Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire

THE SUNDAY DENVER POST

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THE FUTURE OF HISPANIC BUSINESSES
»BUSINESS, 1K

FALL COLORS: AN AMAZING 42-MILE HIKE
»TRAVEL, 1T

THOUSANDS PROTEST HEALTH CARE REFORM

From Denver to D.C., Americans voice their displeasure. »HEALTH CARE, 8A

dp **Online»** View a slide show of images from Saturday's college football games. »denverpost.com/colleges

Dem rivals round up posses

AMERICAN SOLDIER

TO WAR AND BACK
A NEW OBJECTIVE

HOME, HUGS AND HOPE. *Ian Fisher and his girlfriend, Devin, embrace in the bleachers during a welcome-home celebration at Fort Carson on Aug. 21, 2009. During his year-long deployment in Iraq with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, Fisher was confronted with challenges that would change his priorities — which, in turn, would change his life.*

Ian Fisher had expectations for Iraq, and new ones for his life

Given a second chance after his missteps at Fort Carson, Ian Fisher plunged into his unit's Iraq deployment with new resolve. But while he'd gone looking for a fight, he arrived at a time when the U.S. military role had been scaled back. Still, danger lurked alongside the tedium of daily missions, and Fisher adjusted to his role with the help of seasoned veterans. He showed potential as a soldier, learned from his mistakes and came face to face with the decisions that would chart his future. His year-long deployment — interrupted by a two-week, mid-tour leave at home — triggered life-altering changes in a young man finding his way toward adulthood. »STORY, 19-23A

Friday» Earning "blood rifles"
Saturday» From here to Iraq
Today» Aiming for a future

dp **Online exclusive»** In videos and photos, The Denver Post tells the story of Ian Fisher, from his Colorado high school graduation to war-torn Iraq. »denverpost.com/americansoldier

SENATE-BID SUPPORT

Andrew Romanoff has a statehouse base of support in his bid for the seat.

Sen. Michael Bennet, the governor's choice, has backing nationally.

By Michael Riley and Lynn Bartels
The Denver Post

The Democratic primary contenders in the U.S. Senate race are furiously trying to line up supporters across the state, creating dividing lines at all levels of the party as leaders choose a candidate or decide to stay clear altogether.

Both U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet and former state House Speaker Andrew Romanoff have lined up significant support, especially in their natural fields of play — the congressional delegation for Bennet and the statehouse for Romanoff.

But they also have suffered some surprising losses as the leaders weigh the mix of personal connection and party good.

Reps. Ed Perlmutter and Diana DeGette have decided to stay neutral rather than back their U.S. Capitol colleague.

And the current Democratic state House speaker, Terrance Carroll, is backing Bennet rather than the man who is partly credited with the Democratic takeover of the state legislature in 2004.

SENATE » 7A

Denver at Cincinnati
11 a.m. today | TV: KCNC-4

On eve of Game 1, fans are in a funk

By Mike Klis *The Denver Post*

For a weekday afternoon, Johanna is busy. The bar stools at JD Bait Shop Sports Grill in Greenwood Village are already filled with regulars. Johanna is moving from one end of the bar to the other, always in a rush. As she moves, she listens.

Yes, she's heard her fill of Denver Broncos chatter in recent months. Who among us understands the public pulse of the local football team more than a bartender at a sports bar?

"You really want to know?" Johanna said, laughing at what she was about to say. "Everybody thinks we're going to lose. Everybody thinks we're screwed, that's the word I keep hearing. Not many people are very happy."

The Broncos open their season today against the lowly Cincinnati Bengals. Ordi-

Week 1» Preview of Broncos vs. Bengals. »1CC

FANS » 25A

INSIDE Books » 13-16D | Contact The Post » 2B | Crosswords » 18D | Lottery » 2B | Movies » 4-5D | Obituaries » 9-10B | Paper Trails » 8T | Your Money » 9K

BOOTS ON THE GROUND. *Ian Fisher pulls security detail Dec. 10, 2008, for a meeting between intelligence troops and some local residents who were near the site of a rocket attack. He's excited to get selected for the task, and for the chance to finally wield his Squad Automatic Weapon in Iraq, three months into his deployment.*

UNIFORM DAYS IN IRAQ
NEW FUTURE AT HOME

Written by Kevin Simpson with Michael Riley, Bruce Finley and Craig F. Walker *The Denver Post*

"Fisher!"

Sensing no response, Army Spec. Matthew Dane quickly reached forward from the back seat of the Humvee, grabbed the driver's helmet and shook it hard.

Startled, Pvt. Ian Fisher slammed on the brakes.

Crossing a bridge his first night on patrol in Diwaniyah, he had misjudged a tight turn and veered toward one of the city's many murky canals, oblivious to the approaching danger of the steep, unstable banks that could swallow the bulkiest vehicles into 20-foot depths. Humvees carried four yellow canisters of oxygen to give submerged soldiers a fighting chance at escape.

Dane, the team leader, clutched one of them as Fisher jerked to a halt about 2 feet from the edge of trouble. Danger still lurked throughout Iraq in many forms, even if most of the shooting had stopped.

Trained for combat and primed to fight, Fisher arrived in Iraq in September 2008 along with about 3,800 troops of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team from Fort Carson — just as the U.S. military was trying to eliminate entrenched bands of die-hard insurgents and hand off more responsibility to Iraqi forces.

