

Students wait, worry as their boyfriends fulfill military obligations in war in Iraq

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Staff Writer

Every day, U.S. soldiers train for their possible deployment to Iraq. Pepperdine freshman Lyndsi Stephens waits with dread until the day her boyfriend, George, has to leave.

"He's been in the Army since we've been dating," Stephens said. "When I found out he was going to Iraq, I was very heartbroken."

Stephens and her boyfriend met in high school in their hometown of Humble, Texas, a city that takes pride in its soldiers.

While Stephens was applying to colleges, her boyfriend took a step in another other direction.

"He was always bored and wanted money to go to a university instead of community college," said Stephens. "So the Army was a perfect choice for him."

According to GoArmy.com, there are a myriad of educational opportunities for soldier recruits in return for their service. Some include ROTC scholarships, the Montgomery G.I. Bill and the Army College Fund. Depending on the length and position a soldier serves, he or she can earn anywhere from \$5,000 to \$72,000 toward a college education or existing student loans. For Stephens' boyfriend, this means serving three years until he has enough money to go to school.

While Stephens attends college in California, her boyfriend is stationed in Georgia training and working a desk job for the government while he awaits his desert training in Fort Polk, La. After a month in Louisiana, he will leave for Iraq in June to serve for what was supposed to be a year but has been extended by six months due to the recent surge of soldiers overseas.

"I'm going to miss him so much," said Stephens. "But I know he is doing something really good for his country."

Stephens is not alone when it comes to missing her boyfriend in Iraq. Fellow Pepperdine freshman Anna Gorman is also in a similar situation.

"My boyfriend is in the Marines and has been in Iraq for the past six months," she said. "It's been rough, but I try not to worry because it won't help the situation."

Gorman's boyfriend, Jeff Wilson, is in the infantry unit, which involves patrolling and fighting when violence breaks out. He is following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, both of whom were in the military.

Stephens and her boyfriend are going to continue their long-distance relationship even if it means not being able to communicate all the time.

"While he is overseas, I know we will stay together," Stephens said. "I'm planning to write him letters every day and reach him on the Internet every once in a while."

Gorman has also kept in touch with Wilson.

"We'll talk online or on the phone every day for a week, and then not at all for a month," she said. "The communication is in spurts."

Even though communication is up and down, Gorman maintains a level of consistency by writing letters every other day and sending care packages to Wilson.

Gorman's boyfriend is set to come home April 12, with no word yet of an extended deployment due to the surge.

Even though scenes of war plague her mind, Stephens continues to hold faith her boyfriend will come home safe.

"As much as I worry, I know that he is going to come back," she said. "We have a life together after Iraq, and that's not going to change."

Stephens' unwavering confidence stems from her cousin's previous service in the Middle East.

"He was in one of the first groups to go to Iraq and went there twice, for a year each," said Stephens. "He came back safe."

Both Stephens and her boyfriend have their own views on the war.

"He doesn't like politics in general," Stephens said. "I don't support the war anymore, but I still support the troops."

Stephens has shown her support by being a huge devotee of AnySoldier.com, a Web site where volunteers can send care packages to soldiers around the world. According to AnySoldier.com, the Web site was created on Aug. 26, 2003, as a simple family effort to commemorate the death of a loved one. A few of the family's friends and neighbors helped catapult the site to its current 4,000 volunteers. "Any Soldier" is now a non-profit corporation registered in Maryland.

Last year, "Any Solider" grew to incorporate registered trademarks including "Any Marine," "Any Airman," "Any Sailor" and "Any Coast Guardsman." Because of its success, the site has been recognized by President Bush and other

politicians.

"I sent them Christmas gifts and thank-you letters to boost their spirits," said Stephens. "It's important to thank them for what they do and to let them know the American people support them."

Soldiers have written Stephens back expressing their sincere appreciation.

"It makes me glad that I can do something small to help them out," she said. "I wouldn't want them to feel like they are alone in the war."

Stephens hopes to use AnySoldier.com to also stay connected with her boyfriend.

"It'll be a good way for him to feel like I am there by his side," she says. She hopes that people on campus can contribute to the troops.

"It is important for Pepperdine students to know that there are people our age who are out in another country risking their lives for us," she says. "It is an honor for me to get involved in every way that I can, for the troops and for my boyfriend."

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