



FIERCE PATRIOT

ANN GILDROY BUILDS TRUST IN IRAQ

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Ann Gildroy '90 came to Nashoba Brooks as a fifth grader and left after her seventh grade year to enter Groton's second form. She went on to the Foreign Service School of Georgetown University, where she majored in International Security and Diplomacy in World Affairs. She then tried out the worlds of banking and finance in New York and Washington before signing onto the Marine Corps in 2001. After graduating from Officer Candidate School in the top ten percent of her class, First Lieutenant Gildroy became an operations officer for Marine Aircraft Group 24, based in Hawaii, before being sent to Iraq.

Shortly after her arrival in Najaf in August 2004, she “put together a quick little sales pitch” about how she felt she had the right skills to work with the Iraqi security forces, and ended up in Diwaniyah, 100 miles south of Baghdad, as an Iraqi Security Force Liaison Officer to the 8th Iraqi Army Division and Central South Security Forces. She worked with Iraqi security forces and negotiated on behalf of the American command with provincial governors and senior Iraqi military and police commanders.

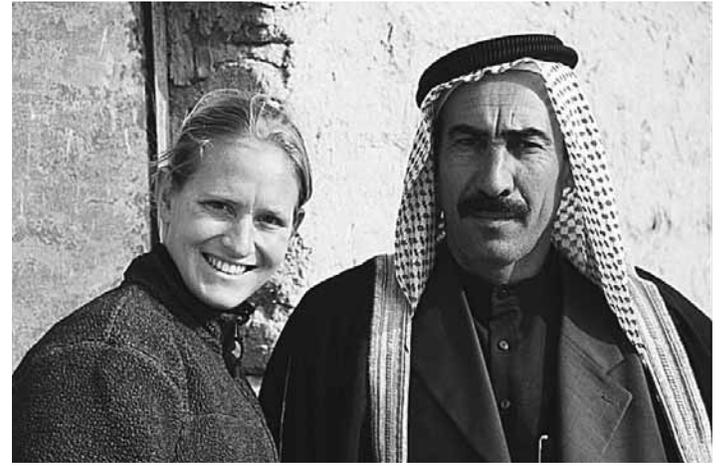
When Ann returned from Iraq in 2005, she entered Harvard Business School and worked in the intervening summer as an investment banking associate with Goldman Sachs in New York. Ann (by now with the rank of captain) returned to Iraq in 2007, to the southern provinces, as one of three Marines chosen by General David H. Petraeus, commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, to live and work with tribal leaders. As reported by Anne Garrels in an NPR segment on Ann Gildroy and her two male compatriots, “The three Marines face significant challenges. They are fighting not only poverty and the mistrust that is the legacy of broken promises by the U.S., but also the influence of the Shiite militias. Their goals are to rebuild the trust of the local people, including forging ties with local tribes to counter the militias.”

The following interview that Ann granted for Nashoba Brooks, conducted by long distance in late January, 2008, catches her in the final months of her second deployment in Iraq. Ann took time away from her intense work in Qadisiyah to stay in touch, commenting, “I'd be happy to do this. Nashoba did a great deal for me.”

Captain Ann Gildroy is one of the three Marines chosen by General David H. Petraeus, commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, to live and work with tribal leaders as they counter the al-Mahdi militia.

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A conversation with Ann Gildroy in Iraq

Nashoba Brooks: Jan Maguire [*Summer Center at Nashoba Brooks School Director and former math teacher*] remembers a school assembly where you stood up and asked some hard questions of Representative Chet Atkins. When he didn't answer directly, you refused to give up. Jan said that she was shifting uneasily in her seat but at the same time thinking, "Here's a girl who will hang tough and do good work." Were you aware that you were being "tough"?

Ann Gildroy: Actually I do not recall that day. I do remember the Rep, because I restored a small colonial cemetery near my house and he came to the cemetery when I was finished to present me with the American flag for the new flagpole I placed there.

My ability to question authority does not come from a contrarian nature or the mere desire to oppose authority. Most of my character development is a result of growing up with my brother, Colin, one of the kindest and most tenacious people I have ever known. Unfortunately, as a child he suffered a great deal of verbal abuse from his peers and each day of school brought him tremendous anxiety.

