Dan Rather Reports

Episode Number: 101

Episode Title: Coming Home

Description: It's been said that war changes everything. On *Dan Rather Reports,* a look at American soldiers returning from conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan and how their lives are forever changed. For the wounded, advances in technology have saved thousands of lives, but is the government prepared for the long term cost of treating returning vets?

Transcript:

ANNOUNCER (VOICE OVER)

HDNET PRESENTS THE PREMIERE OF DAN RATHER REPORTS AND NOW DAN RATHER.

DAN RATHER (ON CAMERA)

TONIGHT, IN MY FIRST REPORT FOR HDNET, ORDINARY SOLDIERS AND EXTRAORDINARY MEN AND WOMEN COMING HOME.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS IS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE ON THE FRONTLINES IN IRAQ. THIS EXTRAORDINARY HIGH-DEFINITION FOOTAGE WAS SHOT BY A U.S. MARINE… IT CAPTURES THE HARD REALITY OF WHAT OUR TROOPS CONFRONT ON THE BATTLEFIELD. NEARLY A MILLION MEN AND WOMEN HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED SO FAR. MANY OF OUR BRAVE SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN SENT TO FIGHT HERE FOR A SECOND, THIRD, AND EVEN FOURTH TIME. FAR FROM HOME, THEY LIVE EVERY DAY IN HARMS' WAY.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

WHAT HAPPENS TO THESE MEN AND WOMEN WHEN THEY RETURN HOME AND TO OTHERS WHO ESCAPE INJURY BUT NOT THE TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE OF COMBAT? THESE ARE THE STORIES THAT HAVEN'T ALWAYS GOTTEN THE ATTENTION THEY DESERVE.

I'M AT FT. HOOD, A SPRAWLING ARMY BASE NOT FAR FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS THAT HAS SUPPLIED MANY OF THOSE TROOPS.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ABOUT 150,000 SOLDIERS HAVE SHIPPED OUT HERE, AND THOUSANDS MORE WILL BE GOING TO IRAQ IN THE COMING MONTHS AND OTHER UNITS THAT HAVE FINISHED THEIR TOURS ARE RETURNING TO BASE. SO TODAY FT. HOOD IS

A SCENE OF TEARFUL FAREWELLS AND JOYOUS REUNIONS.

IT'S 4 A.M. ANGELA BLACKMON AND HER DAUGHTER BROOKE-LYNN HAVE BEEN UP FOR HOURS. THEY'VE GOTTEN WORD THAT THIS IS THE DAY THEY'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

RATHER

Now your daughter is?

ANGELA BLACKMON, WIFE, CWO TOBY BLACKMON

She's nine.

RATHER

And her question is: Where’s Daddy?

BLACKMON

Uh huh, when’s Daddy coming home?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AFTER ALL THE WAITING, SUDDENLY THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE ENOUGH TIME TO GET READY.

BLACKMON

Are we on our way out the door?

DAUGHTER

I don't know.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BEFORE DAWN, A CHARTERED JET CARRYING DOZENS OF RETURNING SOLDIERS TOUCHES DOWN AT FORT HOOD. THEY ARE ALL COMBAT VETERANS NOW. AMONG THEM [IS], CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER TOBY BLACKMON. THIS IS THE LAST DAY OF A ONE-YEAR TOUR OF DUTY IN IRAQ.

TOBY BLACKMON, CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER

It was hard this last time it's being away from your family. To me, that's the worst thing.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FIRST AN I.D. CHECK - THEN A HUG FROM THE "HUG LADY." SHE'S BEEN

GREETING RETURNING SOLDIERS HERE AT FT HOOD FOR A GOOD THREE YEARS NOW.

BLACKMON

Toby, c'mon it's time to go!

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WITH HER SON TOBY, AND THE ENTIRE BLACKMON CLAN, ANGELA FINALLY GETS THE FAMILY OUT THE DOOR.

CHIEF BLACKMON TURNS IN HIS PISTOL.

RECEIVING OFFICER

Welcome home, sir.

CHIEF BLACKMON

Thank you all very much.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ANGELA AND THE CHILDREN DON'T GO TO THE AIRPORT TO MEET CHIEF BLACKMON. INSTEAD THEY MAKE THEIR WAY TO ONE OF THE GYMNASIUMS ON THE BASE. IN THE ARMY, HOMECOMINGS AREN'T PRIVATE AFFAIRS, AT LEAST NOT AT FIRST.

THE SCENE AT THE GYM RESEMBLES A HIGH SCHOOL PEP RALLY BEFORE THE BIG GAME...AND FINALLY, IT'S OFFICIAL THEY'RE HOME. THIS IS HOW EACH AND EVERY RETURNING HERO IS WELCOMED BACK AT FORT HOOD.

THE TROOPS GET INFORMATION THEN THE WORD EVERYBODY'S BEEN WAITING TO HEAR: DISMISSED.

THERE ARE A LOT OF TEARFUL REUNIONS, AND EVEN A FEW FIRST ENCOUNTERS: SOME DADS ARE SEEING, AND HOLDING, THEIR BABIES FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME...THESE SOLDIERS ARE AMONG THE LUCKY ONES.

BUT THERE ARE OTHER HOMECOMINGS THAT FAMILIES DREAD. EVERY DAY SEEMS TO BRING NEWS OF ANOTHER ONE, OR TWO, OR THREE U.S. FATALITIES IN IRAQ. IN OCTOBER ALONE, 105 AMERICAN TROOPS WERE KILLED, MAKING IT ONE OF THE DEADLIEST MONTHS OF THE WAR SO FAR. U.S. ARMY CORPORAL TIMOTHY LAUER, AGE 25, WAS KILLED IN BAGHDAD OCTOBER 14TH BY AN IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE JUST 3 WEEKS BEFORE HE WAS SCHEDULED TO RETURN HOME.

2ND LIEUTENANT JOSHUA BOOTH, AGE 23, FELLED BY SNIPER FIRE IN THE TOWN

OF HADITHA ON OCTOBER 17TH. HE HAD BEEN IN THE COUNTRY JUST A MONTH. LT BOOTH LEFT BEHIND WIFE, ERICA, AND A ONE YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER. IN JANUARY, ERICA WILL GIVE BIRTH TO A SON - WHO WILL BE NAMED TRISTAN JOSHUA BOOTH. WHEN LT BOOTH WAS LAID TO REST, IT SEEMED THE WHOLE TOWN OF BEDFORD, VIRGINIA TURNED OUT TO HONOR HIM. LT BOOTH IS JUST ONE OF ALMOST 3,000 AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN KILLED IN IRAQ, BY ANY MEASURE THAT'S A HORRIFIC NUMBER. YET MILITARY EXPERTS SAY - IN THEIR OPINION - THE FIGURE IS REMARKABLY LOW GIVEN THE SCALE AND DURATION OF THIS WAR. SOLDIERS FIGHTING IN IRAQ HAVE BEEN SAVED BY PROTECTIVE BODY ARMOR, AND THE MILITARY'S ABILITY TO QUICKLY MEDIVAC WOUNDED SOLDIERS TO ACUTE CARE FACILITIES … IN THIS WAR, 90% OF THE WOUNDED SURVIVE, OFTEN WITH GRIEVOUS INJURIES THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN FATAL IN EARLIER WARS.

