

BRAINERD DISPATCH

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SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Steve Kohls / Brainerd Dispatch

Kelsi Hoover delivers fall mums to a customer Friday, from her mom's stand at the farmer's market in Baxter. The open air market is now filled with plants, vegetables and canned goods synonymous with autumn.

Reflecting on service in America's longest war

The end of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan last month after almost two decades likely prompted many to reflect on their experiences during America's longest war.

The U.S. Department of Defense estimates 832,000 American soldiers served in Afghanistan. A report from the

Associated Press seeking to quantify the costs of the war in Afghanistan — both in lives and dollars — stated there were 2,448 American service members killed there through April. At least 13 more were added to that toll following an Aug. 26 suicide bomb attack outside the airport in Kabul as evacuations were underway in the waning

days of the presence of U.S. troops.

Also killed were 3,846 U.S. contractors, 1,144 other allied service members, including from other NATO member states, 444 aid workers and 72 journalists. Approximately 66,000 Afghan national military and police members died, along with 47,245 Afghan civilians and

51,191 Taliban and other opposition fighters.

Closer to home, KROCnews.com reports 29 Minnesotans were among the war dead, including Spc. George W. Cauley, a 24-year-old from Walker who died in October 2009 when his vehicle was hit by a homemade bomb. Minnesota National Guard combat veteran Justin

Doerfler of Brainerd, who shared his story with the Dispatch in today's edition, served with Cauley. Doerfler's truck bears a flag graphic with Cauley's name along with the names of others in his company who've died since their deployment.

Although the Crow Wing County Veterans Service Office was unable to provide an

exact number of residents who served in Afghanistan specifically, Veterans Service Officer Erik Flowers reported a total of 2,301 veterans in their system with Persian Gulf War service. This includes those who served in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the first Gulf War.

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Crosslake man shines light on role in nation-building in Afghanistan

By Chelsey Perkins
Brainerd Dispatch

As events unfolded last month amid the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Tim Bray couldn't help but wonder what twists of fate had befallen his Afghan colleagues.

For nearly a year in 2011-12 on a deployment with the Navy Reserve, Bray worked alongside leaders in the Afghan army and police forces to provide training in managing the bases and other infrastructure built



Chelsey Perkins / Brainerd Dispatch

Tim Bray shares his experiences of serving in Afghanistan with the U.S. Navy as an individual augmentee during a late August interview at the Brainerd Dispatch.

BRAY: Page A10

'Lifting a darkness off my shoulders'

Brainerd man proud of Afghanistan service that impacted his life

By Chelsey Perkins
Brainerd Dispatch

Late last month, Justin Doerfler fell to his knees and prayed, unable to control the tears pouring down his cheeks.

Upon learning of the 13 U.S. service members and dozens of Afghans killed in a suicide bombing Aug. 26 outside the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, the Brainerd combat veteran said emotion overcame him at the loss.

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Chelsey Perkins / Brainerd Dispatch

Justin Doerfler of Brainerd recounts a number of harrowing experiences from his time deployed in combat in Afghanistan with the Minnesota National Guard while seated on the deck of his home in early September.

Politicians tour CLC, school makes bid for state funding of improvements

By Frank Lee
Brainerd Dispatch

It's never easy asking for money, but Central Lakes College officials hope politicians see things their way after a recent tour of the school's Brainerd campus.

State Rep. Josh Heintzeman and members of the House Capital Investment Committee visited the campus Thursday, Sept. 23, as the college president made the case for more

funding. "This improvement project is responding to the world that we now live in," President Hara Charlier told the group as she led them through hallways, locker rooms, classrooms and more.

The student services and academic support renovation project proposes to update the campus "to better meet prospective and enrolled student support needs, remove current barriers and provide space to accommodate innova-

VIDEO
For video, see www.brainerddispatch.com.

tions in support of current and future learners."

"So instead of individual offices, we're moving toward multi-flexible space, so if students come with a group of family members, we can use that space. If we need to have students working together, we can use that space," Charlier said.