We both attended public elementary

school. For a period of time, we rode back and forth to school on the yellow bus. On one particular day during the first grade, Colin was in the back of the bus. The kids were all gathered around his seat and doing their best to scare and torment him. I could hear this all from the front of the bus. I distinctly remember being embarrassed by him at that point, and wishing that I was somewhere else. I did not do anything to help him. My brother is three years older than me.

However, when I returned home that day it was as if something forever changed in me. I felt a deep sense of shame for not helping my brother due to my concerns over being considered popular and my desire to fit in. I think that was the last day I ever desired to "fit in" or conform to the wishes or desires of others. I realized that it would be me who would define what was right or wrong regardless of the acceptance of others and without concern for their opinion or my own desire to be liked by them.

After that moment, I continually sought to protect the weak. I constantly danced with the boys in school who everyone refused to talk to at recess. I came to the aid of those who were picked on during kickball or other games at recess. I started to become keenly aware of how empowering it was to free oneself from the need to be wanted and accepted by the crowd. So I am sure by the time I entered the fifth grade in Nashoba it did not occur to me to think twice about asking whatever question came to mind.

NBS: Even given this courage and strength of purpose, what led you from Georgetown and the world of finance to military service?

Ann: I attended the Foreign Service School at Georgetown, where we studied the causes of war and international conflict during most of my time there. I had been intrigued by why men fight since I first found my father's green beret in a trunk in our house. I used to ask him endless questions about what it was like to be in the military, and I believe that my desire to serve began at a young age.

I think I have always been a fierce patriot. People serve their nation in many capacities, but for me I felt potentially offering all that I have for my country was the only thing that would satiate my desire to give back to America a fraction of what she had given to me. You know the quote that goes something like "I regret that I have but one life to give to my country" — that captures how strongly I felt about service to the nation. I think that being in an environment where few people expressed an interest to serve in a military capacity perhaps furthered my desire to serve.

I attempted to join the Marine Corps my senior year in college. I went to the recruiting station and had most of the paperwork filled out in order to begin Officer Candidate School. I thought when I told my parents, and especially my father, they would be very proud of me. Instead they had a visceral reaction. My



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parents started without a dime to their name, and were never afforded the educational or career opportunities that I had before me. Therefore, I think they wanted me to take a different path than the one they had already come down.

When I went to Wall Street I realized that I would forever regret not exploring my passion to serve. So I contracted with the Marine Corps in August of 2001. My plan was to wait to tell my parents until right before the start of my training in October of 2001. I think, looking back, the conversation was far more emotional due to the events of September 11, because we all knew the consequences were very real.

NBS: After you graduated from OCS, and were then posted to Hawaii as operations officer for an aircraft group, was there already some notion that you would go to Iraq, or that you would be posted to some other area involving multi-national forces? Why were you singled out as a prospect for this kind of work?

Ann: No, I was not being "set up" for the job, or hand-molded or anything. I ended up in Iraq, because a request for a "hot fill" (meaning they needed an officer yesterday) came down to my unit. I volunteered immediately, but I was only a lieutenant, and the position in Iraq was for a major. My commander told me she would first give the opportunity to the officers above me. All of them declined, and my wish to go and fight for the country was fulfilled.

NBS: In 2004, as Iraqi Security Force Liaison Officer to the 8th Iraqi Army Division and Central South Security Forces, you worked and traveled exclusively with Iraqi security forces. The Iraqi soldiers must have been stunned to be in such close contact with not only an American, but an American who was also a female, and a female who was also a Marine.

Ann: Yes, they were stunned to be in such close contact with both an American Marine and also an American female. However, the fighting during that time was so difficult that most of the soldiers were focused on the mission. Traveling exclusively with Iraqis took some time to adjust to here. It served to form incredible trust between us, and I believe they felt honored to have the responsibility of a young woman's life in their hands. In fact, I am sure it emboldened them and offered them a great deal of pride in their capabilities and mission. They knew I was on their side, and was willing to demonstrate my faith in them by traveling with them.