MANY END UP HERE - AT WALTER REED MEDICAL CENTER. THE WARDS ARE FILLED WITH YOUNG SOLDIERS LIKE SERGEANT BRIAN FOUNTAINE, AGE 24. WHEN BOTH HIS LEGS WERE BLOWN OFF BY AN I.E.D., HE YANKED OFF HIS BELT AND TIED A TOURNIQUET - SAVING HIS OWN LIFE. STAFF SERGEANT JOHN BORDERS WAS ON HIS SECOND TOUR OF DUTY IN IRAQ - JUST 9 DAYS AWAY FROM HIS HOMECOMING - WHEN HIS HUMVEE HIT AN I.E.D. ALMOST A YEAR LATER, HE'S STILL LEARNING TO WALK AGAIN ON HIS NEW LEG.

JOHN BORDERS, STAFF SERGEANT

I was doing surgeries every other day for the first six weeks I was here to try to save my right leg. It just wasn't going well and so I opted to have it amputated instead.

BORDERS

They were going to have to fuse my ankle and I wasn't going to be able to run and I was only going to be able to walk on smooth surfaces, level surfaces. I thought it was important to me to be able to not just try and tell my kids how to play sports, I wanted to actually be able to participate and show them "This is what I mean."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT BORDERS' LEFT LEG WAS BADLY DAMAGED AS WELL.

BORDERS

The area here on the front of my leg was pretty much - that was like hole -so that was where I was missing the tibia and then they reattached what they could, but I didn't have everything. So they took part of my calf muscle in the back and put it on top and then they put a skin graft on top of it. It was rough.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DESPITE HIS INJURIES, SGT BORDERS IS STILL ON ACTIVE DUTY AND HAS NO

PLANS TO QUIT.

EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK AT WALTER REED, YOU SEE HEAD WOUNDS. TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY - OR T.B.I.. - IS SO COMMON IT'S BEEN CALLED THE "SIGNATURE INJURY" OF THE IRAQ WAR - ALMOST 30% OF THE SOLDIERS HERE HAVE SOME FORM OF T.B.I.

32-YEAR OLD ARMY SPECIALIST CLAUDIA CARREON IS ONE OF HUNDREDS OF WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN WOUNDED IN THE IRAQ WAR.

CLAUDIA CARREON, ARMY SPECIALIST

All I know is that since the accident, I haven't been - my brain hasn't been working properly.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THREE YEARS AGO, WHILE SHE WAS RIDING IN A FUEL CONVOY THRU THE STREETS OF BAGHDAD, AN IRAQI TRUCK SLAMMED HEAD-ON INTO HER VEHICLE—ROBBING HER OF EVERY MEMORY SHE'S EVER HAD.

CARREON

Probably the memory is in my brain somewhere there, it's just that I don't know how to retrieve the information. I don't know how to make myself remember.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EVEN LIFE-LONG FRIENDS ARE STRANGERS NOW.

CARREON

She saw me and she went like "Claudia" and I went like uh, "Hey." I give her a hug and everything. While I was giving her a hug, I ask my mother "Quien?" like, "Who is she?"

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

Weekly therapy sessions at the VA hospital, name tags and photographs all helped but to remember, she has to write everything down in her journal.

CARREON

What I do is I journal everything every day and I review it at night and am able to remember the next day. Like today I was able to remember yesterday from morning til night and what we are going to do now is see if I can remember the day before yesterday without reading my notes.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

NOTES AND PHOTOS ARE ALL SHE HAS LEFT OF THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENTS IN HER LIFE, LIKE HER WEDDING DAY.

CARREON

I don't remember anything of that getting married with my husband how was it when we dated, how did we met, "I do have pictures but I don't remember."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

NOW, SHE SAYS, THE MARRIAGE IS OVER.

CARREON (VOICE OVER)

I asked him to give me the opportunity to fall in love with him the way I did when I was married to him and to start all over again and he didn't want to.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT HER MOST PAINFUL LOSS IS NOT EVEN REMEMBERING THE BIRTH OF HER OWN DAUGHTER.

CARREON

I don't remember when she was born. I don't remember when I was pregnant.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SONDRA IS NOW TWO YEARS OLD SPECIALIST CARREON WORKS HARD TO REMEMBER WHO THIS LITTLE GIRL IS.THE MEMORIES SHE CAN HOLD ONTO SIT LITERALLY ON A SHELF, NEXT TO HER DAUGHTERS' ANIMATED VIDEOS.

CARREON

Let's see the one when you were very, very little. Do you remember baby when she was little?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AS THEY WATCH, CLAUDIA PIECES TOGETHER FRAGMENTS OF HER PAST TRYING TO REMEMBER WHO SHE WAS AND WHAT IS REAL.

CARREON

"Look at that. Do you remember who is she? Who is she?"

When I see her pictures, it's very exciting and I tell her, "Why can't you go back, just for mommy and just go back in time and be a little baby, a newborn just for a day or two so I can know or experience what it is to have a newborn?" My mom says that I am very protective with her and sometimes that I spoil her but in a way I feel like I have to makeup for what I don't remember.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HER MOTHER LIVES WITH HER NOW, HELPING OUT WITH SONDRA AND FILLING IN THE GAPS OF HER PAST. STILL, CLAUDIA WORRIES THAT ISN'T ENOUGH?

CARREON

How can I remember that tomorrow I am going to wake up and I have to feed my daughter? How am I going to remember that if my daughter cries I have to go upstairs all those little things that happen to children? How am I going to remember all that?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HER DOCTORS AT THE VA, WHO HAVE WORKED HARD TO GET HER TO THIS POINT, TELL HER SHE MAY NEVER GET HER MEMORY BACK OR LEARN TO DRIVE AGAIN OR RETURN TO WORKING A FULL TIME JOB. SHE ONCE WORKED IN ACCOUNTING, BUT NOW IT'S A STRUGGLE TO RE-LEARN HOW TO READ.

CARREON

My reading level is probably at 4th grade and I want to improve that because the way I read to my daughter is the way she's going to learn.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND, AS CLAUDIA CARREON IS LEARNING, HER MAIN MOTIVATION IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF HER.

CARREON (VOICE OVER)

THERE'S TIMES I GET UP AND I DON'T EVEN WANT TO GET OUT OF BED. IT'S LIKE, "I GIVE UP, I GIVE UP, I CAN'T GO NO MORE," BUT THEN I HEAR SOMEONE KNOCKING ON THE DOOR SAYING, "MOMMY." I NEED TO DO THIS FOR MYSELF BUT I NEED TO DO THIS ALSO FOR MY DAUGHTER.

ACT 2

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

TO DATE ALMOST 600,000 SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN HAVE BEEN DISCHARGED FROM THE MILITARY AND ARE NOW ELIGIBLE FOR VETERAN'S BENEFITS. ALMOST 200,000 OF THEM HAVE ALREADY TURNED TO THE VA SEEKING CARE. WITH HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF COMBAT TROOPS STILL DEPLOYED, THIS NUMBER IS BOUND TO INCREASE IN COMING YEARS. THE QUESTION IS: DOES THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERAN'S AFFAIRS HAVE THE MONEY AND RESOURCES IT NEEDS TO CARE FOR THIS NEW GENERATION OF VETERANS?

JIM NICHOLSON, SECRETARY OF VETERAN’S AFFAIRS

We are taking good care of our veterans.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

JIM NICHOLSON IS SECRETARY OF VETERAN'S AFFAIRS, THE SECOND- LARGEST DEPARTMENT IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

RATHER

Let's talk about money. Do you have the funding -- do you have the money to do the job?