Steve Kohls / Brainerd Dispatch

Central Lakes College president Hara Charlier welcomes members of the House Capital Investment Committee Thursday, before leading a tour of the campus to highlight certain needs and to request state funding to improve the school's facilities.

Education

The \$9.52 million project will strategically cluster student service and

learner support units "in harmony with the natural flow and progression of

FUNDING: Page A11

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DOERFLER

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decades, they were able to do that. But again, eventually the guest needs to go home.”

Whether the Afghans he relied on while deployed are alive or safe is another question — one to which Doerfler doesn’t know the answer. Yearbook-like messages from some of these friends are among those scrawled across a British flag Doerfler keeps hanging on a wall in his home office. It’s one of many souvenirs Doerfler preserved from his time at Camp Leath-erneck, which adjoined with Camp Bastion, the main British base.

“You do the best job. I am proud of you brother,” states one of three messages in three different languages left by a man named Kai, an Afghan translator with whom Doerfler worked closely.

“He’s been on my mind a lot lately,” Doerfler said.

These concerns and the experiences Doerfler carries keep him in rare company in the Brainerd lakes area — not only because a small number of locals served in Afghanistan in general, but also because veterans who’ve directly engaged in combat in the Middle East are among a select few.

He’s spent the last dozen years learning to cope with how that time in his life changed him. He’s watched some of his fellow soldiers no longer able to cope themselves. Three members of his unit have died by suicide since the deployment. Others descended into alcoholism or drug abuse, lost their relationships to divorce or otherwise suffered the mental health impacts of war, he said.

Unable to snap himself out of feeling a constant state of vigilance and numbness, Doerfler stewed in anger over fellow Americans complaining about seemingly minor things while people fought and died on the other side of the planet. He struggled to reconnect with his significant other Elodie, who also struggled herself with how to approach communication with Doerfler.

“That was my first time ever being in a war. So it didn’t come with a rule-book coming home,” he said. “I had a hard time sleeping. I had a hard time literally functioning. ... Seeing how good we have it here, and then to see — when I would compare the complaints of some to what I saw mankind was capable of, it caused anger.”

This put him on a dangerous path, he said. Doerfler contemplated suicide himself at one point, ultimately checking himself into a VA hospital in 2013 for a two-month stay for psychological care. Developing a strong faith in God in recent years, caring for others through volunteer work and lending his announcing talents to Brainerd International Raceway and other racing venues helped bring balance back to Doerfler’s life. He and Elodie married in 2019 and share a home with their rescue dog Maggie, a constant companion with full control of the couch in Doerfler’s “man cave” garage.

Yet, memories endure. He’ll never forget the smallest details of his brushes with death. There was the red light of an exit sign illuminating sand granules on the

concrete floor of the bunk as he took cover from approaching rocket fire. The sunset he thought would be his last during an intense and lengthy firefight with Taliban insurgents. The jingling of decorative bells fastened to Afghan delivery vehicles, any of which might contain a pressure plate trigger to a hidden bomb no protective vest or helmet would save him from.

“Every single day was uncertain. ... I had actually made goodbye videos,” Doerfler said. “I actually sat down in a folding chair and I propped my camera up on a bumper and I actually had to do a couple different takes. ... When you start to see what mankind is truly capable of, and you realize the horrors, evils, terrors that can be on this planet — knowing that at any given moment you’re here and then you’re not — getting ready for that,

that was unique.” Doerfler joined the Army National Guard as a junior in Lake Region Christian School in 1997, becoming part of the 1st Combined Arms Battalion. When 9/11 happened four years later, Doerfler said he expected to and was ready to go to war — but that moment didn’t come, at least not in the immediate aftermath.

In 2005 with his eight-year obligation fulfilled, Doerfler was participating in his final drill at Camp Ripley doing range control when he received a call asking if he wanted to deploy to Iraq. With just three days’ notice until departure leaving him feeling unprepared, Doerfler turned down the request.

