

## From Combat to Columbia (USA)

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**Over the course of 16 days in spring 2003, Private First Class Garth Stewart and the 26 other men in his platoon killed more than 500 people. No one knows the exact number.**

(20.02.2006)

On the 16th day, he stepped on a land mine in the suburbs of Baghdad. The explosion ripped apart his left foot, morphing it into the shape of a rose. Now, as he ambles down College Walk with his steel prosthesis, he exudes an unassuming, almost scholastic air.

"You might look at that big number, that 500 dead, and say 'God, that's horrible'," he says, his eyes coming alive behind steel-rimmed glasses. "But really, those were guys that had to shoot at us first. You shoot at me or my friends and it's on, that's no joke."

He pauses and spreads his arms.

"I look at that number and say, 'Wow. That's impressive.'"

His face still marked by a boyish charm at the age of 23, Garth, GS '09 is one of a growing breed at Columbia: he is one of 27 military veterans in the School of General Studies' first-year class.

As students smoke cigarettes on the marble steps outside of Butler Library and grumble about their latest all-nighter, Garth smiles, knowing how little they've suffered.

The fake leg "doesn't slow him down much," laughs his younger brother, Corey, a cook in the Navy. "We've got pictures of him drinking beer out of his prosthetic leg."

"There are some of these guys that act like they demand respect because they got wounded," says Corey, "which, you know, in a lot of ways they do. But in a lot of ways it was a risk we all take doing whatever the fuck it is we do."

"If I was going to join the Army," Garth says, "I really didn't want to be like a health specialist or an accountant or something. I wanted to be the guy throwing grenades and shooting a rifle."

One day, as he stood outside a factory in a lull in the battle for Baghdad, a muzzle flash appeared in a nearby patch of trees. Three impacts on the factory wall followed along the level of his head. A bullet zipped past his nose. "Get down! I see him," he yelled, taking aim with his rifle at the flash. He squeezed the trigger. The shooting stopped.

In all the battles he had fought, this was the closest Garth could say for certain that he had shot a man.

The majority of fighting was done from a distance, using the 120-mm cannon that he named Utopas—a Greek word meaning "no man"—from a tank called Evil Betty.

Fire Direction Control would give the order: Convoy X is under attack. Fire here. Shoot. Adjust. Shoot. Adjust. Shoot.

"You'll get tiny, minute adjustments," Garth says, holding two fingers together, "and you'll walk the round onto the enemy position. Once you fire on a position and move through it, it wasn't uncommon to see lots of dead bodies."

"What soldiers have to do is an important issue to talk about," said Peter Awn, dean of the School of General Studies. "Killing people is killing people. How do you determine ethically who is right to do something like that?"

Garth doesn't seem too bothered.

While popping french fries into his mouth at the West End, he thumbs through a leather-bound picture book. It contains a bizarre smattering of photos from Iraq, some of friends in full battle gear, others of charred bodies in still-smoldering trucks. Unflinching, Garth tells the story of each picture.

The eldest and most erudite son of two former Marines from Stillwater, Minnesota, Garth still firmly believes in the romance of war.

"Insomuch as there is a good way to die," says Garth, remembering the friends he lost, "in open combat, that's it."

At a reunion this past October for the so-called "graduates" of the Army's Walter Reed Medical Center, Garth moved easily through the crowd, picking his way through the Army's top brass and a sea of war's more recently disabled.

"Garth is a phenomenon," said Col. Jeff Gambel, a surgeon at Walter Reed. "The average person with his injuries is in the hospital for weeks and months, but after three weeks, Garth was gone."

In fact, on June 22, 2003, less than three months after having his leg amputated, Garth rejoined his infantry platoon back in the U.S.

"Garth is a rock star," laughed former Deputy of Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, patting him on the arm. He and "Dr. Wolfowitz," as he calls the new World Bank President, became friends during Garth's stay at Walter Reed. Since then Garth has returned on several occasions to lift the spirits of injured soldiers and Marines.

"There was only two things I worried about when I was on the hospital bed: athletic prowess and vanity. I didn't understand, 'What are girls going to think?'"

On his first weekend home from the hospital, he went for a run. The next weekend he got laid. And with that, his worries were assuaged.

