

Inside the Red Zone:

A Veteran for Peace Reports from Iraq

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Dedication:

To the common heroes in the peace movement who tried to stop this war before it began; to the people of Iraq, from whom we have much to learn about being compassionate and humane despite the hellish conditions we have created in their land; to the veterans of this war who will not come home and those who come back committed to telling the truth about what their government sent them to do.

Foreword

By Cindy Sheehan

Inside the Red Zone: A Veteran For Peace Reports from Iraq, is an immensely important book in this day and age of news suppression from Iraq!

My friend, Mike Ferner, had the stunning courage to go to Iraq before the immoral and illegal invasion in 2003 and meet the people that our government was about to attack. Mike knew that the people that George Bush and company were demonizing were really just people and he wanted to go and see for himself.

Now with, as some estimates say, at least 100,000 innocent Iraqis killed and the country lying in shambles, one might say that such an incredibly important book may be coming out too late, but I don't believe that. It may be too late for the poor unfortunates of Iraq and for American troops like my son, Casey, but it is not too late for the people still in harm's way.

At the moment that I write this, the leaders of our world are banging the war drums for an invasion of Iran. This would be a disaster and I hope while you are reading this that you are breathing a sigh of relief that it hasn't happened yet. But if the invasion doesn't happen, you can thank peace activists like Mike Ferner for their courage and conviction.

Inside the Red Zone gives us a very rare look into the average life of an Iraqi person pre- and post-invasion. Except for a few documentaries and stories on the Internet, I can't think of any mainstream journalist who has actually gone out among the people of the country. I remember stories of "journalists" riding in armored vehicles in the invasion wearing their body armor and showing the glory of our military might, but I don't remember one story of how this invasion was affecting the people of Iraq. It just wasn't done. The media have done a terrible job of putting a human face on this war.

In this age of comfort and consumerism above all else, Mike's book is important in telling the story of ordinary Americans who left the comfort and relative safety of America to save other members of humanity.

My entire mission, aside from calling for the immediate and complete withdrawal of the troops from Iraq, is to rally our fellow Americans to go out of their comfort zones to make the world a better place and it gives me so much pleasure and encouragement to read stories of Americans who went above and beyond the call of duty to put a human face on tragedy and to try and prevent it from happening. This book is an important tool for this work.

I am called Mother Courage in Europe and Latin American countries and people always tell me how brave they think that I am. I am not brave. I do not fear anything. The people who are truly brave are the Mike Ferners of the world and the Kathy Kelleys and the Casey Sheehans.

To put one's life on the line for friends as Casey did is remarkable, but to go and do it for strangers and people you most likely will never meet is sacred. The world needs more heroes and far fewer cowards. The cowards send us to war, the heroes try to prevent needless killing.

I hope you, the reader, enjoy this book for what it is, a great adventure story, but more importantly, as a call to action.

This book is a call for us, in any walk of life, to rejoin our humanity and the humanity of the world to put our lives on the line for peace with justice.

We will never have true and lasting peace in our world until the day that we forbid our leaders to demonize and marginalize other fellow human beings.

Mike Ferner gets this and I hope the world gets it too, before it is too late.

–Cindy Sheehan, January 2006

Preface

That you're holding this volume in your hand is proof that unexpected good luck still exists.

When I decided to go to Iraq in January 2004 with the intention to write, it was not just that I suspected corporate news outlets were leaving the U.S. public in the dark about some very important stories. It was because I had seen it for myself, multiple times, during my first trip there just prior to the U.S. invasion of March, 2003. So when I went back for two months early in 2004, it didn't take me long to find some of those stories. As you'll see from the instance at the courthouse in Ramadi, so many people had so many compelling stories you could get literally swept away.

But as I've heard it said, that unless you're Emily Dickinson, if you want to be a writer you need readers. Luckily the internet provides an outlet, albeit unpaid, for writers with something to say. Thanks to sites like Counterpunch, the Baltimore Chronicle, MRZine, Antiwar.com, and LewRockwell.com, my work found responsive readers and I was encouraged to keep writing.

Another bit of good fortune was that in Iraq I met Dahr Jamail, now probably the most influential independent journalist covering that country, just as he began his work. Although I'll not likely attain his level of skill and certainly not his prodigious output, I did learn from him not to be discouraged by lack of a hardcopy portfolio or compensation, and just "get it out there" on the internet.

After many electronic articles and responses, the unprecedented thought struck me to compile these stories in a book. Because Hilary Claggett at Praeger Publishers believed they deserve to be told, you are holding *Inside the Red Zone: A Veteran For Peace Reports from Iraq*.

In these pages you'll meet some of the people who've inspired me to continue working in the peace movement and to become an author. Two deserve special mention.

The first is my wife, Sue Carter, who thinks I'm brave but is in reality the courageous one of us – not only for being an unfailing peace activist but for staring down a timeclock every morning, allowing her late middle-aged spouse to discover the work he truly loves.

The second is not really a single person but 24 million of them – the people of Iraq. Whatever success this book has will be measured by the extent to which readers begin to see them as fellow human beings.

