WAR
THROUGH THEIR EYES • VOLUME III

WARRIORS & STUDENTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN OSHKOSH
A University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Student Multimedia Project
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Wisconsin Army National Guard, Madison Wis., 92F refueler
Tour: August 2010-June 2011, Iraq

By Alex Beld
**Red-Shirt Friday**

It’s Friday and that means Nick Brewer is wearing his red shirt in support of veterans like himself. He is sitting behind a desk in the Veteran’s Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh waiting to help other student veterans. Most of the time he just chats with other veterans who come into the center. This is something he is great at, talking to other people. And even though he stands over 6 feet and has a beard, he appears and acts as friendly as a teddy bear. But it’s also obvious he is a brawler. Brewer is easy to get along with and hard not to respect.

Brewer is a veteran of the Iraq War, having served his tour from August 2010 to June 2011. He is currently a sophomore enrolled at UW Oshkosh, majoring in geographic information systems and urban planning. He lives in Oshkosh with his wife and recently became a dad.

**Nothing but Trouble**

Brewer was born and raised in Madison, Wis., in 1986, and shortly after he could walk, he started raising hell throughout most of the east side. In elementary school Brewer was already learning how to fight and towered over his peers. Brewer was arrested for the first time in 8th grade, he thinks, for trespassing. He got away without charges being pressed or tickets getting issued. Brewer just saw the police involvement as a scare tactic that, of course, did not work. As he got out of middle school and started his career as a high schooler his knack for causing trouble escalated. Long-haired and at 6’2”, weighing more than 200 pounds, Brewer looked like a mix between a hippy and a linebacker. Brewer’s drivers license and first car, a 1994 Chevy Cavalier, really opened up some doors. To this day he still says that when his parents let him get that car it was the worst idea they ever had. His beater with a heater left him with more energy for trouble and opened up new venues.

*I was not a good child. I skipped a lot, I had long hair but was not a hippy. I got into a lot of fights. Brought home by the police quite a bit ... Mostly for breaking curfew, trespassing, loitering, all misdemeanors that didn’t result in anything. The police were mostly, ‘we’re gonna take you home and let your parents deal with it.’*
No Time like the Present

It looked like Brewer would never be on the right path. That was until he approached his parents about joining the military. Brewer was 17 when he first approached his parents about the military, but his parents wouldn’t sign the paperwork. His dad said that he couldn’t make that kind of decision yet. When Brewer turned 18 he tried again, but his parents would not let him miss school to sign up. The MEP station was in Milwaukee and only open during the week. Not wanting to wait until summer to sign up, he ran away to do it. A recruiter drove him, but after signing up he had no way home and decided to call his mom for a ride. His mom got there and explained that his father was at home waiting for him. He thought he was in for the worst of it as he walked into the house, but his dad was surprisingly calm. The confusion and fear dissipate as he realized his dad wasn’t mad, he was disappointed in the way Brewer went about it. He was also concerned for his son’s life, especially since Brewer is an only child.

You know it’s funny because being bad almost trains you for the military. It almost pushes you in that direction. My best friend was enlisting and he comes from a military family, where I don’t. There’s only been two people in the military in my family. One was in World War II and the other was in the Civil War. You know, not a huge military family, huge big breaks [in between]. My friend enlisted and told me how much fun it was. He got to run around with guns and blow stuff up. And I was like, well, that’s kind of what I do now, but I could get paid to do it. And I was like we’ll check it out … I wasn’t going anywhere in life, you know? Bad grades in high school does that to you.

In it for Life

Brewer signed up for six years and started basic in 2005. When he got there he had three choices: refueler, infantry or military police. He had thoughts that must go through the heads of most recruits. What did I get myself into and how can I get out of it? The first day was rough, filled with confusion and yelling, a number of people washed out. If someone so much as sneezed, a drill sergeant would start yelling and several more would quickly join in. They were like sharks and
the yelling might as well have been blood in the water. While there, Brewer hated every second.

Advanced Individual Training (AIT) was after basic. When Brewer got to AIT he was offered Airborne and Ranger training. His contract would have been changed from National Guard to active duty. His soon-to-be first wife played a large role in the choice he made, saying she would leave him if he went into active duty. They were married August 2007, two years after his return from basic, and divorced within a year. After talking with her it was decided that he would be a refueler even though he was leaning towards infantry. Upon deployment Brewer was a sergeant in charge of a four-person team.

When I got out of basic and to AIT and found out what my job entailed, I really enjoyed it. I got to work around helicopters, I got to fly in helicopters, I got to, sounds lame, refuel helicopters. I was a 24-hour-gas station attendant basically, but it was fun ... that’s why I wanted to be a lifer.

Before being deployed Brewer met the woman who later became his second wife. By January 2009 they were dating. They got engaged, but they decided not to get married until he returned; by January 2012 they were married. Brewer arrived in Iraq in August of 2010 and by the time he left on June 10, 2011 he had proved himself as more than a capable adult. Brewer’s refueling station was located in Tallil, near Nasiriyah, in the southwest part of Iraq. From Baghdad to the southern border of Iraq, Brewer’s station was one of the main refueling locations. His team was on the second shift and they would consistently refuel helicopters 12 hours a day, noon to midnight, seven days out of the week. His unit won several awards during his deployment for their quick work as refuelers. They had the best times in the entire theater of war. Brewer recalls that some helicopters would even divert course to come to their refueling station. Despite this, Brewer’s unit did not make it through the tour without making mistakes.

