

Nancy & Riley Sharbonno

Objects for Deployment

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Nancy:

Our family was always a four-piece puzzle. Each an individual but better together. There were times when the puzzle pieces moved around with no permanent change to the original picture.

When our daughter left for college, for example, it changed the picture intermittently and temporarily.

The experience of Riley's military service, particularly his tour in Iraq, changed the pieces and the picture completely and permanently.

The magnitude of the evolution, for me, was unexpected.

Riley:

Three years after returning from Iraq, my family looks different than it did when I left.

Our collective vision of the world has changed.

Our way of interacting with each other has changed.

The kindness with which we say goodbye has more gravity.

Our war story, as I see it today, has four chapters:

1. Optimism and Adventure
2. Reality and Despair
3. Healing
4. Truth and Perspective

Nancy / Optimism:

Riley's service was and is a source of great pride, a great experience for this adventurous son and a continuation of a family legacy of military service.

The excitement of the process took over. Orders, Officer Basic Course in Texas, home for leave, packing for Germany, evaluating what was to be stored for his return and distributing those things that he wouldn't need when he returned four years later.

Before Riley's departure for Germany the most important thing in my mind was that he not forget to request for leave the following November so he would be home for his sister's wedding.

On the second day of Riley's leave back in Minnesota in November of 2003, he received word that his unit would be deployed to Iraq a few weeks after his leave was over.

Riley / Adventure:

Aside from the intangible manifestations of growing up with a father who is a Vietnam Veteran (and rarely spoke of his experience), my life was unaffected by war. Despite several wars occurring, I did not know anyone participating in them. My family hung a flag by our front door during the first Gulf War. My decision to join ROTC and the Army was based on my ability to pay for college. I suppose there was a vague notion of patriotism, but my sense of duty was probably modeled mostly after my father's service in the Marines.

The series of events leading up to my Iraq deployment was an adventure, filled with challenge, but mostly excitement and optimism. After four years of ROTC, I passed the test. My parents and sister proudly pinned my second lieutenant rank on my uniform and snapped photos in front of the flag. At this moment I was filled with pride. I had my orders and was off to Germany for my first assignment. Though war loomed against "The Evil Empire," my mind was fixed on the adventures waiting for me in Germany.

Nancy / Reality / Despair:

My husband Ron, a Vietnam Vet, had an understanding of what the future would bring, and the risks were more vivid to him.

For my daughter, Angela, and me it was an awaking that changed everything we believed about patriotism, politics and war.

Riley's arrival at Abu Ghraib was the beginning of our reality. The tone of his e-mails changed. They were about mass casualties, bombings, hazardous trips to retrieve supplies and regular food poisoning among the soldiers.

On the rare occasion we received a telephone call we could hear Riley cough from the pollution inside the walls from burning garbage and dust. Communication was difficult with telephone delays so we just told him to talk; hearing his voice was wonderful.

During the next leave in October of 2004, Riley's smile was forced and he was sick during our trip to the North Shore. That goodbye was almost unbearable.

Riley / Reality / Despair:

Fortunately, I was able to communicate with my family through email during most of my tour in Iraq.

During the initial phase of my deployment, I had censored many of my emails, knowing that much of what I was experiencing would be difficult for my family.

At some unintelligible point in the deployment, I stopped censoring the information I gave my family (save the gory details). Touristy fluff gave way to deeply sentimental conversation.

Inside, I was in agony. Abu Ghraib was an evil place. I didn't realize until returning from Iraq that my family's experience was no less dramatic. My sister was struggling with the political powers that sent me there. My father was wrestling to untangle the parallels between his experience and mine. My mother was toiling to find a meaningful way to build a bridge between us. In our own way, each of us was struggling to find a useful metaphor to explain this absurd situation.

Nancy / Healing:

Just before Riley's deployment to Iraq our son-in-law, Ryan, was added to our family. His optimistic attitude and patient understanding of what we were going through was amazing. We were happy for Angela that she had a strong partner to help her when we couldn't be there for her. His vows of "in good times and in bad" were tested early in their marriage.

Angela was inspired to earn a graduate degree in Public Policy so she would have the tools to make a positive impact in areas that were important to her. She has also been active in the Soldier to Citizen Program.

