



Soldier discovers that "It's a Wonderful Life"

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After spending most of 2004 sweating it out in the desert sands of Iraq, 1st Sergeant Paul Peterson has returned home to spend a two-week leave in the cooler climate of western Illinois. The Roseville resident came home with many stories to tell, but also with a new appreciation for life in the United States.

When Peterson departed for Iraq this past February, he left behind his wife, Kathryn, and two children, Chelsea and Brandon, as well as his mother and father, who are also Roseville residents. Now that he's home, he's trying to cram in as much time as he can with his loved ones.

When he first arrived, Peterson says Kathryn asked him if he wanted to go anywhere while he was home. He told her all he wanted to do was be with his family. "I just wanted my daily routine," Peterson said. "I want to get up, go over to my dad's, have a cup of coffee over there and talk to him, come in and eat breakfast with mom and spend some time with her, go home and take the kids to school and when my wife doesn't work, spend some time with her." He's happy to add, "We've pretty much done that. We've (done) some Christmas shopping and spent quite a bit of time together."

Peterson's family is certainly excited to have him back, even if it's only for a couple weeks. His mother, Janet Bradshaw, exclaimed, "I just miss(ed) seeing him, smelling him. First thing I did was look at his face and count his fingers and I said, 'Have you got all your toes?' This is a mother's thing; we always count our little baby's fingers and toes. And I don't care how old he gets, you still want him all in one piece." She added, "He walks through the door and you grab him and hold him and check him..." She searched for words before simply saying, "It's just being a mother."

It was certainly a magic moment when Kathryn, Chelsea and Brandon met Peterson at the airport in Moline to bring him home. Kathryn described the scene by saying, "When I first (saw) him coming down that airport aisle...he grabbed me and held me...it was very emotional. I couldn't stop crying for a little bit." She added, "It's just overwhelming."

Now Peterson is home safely, his wife is on the proverbial cloud nine. "I had a lady at church comment that...she needed to wear shades because I'm beaming so much," Kathryn said. "That's true. I just can't stop smiling."

Even though Peterson will be returning to the Middle East sometime in the middle of December, Kathryn says the family has tried to keep their Christmas traditions intact, albeit not on the traditional days. For instance, the Petersons will celebrate the official family Christmas this weekend. The kids will open all of their bigger presents, but Kathryn said she would save a few smaller gifts for Christmas day. "They're getting spoiled, actually," she said with a laugh.

Christmas is not the only thing the sergeant is enjoying while he's home. Even though the troops have plenty of food to eat while stationed in the desert, Peterson says it's not what he's used to back home. In fact, Kathryn says he lost a lot of weight while he was gone. When he arrived in the States, she said, "The first thing he did is went to McDonalds." Peterson has also gotten another chance to enjoy one of his wife's peach pies. "There's nothing like home cooking," he added.

Of all the things he missed during his deployment, Peterson said it's the little things he missed the most. "Real glass glasses. Real silverware...Everything's paper or plastic over there." He added, "You take it for granted. You don't realize what you have 'til you don't have it."

Peterson even missed the western Illinois winter weather. "I was looking forward to the snow when I came home," he said, "and it was snowing." Kathryn added, "The first thing he did when he got out of the van was have a snowball fight." When asked about Iraq's desert temperatures, Peterson responded, "It was 118 (degrees Fahrenheit) for a high over there. Then, when I left, the nights were usually about 45 (degrees Fahrenheit), so I come home and that's the daytime temperature."

One of the more significant things Peterson appreciates about life in Roseville is "Not having to wear a bulletproof vest when you go somewhere." He explained, "I've carried around a nine (mm pistol) so long, its kind of odd...not having (it) with me."

One thing's for sure: life in Roseville is a lot safer than it is in Iraq. While stationed there, Peterson, a member of the 1st Cavalry, Foxtrot Battery, 202 Air Defense Artillery (ADA), explained, "We typically...did patrols." At first they worked the rural areas, but then they moved to Baghdad, where they were in charge of patrolling Airport Road.

According to Peterson, Airport Road is the main road leading to Baghdad's airport. "That road has been noted as being the...most dangerous road in (Iraq)," he explained. "You drive down it, you're going to get shot at." Peterson's battery was assigned the task of securing the route. "And that's what our men did," he added. "Whatever the men in my battery need to do, they do it."

Many of the skills Peterson learned back in Roseville have come in handy during his deployment. He mentioned on several occasions he helped civilians fix their automobiles and get back on the road. "It builds good rapport with the people," he said.

Repairing cars isn't the only thing they've done to improve the lives of ordinary Iraqis. "Our battery has done a lot of great things over there," Peterson explained. "We've got a school built for the children. We have had water purification systems put in so the people don't have to drink out of rivers. It's

helped the community over there. But at the same time I know that doesn't...make CNN."

Peterson certainly has no complaints about his time overseas. "I feel honored to go," he said. "It's tough being away from the family, but...I know what I'm doing is right. To go and serve my country is...a great thing."

When he returns to Iraq, Peterson will be stationed north of Baghdad in a community of approximately 10,000 people. When asked how much longer he will be deployed, Peterson replied, "If we're not extended, approximately four (more) months." His commanding officer has e-mailed him the details of his new assignment and Peterson said, "It's a...relatively safe mission, so that's great." He added, "It'd be good to finish that out that way."

In the meantime, his family will be back in Roseville waiting for his return. Peterson realizes the sacrifice they are making in letting him go. "When you're activated, the soldier's gone, but it's not 'his' deployment; it's the family's deployment." He commented he didn't realize all the holes a person could leave behind.

Peterson's wife and mother expressed appreciation for the way the community has rallied around their family. Kathryn explained people have come to help her complete tasks around the home she couldn't do herself. Peterson also credited their church with watching out for Chelsea and Brandon while Kathryn is at work.

Before he was deployed, Peterson worked for Monmouth Implement. "Monmouth Implement has been very supportive," Janet says, "as well as all the businesses and all the people of the community." She added a man in the community came up to her and told her, "Just tell Paul we appreciate everything he's doing for us." Like Jimmy Stewart, Paul Peterson and his family have truly found that in Roseville, "It's a Wonderful Life."



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