Suicide bombers still struck regularly in Baghdad. Occasional rocket attacks kept bases on guard.

Yet, at times, the missions that occupied Fisher's squad over much of the next year felt nothing like the conflict they'd been trained to expect.

Many days, they shuttled and escorted personnel around Diwaniyah. On some occasions, they chased after shadowy insurgents who had launched rockets or lobbed mortar rounds at forward operating base Camp Echo, about 80 miles south of Baghdad — and were long gone by the time the Americans arrived.

As Fisher began his first overseas deployment, field commanders saw his potential as a soldier. But they remained wary of issues that had surfaced before he'd shipped out, when substance abuse and lapses of judgment nearly got him booted from the military.

A commander's conference call with Ian's father, Vietnam veteran Eric Fisher, had prompted a change of heart in the young soldier. A change of platoons had given him a fresh start.

But for a soldier craving action, Fisher considered his arrival odd timing.

Over the months ahead, long stretches of boredom would be punctuated with isolated moments of anxiety and activity. The possibility of lethal attack lived side-by-side with a relatively insulated lifestyle at Camp Echo, which offered such comforts as video games, Internet access and workout gyms.

Even baseball.

On Thanksgiving, Fisher noticed some soldiers playing catch. He watched for a while, then joined the exercise. Even without much of a warm-up, his pitches soon cracked into a crouching soldier's mitt with the kind of authority that prompted others to back away and watch.

"Nice," he said wistfully. "I haven't thrown a baseball in God knows how long. I should have gone to college. Should have kept playing baseball."

Reminders of home popped up frequently in an environment that offered distractions such as bootleg DVDs and cellphone service. One day, he hiked across camp to the communications trailer and waited for a turn on a computer. He was thinking about his girlfriend, Kirsten, and the on-again, off-again relationship that had them debating marriage.

She had worn her engagement ring on the day that he'd said goodbye. But they hadn't communicated much since his arrival in Iraq. And now, as Fisher navigated the computer screen to her MySpace page, he saw that his picture, once prominently displayed, had been replaced with a photo of someone else.

He stepped outside and shook his head.

"It's one of those things, man," he said. "You can't really let it hit you. Just continue with the mission. ... What the hell am I supposed to do? If I was back home, I would probably be raising hell."

Instead, within weeks, he began e-mailing a former girlfriend. They talked about getting together when he returned stateside.

Her name was Devin.

On the day after he'd nearly dumped the Humvee into a canal, he was back in the saddle, guiding the vehicle slowly through a commercial strip, scanning the evening crowd. Men rode motor scooters. Some sat smoking hookahs. Merchants baked round bread and cooked chicken on open grills.

Fisher took his cues from a couple of experienced veterans.

The squad leader, Sgt. Lonnie Buthmann, a 35-year-old former Phoenix SWAT team member, rode shotgun next to a glowing computer navigation screen. His previous Iraq deployments had left him cynical but savvy.

Behind Buthmann rode Dane, the 28-year-old team leader. The former Ranger had experienced heavy combat in Afghanistan and Iraq before finishing his service commitment and taking an $85,000-a-year civilian office job. He hated it. So he took a loss in rank to re-up with the Army and strike out on his fifth combat deployment. »

BEHIND THE WHEEL. *Fisher sits in his usual spot — the driver's seat of a Humvee, preparing for a morning escort mission into Diwaniyah. While serving as the Quick Reaction Force, his squad must be able to mount up and move out of Camp Echo within 15 minutes in emergency situations.*

NO STOPS. *Iraqis clear the street as Fisher's Humvee approaches. He has been instructed to be aggressive in his driving, to avoid any potential danger. "You can't really stop for people, so you just keep going," he says.*

This is how an American soldier is made.

For 27 months, Ian Fisher, his parents and friends, and the U.S. Army allowed Denver Post reporters and a photographer to watch and chronicle his recruitment, induction, training, deployment and, finally, his return from combat.The story was written by Kevin Simpson with Michael Riley and Bruce Finley. It was reported by Riley in Colorado and at Fort Benning, Ga., Finley at Fort Carson and in Iraq, and photographer Craig F. Walker throughout.

Photography by Craig F. Walker *The Denver Post*

CLEARING THE WAY. *Responding to an overturned vehicle, Fisher stands by as his squad leader, Sgt. Lonnie Buthmann, explains to a group of frustrated Iraqis why a road is blocked. Fisher is charged with checking each vehicle for explosives before letting them pass and clearing the traffic bottleneck.*

DOWNTIME. *As Buthmann and Pvt. Rob-drick Robinson roughhouse, Fisher grabs a smoke. Squad members are relaxed now that their turn as the Quick Reaction Force is over — and they're not on such a high level of alert — leaving time to do laundry, eat at a more leisurely pace and work out in the gym.*

Buthmann and Dane didn't hold Fisher's earlier driving error against him, but they needed to fashion this raw material into a reliable soldier. Buthmann constantly monitored his speed. Dane sent soothing strains of the Beatles' "Come Together" into the vehicle's audio headsets.

Now, Fisher cruised confident and relaxed past an Iraqi policeman at a roundabout.

"See? It gets easier, Fish," Buthmann encouraged. "This is a good speed ... now, slow down ... now, we'll turn east ..."

"Roger," Fisher replied.

They cruised toward a site where insurgents reportedly had planned or launched attacks. Once there, they would stand watch among the palm groves, houses and shops — looking for anything suspicious while deterring disruption of the city's fragile peace.