He left the Guard and soon moved to Miami, Florida, where he lived for a couple of years before returning to Brainerd. Being home again brought feelings

of longing to be back in the military, so Doerfler reenlisted in 2008. Just two months into this second stint, Doerfler took a phone call in a car lot where he was in the midst of negotiating a deal. The call informed him he would be transferred to a newly formed unit and would deploy to Afghanistan. Needless to say, Doerfler no longer needed a new vehicle.

He soon found himself training among a group of soldiers thrust together from across the state — 187 people from 112 different Minnesota cities, Doerfler said.

“Literally, almost nobody knew each other and just got shoved into one unit. And basically they said, ‘Figure it out guys, this is going to be your job,’” he said.

That job was to operate a transportation unit tasked with running

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SLUTE

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Photo Deadline

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Questions? Call Stacey at 218-855-5819.

DOERFLER

From Page A12

logistical convoys, ensuring infantry, medics and others had the supplies they needed. As these convoys traveled through Afghanistan, they needed a security force to help ensure their safety. This included Doerfler, who — along with the other volunteers — was separated from the group to train specifically for how to engage in firefights, should the convoy be attacked.

“Our platoon sergeant says, ‘Who’s single or who doesn’t have kids? Who doesn’t have a spouse? Those are the people we should really have as gunners,’” Doerfler explained. “Reluctantly, there was some of us who started to raise our hands.”

Doerfler’s time in Afghanistan nearly ended before it really began when, during his first mission, a convoy to the area of operation, he lost consciousness amid extreme conditions with the heat index reaching 136 degrees. He and five others in the convoy required medical evacuations, and Doerfler was transported to a Canadian base to be treated.

Disoriented when he awoke, Doerfler first thought he was home in his bed in Brainerd before he realized he couldn’t understand the language being spoken. He remembered he was in Afghanistan. His thoughts turned to the idea he’d been captured as a prisoner of war before he wondered if his truck was hit by a roadside bomb. He frantically

inspected his limbs — they were all accounted for. Doerfler soon learned he suffered from water intoxication and heat stroke. He’d drunk so much water in the heat, there was little sodium left in his body to regulate the balance of fluids and he nearly drowned from the inside.

Later that same night, asleep in a bunk, the camp came under a rocket attack by Taliban fighters.

“Not only does it wake you out of a dead sleep, but the concussion, you feel that pressure because it almost sucks the air out of your lungs,” Doerfler said, adding in the rush to get to the floor from his bunk, his foot became lodged by a bar on his cot and it twisted his ankle.

A second strike sounded closer and a third even closer, with rocks hitting the roof overhead indicating the proximity.

“All I could think about is, I just survived today. How in the hell am I going to die tonight? I didn’t get a chance to call home, say I love you,” Doerfler said.

The next explosion was different, however — it was the Canadians firing back.

“I started just chain-smoking, because of the adrenaline. You just transitioned from, I knew I was dead, to right now, the Canadians are putting foot to ass however they can,” he said.

After that harrowing introductory experience, Doerfler spent the first couple of months on tower duty at Camp Leatherneck, observing the perimeter of the base

and acting as the first and last line of defense against any enemies looking to encroach.

During one of these stints, Doerfler and a Marine watched a group of Afghans approaching the wire. The group ignored a number of warnings issued as part of the escalation of force protocol, including pyroflares, before beginning to cut through the wire.

Doerfler readied himself with an automatic weapon, grabbing a scope from his Marine counterpart to attach to the gun. He removed the safety, placed his finger on the trigger and watched through the scope as a boy no older than 10 scurried through the hole in the fence, grabbed a discarded soda can and ran back out before hopping on a moped and leaving. Getting that close to killing a child left Doerfler rattled, and he described it as one of the longest seconds he’d ever known. It wasn’t unusual for Afghans to collect items like this to be later sold as part of artwork in a village bazaar. Still, there remained the possibility the soda can was destined for something more nefarious, and the situation illustrates the numerous life and death calculations Doerfler was forced to make regularly.

“That pop can can be sold as a beautiful art piece in town, or it can be the pressure plate that ends your life,” he said. “And so that whole night, I just kept picturing that kid’s face in my head. I almost shot a kid with a belt-fed weapon. ... You notice how the psychol-

ogy is. You’re starting to realize the gravity of what human life is and what is it going to be like to take a human life, even if it’s a kid.”