It was difficult for Ron to see his son in a combat situation, even more difficult than serving in Vietnam himself. He started reflecting openly on his experiences for the first time in our 37-year marriage. We took out slides that Ron had taken in Vietnam (some of which he had never seen) arranging them in chronological order for transfer to DVD. I could see they told a powerful story that should have been documented at a time

before his memory of events faded.

This process with Ron inspired me to make two scrapbooks starting with ROTC through Riley's active service with the Army. I used pictures and e-mails to chronicle the story with the hope that someday he could share his experiences with others.

The amazing benefit was the healing effect it had for me. I was surprised how easily those same emotions came back when I read the emails and saw the pictures. When it was finished I could finally and literally close that book and start to heal.

What about Riley? Why don't I know about his healing?

Riley is now married to a woman, Bianca, who he met in Germany and who helped him with his re-entry into civilian life. They have a beautiful baby girl, Enid, who has been a new beginning for all of us.

Riley / Healing:

Upon leaving Abu Ghraib our task force was disbanded. A few of us were sent home, some to other hospitals. I was sent with a small group to Baghdad International Airport where we inventoried equipment and drove forklifts. For me, this is where the healing began. We still had incoming mortars, but much less often and further off target. My battle buddy and I spent our days off lying in our cots (below the sand bags), passing the time as safely as possible. By this time we understood mortality.

From the Airport, we moved a couple more times, neither assignment inspired us to volunteer for risk. We worked, slept, watched DVD's, worked out, and stayed below the sandbag walls of Tent City.

One day in January, we re-joined the rest of our combat support hospital in Mosul and took a commercial flight back to Germany. I can never adequately describe the blinding rich-green color and overwhelming absence of dust when we landed back in Germany.

There I had a comfortable apartment, friends, and wonderful food all around me. Bianca, my girlfriend, was endlessly accepting of my temper, night-sweats, flashbacks, and occasional dive to the floor when a train passed by her apartment.

Shortly after returning from Iraq, my family came to visit. Despite my excitement, I was near my nadir when they arrived. I don't think they knew what to expect when they saw me, but I don't suppose they expected to see the red-line on my new BMW as often as they did. My temper was quick and my penchant for speed and aggression was brand new.

In retrospect, their compassion and lack of judgment probably left the door open for self-reflection and change once the adrenaline hang-over wore off months later.

Nancy / Truth / Perspective:

The subject is too complicated and personal to speak for anyone but myself. I love this country but have never believed in a "my country right or wrong" philosophy. Perhaps this is a product of growing up in the 60's and 70's.

I realize that for many years I neglected my civic duty to be informed and try to understand our country's policies and their effect on the world. It is ordinary people who need to ask hard questions of our policy makers. They need to know that we are engaged and expect them to reflect our values. If we do not do our part we share in the collective guilt when our country makes bad or destructive policy choices. I feel this obligation more acutely now.

Now I have a better understanding of the isolation people feel when they are going through a tough personal time. I was often stunned by the ridiculous statements that people would make to us. Clearly, they didn't understand how serious the situation was, and it would have been more helpful if they

Is it naive to believe that we should train Armies of diplomats and negotiators rather than inventing more perfect, more remote control, efficient killing machines like drones? Everyone loses in War. We lose innocent lives and our collective integrity. There may be a necessity for war, but if we are the educated, innovative and generous people we claim to be we should be able to negotiate and invent new solutions to world issues.

Reflection is ongoing and important.

