

Fighting Chance

Risky surgery might return this eager vet to Iraq.

By St. John Barned-Smith

The first thing Richard Bennett noticed when he got off the plane in Kuwait almost six years ago was the smell, a smell of dust and unending sand, utterly devoid of water. It was a strange concept for the native Jamaican.

Years later Bennett still looks the part of a soldier—serious, with deep-set eyes and cropped jet-black hair. And his memories of war are still fresh. “Iraq [and combat] overloaded every sensual experience,” he says. “There was a lot of smoke, fire, dust, blood, guts, body parts, bullets, holes, bombs, confusion.”

He began the enlistment process just before 9/11, only to find himself one of the first 250,000 U.S. servicemen to enter Iraq in the 2003 invasion, back when 63 percent of the country supported an invasion and more than half of the country approved of the job President Bush was doing.

“As a young boy I always wanted to be in the military, and the Marines was the biggest challenge,” he says.

Bennett is lean, almost slight, around 5-foot-7 and 150 pounds. He’d look more at home as a flyweight in a boxing ring or in a jockey’s saddle than lugging an M-16 and a 26-pound machine gun through the deserts of Kuwait and Iraq as he did during the initial invasion of the current Iraq occupation.

There were the 100-pound packs. There was the experience of a mortar shell thudding into the ground 25 feet away from him as he ate lunch. One night an IED exploded by his Humvee.

“I woke up after the initial chaos,” he says of the event. “It’s still not very coherent.” His injuries left him unable to run without a limp, and with constant back pain.

Ever since, the 27-year-old Philadelphia transplant has been searching for a doctor to reverse his injuries so he can return to the battle lines in Iraq.

“I just have to get my [spinal discs] replaced or fused ... either that or a doctor willing to sign a waiver saying I’m capable [for combat],” he says. But the doctors have been unwilling to operate, saying the surgery would be too risky on someone so young.

What’s strange is that Bennett didn’t even want to go to Iraq when the war started. “When I was first

over there,” he says, “I didn’t want to be there—you kinda ... you play cops and robbers, build yourself up to this certain moment. But in the thick of things, you ask yourself, do you really want this?”

In Iraq, Bennett, who speaks with a soft voice and is quick to laugh, learned how to blow buildings apart, instead of designing and modeling them, as

says, laughing. “It showed me firsthand why I shouldn’t set limits for myself.”

But why would anyone want to return to Iraq? No matter how many times he’s asked, Bennett is quick with the same response. “I want to wake up and have a higher purpose than myself—to do something for the greater good on a larger scale,” he says, before hastily adding, “though I already have that



MICHAEL PERSICO

Battling back: Bennett hopes to find a doctor who’ll clear him for combat.

he had for an architectural firm in Massachusetts before he enlisted. “I like blowing stuff up,” he says now. As a combat engineer, his first demolition project was “to detonate a stockpile of ammo we’d found. That was fun. It was a controlled blast of 40 tons of Iraqi bombs, bullets, rifles and machine guns.”

There were rocket attacks, and friends who died along the way. There was the unrelenting heat, and the fact he had no communication with his family back home in Pennsylvania.

Even so, war agreed with him. “I’m a fan of a challenge. The Marine Corps itself is the birthplace of challenge,” he

with my family.” Bennett lives with his wife and two young children near Mt. Airy.

For now, they’re supporting him in his desire to reenlist, even though they don’t want him back in Iraq.

“It’s tough,” Bennett says, “being held back from doing one thing you really want to do and can do. Honestly, I’m good at making music and making houses. I’m damn good at being a Marine. Being everything else is a step down.” ■

St. John Barned-Smith last wrote about Iraq Veterans Against the War. Comments on this story can be sent to letters@philadelphiaweekly.com