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IRAQ

End war, and bring Josh home

In the July 29 story about John Edwards' convention speech, Herald writer Martin Merzer reports that, "Edwards spoke with passion about the nation's debt to those who are fighting in Iraq" -- and he linked them to Kerry.

I heard the speech, and I am supporting the Kerry-Edwards ticket with new passion and commitment because of one particular soldier: Pfc. Joshua David Elder, a 27-year-old soldier from Auburn, Maine. He was my seatmate on a flight from Portland to Atlanta last month. Josh was heading to rejoin the Maine Army National Guard's 133rd Engineer Battalion in Mosul, Iraq. He is a convoy driver.

Josh, a bundle of barely under-the-surface tension, spent the flight sky-watching, flipping papers and chatting. He grew up in Lewiston and completed his education with a GED. He joined the Guard in December 2001 and has served in Iraq for almost five months. His most recent job was at Wal-Mart at a salary level that would qualify him for the Earned Income Tax Credit.

His conversation covered his home leave, gold-collecting in Iraq and hopes for the future. I wanted to ask how he felt about this war, if he had killed anyone, watched people die or lost comrades. I refrained, and he didn't go there.

Much as he dreaded going back, at some level this war seemed to give him a status he had not had before, and he clearly relished it. One evening his father took him to a local bar and introduced him to the owner as his son on the front lines. Josh was honored and proud when his drink was on the house, enjoying his notoriety and proud to be a soldier. He was featured in several Maine newspaper articles.

Josh has plans. He said that he has developed a skill with trucks and wants get work driving and repairing them when he comes back. He has been researching the business of slot machines. As the flight ended, the flight attendant requested that the passengers stay seated while five soldiers heading back to Iraq disembark first. We did, clapping as they marched off. But I stifled sobs of fear for my new friend. There were good reasons to worry about Josh. His e-mail a few days after our flight reported that ``two days ago a striker vehicle rolled over on its back and killed two. A striker vehicle runs patrols along the streets of Iraq, Kuwait and more. They are heavily equipped, with the latest technology and, of course, very heavy. I was there when it turned over. We were on a convoy to Fort Fulda. It was approximately 1,000 feet or so away. The helicopter tried to rescue them, but ultimately they had no chance due to the weight."

Josh, as of an e-mail last Wednesday, is OK: ``Just another hot day here. Just finished watching a true story -- *Mississippi Burning*. I'm just happy to know segregation isn't a problem anymore, at least publicly."

Young men and women from small towns and working-class neighborhoods from throughout our country are on the front lines. I am supporting the Kerry-Edwards ticket because it is time to end this war and get them home. Kerry would not have gotten us into this mess in the first place. He'll find the right way out and won't get us into another unilateral war.

Coral Gables