

A Cowboy, a soldier, a writer  
By: Cara Brooke Adams

Imagine yourself, thousands of miles away from what you call home, dripping in sweat because of the heat and the fact you're fighting for your life outside the somewhat safe walls of your base. You're hunched in a corner with a digital camera in one hand and your M16 rifle in the other. You take photographs of things most people will never see in their lifetime. You write about things you don't want anyone to experience. You hear a zing and then a ping. That sound means danger. It's the sound of a bullet, a bullet that is not too far away. But you never falter.

The experiences, images and memories you gather this day and so many days like it will be with you for the rest of your life. They will haunt your dreams, stay in the back of your mind and come back at you like one of those flashbacks the veterans who went to Vietnam talk about. There must be a way to get the thoughts out of your head, to loosen them up so they don't strike so deeply each time.

So you begin to do what you've always loved to do. You write. You write and write until your mind goes numb. It starts as a personal journal, then it moves to a "blog" (a Web log), and eventually it transcends into a book.

Who would have ever thought those memories and experiences, combined with your passion and love for writing, could take you this far? No one could have known, but many have dreamed of this day for you, so many people from so many different stages of your life.

This is the true story of an Oklahoma State University alumnus from the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, the story of 27-year-old Staff Sgt. R. Fred Minnick Jr.

"I knew when Fred was 2 years old he would be loving and giving," said Trina Minnick, his mother. "He's honest and dependable, compassionate and tender-hearted. He will make a wonderful husband and dad some day."

Minnick always has loved agriculture and growing up in the small town of Jones, Okla., he was constantly around it.

"Ever since being in FFA, I've always thought of myself as an ag guy, and FFA is where I got my start as a writer," said Minnick.

After being elected as reporter for his FFA chapter, Minnick was encouraged by Bart Effinger, his FFA adviser and high school agricultural education teacher, to write articles about FFA activities and submit them to the local paper.

Knowing that he had two loves, writing and agriculture, Minnick chose agricultural communications as his major and never looked back.

"The passion for both agriculture and writing grew, and I decided to combine my loves in ag comm," said Minnick. "In my opinion, it's the best overall degree offered at OSU. You receive such a rounded education in science and communications that you can literally go into any respected field. When I was interviewing for jobs, public relations employers were amazed at my scientific, animal science specifically, knowledge and ability to translate the technical jargon. I contribute this to my education at OSU."

Minnick started his college career at OSU in August 1996. No more than two months later, Minnick found himself office, enlisting as a soldier to serve his country and help pay for his education.

During his sophomore year at OSU, Minnick began writing for the *Daily O'Collegian*. Though not many of his stories were about agriculture, he got a good taste of writing for press and how to survive in the field of journalism. Minnick also wrote for the *Daily Oklahoman* before he graduated from OSU.

After graduation, Minnick took a job with Bader Rutter, an advertising and public relations firm in Milwaukee, Wis. Minnick worked there from his graduation in August 2001 until February 2004.

Little did Minnick know his passion for writing and his country would take him half way around the world.

Instead of receiving the usual type of love note on Valentine's Day 2003, Minnick received a little "love note" of his own from the U.S. Army. His unit was placed "on standby" for deployment. He was notified in November 2003 that his 2004 Valentine's Day gift was to be a one-year trip to Iraq.

Minnick's unit — the 139 Mobile Public Affairs Detachment — was attached to the Army's first Stryker Brigade. Minnick would work and report along side the Army, usually the infantry brigade to which his unit was attached.

"I actually felt a large sense of pride," said Minnick. "I truly felt honored to be in a position where I could serve my country in such an important position. I mean, as a public affairs soldier, you literally have an awesome responsibility. It is our job to communicate the positive stories, which we did very proficiently."

Later that year, Minnick found himself in Mosul, Iraq. On a day-to-day basis, he covered car bombs, raids on insurgents and other happenings in the area.

Being an infantryman at heart, Minnick loved the action, but he hated to see the carnage that was the result of so many attacks by the insurgents.