Doerfler went on to serve at the main entry point, assisting in inspecting the individuals and vehicles entering the base with deliveries. This included patting people down for bomb vests and inspecting inside and outside cars and trucks, particularly if British bomb dogs indicated the possible presence of explosives. And there were examples of suicide bombings at base entrances that killed NATO troops while Doerfler was in Afghanistan.

Some of these vehicles were what the soldiers referred to as “jingle trucks,” decked out with stickers, decals, reflectors, brightly colored knick-knacks and bells. They often included pictures clipped from magazines of foreign locations — sometimes, photographs of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, a disconcerting find nearly a decade post-9/11. It seemed the advanced infrastructure was the draw, given they’d also display photos of towers in Dubai or London or China as well. But it presented yet another situation when intentions weren’t clear.

“You didn’t know what to think. Your brain is trying to say, you want to see the innocence of them wanting to see these big structures. Yet at the same time, coming out of here, we don’t have those towers anymore,” Doerfler said. “There’s

a fine line. You’re walking a tightrope of trying to find the innocence, as well as, is this person a threat? It’s almost like you have to, on the fly, analyze instantly.”

Doerfler’s final assignment saw him providing convoy security, the job for which he originally received training. It was during one of these missions when he found himself in the middle of the most intense fighting he would see on the deployment.

Shooting from the Taliban persisted through an entire day with the first shots ringing out at 11:30 a.m. As the sun set, the barrage intensified. Doerfler communicated with a soldier in another truck, asking him for a warning if he saw anything approaching from behind the western direction Doerfler faced. The soldier leaned out the truck window and gave Doerfler a thumbs-up, prompting sniper fire. A bullet ricocheted off the truck armor and whizzed past Doerfler’s cheek, gunfire and mortar blasts sounding all around him. A horn blast soon after was the warning he asked for, and then he took fire from multiple directions.

“I could picture my mom in my head, and what was gonna happen when she saw two uniforms walking up the driveway,” he said. “And all I was whispering was, ‘Be strong,’ because I knew at this moment, I’m not going to be surviving this. I will not see the sunset. ... The only thing that ran through my head, I hope it doesn’t hurt.”

The convoy received a warning to pull down their weapons and lock down the hatches on their trucks as a B-1 bomber approached but ultimately, bombs weren’t necessary as the threat abated.

The toll of these traumatic circumstances on Doerfler was apparent even before he returned to American soil. Revisiting some of the journal entries he wrote while deployed offered an early look at the struggles that would plague him for years to come.

“I wrote in my journal, ‘I don’t want to die, but maybe just taking a shot will help me feel anything.’ Because I had been so numb, physically and mentally,” he said. “I didn’t know what emotion was anymore. Every day was the same. You don’t even know if you’re gonna live or not.”

Doerfler is grateful he’s no longer shrouded in the darkness from which he once saw no exit, even as recently as three years ago. Spending time exploring himself and his relationship to faith gave him an outlet — and hope.

“That’s only because I’ve literally been strengthening in my faith,” he said. “I heard it said best this past week. During scary times, we can either view it as everything is falling apart or as it’s all coming together. There’s where I tried actually looking at, what is prophecy? Is it just a story? Or was there a science that ancient people had?”

“... Evil exists, and that means the flip side of that coin exists as well.”

WAR

From Page A1

The war wasn’t only about combat — a sig-

nificant part of the U.S. effort involved establishing infrastructure and helping to train Afghan soldiers and police officers. Crosslake

man and Navy veteran Tim Bray’s engineering and infrastructure management skills brought him into the Middle Eastern country this way

as a U.S. Navy individual augmentee. In today’s edition, Bray recalls his deployment as a rewarding experience during which he learned about

leadership while stationed at the Herat base in western Afghanistan.

The two local veterans featured here have different stories and dis-

parate experiences, but what they have in common is military service of which they are proud. Here are their stories.



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