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Taking One for the Team

As Brewer very well knows, following rules isn’t always easy. During his tour he learned what it is like to be on the side of all the authority figures in his life. The first incident Brewer could remember was when a member of his team wasn’t thinking while testing a pump, obviously doing something he shouldn’t have. And a mistake was made; the team member managed to spill fuel on Brewer as he walked right by. Right away Brewer left to go change, but before he could get back he had to wait for a busdriver to take him back. To calm down he had a cigarette but wasn’t thinking about the fuel on him. As he brought in his hand to cup the flame, he lit his whole arm on fire. He quickly ripped off his shirt and stomped out the flame. When he got back with his new shirt on, he yelled at the private. Unfortunately this was not the worst thing to happen to a member of the team.

One of my soldiers did something really stupid and to this day no one knows exactly what happened except for him and the guy that was in the truck with him. Basically he scalped himself. He was in a truck, one of our fueling trucks, and he hit a bump. No one is really sure what happened but his helmet came off, and he removed the skin right here [top right side of his head] ... I still got in trouble for it but I had the day off. No one bothered to come and tell me that my guy had scalped himself, of course ... So when he woke up and they sent him back to his chu [container housing unit]. I showed up and asked him what happened and had to take an accident report and see how bad he was hurt and yell at him a little bit. Not one of the more fun jobs I’ve ever done in my life.

Not So Near Death

During one helicopter mission, Brewer and a full helicopter crew were flying over Baghdad. When a helicopter flies over the city there is a chance that it will be shot at.

We’re flying, probably at 2,500 feet, so we’re high up there. You can still see everything ... I’m taking pictures and I’m looking through the viewfinder and I see this plume of smoke. I’m like, ‘What is that?’ So I’m looking down and I
see thing kind of oscillating up at us ... in a span of two seconds before my mind goes, ‘That is an RPG [rocket propelled grenade].’ So I call it over the radio, ‘RPG! RPG! LEFT SIDE!’ The crew chief looks over and he goes, ‘Huh, it is an RPG, interesting.’ The pilots in front go ‘RPG?’ I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Hello, it’s an RPG. We might want to do evasive maneuvers or something, or get out of the path, we need to something here.’ When I realized they weren’t, it didn’t click in my head that I’m in no danger at all. They know it, but I’m sitting there thinking, ‘I can’t believe that they’re doing nothing’... I’m basically bidding myself adieu and I’m watching this RPG come up and it just kind of pitters out, hangs there for a second and falls right back to earth and explodes in a busy crowded street. And I’m like, well, that ruined someone’s day.

What Brewer didn’t know was that the maximum effective range is somewhere closer to 1,100 feet, which was not even half the distance to the helicopter. During that same month Brewer had a much closer experience with a potentially life-threatening situation. While tying down gear he decided to race a sandstorm. This is a race that he lost badly when he was blown off the side of a bunker. In the winter, sandstorms were a common occurrence and they could blow gear away. Part of Brewer’s job was to prepare his FARP for these storms. Even the helicopters had to be tied down so they wouldn’t tip over.

**Long Distance Love**

Despite these experiences, Brewer still says that one of his worst days was when he couldn’t be home or wish his second wife, Kim, happy birthday. The Internet connection on his base was unreliable at best. At the same time Brewer had previously told his wife that he was leaving for a mission and wouldn’t be able to talk for a few days. Shortly afterward he found out that the mission was scrubbed because of sandstorms.

It was so close to the end of deployment and I couldn’t be home and the Internet wasn’t working and hadn’t worked for a week and it was probably due to a sandstorm and maintenance, people breaking stuff ... Couldn’t call her, couldn’t talk to her, couldn’t send her a letter because mail wasn’t going out. I just remember she’s sitting there on her birthday, she still thinks I’m going on a mission and I couldn’t say happy birthday and that ate at me.”

**Gone But Not Forgotten**

Since Feb. 23, 2012, Brewer has not been a part of the military. He served for seven years
after extending his contract by one year. During his time in the military, Brewer managed to ruin both of his knees and his back. His first injury occurred while he was on a plane traveling back from R&R, he simply stood up and heard his knee pop as he fell to the floor. While rehabilitating his knee he overworked his healthy knee. His back was injured several times before it could no longer rebound. Despite his injuries he continued to go about his daily routine, often doing more work than he was supposed to. In the end he had to leave the Army because his injuries were too severe. Instead of being medically discharged he simply let his contract run out.

I knew I was getting out when we came back because we got back in June and we were back drilling by October and my goal was to try and train the new privates and bring them up to speed with the rest of us because we had the awards to prove it. We were the single best FARP operation in the entire theater ... And I was on my way out and I'm trying to train these people to do the right thing ... I want nothing more than to go back.

Nick Brewer is scheduled to graduate from UW Oshkosh in 2015 with a Bachelor of Science degree in geographic information systems and urban planning.