NICHOLSON

We do have the funding. In fact spending on the VA health system has gone up 70 percent under President Bush in the five plus years that he's been in office. Our overall budget for this year is over $80 billion.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

BY ALL ACCOUNTS SECRETARY NICHOLSON IS A GOOD AND DECENT MAN AND A STRONG LEADER. BUT NICHOLSON'S CONFIDENT ASSERTION IS AT ODDS WITH A JUST-RELEASED REPORT BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTING OFFICE. IT FOUND "UNREALISTIC ASSUMPTIONS, ERRORS IN ESTIMATION AND INSUFFICIENT DATA" CAUSED THE VA TO UNDER-ESTIMATE THE COST OF SERVING VETERANS RETURNING FROM IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN BY $3 BILLION OVER THE LAST 2 YEARS. ACCORDING TO THE GAO REPORT, PROJECTED SAVINGS "WOULD HAVE REQUIRED TRANSFERRING OR DISCHARGING POTENTIALLY THOUSANDS OF VETERANS, MANY OF WHOM HAD SEVERE, CHRONIC, PHYSICAL OR MENTAL IMPAIRMENTS."

RATHER

It's my understanding the GAO report said additional funding is needed and not been requested.

NICHOLSON

That's correct. And—there have been—several prominent—members of Congress that have said the same thing.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IN FACT, BARACK OBAMA WHO IS ON THE SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE INTRODUCED A BILL THIS PAST SEPTEMBER THAT HE SAYS WILL ADDRESS A "LOOMING CRISIS" IN VETERAN'S HEALTH CARE.

NICHOLSON

We're getting the job done and if I felt for a minute we were not, I'd be in there agitating for more money.

RATHER

Barack Obama says that he did not think the veterans were getting the care they needed. Your response.

NICHOLSON

When you treat over a million veterans a week there it will be on any given day, or any given week you know, glitch or two in that system. But, overall our care is world class, and that's our goal.

RATHER

You know that he disagrees it's just a matter of glitches. The thrust of his criticism is that there's not nearly enough funding for the wave of veterans that will eventually come back from Iraq and Afghanistan.

NICHOLSON

on the '08 budget now. It will it will have a significant increase, because we're gonna have more veterans coming into our system.

RATHER

I don't want to leave any ambiguity, is it fair or unfair to say that you flatly refute and deny that the VA is under funded.

NICHOLSON

Yes, I flatly say today that we have the resources, currently, to do our mission.

MAJOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH, MAJOR, IRAQ WAR VETERAN

When you have a Secretary of the VA that says that he has all the money that he needs, but that we have veterans going without the care that they need, something's wrong there.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MEET MAJOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH: SHE'S ONE OF THE VA'S MOST VOCAL CRITICS, SHE'S AN IRAQI WAR VETERAN FLEW BLACKHAWK HELICOPTERS OVER BAGHDAD AND SHE'S A DOUBLE AMPUTEE.

RATHER

I interviewed the present head of the VA. He said, "Number one, that he has the funding he needs. That he doesn't need additional funding. Your reaction to that.

DUCKWORTH

I invite him to come and visit my VA hospital. I invite him to come talk to some of the veterans in my district, come to come to the prosthetic lab at my VA hospital and explain why none of those prosthesis's have had a chance to work on a state of the art artificial leg like I have.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DUCKWORTH HAS SPENT MUCH OF THE LAST TWO YEARS ON ARTIFICIAL LIMBS. HER RIGHT LEG COST MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS. ON IT SHE WEARS AN AMERICAN FLAG, A SYMBOL OF HER DEEP PATRIOTISM.

RATHER

It's one thing to go into the military service, it's another thing to wanna become a Blackhawk helicopter pilot. Why would you wanna do that?

DUCKWORTH

I just thought it was inherently unfair that here I was as a female I didn't have to face those dangers. I wanted to be equal and if that meant that I should face combat or at least have take the risk. I love it though. I've made it my first choice and I, I, I'm so glad I got it.

RATHER

Even though things turned out the way they did?

DUCKWORTH

Even though they turned out the way they did.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

NOVEMBER TWELFTH, 2004, STARTED OUT ROUTINELY ENOUGH FOR MAJOR DUCKWORTH AND HER CREW FERRYING TROOPS IN AND OUT OF CAMP ANACONDA, NORTH OF BAGHDAD.

DUCKWORTH

Well, we had a good day. I was flying with Dan Milberg, my friend, someone I hadn't flown with in a few months and I was really looking forward to it.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT ON THE LAST RUN OF THE DAY, OUT OF THE GREEN ZONE, THE BLACKHAWK CAME UNDER ENEMY FIRE.

DUCKWORTH

I heard tap, tap, tap on the side of the aircraft. I swore. I said to Dan I think we've been bleep, bleep bleep hit,

DUCKWORTH

And then boom there was a fireball in front of my face. We were hit by a rocket propelled grenade that hit just right about where I was sitting, just to the right of my right thigh, basically obliterated my leg, my right leg on impact, there was nothing left. I think I was passing in and out of consciousness and I remember trying to shut off the engine, trying to lift my left hand and that was the last thing I remember. And then Dan got me out of that field, carried me to safety and saved my life. For some reason I survived the 20 minutes to go up to Baghdad ER. I should have bled out in about four and a half minutes. There's no earthly reason why I survived.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

LIKE SO MANY INJURED SOLDIERS BEFORE HER, DUCKWORTH WAS FLOWN TO WALTER REED HOSPITAL. SHE AWOKE THERE IN HER HOSPITAL BED, DEVASTATED, BELIEVING THAT SHE HAD CRASHED THE BLACKHAWK UNTIL A CREW MEMBER SET HER STRAIGHT:

DUCKWORTH

And ever since then I've been okay because I know that with everything that I had, I tried to do my job. So, it wasn't a crash, it was a landing. Probably not the most elegant landing we've ever made, you know? But we got the job done.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TAMMY'S RECOVERY WAS PAINFUL, AND SLOW. MORE THAN 30 SURGERIES REPAIRED HER DAMAGED BODY A MUSCLE GRAFT FROM HER RIBCAGE SAVED HER ARM. AFTER MONTHS OF INTENSIVE PHYSICAL THERAPY, SHE TOOK HER FIRST STEPS WITH HER NEW LEGS. CONSTANTLY BY HER SIDE, HER HUSBAND BRYAN BOWLSBEY - HIMSELF A MAJOR IN THE ARMY NATIONAL GUARD.

RATHER

Was there a time, which you may find, when you thought your marriage wouldn't make it through because of this?

DUCKWORTH

No. My husband has been my rock. There was never any question. He he's gone through things that no husband should ever have to go through for his wife. No spouse should ever have to see their partner the way he found me, and make the decision that he had to make for me in the hospital. But there was never, ever any question. I joke about the fact that, you know, I was lucky that my husband wasn't a leg man.

RATHER

You must have gone through periods of being despondent, being down?

DUCKWORTH

Of course it's tough. And there are times when you get up in the middle of the night and and - and you wanna get out of bed and - and you can't and - and nobody likes to sit in a wheelchair. But, you know what? There are 2800 other kids who didn't make it home and they and their families would rather have them back with all four limbs missing and so who am I to question this gift that I have been given.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SHE ALSO SAW THE COURAGE OF YOUNG INJURED VETS RECOVERING AROUND HER.

RATHER

What were your impressions of the others who were there with wounds?

DUCKWORTH

I was 36 when I was shot down. The average age of the war wounded is between 19 and 24. I remember looking at them and going “Gosh these are just kids.”

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HER DIFFICULT ROAD TO RECOVERY LASTED OVER A YEAR YET JUST A FEW MONTHS AFTER LOSINGHER LIMBS, DUCKWORTH WAS ASKED TO TESTIFY BEFORE THE SENATE VETERANS COMMITTEE.

