Iraq war off most Americans' radar, those who served say

by Steve Liewer

Twenty minutes into the invasion of Iraq, Marine Sgt. Nathaniel Donnelly huddled with his men in the windowless rear of an armored vehicle as it rumbled across the Iraq-Kuwait border.

The roar of artillery pounded in their ears. Anxious officers chattered over the radio.

OVER HERE - Former Marine Sgt. Nathaniel Donnelly (above and left, while serving in Iraq) is now a senior at San Diego State University, where he founded a campus veterans organization. He plans to return to the Corps, this time as an officer. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. "We could hear everything, but we couldn't see anything. We had no control," Donnelly said of the events of March 20, 2003. "It's probably the scariest moment of my life."

Baghdad fell to U.S. forces after about six weeks of fighting. A few months later, Donnelly returned with his unit to Camp Pendleton, Calif., and left the Marine Corps, thinking the war was won.

But the conflict is far from over. As the Iraq war nears its fifth anniversary, nearly as many military boots are on the ground in Iraq - 158,000 U.S. troops - as were there during the invasion.

Pro- and anti-war rallies are being held nationwide to mark the milestone. Those events notwithstanding, Donnelly and other veterans believe Americans' preoccupation with the war has dimmed.

"People aren't as mad anymore," said Donnelly, 31, now a senior at San Diego State University. "People I meet, they don't care as much. It's just kind of normal news."

The military's all-volunteer force means only a small segment of the U.S. population is directly affected by the war, said former Marine Capt. Nathaniel Fick, 30, who commanded a Camp Pendleton-based infantry unit in Afghanistan and Iraq and later wrote a best-selling memoir, "One Bullet Away."

The Pentagon continues to forbid the photographing of service members' flag-draped caskets. That makes it easy for the public to forget the war's toll, especially as casualty counts have fallen in the past year, Fick said.

"There's been a concerted effort, in some ways, to keep the war out of the headlines," said Fick, now a graduate student at Harvard University.

Some defense analysts said the tanking real estate market, soaring price of oil and constant talk of a recession have overshadowed the Iraq war.

"Clearly right now, the economy has supplanted Iraq as the No. 1 issue," said Bob Work, vice president of strategic studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington, D.C. "The public is not engaged, because it's off the front page."

A study released in March by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center illustrated the point. War coverage made up 3 percent of news coverage during the first week in March, down from 15 percent in July and about the same as coverage given to the Academy Awards and Prince Harry's return from Afghanistan.

Iraq hasn't been the top story since October, the study reported, and only 12 percent of survey respondents said they were following war news closely.

Meanwhile, the Pew survey showed that about 28 percent of respondents correctly identified the number of U.S. troops killed to date in Iraq - about 4,000. That's barely half of the 47 percent to 55 percent who answered correctly in eight previous surveys conducted between April 2004 and August 2007.

"I don't see the outrage, the concern," said Tom Richards, a decorated Marine from the Vietnam War who now heads the United Veterans Council of San Diego. "The military's fighting the war, and the American public's at the mall."

Public discourse on the war might be waning, but the leaders of two large charities that assist service members said private giving is still strong.

"The emotional and social support for the military - especially in a community like San Diego - is always there," said Susan Farrell, executive director and CEO of USO San Diego.

Farrell's nonprofit group runs a lounge at Lindbergh Field and offers free meals, books and entertainment to military personnel and their families.

Paul Steffens, executive director of the San Diego Armed Services YMCA, said he recently couldn't get into his office. That's because it was filled with packages containing 4,000 pounds of coffee bought for troops in Iraq by patrons of local Starbucks shops.

"People may be tired of the war, but they still recognize we've got to help the families," Steffens said.

More help and compassion are extended now to those who have lost loved ones in Iraq than four years ago, said Sandra Aceves of Chula Vista, Calif. One of her sons, Navy corpsman Fernando Mendez-Aceves, died in combat April 6, 2004.

"I did not know where to turn," said Aceves, 52, who is now a mentor with the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, a support group for families of fallen service members. "I just knew that people were not going to understand me."

But people do understand, she eventually realized. Even those with no connection to the military sympathize with someone who has lost a child too young.

"The reaction I get is that they are the ones who start crying, and I am the one who ends up comforting them," Aceves said.

Still, some returning Iraq war veterans whose losses aren't so apparent say they sense an awkward indifference to their service when they meet people with no connection to the military.

"The average citizen doesn't seem to know the war is still going on," said Amanda Smith, 26, who served a year in Iraq as a National Guard military police officer in 2003-04. "It's like (veterans) are forgotten. When they come back, (the public) doesn't know how to treat them."

Smith said she is rated by the Department of Veterans Affairs as 80 percent disabled with post-traumatic stress disorder, lupus, back trouble and hearing problems that are service-connected.

She is most comfortable around others who have been to war, because like many veterans, she finds it

strange that an experience that transformed her means so little to most civilians.

"I don't talk too much about Iraq to the average person, because they don't really relate," said Smith, who has earned a bachelor's degree in sociology. "It's a shell shock to go over there, and a shell shock to come back."

James Kelly returned in January 2004 from a year in Kuwait with an Army Reserve logistics unit to a surreal scene at Los Angeles International Airport. Seeing his unit's dirty desert camouflage uniforms, everyone - passengers, ticket agents, baggage handlers and pilots - stopped and cheered for them.

"The entire airport stopped functioning. ... Half the people were crying," said Kelly, 30, now a college senior. "Words can't describe what it was like to have that many people stop and say, 'Thank you.' "

He's sure that nowadays returning soldiers aren't receiving the same kind of tumultuous welcome from the public that his unit received.

"It's gotten numbed down a bit," Kelly said. "Now it's like, 'Oh, you're back.' "

Donnelly, the Marine sergeant, now works at San Diego State University's Veterans Affairs Office. He founded a campus veterans organization and is active in a national lobby group for student veterans.

He said even he gets caught up in the hubbub of civilian life.

"It doesn't bother me so much that people don't care," Donnelly said. "I don't think about it as much, either."

That might change soon. Donnelly plans to take his bachelor's degree from SDSU's International Security and Conflict Resolution program and rejoin the Marines, this time as an officer with newly developed leadership skills. He almost certainly will head back to Iraq.

"I feel left out, having kind of started it," Donnelly said. "It's not finished."

He has gotten used to the idea of serving in the military so that civilians can hold on to the luxury of taking their freedom for granted.

"I started thinking, 'That's why we do what we do,' " Donnelly said. " 'So they don't have to care.'"

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