The Humvee rolled across soft, uneven terrain crisscrossed with ditches — and bogged down. Fisher revved the engine. The wheels spun helplessly.

Nobody wanted to call the dispatcher and request a tow. Buthmann advised Fisher to back the Humvee out gently. But Fisher thought he had a better idea. He had spotted a flat patch of ground in front of him that he could use to pull them free.

"I'm sure I can go straight," he insisted, ignoring his squad leader's advice, gunning the engine and lurching forward.

The Humvee wallowed deeper in the mess.

After several tries, Fisher managed to rock the tires free of the muck and back the vehicle out of the quagmire as originally directed. Buthmann decided to dwell on the positive.

"A big departure from yesterday," he said. "Except when you said, 'I'm sure I can make it.' "

Buthmann continued to instruct Fisher on the drive back to the base. He advised him to avoid driving too close to the carcasses of dead dogs that littered the roads and sometimes hid IEDs. And later, as the vehicle veered slightly, he cautioned Fisher against letting his attention stray from the path ahead.

"Look at the road," Buthmann said. "That's where the bombs are."

He was well aware of Fisher's pre-deployment issues, but he also thought that when people make mistakes, they shouldn't pay for them the rest of their lives.

"Every once in a while, somebody trips up," Buthmann said later. "And I firmly believe that if you can help that guy pick himself up, dust himself off, take a look in the mirror and chalk it up as a learning experience, I'd say eight times out of 10 that person's going to turn around and do well.

"Fisher's one of those cases."

MUD AND GARBAGE. *An Iraqi girl leads her sheep past Fisher's Humvee in a poor section of Diwaniyah. Fisher tries to remain indifferent to the squalid conditions. "I'm just in their country doing my job," he says.*

Often during the deployment, 36-year-old platoon Sgt. Nate McClain fielded questions from the younger soldiers. They shared a common theme:

"Why are we doing this?"

The queries reflected a growing frustration with their mission. McClain patiently would explain that the conflict had entered a transitional phase in which the U.S. role centered on assisting a fledgling Iraqi security force in taking control of its country.

"It's kind of strange," McClain said. "They're disappointed."

Instead of facing off with the enemy, clearing rooms in close-quarters urban combat and tasting battle, they were being asked to provide transportation, react to events long after the fact, provide support to the Iraqis and sometimes undertake the most mundane and menial chores.

Except for their missions outside the wire, they were largely insulated from the locals and uninterested in the people or the land. McClain encouraged his men to learn some basic Arabic phrases, or to exercise finesse in tactical situations, to pay attention to what he called "atmospherics" and local political activity.

It was a tough sell. Some of the soldiers, including Fisher, saw little appealing about this place, with its squalid housing compounds incongruously sporting satellite dishes.

"I just want to do my job," Fisher said. "Come home safe. That's it. I don't really pay much attention to the Iraqi nationals, or what they think of me, or what I think of them. Because I really don't think anything of them. I'm just in their country doing my job."

At the same time, though, the soldiers lived with the knowledge that they remained targets for the subsiding but still-lethal insurgency through rocket attacks, roadside bombs and suicide attacks. "Ka-boom" was the all-encompassing term that described the danger.

But Fisher noted a bit of personal irony. On a phone call to Colorado to talk to best friend Nick "Buddha" Nelson, he confided his frustration that the deployment to Iraq marked the first time since high school that fighting *hadn't* been a regular part of his life.

It was just this sort of thinking that worried commanders, who hoped to prevent complacency from making the troops vulnerable to surprise attacks. Fisher did what he could to stay prepared.