RATHER

And what did you tell them?

DUCKWORTH

I told them that the men and women who are wounded in this war will need healthcare and will need support from the V.A. for the rest of our lives, for the next 50 to 60 years, that we would need access to the very best technology and that-- this can't be something that is just promised in passing while there is a war and then you just forget about us when the war is over. This country needs to keep that promise to its veterans.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

KEEPING THAT PROMISE, EXPERTS SAY, WILL REQUIRE MORE THAN A HUNDRED BILLION DOLLARS IN THE YEARS TO COME. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE STATISTICS SHOW THAT OVER 10 THOUSAND SOLDIERS FIGHTING IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN HAVE BEEN TOO SEVERELY INJURED TO RETURN TO ACTIVE DUTY. MANY OF THOSE WILL REQUIRE A LIFETIME OF AROUND-THE-CLOCK CARE. WITH OVER SEVEN MILLION VETERANS ALREADY IN THE VA’S HEALTH

CARE SYSTEM THE TASK SEEMS DAUNTING.

BUT, DUCKWORTH SAYS, DESPITE HER TESTIMONY, SHE SOON LEARNED THAT IN FACT, FUNDING CUTS FOR VETERANS CARE WERE BEING CONSIDERED.

DUCKWORTH

I'm sitting in a wheelchair waiting for my artificial legs and I thought, "These politicians have no idea. These politicians are not making their decisions based on the sacrifices that my buddies and I have made."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DUCKWORTH GOT ANGRY WITH THOSE POLITICIANS AND DECIDED TO RUN FOR CONGRESS HERSELF.

DUCKWORTH

Our troops cannot speak for themselves.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SHE WAS ONE OF SEVEN RECENT WAR VETS ON THE BALLOT THIS YEAR. THEY ARE A NEWGENERATION OF POLITICIANS, MAKING IT THEIR MISSION TO SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON THE ISSUES FACING RETURNING VETERANS AND ON THE WAR ITSELF.

PATRICK MURPHY, PARATROOPER

And when our country was attacked on 9/11, I deployed twice for our country.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

PATRICK MURPHY, A PARATROOPER WITH THE 82ND AIRBORNE, HAD SENATOR BARACK OBAMA BY HIS SIDE, AND SOON TO BE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE NANCY PELOSI.

NANCY PELOSI, SOON TO BE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

He will ask the tough questions of the Bush administration about this war.

VAN TAYLOR, VETERAN, REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE

We have the greatest military in the world, I know because I've served there side by side.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

VAN TAYLOR WAS THE ONLY REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE. HIS DISTRICT INCLUDES PRESIDENT BUSH'S HOMETOWN OF CRAWFORD, TEXAS.

DUCKWORTH

I was talking about veteran's benefits even while I was still at Walter Reed.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, DUCKWORTH MET WITH VETS, WHO TOLD HER THEY WORRY ABOUT THEIR FUTURE.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

I had heard that the Chicago office of t he VA had been under funded by about 200,000 dollars.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FROM WHAT SHE HEARS, AND WHAT SHE KNOWS FIRST HAND, DUCKWORTH BELIEVES THE VA IS INDEED FACING A CRISIS, AS MORE AND MORE SOLDIERS RETURN HOME.

RATHER

As you and I sit here, the war goes on.

DUCKWORTH

Yes, sir.

RATHER

So it means there are going to be more there will be thousands more down the road. Question: are we prepared to care for them, to give them the very best care? The kind of care that people pay the price that they have paid, deserved?

DUCKWORTH

Not through the VA system. No, we're not. We simply are not. We have not dealt with a number of these veterans and a number of them have not even signed up for care and they're not even talking about veterans who right now are not showing any health problems who may have health problems 20 years down the road.

For example, I think we're gonna have respiratory illnesses in the next 20 years that's gonna crop up at the result of this war that is not showing right now.

And I’m just deeply, deeply worried about my buddies who are wounded who are not going to get the care that they should have.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DUCKWORTH'S RACE FOR CONGRESS WAS TIGHTER THAN SPRINGSTEEN'S

HEADBAND. IN HER TRADITIONALLY REPUBLICAN DISTRICT, THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S BIG GUNS CAME OUT TO HELP BUT IN THE END, TAMMY DUCKWORTH DID NOT WIN.

DUCKWORTH

And today and this past year you made this country a little bit better and for that I that I thank you.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SHE'S NOT READY YET TO SAY IF SHE'LL RESPOND TO THE CALL OF "TAMMY 2008,",BUT SHE SAYS WHATEVER SHE DOES, SHE WILL REMAIN A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH.

DUCKWORTH

It comes down to this: does this country value the promise that it makes to its veterans?

DUCKWORTH

To its all-volunteer military? The people that are on the frontline in Iraq right now, today need to be able to know when they put on that armor and they put on that helmet and they climb into that humvee, that if they're injured in the line of duty, they will be cared for, for the rest of their lives. So that they can focus on mission, so they can get out there and put themselves in the line of fire.

RATHER

It must happen, I know it happens. People who don't know you, look at you and say what happened to you, what do you tell them?

DUCKWORTH

I tell them I served my country in Iraq and I made it home.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SOME SOLDIERS COME HOME WITH WOUNDS THAT CAN'T BE SEEN. SERGEANT COBY THOMAS WAS AN AUTO MECHANIC AND A WEEKEND WARRIOR IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD WHEN WE WENT TO WAR IN IRAQ TWO YEARS AGO.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, HE NEARLY DIED WHEN THE HUMVEE HE WAS RIDING IN PLOWED INTO ANOTHER HUMVEE. WHEN HIS WIFE DEBBIE VISITED HIM IN THE HOSPITAL, SHE WAS SHOCKED BY WHAT SHE SAW.

DEBBI THOMAS, WIFE OF SGT THOMAS

I didn't even recognize him.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT THOMAS SUFFERED MULTIPLE INJURIES INCLUDING A BROKEN JAW AND BRAIN DAMAGE.

RATHER

Could you walk?

SGT COBY THOMAS, MECHANIC

Yes.

DEBBI THOMAS

He could not walk, okay? He was not able to walk.

RATHER

How long did it take you to regain your ability to walk?

SGT THOMAS

Just a short time, 30 minutes, (snap) an hour.

DEBBI THOMAS

He doesn't remember, it was several weeks.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AFTER MORE THAN FOUR MONTHS IN THE HOSPITAL, SGT THOMAS WAS DISCHARGED.

RATHER

Did you feel you were ready to come home?

SGT THOMAS

Yes.

RATHER

Physically?

SGT THOMAS

Yes.

RATHER

Mentally.

SGT THOMAS

Yes.

RATHER

Psychologically?

SGT THOMAS

Yes.

RATHER

Debbie, you might have been a better judge, do you think he was ready to come home?

DEBBI THOMAS

No. He was not ready. I saw a man who was still at war, who was still ready to fight. There was a lot of anger. I didn't know how deal with it 'cause Coby had never been an angry person.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

APART FROM HIS BRAIN INJURY, THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE CONTRIBUTING TO COBY'S STRANGE BEHAVIOR. LIKE ONE IN FIVE IRAQ WAR VETERANS, HE WAS SUFFERING COMBAT RELATED PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS.

DEBBI THOMAS

Coby didn't sleep. He felt like he always had to be ' guarding his perimeter'. He would walk for hours and hours. Just pace back and forth on the porch. He would walk up and down the driveway. Just looking at everything, watching all the time. And he kept a weapon on him all the time.

