Our Soldiers, Our Thanks
Here's to the men who risk their lives to keep us free.

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER
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With Thanksgiving here, and the first American troops to deploy for the Iraq War nearing their one-year anniversary overseas, it's a good time to remember some families in this country to whom the rest of us owe a great deal. Take the family of Sean Shields, a young American I encountered while embedded with the 82nd Airborne Division. Lt. Shields, currently stationed near Baghdad, is the third generation of his clan to serve in the U.S. Army airborne.

Sean's grandfather was one of the men who first created the stellar reputation of the 82nd Airborne--parachuting into the critical battles of Normandy and Nijmegen during World War II. Sean's father served in Gulf War I, eventually retiring as a colonel. Now Sean is an Army Ranger doing his share of the heavy lifting in Iraq. He has shaken off two roadside bombings of his Humvee within a month, and soldiers on without complaint. There are many such families in this country with a multigenerational tradition of military service.

There are also many families who seem oblivious to this tradition. In his recent book, "Keeping Faith," Frank Schaefer describes how, after he'd sent other children to New York University and Georgetown, his affluent Boston neighbors expressed disappointment at his son's decision to become a Marine. "He's so bright and talented and could do anything!" blurted one man. "What a waste!" A similar view is betrayed by New York Times reporter Chris Hedges when he describes today's soldiers as "poor kids from Mississippi or Alabama or Texas who could not get a decent job or health insurance and joined the Army because it was all we offered them."

Are such impressions accurate? From my experiences observing American soldiers--most recently as an embedded reporter in Iraq--my answer is an emphatic "no." A much wider range of talented people serve in our military than many realize. There are suburbanites, hillbillies, kids from concrete canyons and farm boys in our fighting forces. I met graduates of tony schools like Wesleyan and Cornell in Iraq, not only in the officer corps, but in the ranks. I met disciplined immigrants from Colombia, Russia, Panama and other places. Our battlefield computers, helicopters and radars are kept humming by flocks of mechanical whizzes and high-tech aces.

I know of a man who was most of the way through a Ph.D. at Fordham University when, looking for a more active and patriotic career, he decided he'd like to start jumping out of airplanes with the 82nd Airborne. He came in not as an officer but as a private. Four years later, he is a highly competent sergeant. I learned about the son of an engineer and a nursing supervisor who had glided through his school's gifted-student program before landing a job as an open-heart-surgery technician. Then the Sept. 11 attacks convinced him that his country needed him for more important work. He is now a medic in the 82nd Airborne, hoping for an eventual career as an Army doctor.

A few years ago, I interviewed Gen. John Abizaid, now America's top military officer in the Middle East. He had entered West Point in 1969, and noted that at that time the academy had to accept every minimally qualified applicant just to fill his class. Today, entry into our military academies is prized as much as admission to an Ivy League school. That's a clear indicator of how support for the military has rebounded in this country since our Vietnam-era lows--and it hints at the quality of the individuals who flow into our armed forces at all levels.

Our soldiers aren't all saints and scholars, but the base of our military pyramid is full of impressive individuals. There are also many unusually talented men and women at the middle and top of the command structure. The commanders of our troops in Iraq today are instructive examples. Brig. Gen. Martin Dempsey, who leads the First Armored Division in Baghdad, has earned, in addition to his military achievements, three separate master's degrees. Maj. Gen. David Petraeus, whose leadership of the 101st Airborne has temporarily made him the prince of northern Iraq, is well equipped for that task thanks to, among other credentials, a Ph.D. in international
relations from Princeton (which he earned two years faster than most doctoral candidates). The commander of our third full division in Iraq, Maj. Gen. Raymond Odierno of the Fourth Infantry Division, has a master's in nuclear engineering.

Independent thinking by line soldiers is not only tolerated in our armed forces, it is required by the new freelancing style of warfare. Outsiders who envision our fighting forces as authoritarian institutions would be surprised to observe the meritocratic nature of our military in action. Obstacles are generally surmounted after open, democratic-style contention among competing views. I witnessed many spirited debates—among officers in the command tents as well as between privates and sergeants—over the best ways to achieve important objectives. The general modus operandi is competition: "May the smartest idea, and biggest bicep, win."

