

One Day Shaped Their Lives

Shocked by coordinated attacks on their homeland, Americans joined the military after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks out of a sense of duty, to exact revenge and find direction. They deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. A decade later, they continue to serve in two of the longest wars in American history. Their lives were shaped by 9/11.

He went

A wave of emotion swept over Ryan Smithson

as he watched the twin towers collapse in history class. A wrestler from East Greenbush, Smithson was 16 when he witnessed 9/11 in Columbia High School

. His teacher told the students they were "living history."

It impacted him deeply. The deadly day changed his view and recast his future. Though he had a steady girlfriend and did not come from a military family, Smithson enlisted in the Army Reserves

right after graduating.

"Part of it was a vengeance thing, but it was more just service," he recalled. "I wanted to stand up and do what I thought was right after 9/11. I felt like it was my generation's Pearl Harbor."

The Army sent Spc. Smithson to Iraq. He drove military vehicles, hauled heavy equipment and helped rebuild the country -- "hot, dirty, dangerous" work.

Smithson returned from war physically intact, but unemployed and confused. Tremors jolted him out of sleep, and he felt terrified, ashamed, even if he knew the feelings were irrational.

"I wanted to just forget everything," he said. "I don't think I fully appreciated the good things we did in Iraq."

Within months, he got a job and enrolled in college. He started writing essays in September 2006. Words poured out, and he combined the essays into a book, "Ghosts of War." It was therapeutic, he said.

Smithson left the military in December. Now 26, he lives in Schenectady with his wife, Heather, and 1-year-old son, Grant. He works as an oil delivery man. He said the past 10 years taught him a lot about himself. He's now proud of his service. "I was just a kid trying to do the right thing," Smithson said.

He's there

Marine Corps Cpl. Matthew Martin

of Watervliet grew up with 9/11. On that Tuesday morning 10 years ago, Martin was a fifth-grader at Rensselaer Elementary School

. "I don't think I understood what was going on," Martin said in a phone interview from Camp Bastion in Afghanistan, where he's stationed. His mother, Deborah Smith

, later explained it to him. The story motivated him to become a Marine after graduating from Watervliet High School

.
The 20-year-old works as an aerial observer/gunner in a helicopter squadron. Martin and his wife, Paige, who is from Clifton Park, are expecting their first baby. They have a home near San Diego. His tour ends early next year.

They're going

Spc. Robert Harris

, 40, is among about 2,200 New York Army National Guard

troops who leave for a yearlong tour of Afghanistan in January. The Brunswick soldier worked as a telecommunications worker when Al-Qaida

attacked the World Trade Center

and Pentagon

with hijacked jetliners.

"I couldn't believe what was happening," Harris said. "I knew right there we were going to war."

Harris went home and shielded his 3-year-old son from the television coverage. He felt frustrated he couldn't help. It kick-started him into a new way of thinking. He's prepared for his first deployment.

"There's mixed emotions," Harris said.

Mathew Tully became a New York National Guardsman in 1998. As a civilian, he worked for Morgan Stanley

in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. He escaped from the south tower after the first plane struck.

Tully deployed to downtown Manhattan after the attack. He went on to serve in Iraq in 2005. Now 37 and co-founder of Tully Rinckey in Colonie, a law firm that specializes in military affairs and employment law, he leaves for Afghanistan next year.