RATHER

What kinda weapon did you have?

DEBBI THOMAS

I'd take a pistol.

RATHER

When you asked him what he was doing, what did he say?

DEBBI THOMAS

He said, “Somebody has to stay on guard all the time."

RATHER

Was this the same Coby that had gone away.

DEBBI THOMAS

No. I said, "You look like Coby," and, I said, "but, you're not you're not the man that left July the 15th. You're not that man." And, I wanted him back so bad.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

COBY THOMAS' SLEEPLESSNESS, AND ANGER, HIS HYPER-VIGILANCE AND DENIAL ARE ALL CLASSIC SYMPTOMS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER, OR PTSD, A SERIOUS CONDITION THAT AFFECTS TENS OF THOUSANDS OF IRAQ WAR VETERANS.

SGT THOMAS

I was very adamant that there was nothing wrong with me .

RATHER

Well, fair to say or not that you were in denial?

SGT THOMAS

Oh yes. Yes, very much.

RATHER

Nothing wrong with me.

SGT THOMAS

Exactly.

RATHER

I’m perfectly ok.

SGT THOMAS

Yes.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHEN I MET COBY THOMAS HE HAD JUST RETURNED HOME AFTER TWO

MONTHS IN REHAB - FOR A WHILE, AT LEAST, HE SEEMED LIKE HIS OLD SELF.

DEBBI THOMAS

He can joke again. He he's got his one-liners and he looks healthy.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND COBY TOO THOUGHT HIS PROBLEMS WERE IN THE PAST.

SGT THOMAS

You know, it's lucky someone didn't either kill me or have me committed, the way I acted when I came home.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT IN THE WEEKS SINCE I SAT DOWN WITH DEBBI AND COBY THINGS HAVE NOT GONE WELL. DEBBIE SAYS SHE HAD TO MOVE OUT OF THE HOUSE, AND COBY IS AGAIN OVERWHELMED BY ANGER. FOR COBY THOMAS, THE WAR IS FAR FROM OVER.

HOW TO TREAT SGT THOMAS AND THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS LIKE HIM HAS BECOME A TOP PRIORITY FOR BEHAVIORAL SCIENTISTS AND THIS IS THE CUTTING EDGE.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

PERHAPS THE MOST PROMISING NEW TREATMENT FOR POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER IS VIRTUAL REALITY THERAPY.

DR ANTHONY RIZZO, RESEARCH SCIENTIST

Typically this is done in stereo

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR. ANTHONY "SKIP" RIZZO IS A RESEARCH SCIENTIST AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. IT'S INSTITUTE FOR CREATIVE TECHNOLOGIES IS IN THE FOREFRONT OF DEVELOPING VIRTUAL REALITY V.R. THERAPY FOR OUR TROOPS.

RIZZO

The idea was that if we can put somebody back in a combat environment that eventually the person will deal with the emotional memories that have been perhaps suppressed, or that are causing them problems.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THERE ARE SETS DESIGNED TO MIMIC WAR-SCARRED IRAQ COPTERS ROAR OVERHEAD BURNING VEHICLES LITTER THE STREET.

RATHER

This certainly gives you a sense of being there every correspondent who has been in Iraq and out of there has seen this scene.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR. RIZZO HOPES IT WILL REACH AND HELP SOLDIERS WHO ARE UNCOMFORTABLE SEEING A THERAPIST FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS.

RIZZO

It takes the onus off of the deep, interpersonal component of therapy. The clinician is still using all the typical things that they would do in therapy. But they've got this centerpiece that attracts a person in a way that might not be possible with traditional therapy.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HE BASED HIS ' VIRTUAL IRAQ' ON A ' VIRTUAL WARRIOR' A REALITY PROGRAM THE ARMY DEVELOPED TO TRAIN SOLDIERS HEADED FOR COMBAT.

RIZZO

When I first saw it I said, "Wow, they have a graphic environment that looks like Iraq or Afghanistan. Why not take that already existing environment, modify it to our needs, and build a treatment tool for PTSD?"

RATHER

Since you're recreating so vividly the very scenes that have caused the soldier to have post-traumatic stress disorder there's some risk of making his situation worse because he has to relive it and keep on reliving it.

RIZZO

I think the issue of worrying about whether you're gonna traumatize the patient further is a legitimate concern. And this is why it the hands of a good clinician, you do it in a very managed and progressive fashion, so you don't push somebody over their limit.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THESE FULL SCALE MOCKUPS ARE USED FOR TRAINING PURPOSES. FOR NOW, V.R. THERAPY SESSIONS UTILIZE A HEAD MONITOR DISPLAY. DR. RIZZO FITTED ME OUT.

RIZZO

Look straight ahead. Now you're looking out the window and you can turn your head any way you want.

RATHER

Amazing.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND BEFORE LONG, I WAS RIDING DOWN A HIGHWAY IN IRAQ IN A HUMVEE.

RIZZO

If you look up in the air you'll see a helicopter.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

I MAY HAVE BEEN DRIVING THE HUMVEE, BUT IT WAS DR. RIZZO WHO CONTROLLED THE LEVEL OF STRESS.

RIZZO

In the course of your driving I'll ramp it and then all hell will start to break loose.

RATHER

Where did these guys come from?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HE COULD DECIDE WHEN TO LAUNCH A MORTAR ROUND OR SET OFF AN I.E.D.

RIZZO

Now I'll start to add more things.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EACH TIME A BOMB WENT OFF, MY CHAIR WOULD SHAKE.

RATHER

We've taken 3 more holes through the windshield, captain.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHEN WORKING WITH PATIENTS, THE THERAPIST MONITORS HEART RATE AND RESPIRATION.

RIZZO

We don't have to worry about whether they really are imagining the scenes in graphic detail. We can deliver the scenes in a very clear way so we know what they're seeing and what they're experiencing.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR. RIZZO'S PROGRAM IS NOW BEING TESTED AT CAMP PENDLETON AND SEVERAL VA CENTERS AROUND THE COUNTRY.

RATHER

Well, key question, does it work?

RIZZO

We've just started our clinical trials over the last three months so I don't know what the actual end status is of the people that are in therapy now. But are reporting a drop in they symptomatology over the progression of - of the treatment. And they enjoy it. They wanna come to therapy. That's a big difference.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EVERY SOLDIER WHO GOES OFF TO WAR COMES HOME CHANGED BY THE EXPERIENCE SOME ARE WOUNDED PHYSICALLY OR PSYCHOLOGICALLY, OTHERS DISCOVER RESERVES OF COURAGE THEY NEVER KNEW THEY POSSESSED. IN SGT KEVIN BENDERMAN'S CASE, THE WAR ENDED HIS MILITARY CAREER.

RATHER

Desertion. Strong word. Are you a deserter?

KEVIN BENDERMAN, SGT

No, I’m not. I did not desert my unit.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT SGT BENDERMAN WAS CHARGED WITH DOING JUST THAT. IT'S NOT WHAT YOU WOULD EXPECT FROM A SOLDIER WHO WON ARMY ACCOMMODATION MEDALS AND SPENT MORE THAN 7 YEARS IN THE U.S. MILITARY. BUT SEEING THE WAR UP CLOSE CHANGED EVERYTHING.

BENDERMAN

When you get down to the bottom line war is about this group of people killing this group of people for whatever reason in the most brutal way they can.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT KEVIN BENDERMAN'S UNIT DEPLOYED AT THE START OF THE WAR AND WAS ORDERED TO TAKE UP A POSITION SOUTH OF BAGHDAD.

RATHER

Did you believe in the mission?

