responsibility, you get leadership in a lot of these vets and I don't think the civilian population has really made that connection yet," Hansman said.

Barretto, who left the Army as a sergeant in 2007, went on many interviews but rarely had follow-up calls.

"I felt like I was qualified to do the job," said Hansman. But he got the impression that being a veteran did little to impress prospective bosses, and in some cases, was a turn-off.

Facing forward

Despite his job-hunting woes and PTSD, despite the fact that many Americans think the war he fought in was wrong, Barretto said he is still glad he served .

The way he sees it, troops toppled a ruthless dictator and made life better for the Iraqis.

"They have the same aspirations as we do," Barretto said. "Nice home. Food on the table. I want to work, and I want to live life abundantly."

Which he's trying to do. He has a clerical job at LA County child protective services. A doting wife, healthy children - and another boy to be born in June.

Barretto said nothing can keep him from missing it.