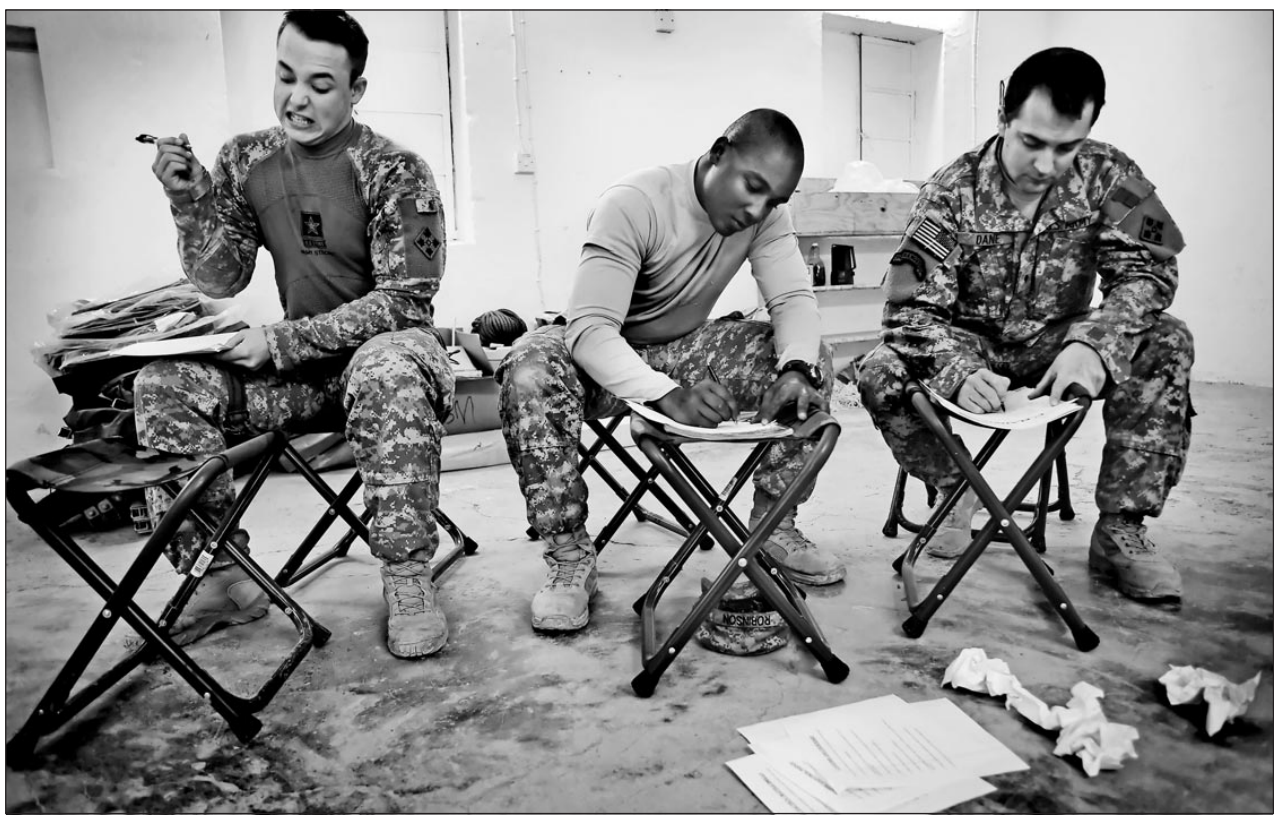
He regularly lifted weights in an effort to get "massive," with visible success: He put on 38 pounds during the first half of his deployment, mostly muscle that enabled him to fire his M-249 light machine gun while standing up — no easy task with a loaded weapon that weighs more than 20 pounds.

"Of course it's disappointing that I don't get to shoot somebody," Fisher said. "It's just like, this is what I trained for so long, and it's funny for it to be so quiet and so boring."

He preferred the distraction of missions outside the wire to the tedium of the base. Now, he rambled east out of Diwaniyah down a rural road en route to help a disabled wrecker that an inexperienced driver had turned over in a predawn convoy.

A puppy wandered aimlessly from a farm field into Fisher's path and stopped. He swerved the Humvee and avoided it. Buthmann raised his eyebrows at the maneuver. Army drivers were encouraged to drive aggressively — often down the middle of the street or against traffic, forcing everything out of the way.

"It was a puppy," Fisher explained. "I don't have a heart for the big dogs. But the little ones ... you know?"



TESTING TROUBLE. *The written portion of the promotion test Dec. 7, 2008, proves more frustrating than Fisher had expected. Testing with him are Robinson and Spec. Matthew Dane. Fisher failed in this try but won his promotion to private first class — the rank he had when he joined the Army — before leaving Iraq.*

COMFORTS OF HOME. *Calling a friend back in Colorado, Fisher rests with the handgun he had just disassembled and reassembled for practice. Cellphone service is one of the perks at Camp Echo, which one soldier dubbed the "Ritz-Carlton" of forward operating bases. There are pingpong and pool tables, video games, Internet access and workout gyms.*

While other soldiers worked carefully to extricate the wrecker from a ditch, Buthmann assigned Fisher to help handle the resulting traffic snarl by inspecting each vehicle before letting it drive past.

"Make sure there's no ka-boom in them as they drive by," Buthmann said.

Within an hour, Fisher and Pvt. Thomas Young, his roommate back at Camp Echo, had helped reduce the backup to just a few cars. Buthmann told Fisher to check their Humvee for any food they could give to a local teen who'd been working with Sunni tribal elders to route traffic around the salvage operation.

The boy smiled as he accepted a bag of peanuts, raisins, M&Ms and some water. His father was a tribesman, and word of the Army's kindness would spread. It was this kind of political awareness and adapting to opportunity that increasingly helped Americans deployed in Iraq.

Still, few assignments on this deployment fulfilled the expectations embedded by Fisher's training. Commanders had prepared his unit for the worst, for the sleepless, miserable conditions of war. But what they got was what Dane called "the Ritz-Carlton of FOBs" — with pingpong, pool tables and plumbing the average Iraqi could only dream about.

And busywork.

In mid-December, Fisher and some of his platoon mates were charged with removing a few inches of packed dirt from the roof of an old, deteriorating building. Armed with a shovel, Fisher dug into the dusty detail with a sardonic monologue.

"It was hell," he said, as if recounting a war story to his grandchildren. "I remember. I was there. It was called Operation Sand Storm."

They dug, shoveled and swept for three hours. It proved no more satisfying than the trash detail that followed.

But he was starting to look at his role and see a bigger picture, a more mature reckoning that had him thinking beyond his present circumstances.

"Maybe it's about learning to soldier up and do your job in life," he mused. "Maybe that's what a real soldier is."

No sooner had the call to prayer faded from the minarets than pulsing sirens screamed from the loudspeakers at Camp Echo.

Rocket attack.

The mammoth mess tent where Fisher and hundreds of other soldiers hunkered over Sunday dinner presented an inviting target — a high concentration of U.S. forces vulnerable to attack.