BENDERMAN

When you get your orders, you do what you're supposed to do.

RATHER

Important to understand in the military. That's the way it works.

BENDERMAN

Yes, sir.

RATHER

Yours is not to reason why; yours is to get it done.

BENDERMAN

Yes, sir. Definitely.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT, ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, HE SAYS HE FELT OVERWHELMED BY THE SUFFERING HE SAW.

BENDERMAN

We were traveling north on highway one and we saw girl of probably about 10, 11-years-old begging for help. Her arm was burned black from her hand all the way up to well, past her elbow. And we just had to leave because the mission dictated that we continued to march. I went to my company executive officer and said, "why didn't we stop and help the girl? I mean isn't that what we're here to be doin'? Helpin' these people?"

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT BENDERMAN SAYS THERE WAS ONE INCIDENT THAT SHOOK HIM TO THE CORE. HE SAYS IT HAPPENED AFTER HIS UNIT SET UP HEADQUARTERS IN AN ABANDONED BUILDING IN THE TOWN OF KHANIQAN. (KON-E-KON)

BENDERMAN

It had a brick walk built around it. And the little kids in Khaniqan would climb up on the wall, you know. And they would laugh and point and probably throw some small pebbles. And our commander came out of the building one day and told us that if those kids got back up on the wall to shoot them. We all looked at him like he was crazy. The more I saw what was really goin' on the more I started saying to myself, "well I can't do this.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BY THE TIME BENDERMAN RETURNED HOME FROM A SIX-MONTH TOUR IN IRAQ, HE SAYS HE KNEW HE COULD NEVER GO BACK. HE HOPED TO GET ASSIGNED TO STATESIDE DUTIES FOR THE REMAINING MONTHS OF HIS ENLISTMENT. HE ALSO DID SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY HE FILED FOR CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR STATUS.

RATHER

Some people are gonna say I don't see how you become a conscientious objector after you volunteered for the for the army.

BENDERMAN

The army has a regulation AR 600-43 that's set up for people to file a conscientious objector application. If the army didn't think that that that could happen why would they have a regulation for it?

RATHER

And how did the army respond to your application?

BENDERMAN

You're supposed to submit the paperwork to your immediate company commander. He threw the form back at me and told me to get out of his office.

RATHER

He didn't literally throw it back at you?

BENDERMAN

Well yes. He threw the form back at me and told me to get out of his office.

RATHER

You knew you were gonna catch hell for this. Or did you?

BENDERMAN

Well. I kinda had the idea that a lot of hell would be coming down the pipes as a result. My first

sergeant called me a coward. I even got a letter back from the chaplain after the fact that said that he was ashamed of me.

RATHER

Were you on the verge of being sent back to Iraq at that time or did you know?

BENDERMAN

Well we had no concrete date but we had been told that entire year that we would be going back to Iraq.

RANDY MARTIN, LIEUTENANT COLONEL, FT STEWART SPOKESMAN

He knew full well he was required to deploy.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

Ft Stewart spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Randy Martin agreed to discuss the Benderman case.

MARTIN

On the eve of that deployment he said, "I don't wanna go because I am a conscientious objector.

RATHER

Can you understand, do you understand that the timing of it makes it, to some people, look suspicious?

BENDERMAN

Oh, well, I can understand that. But they don't understand that I had contemplated this for a year prior to filing my application.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHEN SGT BENDERMAN'S UNIT SHIPPED OUT TO IRAQ, HE STAYED BEHIND. BENDERMAN INSISTS HE WAS TOLD TO STAY ON BASE, THE ARMY SAYS HE DISOBEYED AN ORDER TO DEPLOY. HE WAS CHARGED WITH DESERTION ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS BREACHES OF MILITARY DISCIPLINE. WHILE AWAITING COURT- MARTIAL HE CONTINUED TO REPORT FOR DUTY, BUT NOW HE HAD A NEW ASSIGNMENT PROCESSING THE PAPERWORK FOR SOLDIERS WHO HAD GONE AWOL.

BENDERMAN

This is kind of a funny thing to me because they had put me in charge of a group of soldiers that had been arrested from being absent without leave and brought back to Fort Stewart.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BENDERMAN SAYS THESE AWOL SOLDIERS WERE EITHER RETURNED TO THEIR UNITS OR DISMISSED FROM THE ARMY WITHIN A MATTER OF MONTHS AND THAT NONE OF THEM GOT A LONG PRISON SENTENCE OR THE DISHONORABLE DISCHARGE THAT THE ARMY SOUGHT FOR HIM.

Do you think the army singled you out?

BENDERMAN

I think my command singled me out. I won't say the entire army.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT BENDERMAN'S WIFE MONICA DECIDED TO FIGHT FOR HER HUSBAND. SHE STARTED A WEB SITE AND WORKED TO BRING MEDIA ATTENTION TO THE CASE.

MONICA BENDERMAN, WIFE

It became important to be able to make people aware of what could happen to soldiers.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS AND ANTI-WAR ACTIVISTS TOOK UP THE CAUSE AND LETTERS OF SUPPORT POURED INTO THE BENDERMAN HOME.

MONICA BENDERMAN

We've actually got about 15 boxes full of letters from all over the world. Some of them from Italy. This one's from Japan.

BENDERMAN

This is really important to me. Because it's a letter from a retired marine captain, 24 year career marine. He says "i was skeptical. But the more we talked I came to see that he had given these subjects much thought and experienced a profound change of heart. Sergeant Benderman is the genuine article. I commend his courage and commitment to his ideals."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THE ARMY CAME TO A DIFFERENT CONCLUSION.

MARTIN

His case was investigated. Due process was applied. And the judgment of the command was that he did not fit the criteria of a conscientious objector. Mainly, that he did not have true moral or ethical opposition to war or being a combatant in war.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BENDERMAN WAS FOUND NOT GUILTY OF DESERTION, BUT CONVICTED OF A LESSER INFRACTION MISSING MOVEMENTS BY DESIGN. HE WAS STRIPPED OF HIS RANK AND SENTENCED TO 15 MONTHS IN THE STOCKADE AT FORT LEWIS, WASHINGTON.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

WOULD SGT BENDERMAN HAVE BEEN BETTER OFF IF HE HAD SIMPLY GONE AWOL? CONSIDER THIS: EVERY YEAR THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS DO JUST THAT. AFTER 30 DAYS THEY ARE CLASSIFIED AS DESERTERS - BUT FEWER THAN 10% OF THEM ARE EVEN COURT-MARTIALED. WHY WOULD THE ARMY HAVE SINGLED OUT SGT BENDERMAN? IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THAT HE JUST DIDN'T SHUT UP. HIS WEBSITE PROMINENTLY FEATURED HIS ACCOUNT OF BEING ORDERED TO SHOOT CHILDREN. AND HE VIOLATED MILITARY REGULATIONS WHEN HE WROTE PRESIDENT BUSH, HIS COMMANDER-IN CHIEF, TELLING HIM THAT HE WASN'T WORTH "THE DUST OFF THE BOOTS" OF THE SOLDIERS WHO HAD BEEN KILLED IN IRAQ.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BENDERMAN WAS RELEASED FROM PRISON LAST AUGUST, AFTER SERVING MORE THAN A YEAR BEHIND BARS. HIS CONVICTION IS STILL UNDER APPEAL. IF HE LOSES, HE'LL BE GIVEN A DISHONORABLE DISCHARGE. THE BENDERMAN'S ARE NOW WORKING TO ASSIST OTHER SOLDIERS WHOSE LEGAL PROBLEMS THEY SAY ARE NOT BEING PROPERLY HANDLED BY THE MILITARY.

