

Iraq Vet Has Full Supply of Grit

In 2004, the Army Reserve captain left her executive assistant job at the hotel and conference center to volunteer for overseas duty as a supply route coordinator. Now, three years later, she has returned home to Latham to replace her bullet-proof vest with an apron.

But like many returning servicemen and women, St. Denis is going through a readjustment period at home. The soldier, private contractor and wartime blogger isn't struggling, but three years in Iraq has certainly changed her. She says the heady experiences were so moving that she sometimes finds it difficult to relate to the person she was prior to deployment.

"I am less 'everything is peaches and cream,' " St. Denis said recently while making a chicken dinner in her Route 9 home. "And I have greater appreciation for the little things."

Working in Iraq taught her to slow down and appreciate "what so many Americans take for granted: leaves, grass, home-cooked meals," St. Denis said. The 37-year-old is learning to live without nervous energy and responsibility, and says she has far less patience for whining.

Hearing a friend complain that a store didn't have a specific color of Ralph Lauren home paint grated on her.

The Desmond was a wonderful place to work, but returning to the job would be impossible because St. Denis feels she would have no tolerance for "complaints about pillows not being fluffy enough."

A lot of her returning colleagues also feel a bit misplaced, she said.

"We basically are kind of an island of misfits. There's nothing that's going to be as emotionally fulfilling as rebuilding a country," St. Denis said.

Her feelings are common among returning vets because the Iraq conflict has not engendered a sense of shared sacrifice in the United States, said attorney Greg Rinckey, who represents soldiers and Marines.

"Part of the problem is the U.S. is not really a country at war," Rinckey said. "This isn't like World War II when you had everyone rationing. It's definitely something I see."

Most vets have a totally different outlook on life when they return from a war zone, Rinckey said. "They see people scrounging to just live, going through garbage to find meals and people blown away at any moment," he said. It's hard not to be touched by that, Rinckey said.

St. Denis was born two months prematurely in Niskayuna in 1970. Doctors gave her a slim chance at reaching her teen years.

Always the fighter, St. Denis survived and graduated from SUNY Cortland. During college, she joined the Army Reserves in Syracuse. She had always wanted to be a soldier, or a firefighter like her dad, Bob Stewart.

St. Denis has red hair, green eyes and likes to tell jokes. Several years ago, she, her father

and brother all had the Scottish Lion Rampant tattooed on their arms. On the Fourth of July in 2003, she married her husband, Scott, wearing a red, white and blue dress. All guests were required to wear the colors of the flag.