Snapshots on a bulletin board reminded the soldiers that an assault in August 2006, also around dinnertime, had wreaked destruction and death. And just days after Fisher and the rest of his unit arrived, insurgents had launched a thundering rocket at the camp that missed its mark but left a moonlike crater outside the walls.

Now, the discordant wails from the sirens melded with the crescendo of expletives shouted amid the chaos. Soldiers kicked white plastic chairs out of their way and scrambled toward an exit door. Rifles rattled. Spaghetti splattered. Food-filled trays flew.

Fisher saw elements of slapstick in a scene that, in the moment,

ATTACK, ANXIETY. *After two blasts shook Camp Echo early Dec. 5, 2008, Fisher runs with his helmet and weapon after pausing in a bunker to collect his thoughts. He's headed toward his Humvee to await orders.*

seemed anything but amusing. He lugged his SAW, the M-249 squad automatic weapon. A pistol was strapped to his thigh.

Outside, some soldiers took cover in concrete bunkers, pressing against the cold walls. Some whispered prayers. Some chatted nervously. Some crouched silent, anticipating ka-boom.

But Fisher and his squad moved past them, accelerating into a run across the gravel. As part of the Quick Reaction Force, his unit would speed away from camp to seek and douse any further enemy offensive.

Reaching his parked Humvee, he climbed into the driver's seat and flicked a switch to jolt its engine to life. He flashed the lights. He pulled himself into his armor-plated vest and grabbed his helmet.

Pvt. Rob-drick Robinson, a 20-year-old buddy of Fisher's from boot camp at Fort Benning, jumped aboard and snaked his way through the gun turret in the Humvee's roof. He donned his own battle gear before slipping into the harness from which he could command the vehicle's .50-caliber machine gun.

Fisher edged the Humvee toward a staging area outside the camp gates. The sirens still blared.

But just as their vehicle prepared to leave, a dispatcher called them back. The rocket's point of origin hadn't been determined, so Fisher sat idling the Humvee while Buthmann and Dane gleaned some details from the radio chatter on their headsets.

It seemed that two rockets had been fired at the base — but had exploded well before they could reach their presumed target.

Fisher stewed.

"Kind of stupid," he said. "The point of having a Quick Reaction Force is for a quick reaction. ... And they call us back in."

Months earlier, his unit might have been first to the scene. But tonight, the Iraqi forces, relying on their own word-of-mouth network, would be the first responders.

Fisher stood outside his vehicle, bathed in the beam of its headlights, waiting. The sirens turned quiet. Soldiers ventured out of the concrete bunkers. Fisher's squad members faced a tactical decision: Should they scramble back to the mess tent and put together some takeout plates so they could finish their dinner?

Just then, the word came down: They would roll out.

The Humvees drove out of Camp Echo in formation, headed toward central Diwaniyah down a street lined with date palms and littered with garbage. Fisher swerved left, then right, navigating his vehicle through a swirling haze of dust, locked on the tail lights of the rig ahead. Above him, Robinson scanned the landscape, swiveling the machine gun with a rhythmic *click-click-click* in the turret.

Buthmann patched an iPod into the vehicle's headsets and played Sinatra. Music, he and Dane felt, had a steadying effect on the younger Fisher and Robinson. He'd learned that a soldier's posture while on patrol here needed to be alert but »

A LIGHT HOLIDAY TOUCH. *Fisher helps 1st Lt. Robert Munoz hang Christmas lights in the platoon's operations center. Munoz likes the center to be a gathering place for his troops — a home away from home.*

relaxed. Too quick a trigger finger could undo months of carefully cultivated goodwill.

Sinatra crooned:

Joy may define in a thousand ways,
but a case like mine needs a special phrase
to reveal how I feel
I've got the world on a string ...

First Lt. Jacob Loftice had taken Dane's place in the Humvee to help analyze the point of impact and determine a point of origin and type of weapon. From there, the unit would race to the estimated launch site and confront an enemy.

In theory, at least.

Loftice had attended a commanders' briefing and relayed what he'd learned to Buthmann: "We don't even know who they are. We think they have really bad aim."

"So they launched this from inside the city?" Buthmann asked, scanning his computer screen where dots now indicated a point of impact near the center of Diwaniyah.

He mulled over the tactical issues that lay ahead: narrow streets lined with empty commercial buildings, rooflines that could conceal an ambush. His SWAT experience merged with his military training to bring all the dangers of urban combat into focus.

"It's a (expletive) chokepoint," he concluded. "And we're going to be in there looking for stuff?"

Turning up a dark side street, Fisher killed the Humvee's lights. Buthmann and Loftice got out of the vehicle, mounted night-vision scopes on their helmets and, rifles raised, walked beside the Humvee as Fisher slowly drove forward. Everyone scanned the cityscape of darkened buildings, side streets and parked vehicles as they approached the university.

No sign of any rocket damage.

As they moved forward, Buthmann's eyes zeroed in on a glowing red dot on a door frame. He trained his rifle on the object until he could discern what it was — a door buzzer. Still, his eyes traced a path up the brick wall toward the roof. Nothing.

Fisher brought the Humvee to a halt. Far ahead of him, a group of Iraqi soldiers and policemen worked the scene where the rocket had landed. Through an interpreter, the Iraqis explained that one rocket had exploded above a university's law school. A second rocket had blown through a wall and gouged a crater in the dirt.