BENDERMAN

I don't wanna see the next guy getting the same kind of treatment after he's served honorably in combat and and realizes that he cannot you know no longer participate in war with a good conscience.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IF YOU ASSUME THAT ALL THE AMERICAN TROOPS FIGHTING AND DYING FOR THE UNITED STATES IN IRAQ ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS, YOU WOULD BE WRONG.

TODAY, NEARLY 40-THOUSAND NON- CITIZENS SERVE IN THE U.S. MILITARY. THEY HAIL FROM VIRTUALLY EVERY COUNTRY IN THE WORLD. BUT THE MAJORITY ARE OF HISPANIC ORIGIN. THEY REPRESENT A POPULATION THAT HAS STRUGGLED TO GET INTO THIS COUNTRY. AND NOW THEY ARE LITERALLY FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO STAY HERE PERMANENTLY.

RATHER

You live in one of these barracks?

YERANDYS MARTELL-CARRASCO, MARINE CORPORAL

Yes sir.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

U.S. MARINE CORPORAL YERANDYS MARTELL-CARRASCO ARRIVED FROM CUBA 9 YEARS AGO, WHEN HE WAS 12. IN 2001, AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR YEAR, HE WATCHED WITH THE REST OF AMERICA THE HORRORS OF 9/11.

MARTELL-CARRASCO

And the very next day after that I joined. I went to the recruiting station and signed in for the marine corps. I knew we were gonna go to war. I knew that. And who was better to protect my family than me?

RATHER

Your mother didn't want you to come in?

MARTELL-CARRASCO

My mother didn't want me to come into the military period. Cuz - she- that's the reason we left Cuba, cus- when you're in Cuba you gotta go mandatory to the service for three years. So my mother didn't want that. Ironically, I wanted, I joined the service. So she was kind of mad about that.

For Corporal Martell, the typical highlights of youth have been consumed by marine corps life. He turned 18 just before starting boot camp; he celebrated his 19th birthday during his first tour in Iraq. Last year, he re-deployed for a second tour.

RATHER

Did you see combat?

MARTELL-CARRASCO

Yes, sir. I saw combat.

RATHER

Have any close calls?

MARTELL-CARRASCO

Just a couple, sir.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TODAY, MARTELL IS AN INFANTRYMAN STATIONED AT CAMP LEJEUNE NORTH CAROLINA. HE'S ONLY 21, YET HE'S ONE OF THE MORE COMBAT EXPERIENCED MARINES RESPONSIBLE NOW FOR TRAINING AND PREPARING THE NEWEST RECRUITS FOR THE WAR IN IRAQ.

RATHER

You're a corporal now, leader of 13 men. In terms of the Marine Corps, does the fact that you're a resident, not a citizen work against you in any way?

MARTELL-CARRASCO

Not at all sir, they don't look at that at all sir. When you get promoted, it's what you do. It's how you do for the marine corps, it's how you present yourself.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AT A TIME WHEN OUR MILITARY IS STRUGGLING TO MEET RECRUITING GOALS, NON-CITIZENS, LIKE CORPORAL MARTELL, ARE A RECRUITING GODSEND.

AFTER 9/11, PRESIDENT BUSH SIGNED AN EXECUTIVE ORDER MAKING ALL ACTIVE DUTY NON-CITIZENS IMMEDIATELY ELIGIBLE FOR U.S. CITIZENSHIP. THE APPLICATION PROCESS HAS BEEN STREAMLINED AND NEARLY 26-THOUSAND SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN HAVE BECOME NATURALIZED CITIZENS SINCE THE WAR ON TERROR BEGAN.

WE WERE WITH CORPORAL MARTELL AS HE WENT TO FILL OUT HIS PAPERWORK AT AN OFFICE ON BASE.

OFFICE WORKER

You know this is free the only thing you're going to have to spend money on is two passport pictures.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HE HOPES TO BECOME A U.S. CITIZEN BEFORE AGAIN RETURNING TO IRAQ.

RATHER

Has being a Marine helped you become a citizen?

MARTELL-CARRASCO

It definitely speeds up the process.

RATHER

So you don't have to handle much of the paperwork yourself.

MARTELL-CARRASCO

Not at all sir, pretty much they take care of you sir.

OFFICE WORKER

The main thing I need you to do is make sure you sign it because that is the one thing I can't do for you.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT SOME CRITICS CLAIM THAT LURING NON-CITIZENS INTO THE MILITARY WITH THE PROMISE OF CITIZENSHIP ALMOST GUARANTEES THEY WILL BE SENT INTO COMBAT ZONES -PUTTING THEM DIRECTLY IN THE LINE OF FIRE.

THAT'S BECAUSE NON-CITIZEN SOLDIERS CAN'T GET THE SECURITY CLEARANCES THAT U.S. CITIZENS DO, SO THEY WIND UP WITH RISKIER JOBS THAT DON'T REQUIRE CLEARANCES. LIKE THOSE ON THE FRONT LINES.

WHILE NON-CITIZENS MAKE-UP THREE PERCENT OF THE OVERALL MILITARY; SEVEN PERCENT OF OUR COMBAT FIGHTING FORCES ARE IMMIGRANTS. FOR DOZENS OF THEM, CITIZENSHIP CAME AFTER THEY DIED SERVING OUR COUNTRY.

MARTELL-CARRASCO

I don't wanna say a lot of people, but some people would say, you know, here's a young man who could do a lot of things. But he chooses to go to Iraq, not once, not twice but three times and gets shot at as a marine. And he's not a citizen, he’s a resident, he doesn't have to go why do it?

If I can make a difference and I can make somebody come back alive, that's all I really care about sir.

RATHER

Are you afraid of dying?

MARTELL-CARRASCO

I’m not afraid of dying. I’m afraid of my Marines dying. That's my biggest fear losing one of my marines and having to call their parents and saying your son is not home with us.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ON VETERAN'S DAY WEEKEND IN CEREMONIES HERE AND IN IRAQ AND IN AFGHANISTAN MORE THAN 200 SERVICEMEN AND WOMEN WERE SWORN IN AS NEW U.S. CITIZENS.

SWEARING IN OFFICER

Congratulations. You're our nation's newest citizens.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

Like Corporal Martell, they say they've always been proud patriots making the united states flag their own, only reinforces it.

MARTELL-CARRASCO

The day I raised my hand and I said yeah, I wanna be a United States Marine, I was proud sir. I had a feeling in my stomach. I get to do something not everybody else gets to do.

I did two tours for this country; I'm going to do three tours. I'm not going to live anywhere else but this country. So I will be proud to live in this country forever.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CORPORAL MARTEL HEADS BACK TO IRAQ SOON. LIKE THOUSANDS OF OTHER SOLDIERS.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

NINE-YEAR-OLD ARISTIDE GLASS IS ALWAYS TRYING TO GET HIS DAD TO PLAY BALL WITH HIM. SINCE THERE'S NO NET - HE SCORES POINTS LIKE THIS:

BUT THE CLOCK IS RUNNING OUT ON THIS GAME. WITHIN JUST A FEW WEEKS SGT ANTINO GLASS WILL BE SHIPPING OUT TO IRAQ FOR A SECOND ONE- YEAR TOUR OF DUTY. LEAVING BEHIND HIS SON ARISTEDE, HIS WIFE, CHRISTINE, AND A BABY BOY AMANTI.

ANTINO GLASS, SARGEANT

I'm away but eventually I'll be back. That's how I look at it. I like I use that a part of my motivation. You know that gives me the extra drive to go on and on each day. It's almost like a calendar, marking a calendar. You know it's like at the end of that calendar is the prize which is my family.