America's soldiers have the skills to fly missiles into designated windows and squeeze off one-mile sniper shots. They have the openness and democratic habits to serve as good representatives of our liberal society. And they are also admirable on a third front: for their moral idealism.

Hollywood war stories like "Saving Private Ryan" and "Black Hawk Down" promulgate the notion that contemporary soldiers fight not for cause and country but simply for the survival of themselves and their buddies. But most American soldiers are quite conscious of the titanic clash of moral universes that lies behind today's U.S. venture into the Middle East. They are not only aware of the historical importance of this fight, but proud of their role in it, and broadly motivated by high principles extending far beyond self preservation. Gregory Kolodciejczky was a New York City fireman. When the Twin Towers went down, 14 men from his stationhouse were killed, and he decided to help make sure the events of that day would never be replayed in his country. At age 32 he chucked everything and started a new career as a paratrooper. He believes that by fighting in Iraq he is honoring the memory of his dead friends, and helping protect Americans from future acts of terror. I know numerous soldiers who put aside well-paying jobs, family life, graduate school and comfortable careers after concluding, in the wake of Sept. 11, that their country needed their military service.

Families of some of the soldiers I've reported on have shared their letters home with me, and many of these reflect the rectitude of those men and women. Lt. John Gibson of the 82nd's 325th Regiment wrote his parents on his birthday this summer that "we are homesick and want to see our families and loved ones, but not at the expense of an incomplete mission. I know that a completely free and democratic Iraq may not be in place by the time that I leave, but it will be significantly under way before I am redeployed. I see things here, on a daily basis, that hurt the human heart. I see poverty, crime, terrorism, murder, and stupidity. However, I see hope in the eyes of many Iraqis, hope for a chance to govern themselves. I think they are on the cusp of a new adventure, a chance for an entire country to start over again."

Pvt. Melville Johnson of the 82nd Airborne reflected on his time in combat this way: "I feel Iraq has real potential for the future—with the help of the U.S. military, humanitarian agencies, and the installation of a just, fair, and compassionate government. I feel tremendously for the American families that lost a loved one. I also feel for the families of the enemy. At night, before I rest, I think of the enemy we killed. I remember the way their bodies lay in unnatural states, positions God never intended them to take. I hope these images will soon fade. But would I willingly, happily, and completely fight this war again? Yes, I would do it all over again with just as much, or more, determination."

The patriot Thomas Paine once said, "If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, so that my children may have peace." This is a creed many soldiers adhere to quite literally. To a man, the deployed GIs I know tell me they don't want any waffling or hesitation about finishing the job in Iraq. They say it is much less important that the Iraqi war be over soon than that it be successful, and they know that will take time.

Amid the sour soap opera of Jessica Lynch, Americans should remember that there are many U.S. soldiers who displayed real self-sacrificial heroism in the Iraq War. Just among the 82nd Airborne there are men like Medic Alan Babin, who left a covered position and exposed himself on the battlefield to come to the aid of another
soldier. He was shot in the abdomen and is now fighting his way back from the loss of numerous organs, several full-body arrests and 20 operations.

When you talk to our wounded soldiers they say, astonishingly, that they don't regret the fight. Almost universally, they say they are anxious to return to their units as soon as possible. Most American warriors subscribe to the words of John Stuart Mill: "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself."

It's easy for critics on both the left and right to convince themselves that the U.S. is a decadent society, that our young people have gone soft, that we will never have another generation like the men who climbed the cliffs at Normandy. That judgment, I'm here to report, is utterly wrong. We've got soldiers in uniform today whom Americans can trust with any responsibility, any difficulty, any mortal challenge.

At the end of this strenuous year, we give thanks for them.

Mr. Zinsmeister, editor in chief of The American Enterprise, is author of "Boots on the Ground: A Month With the 82nd Airborne in the Battle for Iraq," just published by Truman Talley.