For the squad in the Humvee, the task now turned to providing security for the experts examining the scene. Fisher, with his SAW resting beside him, kept watch from the driver's seat. Buthmann and Loftice roamed on foot, heads on a swivel. Robinson turned in his turret — *click-click-click.*

Time dragged. Fisher smoked a cigarette and listened to the music piping through his headset.

Oh Suzie Q, oh Suzie Q,
Oh Suzie Q, baby I love you,
Suzie Q ...

The Creedence Clearwater Revival standard from the late '60s had a particular resonance. His father had listened to the tune during the Vietnam era.

"Say that you'll be mine ..." Fisher sang along, passing the time.

"THAT'S WHAT IRAQ SMELLS LIKE." *Ian gives his mom a whiff of his boot March 7, 2009, after five days of travel to start his mid-tour leave. Ian bulked up in Iraq and must get new clothes. "He's looking like Popeye," Teri Mercill says.*

A WELCOME BREAK. *Departing from the airport with friends and family on his mid-tour leave, Ian's first words are "It's cold." After the warmth of an Iraq winter, he smiles at being able to see his breath.*

The investigation seemed to be winding down when a three-wheeled, motorized rickshaw approached from the left, its single headlight bearing down on the Humvee. It showed no sign of slowing down. Fisher braced. Robinson clicked into position, training his weapon on the driver.

"Im-she!" he shouted, pronouncing a word he'd been taught for the Arabic command to halt.

As the rickshaw closed to within 40 yards, the tactical calculations became critical. If the driver failed to stop, Robinson would fire a disabling shot at the engine — with no way of knowing whether that shot might trigger a suicide bomber's explosives.

"Im-she!"

If Robinson fired on a clueless civilian, investigators would parse every detail leading to the action.

Buthmann also spotted the vehicle. He raised his rifle.

Then, out of the shadows, an Iraqi policeman appeared. He stepped in front of the rickshaw, hand raised. The driver stopped, then turned around and disappeared into the night.

The mission dragged on for more than five hours before they returned to Camp Echo well after midnight. Reaction, collaboration, boredom, adrenaline.

"This," Fisher said flatly, "is like being a cop."

Two nights later, the squad was assigned to accompany a team of intelligence troops to revisit the impact site, in hope of gleaning more information about the rockets' source. Once there, Fisher's group pulled security while the bomb experts talked with locals.

"I want the kid to get out with me," Buthmann said, meaning he wanted Fisher and the heavy firepower of the M-249 to help him secure the site.

Fisher kept a tactical distance from Buthmann and scanned the scene, ready to react to any unwelcome activity. He relished the duty, in part because his squad leader had chosen him for the job but even more so because he finally got to wield the SAW — even if he never did fire it.

Among the mundane missions that defined his tour, this one at least seemed more like a soldier's duty.

When Ian Fisher flew into Denver International Airport in March for a 15-day mid-tour leave, he felt like a changed man. Above all, the deployment to Iraq had sobered him.

It wasn't just that he'd pulled free of his craving for alcohol and drugs — or, as he put it: "I'm not hooked on 'certain things' in my life anymore. I don't feel like I need to have something to get away from my angers and needs."

His dad also noticed a new maturity. His buddy, Buddha, saw a more serious and worldly Ian. His mother recognized the same old smile, laugh and hug — though he smelled a little ripe after five days' travel and now seemed to have "a distance in his eyes."

Teri Mercill had received an e-mail from her son just weeks earlier. It was more of a diatribe, really, about "civilians who live at home in their little bubble, safe as can be" while disrespecting the job that soldiers had undertaken. It reflected a frustration inspired by his correspondence with young friends back home.

He wrote about Iraq — the squalor everywhere, the anger of some locals, the disfigured victims and the looming danger and uncertainty. Things people back home couldn't understand. In formal fashion, he signed it: "Your son, Ian Michael Fisher."

Teri immediately forwarded the e-mail to her ex-husband. When Eric Fisher read it, the words struck an emotional chord that moved the Vietnam vet to write back to his son.

"You have joined a proud and very elite fraternity of war veterans," he wrote. "Whether it be in the jungles of Vietnam, the fields of Europe or the sands of Iraq, war is war. When you return to the world of some type of normalcy and you speak to your once called friends, please remember, they speak out of ignorance, not realizing where you have been and what you have done or seen. ... So if you want, in your own time, to talk, you know I will be here ..."

Now, heading away from DIA, Ian looked down when his mother asked him how things were going in Iraq. He didn't want to talk about it. Instead, he peered out the windows, taking in the familiar mountain vista but also instinctively scanning the roadside.

After months in Iraq, civilian life required some adjustment.

Ian adapted quickly. With Buddha and others in tow, he left his dad's house for the mall to buy high-top sneakers and bluejeans — his old ones now squeezed his bulked-up thighs. Then came a party at a friend's house. There, Ian stepped away from beer pong after a couple of games and slipped off to another room with Devin, whose online correspondence had rekindled a relationship.

The two of them talked into the night.

"We're boyfriend and girlfriend," Devin said later. "I don't remember how that happened, but I think we just figured it out together, not really saying anything to each other. But it happened."

In short order, the good times melded Ian and Buddha together again. They got tattoos to seal their renewed friendship. Ian designed them: a pair of brass knuckles with the initials N and F — Nelson and Fisher. They took the ink on their rib cage, a particularly painful process that represented the struggle their friendship had survived.

