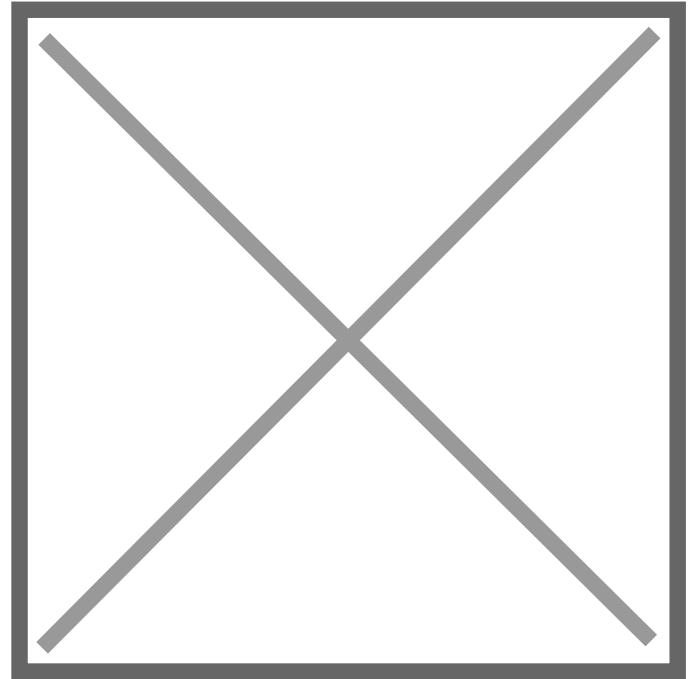
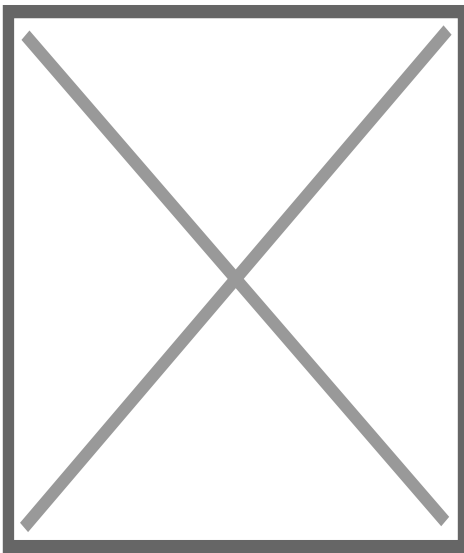


Winning hearts and minds in Iraq

Salvation Army employee serves with the US military in Iraq.

by Jason M. Hale –



Army National Guardsman Jason Hale is befriended by Iraqi children.

I'm a proud citizen soldier, serving my country as a paratrooper in the Army National Guard. That means I wear a suit and tie to my development job at The Salvation Army's Eastern Michigan Divisional Headquarters during the week and an Army combat uniform and parachute one weekend a month for my military training. It also means that I, like all the other guardsmen who have gone before me, put my life on hold, put down my civilian responsibilities and picked up a rifle to defend our freedom and wonderful way of life.

In January 2008, I left the comforts of the civilian world behind and deployed to the desert heat of Iraq with the 1-125 Infantry Battalion of the Michigan National Guard. Training was over. This was real. Everyone knew the consequences of failure meant one thing...never coming home. It was a strange feeling as we'd roll outside the wire to do our patrols, each day wondering if it would be our last. Over 4,000 soldiers had been killed by the time we arrived, mostly victims of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED)—the kind of attack you don't see coming and can't really defend. Within the first few hours of our arrival on base in Iraq, a young marine was killed by one of these IEDs. We all heard the

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explosion. This was our new home; this was war.

A cup of chai

With boots on the ground in this combat zone, our mission was not just about finding the ‘bad guys.’ To win the hearts and minds of Iraqis not involved in the insurgency was equally important.

This was no easy task. Many of the Islamic terrorist groups and radical religious leaders tried to convince the populous that this was a war on Islam instead of a war on terror. Innocent Iraqi citizens were caught in the middle—threatened with death by the insurgents and unsure whether to trust the coalition forces.

We began to do what we could to establish relationships with the local people. One of the most effective outreaches was so simple: We drank their tea. Sitting down with the Iraqis and enjoying “chai,” as they affectionately call it, helped us to build a bridge between our two cultures and gave us a starting point for getting to know each other. There’s an ancient Middle Eastern proverb that says, “The first time you share tea you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family.”

Seeds of hope

Through this experience, I realized how important it is to celebrate other cultures and customs. It’s when we celebrate each other’s uniqueness that we become too distracted to fight over those same things that make us different.

I met Iraqi parents just like the moms and dads here in America; they simply wanted a better life for their kids. I met Iraqi soldiers thankful to be out from under the brutal and bloody fist of Saddam’s rule, excited to see their country becoming a great place of education and commerce again as it had been in the past.

The changes won’t happen overnight, and may not be as quick as the people would like. But while enjoying tea with my new friends in Iraq, I saw the seeds of hope beginning to sprout, and I for one hope that change continues to happen.

To contact Jason or see photos of his time in Iraq, visit [facebook.com/jason.m.hale](https://www.facebook.com/jason.m.hale).