Not all the war's casualties have been so lucky. At the reunion in Washington, not far from Garth and the generals, a group of three veterans quietly commiserated and took refuge—however transient—in each other's company. Two had sustained head injuries, eliminating their capacity for short-term memory, and the third suffered from a slight limp and a crippling case of post-traumatic stress disorder. None among them was older than 22.

"If you got shot, you were in Afghanistan," explained one of the vets, his voice slightly vacant. "If you got hit by an IED [Improvised Explosive Device], you were in Iraq." The young man stared off for a moment. Catching himself, he said, "We were all in Iraq."

"At home," explained veteran Colton Aikin, "no one understands, no one understands what I went through, no one's changed, but I've changed. Here [among the wounded veterans] people understand... I just, I don't know how much longer I can do this."

Later, when asked, Garth muses on their fate. "They think about what happened to them when they got hurt and they're not able to shake that thought. They're lost in that thought." He sounds puzzled by this, unable to empathize. "It's like they keep injuring themselves again and again and again in their minds."

Garth barely acknowledges the dark days he had in recovery. A Washington Post article from July 2003 depicted him as a "miserable ball of blue

pajamas," saved from debilitating stomach cramps after his surgery by the caffeine of a Mountain Dew.

But in the big picture, Garth says he's pretty well off. "A below-the-knee amputation is more or less superficial," he explains, unblinking. "Sacrifice isn't a bad thing. If you can get hurt and make something good happen because of it, who gives a shit?"

For his own part, Garth now dreams of becoming a history teacher and a politician. "Country is important to me," he declares. But Garth's service to his country ended early in the war, before IEDs, before Fallujah, and even before the end of "major combat operations."

When asked about civilian casualties, he talks about a group of Iraqi peasants that greeted his platoon by lining a roadway to wave at the Americans. Troops from the Fedayeen Saddam, an Iraqi unit close to Hussein, spotted the villagers and aimed an artillery barrage at them, killing dozens of innocent people.

Garth's platoon fired back, destroying the enemy.

Garth tells two stories. In one, a car is speeding toward his camouflaged tank during a sandstorm. The car crosses into the nearby no-man's land, where the gunner is authorized to destroy the vehicle. Garth quickly peers through his rifle scope and spots a man and a child in the car. He shouts over the radio to the rest of his platoon to hold their fire. Two innocent lives are spared.

In the other story, the same thing happens to a different platoon, another in Garth's battalion. It is a sandstorm. The gunner, fearing attack and lacking binoculars, sprays the vehicle with machine-gun fire. The van rolls off the road into a ditch. Inside it, the soldiers discover the shredded bodies of a middle-aged man and an old woman. In the backseat, they unearth a gaggle of crying children bleeding from mortal wounds.

"I'd feel more comfortable calling it luck," Garth says about his experience with civilian casualties. "But some units make it through without doing the wrong thing, and that's huge."

During and after Garth's service in Iraq, though, many civilians were killed: according to Iraq Body Count, U.S. soldiers killed 9,270 civilians during the first two years of the war in Iraq.

"I can personally say that because of my conduct, more hostile enemy soldiers died and more civilian lives were saved," Garth says. "And that makes me happy."

Early in the fall semester, before his old unit had come home from its second deployment, Garth spoke easily about spreading freedom and described the potential of "a stable, prosperous democracy" in Iraq to "act in a predatory fashion on all the theocracies that surround it."

Now, his friends tell him that Iraq is not the same. "In 2003, when we crossed the border, you could drive a hundred miles in a day, fight a battle in the morning, fight a battle at night. It was electrifying. You didn't even need sleep." Garth pauses on this point, his eyes beaming with pride.

"Nowadays," he says, his voice falling flat, "you just drive, an IED goes off, maybe one guy gets killed. Everyone knows him, someone's gotta write a letter home to his parents, and that's all that happens."

"If you're a soldier there now, you're just securing yourself," he continues, sounding doleful. "You know, what are you protecting? Well, you. That's it. You're there to guard U.S. soldiers, and that's a shame."

Having been promoted to specialist, Garth was medically retired from the Army on Nov. 29, 2004.

"It's a memory I cherish," Garth says, peering into the distance, a smile reemerging on his face. "A war experience I compare to a warm blanket. You wake up in the morning and there's a couple of seconds where you don't remember who you are, then I remember. 'Oh yeah, I've been in a war, I go to Columbia.' I pull the blanket over me for a couple more seconds. It feels great."

by Matt Mireles

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