The two friends became almost inseparable during Ian's two-week leave, except for the time Buddha spent at work in a bagel shop. The necessity of a job grew out of his brush with the law — a two-month jail sentence for drug dealing more than a year earlier that now had shifted to three years' probation.

That hadn't started well, by Buddha's own account. He smoked pot, drank, missed or failed his court-ordered urinalyses and generally misbehaved. But he insisted he'd been trying.

Ian sat in on Buddha's meeting with the probation officer and learned his friend's behavior could get his probation revoked. Livid, Ian drove to the courthouse and paid $85 Buddha still owed the court and helped him set up his community service dates.

Buddha got a reprieve.

"You disappointed in me?" Buddha asked once they were back in the car.

"Can I tell you something?" Ian answered. "I actually expected something like this. But honestly, Buddha, you're doing a hell of a lot better than you were before. You know what the Army taught me? You're never good enough; you can always do better. But if you know in your heart that you're doing your best, it's OK.

"Now let's forget it."

Ian spent only sporadic time with his father over his two weeks home. They visited a shooting range where Eric often practices. Afterward, they had lunch at Wendy's and a brief visit that Eric savored.

"I guess any time with him is a blessing," he said.

Teri also saw her son only at brief turns — once at her apartment, again for lunch at her downtown office and once more in an emotional farewell as he dropped her off to catch a vacation flight. She'd hoped he would go to church with her on Sunday, but he slept in after a night of partying.

"Well," she said, "he got off that plane a soldier. But as soon as he changed into his civvies, he turned back into a self-absorbed teenager. I guess that's good."

On the final night of leave, Ian packed his things in anticipation of his early-morning flight and headed out once again with Buddha, Devin and others, bound for the Grizzly Rose, the country-western nightclub. Eric stood in the driveway, watching his son's car pull away, shaking his head.

"I worry less when he's in Iraq," Eric said, "than when he's here for two weeks."

Eric half-expected his son to struggle with the idea of returning to Iraq. After all, Ian wasn't so far removed from the near-disaster at Fort Carson just before deployment, when he'd had difficulty separating

LINKED IN INK. *Ian and Devin have fun watching Nick "Buddha" Nelson get a brass-knuckles tattoo March 14, 2009. Ian got a matching one earlier that day. The design includes an "N" and an "F," for their last names. "He's my best friend," Ian says. The tattoo "represents all the trouble we have gotten into together."*

LESSONS LEARNED. *Smoke rises from trash being burned at Camp Echo. Daily, menial tasks led Fisher and other soldiers to question their purpose in Iraq. But as the months passed, he began to make sense of it: "Maybe it's about learning to soldier up and do your job in life. Maybe that's what a real soldier is."*

himself from his friends.

But this time, even though he didn't come home until the wee hours of the morning, Ian rolled out of bed when his father woke him a little after 4 a.m. He collected his bags and made the plane that would transport him back to the war zone.

Six months later, a warm night breeze swept the tarmac at Colorado Springs Municipal Airport as the World Airways jet taxied to a stop.

Faces pressed to the windows.

They saw a brass band assembled at the bottom of the portable stairway and a line of military brass ready to shake the hands of 344 soldiers as they returned from a yearlong tour in Iraq.

Ian Fisher was the 10th soldier off the plane. He walked toward the reception building with an M-4 rifle slung over his shoulder and the theme from "Rocky" ringing in his ears.

About two hours later, he and the others marched into a hot, airless gymnasium at Fort Carson, where thumping patriotic music gave way to a brief welcome home ceremony. The crowd observed a moment of silence for the 10 soldiers from the 2nd Brigade Combat Team who had died in Iraq — a sobering reminder of a lethal, though subsiding, conflict. And then, finally, the unit was released to an ecstatic reunion with family and friends.

Ian picked his way through the crowd and climbed the bleachers to where his parents stood with his brother and Devin. He immediately pulled his girlfriend into his arms, where they shared a long kiss before he turned to greet Teri, then Eric, and then Andy, Ian's brother. Turning again to Devin, he wrapped her up and lifted her off the ground.

He could see a future taking shape.

As a soldier, Ian remained a work in progress, but the last months of his deployment, while not issue-free, nonetheless seemed to inch him toward maturity.

During his year in Iraq, he never fired a weapon in combat. Yet he came home with a more clearly defined vision of a professional soldier.

"When I first came into the military, I was — I don't want to say ignorant, but it's the best word I can possibly use," he said later, relaxing at his father's house. "I really didn't take my job as serious as I should have."

The second half of his Iraq deployment hadn't been much more interesting than the first. Shifted to the port city of Basra, away from the relative luxury of the base near Diwaniyah, the platoon split into two units that manned outposts within the city limits. Primarily, they were charged with providing security for military transition teams that advised Iraqi forces.

His squad leader, Staff Sgt. Matthew Robinson, put him in for an Army Commendation Medal, a relatively minor award that reflected the tedium of the deployment. For Fisher, it recognized a succession of jobs well done, primarily in Diwaniyah — driving the Humvee, scrambling into action with the Quick Reaction Force, searching up to 500 Iraqi visitors a day at the base. He'd learned some rudimentary Arabic to more effectively do that job.

"Everybody that went this year, they were looking to kill, do what guys in previous deployments had done, to get the opportunity to fight for their country," said Robinson, who figured Fisher should now pursue sniper or Ranger training. "Most of these guys wanted more. Fisher's one of those guys."