RATHER

Your younger son is how old?

GLASS

Four months today.

RATHER

You will probably miss seeing his first steps?

GLASS

Yes. I am. I try to get him to do everything I know I'm gonna miss.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ON HIS SECOND TOUR, SGT. GLASS WILL ONCE AGAIN BE CHARGED WITH SUPPLYING THE ARMY'S HUMVEES, TANKS AND BRADLEY'S WITH FUEL. IT MAY SOUND FAIRLY SAFE, BUT IN IRAQ, EVEN THE ORDINARY CAN BE FRAUGHT WITH DANGER.

GLASS

It was a Sunday afternoon, quite calm, peaceful. I wasn't doing anything spectacular, nothing like that. I was just washing my laundry in the bucket. And all of a sudden mortar rounds came in on the camp. And I just put my hands over my face and I said uh ok I seen the blood in my hand.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT GLASS WASN'T PERMANENTLY SCARRED IN THAT ATTACK, BUT HIS WOUND WAS SERIOUS ENOUGH THAT HE WAS AWARDED A PURPLE HEART.

CHRISTINE GLASS

I hate that he's leavin' again. And it's no guarantees that he's gonna come back the way he left.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND WITH OUR MILITARY STRETCHED THIN, THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER WORRY FOR CHRISTINE SGT GLASS MAY HAVE TO STAY IN IRAQ BEYOND HIS SCHEDULED TOUR OF DUTY.

CHRISTINE GLASS

They say a year, but then you know you can get a phone call and they say, "okay well, they extended for six more weeks." it's not easy explaining extended tours to a 9 year-old. I can't promise him that he's gonna be back when they say.

RATHER

Well I"m gonna ask each of you, who in this arrangement has the tougher job?

CHRISTINE GLASS

I would say me. Yeah, I would say me.

RATHER

Well, what about it, sergeant? She got a tougher job than you have?

GLASS

She got me beat. She has me beat by a long shot.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EVERYWHERE WE WENT AT FT. HOOD, WE SAW FAMILIES ABOUT TO BE SEPARATED BY WAR. FAMILIES LIKE THAT OF SGT JOHN KERKHOFF.

JOHN KERKHOFF, SARGEANT

We have a beautiful two-year old baby boy, Ty. It's- it's harder to leave this time.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

HIS FAMILY HAS BEEN IN A STATE OF FLUX FOR THE PAST WEEK. HE'S DUE TO SHIP OUT FOR A SECOND TOUR IN IRAQ, BUT OVER AND OVER, THE TIME AND THE DATE OF HIS DEPARTURE HAS BEEN CHANGED. SGT KERKHOFF SEEMS TO TAKE IT ALL IN STRIDE.

KERKHOFF

I’m very ready to go back to Iraq. I know what to expect this time.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT IT'S TAKING A TOLL ON HIS WIFE, DARLENE.

DARLENE, WIFE

It's all just roller coasters. Not knowing exactly when he's leaving.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS LAST WEEK HAS BEEN A FLURRY OF ACTIVITY.

DARLENE

Packing. Gettin' storage, gettin' U-haul. Making sure everything gets shut off. Making sure we get out of our lease.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WITH HER HUSBAND LEAVING, THERE'S REALLY NO REASON FOR DARLENE TO STAY IN TEXAS. SO SHE'LL DRIVE BACK TO CALIFORNIA WHERE SHE HAS FAMILY AND FRIENDS. DESPITE ALL THE CHANGES IN SCHEDULE, SGT KERKHOFF'S MOTHER, MARILYN, IS DETERMINED TO STAY UNTIL HER SON SHIPS

OUT.

MARILYN, KERKHOFF'S MOM

I am here 'til the last minute. Because I'm gonna see him off. And if it takes changing my plane ticket five times, i'll do that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ORDERS HAVE COME DOWN. WEAPONS PULL A 15:30. DEPARTURE AT 18:00. THERE WILL BE NO MORE DELAYS.

DARLENE

It just gets harder. I don't know where he's going.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AS ONE FAMILY IS SEPARATED ANOTHER FAMILY BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE.

KERKHOFF

Going back for another glorious time. I feel very comfortable going back and knowing that I' come home safe and keep my squad safe and alive.

Darlene wants to support her husband.

DARLENE

I'm excited for him. It's what he wants to do. So we just back each other up.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

But when the conversation turns to re-enlistment and future tours of duty - fault lines in the family start to appear.

KERKHOFF

I haven't decided if this is gonna be my last tour. We talk about it all the time. It's always an on/off debate whether or not I should stay in.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT DARLENE SEEMS TO THINK THAT THEY HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING.

DARLENE

We decided we want him home.

KERKHOFF

It's very hard to me to leave my family I'll come home and he'll be older. And talking more. And I'll get to catch up everything I missed.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DURING HIS FIRST TOUR IN IRAQ, SGT KERKHOFF SERVED IN A SUPPORT POSITION WITH THE AIR FORCE.

MARILYN

I think I felt the first time around that he was, I don't know, safer. This time's different. He's a calvary scout and of course that's a combat role. It's right in the thick of things. And he did that on purpose. That's what he wanted.

DARLENE

I love you baby.

KERKHOFF

You know I’m going to come home.

DARLENE

I know.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SGT KERKHOFF ENLISTED AFTER 9/11 HE KNEW EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS GETTING INTO.

KERKHOFF

I knew that I would be going to be war. I was 100 percent dead sure that I would go to war, at least, once or twice.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THERE'S JUST TIME NOW FOR ONE MORE PHONE CALL.

KERKHOFF

Hi dad.

MARILYN

As it gets closer reality kind of sets in. I just can't help but think about all those men and women

just like him. You know, there's 130,000 troops deployed. They're all my family. I can't help but be proud of them all. These are young men and women who did not choose an easy path. They all have families. They're all going through what we go through.

So this nation owes them a debt of gratitude.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

AND SO ANOTHER SOLDIER WHO CAME HOME RETURNS TO IRAQ. ONE VETERAN WHO SERVED IN THE WAR KEEPS SIGN ON THE WALL IN THE OFFICE WHERE HE COUNSELS VETERANS WITH POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER. IT READS. POOR IS A NATION THAT HAS NO HEROES. SHAMEFUL IS A NATION THAT HAS HEROES AND FORGETS.

AMERICA CONTINUES TO BE A LAND RICH WITH HEROES, AND WE OWE ALL A SPECIAL DEBT. HOW WE MEET THAT DEBT SAYS AND WILL SAY A LOT ABOUT OUR NATIONAL CHARACTER. WITH THIS IN MIND, ONE MIGHT ASK: WHERE IS THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW WE WILL PROVIDE, IN THE SHORT AND THE LONG TERM, FOR THE VETERANS OF AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ? SOME WILL REQUIRE EXPENSIVE MEDICAL CARE FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES AND ALL DESERVE THE DIGNITY THEY HAVE EARNED IN THE HARDEST WAY POSSIBLE.

WE'VE HEARD A LOT ABOUT HOW OUR LEADERS DIDN'T, QUOTE, " PLAN FOR THE PEACE" IN IRAQ. WILL IT ALSO BE SAID THAT WE DIDN'T PLAN FOR THE DAY, AND THE DAY AFTER, OUR TROOPS FINALLY COME HOME?

FOR HDNET, DAN RATHER REPORTING THANK YOU FOR TUNING IN I'LL SEE YOU AGAIN NEXT WEEK.