

Learning about a war and a friend

By MELODY KINSER

The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — From the sandbox to the desert sands.

The journey Matthew C. Armstrong and Lt. Kurt M. — whose identity is not being revealed due to the security surrounding his military role — have taken spans many years and many miles.

With a first encounter as youngsters at Apple Pie Ridge Elementary School to receiving their diplomas from Sherando High School, the Winchester-area natives recently wrapped up a memorable — and life-changing — experience in Iraq.

Armstrong, pursuing a better understanding of his country's role in a war thousands of miles from safe soil, and Lt. Kurt, who started on a path of service fresh out of high school, became reacquainted in Haditha last month.


"I had known Kurt for awhile," Armstrong said on Thursday. "I crossed paths with him as early as 6 years old (at Apple Pie Ridge Elementary School). Our paths seemed to cross continuously throughout elementary, middle, and high school."

He said they would "occasionally play on the same soccer team or his brother John played on my brother's team." And there was a summer when the two worked at the same swimming pool. "I would constantly run into him."

At the end of his high school ca-

reer, he recalled that Lt. Kurt that "found his focus," when he went to the U.S. Naval Academy after having been nominated by Rep. Frank R. Wolf, R-10th. Armstrong remembered the future lieutenant as having had "fairly long hair and then he didn't" (when he realized his military dream). He also said the Winchester teen who would become known as Lt. Kurt in adulthood was "the only one from our class" to attend the naval academy.

"I would run into him from time to time and when I would I'd ask him

A photograph of Matthew Armstrong, a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a military uniform. He is standing in front of a large, multi-story building, which is identified in the caption as a palace of Saddam Hussein. The image is somewhat faded and has a grainy texture.

Matthew Armstrong, a Winchester-area native who teaches at North Carolina A&T, stands in front of what once was a palace of Saddam Hussein. Armstrong spent time in Iraq embedded with the unit of a childhood friend, Lt. Kurt.

where he's been and what he had been doing. I remembered getting stories from him," Armstrong said. He learned his classmate's military career included assignments in Baghdad, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Lt. Kurt had participated in the march on Baghdad in 2003, was in Pakistan in 2005 "during the massive earthquake," and he "had also been in the Philippines training some antiterrorist forces over there."

Armstrong said "it was only logi-

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cal, it only made sense that he would return to Iraq for what might have been his final mission with the Special Forces."

When Armstrong "heard he was going to Haditha in 2007, it seemed to me that this was both my chance to see this war from a first-hand perspective and see the next phase of the war." He said Lt. Kurt "had been over there doing a lot of work that I think has contributed to this phenomenon — Al Anbar Awakening (the province has united to battle al-Qaeda forces in Iraq). This was once the most chaotic and violent region in the country, so I sent him an e-mail."

With that e-mail, the process of Armstrong reuniting with his hometown friend started.

He departed for Iraq on Feb. 29 and returned March 14.

Before making the 15,000-mile journey, he said Lt. Kurt's responses to his inquiries were "short answers. I didn't feel like I would get the whole story — that's probably one of the reasons I felt like I needed to experience it myself."

The idea of Armstrong going to Iraq "first came up in late summer 2007." He said an e-mail addressed the possibility about him coming as an embed. "I didn't expect it was feasible considering he was in Special Forces."

He said he thinks Lt. Kurt was accepting of the proposal because he would have "his story told to his own town, to Winchester. It was becoming increasingly important to me to tell this



The writer, Matthew Armstrong, stands on a tank that has been destroyed in the desert by gunfire. He was embedded with troops in Haditha and has written about the experience.

story to the place he grew up, I grew up," Armstrong said.

"We were getting a lot of casualty counts, a lot of statistics, not really getting inside what our soldiers were doing in the day-to-day and the Iraqis we would be handing off power to," Armstrong said about his pursuit of the story.

He did say Lt. Kurt "was instrumental in getting my embed approved; he felt this was an important story to tell."

In the "it's-a-small-world" category, Armstrong noted that his application had to go "fairly high up the chain,"

with a Col. Connor aiding in its approval. While he didn't get the colonel's first name, he did learn he was a 1979 graduate of James Wood High School.

He started planning for the trip in October and continued "up to the day" he left in February.

Departure was not an easy step though. "The struggle for me to get over there . . . there was a lot of fear from my family about me going over there. When I decided to do it, there was a massive upheaval in my family . . . a lot of family stress and upheaval and almost enough to make me reverse my decision."

By the end of the process, however, he said his family "could see why this was important to me and supported me doing it."

Even though the information he could share with his family, especially in terms of location, was limited, he did have access to make phone calls from military bases.

While they had known each other since childhood, "the trip did change our relationship in a really good way," Armstrong said.

"Having been alongside with him, I have more respect for him, I feel closer to him." He also said he has "a greater respect for what our soldiers are doing over there, what other soldiers in the war have been doing in general before the trip to Haditha.

"I think my understanding of this war was pretty simple. I think there was a mistrust that I recognized on the part of the military and Kurt himself when it came to the press and I think there was a reciprocal mistrust in the other direction that existed prior to the trip."

Armstrong said that Lt. Kurt "seeing his story through me and me seeing his experience through his eyes created more trust."

He said he expects they will "probably be more close" after sharing the time in Iraq. "It was not an alienating experience by any means. He got to step inside my shoes as a writer every night and I would talk to him and interview him."

While he was afforded the opportunity to reconnect with someone from his past, Armstrong said the decision to go to Iraq stemmed from his desire "to see it for myself."

He said he viewed the war as involving "so much of our country's activities — my own included — our own money, our taxes, educational resources. More than anything, I think psychologically it has taken a toll on the country. We think about it every day, we see it every day, we hear about it every day. I was tired of hearing about it — I wanted to see it for myself."

Traveling as an embedded member of the press, Armstrong said the trip cost "a lot less than I thought it would. The military took such good care of me when I got there." While there were what he termed "preparatory expenses," the total was about \$2,000. "I had to put a lot of my own resources into it."

Once he was accredited, the government was very accommodating, providing free lodging at military sites in what he described as "a very fascinating country."

A 1995 graduate of Sherando High, Armstrong majored in English and history at James Madison University, where he "wrote a little bit for the school paper." He then went to the University of Virginia, where he received a master's in literature. He followed with another master's, in fiction, from the University of North Carolina in Greensboro.

A lecturer at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, he is the son of Dr. John Armstrong and Mary Kay Armstrong. His father still practices in downtown Winchester and his mother taught at Shenandoah University.

As for when his friend will return home, Armstrong pointed out that Lt. Kurt plans to be in Winchester for the Apple Blossom Festival. "He very much considers Winchester home."