Introduction

Through the summer of 2002 demands for war emanated from the White House and rolled across the land. That fall they grew to a deafening roar as the administration of George W. Bush prepared the nation to invade Iraq. Still, the hearts of many beat a hopeful response that Bush's "preemptive" war would instead be a prevented war.

In retrospect, it might seem crazy to believe that ordinary people could keep the dogs of war leashed, but we truly did. And around the world millions more believed the same.

British rail workers began refusing to move war cargo. Italian unions called on members to lay down their tools in protest. In thousands of cities and small towns across the U.S., people marched and prayed. For once, a war faced global opposition *before* it began, never more clearly demonstrated than on February 15, 2003. On that single day, beginning in New Zealand and Australia, and sweeping westward across Japan, China, Indonesia, India, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, North and South America, over 10,000,000 people took to the streets to demand peace.

In those months before the invasion, hopes for peace also grew in Toledo, Ohio, a city of 300,000 on the western edge of Lake Erie. Along with hope, some of us also felt rising anger, frustration and resolve; vowing that this time, we would do more than hold a sign or attend a rally.

It was in this atmosphere that I concluded to do something that seemed more commensurate with the threat of war – to go to Iraq. I wasn't sure exactly why, or even what I would do when I got there. But I was compelled to do something more and going to Iraq made sense. A friend referred me to an organization that in the course of seven years had sent over 70 delegations of U.S. citizens to Iraq to learn how U.N. sanctions were affecting its people, then return home and speak about what they saw. As invasion looked more likely, Voices in the Wilderness shifted their focus from sanctions to trying to prevent a war, renaming its delegations as Iraq Peace Teams (IPT).

By the time I heard of their work and applied to join a delegation, it was early January 2003, a little more than two months before 130,000 U.S. and British troops stormed out of Kuwait into Iraq. When friends and reporters in Toledo asked me what I would do in Iraq I replied that I was prepared to use my training as a Navy hospital corpsman to assist civilian casualties in case of war. Still hoping that would ultimately not be needed, I booked a flight and prepared to go.

As the days ticked by preceding my trip, word got around town. Local TV stations sent reporters to the house and right-wing radio talk show hosts had a field day. Voices in the Wilderness delegates routinely took boxes of medical supplies to Iraq in order to purposely violate the sanctions and make a political point, and people responded so enthusiastically to my request for over-the-counter medications that I added two more suitcases of these supplies to my luggage. One disturbed fellow

phoned the house and recorded a death threat, claiming he was taking collections for a body bag, and hoped his son, then stationed in Kuwait, would run into me “after he kicks Saddam Hussein’s ass.”

After a stint in local politics, I had developed a pretty thick skin, and none of the negative comments bothered me very much. But the night before I left, lying in bed with my wife, thinking of how many U.S. and Iraqi soldiers were experiencing a similar “last night at home,” the phone rang. A friend called to tell us that a local TV station had run one of those unscientific call-in “polls,” asking the question: “Is Mike Ferner a traitor for going to Iraq?” A full 74% of my fellow citizens responding felt I should swing from the nearest yardarm.

My response was a crude admonition and a few deleted expletives. My wife, however, took the news to heart and in a moment was on the phone to the station’s newsroom, telling them, “How dare you accuse my husband of being a traitor? He served four years on city council. He served in the military. And thanks to you, our lives may be in jeopardy.” She later told me of receiving about a dozen hate calls and emails the first few days after I left, but those were eventually replaced by a far larger number of positive comments.

The Northwest Ohio Peace Coalition decided to hold a news conference on Saturday, February 1, the morning I left for the Middle East. As an indication of popular opposition to the war and how it would be covered by the news media, over 200 supporters came out for the news conference – and one local TV station.

That morning, people brought bags of medicines and supplies for me to take to Iraq, and pressed small donations into my hand as they said goodbye. One person I’d never met before introduced himself and wished me well. He said, “This trip will change your life.” I had no idea how true those words would become.

Inside the Red Zone: A Veteran For Peace Reports from Iraq takes its name from the unofficial term for that part of Baghdad, and by extension, all of Iraq, that lies outside the “Green Zone,” a heavily fortified area on the Tigris River that used to be home to Saddam Hussein and his elites, now headquarters for the U.S. operations in Iraq. One day at breakfast in the Agadir Hotel, Dan Pepper, a photographer, sat down to tell us the morning’s best story – an incident from the previous day when he was working in the Green Zone and ran into two Bechtel Corp. contractors. “They asked me where I lived in Baghdad, and when I told them a hotel on the other side of the Tigris, they asked excitedly, ‘You mean you live in the Red Zone? Could you take some pictures for us so we can see what it looks like?’”

Reading this modest volume will not provide you with the definitive political analysis of Iraq. But no one should be as ignorant about the lives of ordinary Iraqis as those Bechtel contractors. This book tells the story of a month I spent in Iraq just before the U.S. invasion as a member of a delegation of peace activists, and the two months I spent there a year later, as an independent journalist to write stories about ordinary people and how the war changed their lives...and mine.