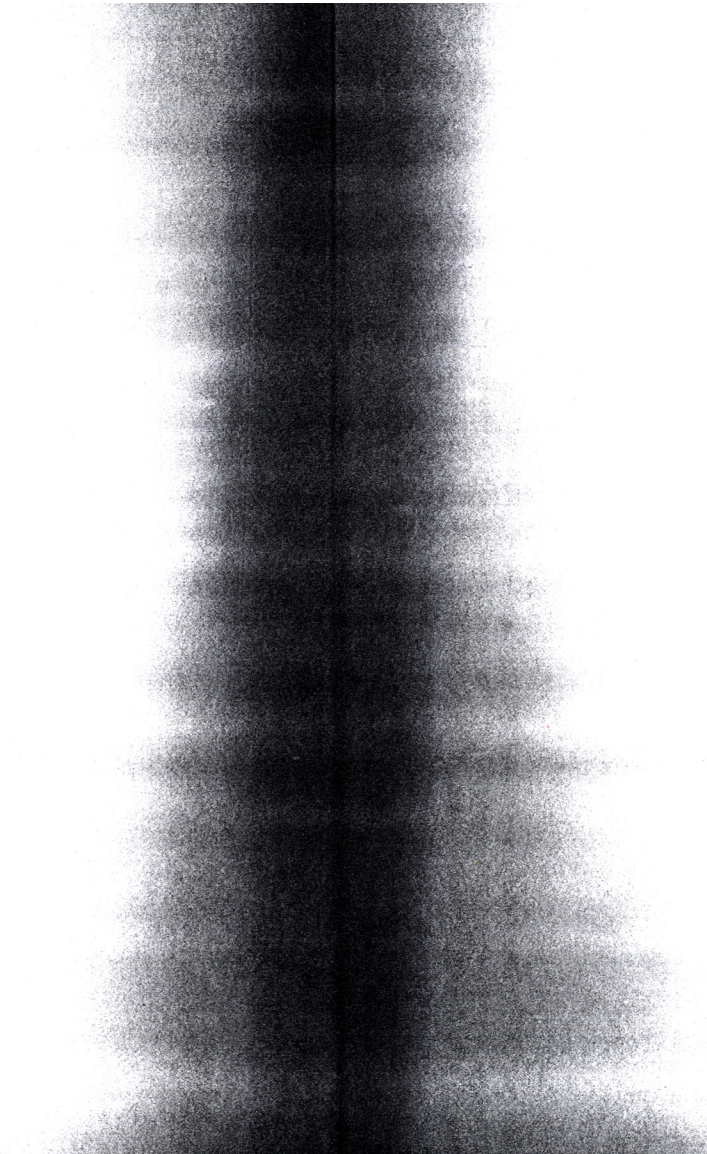
Riley / Truth / Perspective:

Five years after setting foot in Iraq, the world looks radically different to me. I have a profound desire for simplicity. The things that use to occupy my mind are tasteless. Shopping malls make me nervous and terribly angry.

Since my daughter's birth last September, I feel compelled to answer the question I know she will eventually ask: "Why were you in Iraq?"

My unit alleviated suffering and saved many lives, but I struggle to believe my time in Iraq was spent in support of a just war. I push away the persistent weight of doubt. I don't yet know what I will tell her, consolidating so many thoughts is daunting.

I very distinctly remember asking my father the same question about 20 years ago. He never had an answer either.



COLOPHON

A PROJECT BY
Monica Haller

BOOK BY
Nancy Sharbonno
Riley Sharbonno

PHOTOS
Nancy Sharbonno
Riley Sharbonno

TEXT
Nancy Sharbonno
Riley Sharbonno

COPY EDITING
Dan Haller

TEMPLATE DESIGN
Matthew Rezac
Monica Haller

SOFTWARE DESIGN
Mark Fox

PRINTING
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Nancy Sharbonno's son, Riley, served as an Army Nurse at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq from 2004–2005. The only thing greater than her pride in him was the fear that she may lose him. "It was the longest year of my life and an experience that has given me a new view of the world, compassion for all those who were not as fortunate to have their son or daughter return and many questions regarding prospects for peace in our world." Her home is in St. Cloud, Minnesota where she is reminded each time she sees Riley's little girl, her granddaughter, how blessed she is.

Riley served as a captain in the Army from 2002–2008. He graduated from St. John's University in Collegeville, MN in 2002 with a B.S. in Nursing. After graduating, he joined the Army and started a three-year tour, stationed first in Germany. From there he was deployed to Iraq and was assigned to be one of two RN's in an E.R. within Abu Ghraib Prison. After 12 months, he was redeployed to Germany, where he met his wife, Bianca. In October 2005 he was assigned to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, TX as a staff/charge R.N. On May 4th, 2007, he resigned his commission as a captain in The Army and moved back to Minnesota. Riley currently lives in Minneapolis, MN with his wife and daughter and works as the Assistant Nurse Manager of the Emergency Room at The University of Minnesota Medical Center and University of MN Amplatz Children's Hospital.

