

The Heart of a Soldier

No matter how you feel about the war in Iraq, it is critical to hear the voices of those serving on the front line. Voices like those of U.S. Army Captain Kate Blaise.

By Tracey Porpora

While the farming town of Macon, MO will always be home to Capt. Kate Blaise (pronounced “blaze”), this small town girl has come face-to-face with the extreme poverty and hopeless despair of those living in third world countries that most of us only hear about on the evening news. Here’s just some of her story...

As a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army, she has had an active role in the war in Iraq--a brave experience that has led to the completion of her heartfelt memoirs, appropriately titled *The Heart of a Soldier* (Gotham Books, \$25.00). The book provides readers with an inside look at “the human side of war.” Now, at 29-years-old, Kate reflects on her life as a woman in the military, and her loving marriage to her high school sweetheart, Mike Blaise—a man who shared her sense of patriotism, became a U.S. Army helicopter pilot, and lost his life fighting the war in Iraq. “I want people to know at least one soldier,” says Kate, referring to her reasons for writing the book. “A lot of people get out-of-touch with who the men and women in the U. S. Military are. We are just the ‘average Joes’-- the girls and guys next door. I want people to see why someone would want to be a soldier.”

Kate's decision to join the army came as no surprise to those who know her. "I remember my dad talking about his time in the military, how it's a great way to see the world, and how lucky we are to be living in America," recalls Kate, who comes from a long line of military men that dates back to her great-great-great-grandfather, James Randall, who was a soldier in the Union Army. "I was always a 'tom-boy,' something about the U.S. Army lifestyle struck a note with me, and I wanted to be like my dad."

Having met Mike Blaise at age 16, it wasn't long before Kate fell in love with this affable high school football player with a sarcastic sense of humor. In fact, he was there for her during one of the toughest times in her life. In 1994, Kate's mother was in a car accident that caused her to suffer brain damage, and be confined to a nursing home.

At just 21-years-old, Kate married Mike. But life together was anything but normal. Since both of them were in the U.S. Army, 70 percent of their time as a married couple was spent living apart from one another. (Before becoming a helicopter pilot who achieved the rank of Chief Warrant Officer II, Mike was an enlisted infantry soldier). "If we had free time, we made it a priority to spend it together," she says. And to be together, they had to make sacrifices. Early in her career, Kate passed up her "dream job" of leading a truck platoon in the U.S. to be stationed with Mike in Korea. "I knew what I was giving up to go, but I knew what I was gaining," she remembers.

To get herself "in the fight," Kate chose to become a U.S. Army transportation logistics officer who helps oversee medical support, maintenance and supplies for the troops. Noting that "combat roles" in the U.S. Army are closed to women, Kate says, "It was toward the end of my active duty that I realized a lot of people in Iraq saw me as a soldier and a woman. To me, that was the biggest thing, trying to get people to

understand we are all soldiers.” In Iraq, Kate’s “day job” was a personnel officer. At night, she was a battle captain who ran information centers for the 101st Airborne Division’s logistic battalion. “Because the nature of warfare is changing, everyone in the military is on the front line. I was pretty much on the front line with my unit in Iraq,” she says.

Having had the opportunity to meet the Iraqi people, Kate says she’ll never forget the look of fear and hopelessness in their eyes. “There’s no doubt in my mind that we [The U.S. Military] needed to be there. When I came into Iraq, I saw nothing but fear, and when I left, I saw hope,” she says. “The Iraqi people voted, children are going to school and women are able to deliver babies in hospitals—all for the first time.”

Meanwhile, the war, which has separated thousands of families, brought Kate and Mike together. “Mike would always joke that we had to go to war to be married again,” she says, noting Mike’s job as a helicopter pilot was to be “the eyes and ears” of the soldiers on the ground. “I was able to go through a life changing-experience--a war--with my spouse right there. But the downside was the worry I felt for his safety,” she admits. Although they lived in separate quarters, Kate and Mike got to see a lot of each other in Iraq. During their tour, they shared dinners, holidays and spent downtime mapping out their plans for the future. They even took an R&R break together in Qatar, a peninsula located off the coast of Saudi Arabia.

At the end of her tour, Kate was eager to start a more “normal” married life with Mike in the United States under the same roof. But just days before they were set to leave Iraq, Mike’s helicopter crashed during a mission that took place in bad weather and his life was taken. Kate’s life was forever changed. “Mike knew the risks of what he was

doing, and felt so strongly he was doing everything for all the right reasons,” says Kate, noting her support system that has helped her through this time includes God, her dad, five siblings and Mike’s family. “Because of my faith, I have a ‘sure knowledge’ of where Mike is, and that we will meet again. I don’t like pity. I am blessed that I was able to love, and be loved by a very good man.”

CW Footnote:

In her book, The Heart of a Soldier Kate concludes... “If you had told me in the spring of 2003, when the war looked won, that we’d still be fighting so fiercely, I wouldn’t have believed it. Like many Americans, I too find the war situation frustrating and, at times, deeply saddening. Yet for every terrible incident we read about, there is a positive development that goes unnoticed. There are thousands of Iraqis who have decided to change the course of their country by becoming police,, teachers, politicians and shopkeepers. It’s a tough battle. Wars are not fought and won like they once were, when there was a decisive victory and everyone went home”