In the latter stage of the Iraq deployment, Fisher's frustration and anger spilled over and he lashed out at some higher-ups. Dane, who was the object of the private's wrath on one occasion, shrugged it off as the clash of two "alpha males" in the same unit.

They talked it out.

"From that day forward, I have seen a 100 percent change in Ian Fisher," Dane said. "I've seen the soldier I wanted to see a year ago. You grow up as a soldier and a person by making mistakes. You can't grow unless you screw up.

"And everybody screws up."

As a result of the incidents, Fisher was referred for counseling. And while he admitted to being somewhat in denial that his behavior constituted a problem, he seemed to take the lesson to heart.

On Aug. 14, 2009 — just a week before he came home — Fisher won his promotion to private first class, the rank at which he'd started his Army odyssey more than two years earlier.

McClain, the platoon sergeant, saw great potential in Fisher — promise rooted in his intelligence. But the young soldier's future remained colored by the fact that trouble, in the form of old high school friends, lurked just minutes up Interstate 25.

"I think he's winning the battle," McClain said. "But he might not realize his full potential until he gets away from Fort Carson. For him to really take off, maybe he's got to be away from Colorado and his safety net."

Eric Fisher had told his son that, soon enough, the day would come when he'd outgrow his old friends. Two days into Ian's return, there'd been no mention of his buddies.

Teri Mercill perceived subtle battle lines in the war for her son's allegiance. Some of Ian's high school friends, particularly Buddha, exercised an influence on him that seemed calculated to make him choose between the never-never land of teen alliances and the duty-call of his military commitment.

"He's got to learn to be comfortable in his skin," Teri said. "It's a growing process, and I have no doubt he'll get there, and he'll get there his own way, which is the best way."

By Ian's reckoning, he experienced epiphany in Iraq, where he could reflect on a clear choice: Either continue trying to live in the moment or start crafting an adult life. It had taken nearly losing his military career to pull it all into focus.

"It definitely was a process," Ian said. "I knew in little increments, I guess, that made the picture clear on what I really want in life. I guess I'm kind of getting over that hump of being a kid and growing into an adult."

With the Army, there would assuredly be other battles to fight. He'd gone to Iraq at a time of falling action, but after several months back at Fort Carson, future deployments — Afghanistan looms likely — could well provide the combat he'd craved.

His personal struggle would come down to his ability to follow new priorities. The old priorities — drinking, partying, girls, fighting — got him into trouble, but they also were the things that cemented his teen friendships.

"To me," Ian said, "the hardest part is trying to make them realize that I can still be there, still be as good a friend as I was, without getting into all the trouble."

Now, he had plans.

On the Monday morning after Ian's return, he and Devin climbed into his car and headed for the Jefferson County courthouse in Golden.

They sat across from the clerk who took their information for a marriage license. Devin already had quit her job at Dairy Queen in anticipation of her new life as an Army wife.

Ian dipped into his wallet for the $30 license fee, pulling the U.S. currency from among some leftover Kuwaiti dinars. In about an hour, they'd have a judge solemnize their vows.

Eventually, they'd have a proper wedding. Maybe next summer, an outdoor affair. Everything had happened so quickly — an old high school relationship revived online, hastened to the brink of marriage during Ian's mid-tour leave.

Soft-spoken Devin, 18, acted on a gut instinct that Ian was the one, and had the notion confirmed when people close to her said they saw her feelings reflected in her face.

"Everyone saw it," she said.

Both Devin and Ian moved ahead undeterred by their parents' divorces, their own quick decision or their youth.

"We have statistics and odds against us right now," Ian acknowledged. "I hate statistics. Who has the right to say we won't make it?"

In a quiet courtroom, they joined hands as a black-robed magistrate led them through their vows. Afterward, they strolled down the long, windowed hallway, letting reality settle over them.

They would spend the afternoon apartment hunting in Colorado Springs for off-base housing. There would be paperwork to get Devin onto the Army's health care plan.

They'd already bought a dog, a pit bull puppy named Kyra. They'd decided on a new vehicle. They'd talked about starting a family. Adult obligations and responsibilities loomed.

"You were nervous," Devin told her husband as they left the courthouse. "Your hands were all sweaty."

They beamed as they climbed into Ian's car and hit the highway. Cruising along, Ian picked up his iPod and clicked on a song.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I want to play this."

Meet me at the altar in your white dress,
We ain't gettin' no younger, we might as well do it.

He'd been repeating the words at the courthouse, to no recognizable tune. But now the lyrics, from "Let's Get Married" by rhythm and blues artist Jagged Edge, drifted smooth and soulful through the car until Ian interrupted.

"Ya know, everyone gets counseled in Iraq that life is not going to be like your fantasy when you get back home," he said. "Well, I'm checking this off my fantasy list."

LOOKING AHEAD. *His year in Iraq finished, Ian leaves a welcome-home ceremony with Devin and his mother, Teri Mercill, on Aug. 21, 2009. "You could tell this time he was home for good," Teri says. "He knows he's done."*

HANDS IN MARRIAGE. *On Aug. 24, 2009, three days after Ian's return from Iraq, he and Devin apply for a marriage license at the Jefferson County clerk's office. The couple were married an hour later in a quiet courtroom. "I'm happy," Devin says. "I wanted to do this ever since he went back to Iraq."*