It may be surprising, but I found my acceptance by hundreds of Iraqi soldiers far easier in many ways when compared with being accepted by Marine infantrymen or Army Special Forces teams. In fact the latter is far trickier and takes an impenetrable layer of thick skin.

I did not realize it at first, but by the end of my second tour I started to feel that I had done something for women's liberation here in Iraq. I am consistently

the only female who eats with Iraqi males. When the son of one of my Iraqi commanders was killed, I mourned on the male side of the funeral building (men and women here mourn separately). I knew that each Iraqi man who was present at any of those events must have thought a little bit about the contrast between my treatment and the treatment of their own women. When General Casey visited us, one of my Iraqi battalion commanders told him that my work was worth ten of his best men. He said this in front of a number of Iraqi soldiers, and it was a very proud moment for me.

The Iraqis are like most other human beings. They are keenly aware of who genuinely respects and likes them as people. I have never once felt more entitled than any one of the Iraqis I have come in contact with, and certainly do not think I have ever made them feel that way. I have a great deal of compassion for them, and believe that comes across—it is something they feel is genuine. I know that it could just as easily have been me standing on the side of the road with no shoes, and wondering where my next meal would come from. Instead, I was born in Boston. Since I am not religious I see that as nothing other than pure luck.

NBS: As an advisor to and liaison with Iraqi troops, you met with General Petraeus [then Lt. General] and approached him with a concern about the equipment being provided to your Iraqi soldiers. What was the condition of the equipment, and

what was his reaction to your request for improving it?

Ann: I am not sure if you remember the battle for Najaf in 2004. The Iraqi unit I worked with had about a 60 percent desertion rate. Each man had no more than five rounds of ammunition in their magazines, and they were facing a fierce enemy. At the time, Lt. Gen. Petraeus was responsible for the training and equipping of the Iraqi Security Forces. Not an easy task. I traveled with some of my Iraqis up to a warehouse in Baghdad near to Abu Ghraib. It was a long and difficult trip. I was determined to sit there in front of the warehouse until the American contractors running it gave me flak vests and anything else the Iraqis needed to continue the fight in Najaf. The same day I was staging my mini-protest, Lt. Gen. Petraeus and Gen. Casey landed in their helicopters to take a tour of the very warehouse that I was sitting in front of. They did not see me, but I saw them. It was then I found out who Lt. Gen. Petraeus was and what he was responsible for doing here. I went back to Najaf with my guys and the new equipment that the contractors eventually issued to us. However, it was not enough—not even close to enough. I had tried numerous times to use the “channels” to get logistics support for the Iraqis. It was not working. I remember finding a Polish soldier who had a Centrix system that had the e-mail addresses for the General’s command. I e-mailed as many people as I could find and BCC’ed the General. I sent

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them some pretty graphic pictures of our circumstances.

A few days later I received word that Lt. Gen. Petraeus would visit us in Najaf. I would be one of the people to brief him. I added some fairly critical slides to my presentation about the inability of the system to provide Iraqis with what they needed. My Marine commander removed them, but I verbally briefed them anyway to Lt. Gen. Petraeus. My first impression of him was how willing he was to acknowledge any problem, and he struck me as a man who really wanted the ground truth. He was not defensive at all, and in fact seemed pleased with the report. I knew then he really wanted to fix the system, and was willing to listen to a



lieutenant. He is a man who wants to achieve his mission and is fiercely dedicated to it, but he is not at all concerned about putting lipstick on a pig, as we say in the military. He serves the interest of others instead of himself. It is a rare quality, and one that compels those around him to do their best.

NBS: After that extraordinary experience, you came back to the U.S. and Harvard Business School. What was it like to be in Cambridge after a year in Iraq? Were you able to slip back into your previous interest in banking/finance? What haunted you the most about Iraq during that time away?

Ann: After I got off the plane from Iraq, I went home just long enough to re-pack my bags, and then I headed for Harvard Business School. I was still on active duty until the first semester of my first year there. I'd fought with the Marine Corps to use my vacation in order to begin school, so I had very little downtime between heading home and starting my new life.