He generally wrote the positive side of the war. Writing about school openings and arrests made were some of the articles and photographs Minnick reported.

However, being exposed to it all was getting to him. He said he needed to get away from the thoughts and images the Army didn't want to be heard or seen. So, he decided to start a journal. When that didn't do the trick, he began writing a blog he could share with people back home.

"At first, I started the blog so people could know I was OK and because I was tired of the mainstream media reports," said Minnick. "After a while, it became more therapeutic than anything. I found it very helpful for my emotional state to express my feelings and get the deaths of friends off my chest."

Minnick's actions are similar to what has been the growing trend among troops today. Many soldiers have started writing on the Internet as their personal way of dealing with all the emotions that come with a tour of duty.

After a while, Minnick was contacted by literary agents and movie producers. Some even wanted Minnick to write a screenplay. Although he refused, it did give him the idea and initiative to write a book about his experiences.

Even though he is unable to pinpoint the exact nature of the book, he refers to it as a more comical book than others with the same topic. Minnick mainly wants to illustrate a true sense of war.

“In one chapter, I describe the smell of blood and how you eventually become numb to the carnage,” said Minnick. “And in another chapter, I talk about an Iraqi with a gold tooth, and I compare him to a pimp in the hood. My goal is for it to be an emotional roller coaster because that is what war is. I want people to laugh on one page and to cry on the next.”

Even though Minnick may have felt alone at times, he was far from being alone in this world. His parents have always been a support system for him and calling Ronnie and Trina Minnick anything other than “extremely proud parents” would not be a fitting title. They have seen their soldier through more than anyone. From the silly things Minnick did when he was a child to the nightmares and flashbacks he had when he came home, the Minnicks have seen him through it all.

“There’s not a mother on this planet who could be more proud of her son,” said Trina Minnick. “He has served his country well, and he’s a survivor. Sometimes it’s hard to believe he’s my son, but he is.”

Even though Fred Minnick came home without any physical battle scars, it doesn’t mean there aren’t any scars at all. It took the Vietnam War and almost 10 years for psychiatrists to identify the symptoms as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Army National Guard recruiting order. However, the military prefers the term “Temporary Adjustment Disorder.” Nightmares and flashbacks are two of the many signs of TAD.

Minnick’s parents actually experienced one of the nightmares that shake soldiers to their core.

“One night after his return Fred said he was going to sleep in our backyard,” said Ronnie Minnick. “He said he wanted some peace and quiet. About 2 a.m., Fred started beating on the patio door, screaming ‘Hajji is everywhere!’”

The elder Minnick said Fred’s younger brother, Justin, let the soldier in the house. He ran to his parents’ bedroom door screaming the same thing.

“Hajji is everywhere and we need to leave now!” demanded Fred Minnick.

His father’s first thought was that it was a big joke. This was something his son would have done before the war.

The frightening glare on his son’s face told him it was not a joke.

“Security has been breached in Sector 9 or Tower 9! Hajji are everywhere!” screamed Fred Minnick. “We don’t have time. We have to leave now!”

A few seconds later, a crying soldier came back inside and said, “I can see how a soldier can kill his wife during his sleep and go to prison for it. It isn’t fair.”

The military has taken steps to help prepare the troops for combat stress by requiring them to attend a pre-deployment session where they learn the warning signs and how to get help for the illness while they are there and when they return, which Minnick has done.

Minnick did something else to help him deal with the TAD. He used his blog to write about his experiences.

“Fred’s blog was a way of getting things off his chest and even sharing with other people in the world what soldiers were seeing,” said Ronnie Minnick.

Minnick’s blog was one of his first steps in writing his book.

“Through my blog, I garnered a large readership,” said Minnick. “I started writing and sending my work out to publishers and agents who were highly regarded. The idea behind the book actually came from all my readers who begged me to write about my experiences.”

Minnick said his book is tentatively set to be released in March or April.

Through agriculture, OSU and his country, Minnick has turned his passion into a successful career. Today, Minnick has reached his goals with the help of OSU