It was one of the most difficult transitions in my thirty years. The guilt I carried with me about leaving the Iraqis and my fellow service members to continue fighting was intense and plagued me constantly. I folded into myself, and ostracized myself socially. I focused all of my energies on academics, because I felt that the young men and women who did not come home deserved to know I would make the most of the opportunity before

me. I have never felt as alone as I did that first year.

The transition from war is different for each soldier and marine. Typically upon return they are with each other, which eases the transition. I had a few former service members I clung to at Harvard Business School, but I was simply unable to relax and enjoy the social environment at the school. I would never be the same animated and jovial person I was prior to experiencing Iraq. When I had landed in Kuwait on my way home, I was booking my follow-on tickets to my final destination to see my parents. I will never forget the enormity of the emotions I had, realizing how many young men and women would never again return home. It was impossible for me to justify sitting on a boat cruise in Boston Harbor, enjoying cocktails, while my buddies were gutting it out here in Iraq.

The war lives with you every day. There is nothing about the experience that does not haunt you, whether it is faces you see in your mind, Iraqis you worry about daily, or unwanted news from the front. Until it is over we will all continue to live it. I cannot point to one thing that most haunted me, but perhaps it was not saying goodbye to a corporal in our unit. I flew with him on his way out of country. His body was in the bag at my feet. I distinctly remember wanting to kneel by his side and hold him to prevent him from shaking on the deck of the helicopter. I was too worried to embrace the black plastic upon my exit, because I felt the heli-

copter crew would find my actions inappropriate. I deeply regret my failure to hold him one last time.

NBS: That answers better than anything else the question about why you have returned to Iraq. You're back because of memories like this—and because you continue to live the war in your mind. But you're also back because of your respect for General Petraeus and your belief that he would allow you to serve in a truly meaningful way. What was your first thought when he asked you to go back there? What was the response of your parents this time?

Ann: General Petraeus is the one leader I would follow into the depths of hell and back. His selfless dedication, and constant willingness to serve others is compelling. I have been and continue to be honored to work for him. He clearly will be one of the most influential people in my life, so I did not hesitate to forego anything to be in service to him and the Iraqi people again.

Telling my parents was incredibly difficult. My mother had a very strong reaction to my return. I think for all of us, we know that each extra day here brings a greater chance of death. Mom and Dad had relaxed into my safety back in the United States. To them I was done with Iraq. They too had given what they felt was needed already, and now I was asking them to go through it again. People with children in a combat zone go through incredible stress and anxiety, and in some





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ways I think greater than we do here. It is a helpless feeling to sit at home, waiting for news at home. I felt very badly for making my parents so sad, but I knew that they knew it was the right thing to do.

Mentally I found it extremely difficult to return. Perhaps I too wondered—How many times can you roll the dice here and come out okay? When I said goodbye to my parents and my home, I thought to myself, “My God, this is an incredible sacrifice, and I hope I make it back to touch and see these people again.”

NBS: Now that you’ve been back in Iraq for some months, living and working in Qadisiyah, have you been able to find some semblance of normalcy? If there were to be such a thing as a typical day in Qadisiyah, could you describe it?

Ann: There is nothing typical about each day here. When we first arrived in the province the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia controlled approximately 80 percent of the

urban areas. So our focus at that point was to fight the militia. We developed a plan to employ counterinsurgency tactics, and then executed that operation with the Polish forces here. It was a very difficult time for a few months, but in the end the operation was a success and at the moment, the city is ours again. So during that time we would often sleep in a small patrol base in the city, and conduct foot patrols in order to “soft clear” the houses in the areas of potential weapons caches and to gain what we call “atmospherics” from the people.

Now a typical day may be heading out to some remote areas in the province and checking on our men who we have hired to provide security. Do they have their weapons? Are they at their posts? Have they been attacked, and how did they respond? After talking to the village people, we usually make our way over to a mud structure to have lunch with the local Sheikh. We may sit with him for several hours and gather necessary information to keep the enemy at bay. However, each day brings something new.

NBS: For the Sheikhs, as with the Iraqi soldiers in 2004, it must have been a shock, at least at first, to interact so closely with a female American Marine. Was it difficult to win their trust?

Ann: Trying to understand how trust is built and why one person feels comfortable with another is very complicated. I think again it goes back to the clear

demonstration of personal risk. The Sheikhs know that we travel each day to see them at great personal risk, and we are willing to remove our weapons and gear in their presence. Sitting at lunch with no boots, no armor, and no quick means of escape is a huge demonstration of one’s willingness to further the relationship.

Oftentimes we have a very Amerocentric way of thinking about things here. In the beginning of the war I noticed American commanders were not willing to risk loss of life or limb in order to attend a lunch or tribal ceremony. The commanders were, however, willing to do that for tangible military gains, such as securing a building or uncovering a weapons cache. In a counterinsurgency, a lunch and a relationship is a tangible gain. In many respects, the people are the terrain in this type of war. You must secure them. Therefore, our team approaches everything we do with an effort to fight for their trust.

Constant “face time” in the villages with the people is very important to the relationship. Sitting on the floor and eating with your hands is equally important to the fight. Our team genuinely enjoys and loves the people, so again I think this furthers our ability to gain their trust.

Finally, if we promise something we deliver it. Perhaps the most important thing here is to be true to your word.

NBS: Last year, there was a draft bill in the federal Council of Representatives that spelled out the authority of provincial



government, giving the bulk of the power to provincial governors rather than to provincial councils. How are current issues/developments involving Iraqi governance impacting your work; your goals?

Ann: Needless to say the governance piece here is a mess, and it impacts my work almost daily. Southern Iraq is complicated, and unfortunately, very important to the overall war effort. The current government down here in the South is wretched, and they suck every bit of patience from me. In theory, it was a great idea to empower the local governors, and in practice it has made our work very difficult. The security portion of this war, which

the surge was designed to help with, is a mere fraction of the pie. I am afraid we have placed some very calculating and manipulative Islamists in power in the South, and I do not see the situation changing anytime soon. I work very closely with the tribes, and the government feels incredibly threatened by the power of the Sheikhs. So, in many ways, I am in direct opposition to the very government I should in theory be supporting.

NBS: When you return this time from Iraq, in 2008, you plan to return to Goldman Sachs—to the Houston division—as an investment banker. What do you imagine this experience—or maybe the whole rest of your life—will be like after your time in Iraq?

Ann: I am trying to live more in the moment at this point. I will have to embrace the transition upon returning home. In many ways, here in Iraq, you are as alive as you will ever be. Deep service is incredibly rewarding despite the anxieties brought on by war. Life here is at its base—survival. Complications of modern society, money, relationships, and other things do not exist. I find that I am really just reduced to a basic human in this capacity, and simple pleasures are exhilarating.

It seems at home it takes so much more to stimulate the mind and body. I think for the “whole rest of my life” I will always spend moments thinking of my experiences here. If I make it home, I too

will always take time to be grateful for what I have been given and the expensive freedoms I enjoy. I hope that in some ways it empowers me to remember what is important in life, and hopefully the pursuit of all things material will not consume me in the world of Wall Street.

NBS: In his blog, Wes Morgan [a Princeton student who spent a summer in Iraq] talked about meeting you and Seth Moulton [one of the other Marines assigned to the South by General Petraeus]. He ended that entry about the two of you with this: “I’m sure they would dislike this characterization, but to me they seemed like a pair of twenty-first-century Lawrences of Arabia. I have never met two more impressive people in my life.” Do you ever have a “Lawrence of Arabia” moment?

Ann: I think I have had a few “Lawrence of Arabia” moments. Perhaps a memorable one would be when the Iraqi soldiers brought me a little Arabian horse. The horse had a bridle, but there was no saddle. They know I love horses, and there really aren’t many here in Iraq. So I hopped on and started galloping around the Iraqi Army compound with my weapon on my back. The soldiers started cheering as I passed them. It was a welcome diversion for all of us.

— Elizabeth Lutyens



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