

Soldier risked war, worked for peace

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Joseph M. Zabawa has done the work it takes to get feuding peoples to prefer peace. Eventually, even implacably hostile foes will find a good reason to lay down their arms, he noted.

"Fighting gets old after awhile," said the 26-year-old reservist who has served in Bosnia and Afghanistan. "The average person doesn't want to be a part of it."

Zabawa, whose parents live in Hilton, graduated from Aquinas Institute in Rochester in 1994, and is a state trooper. He sees his roles as soldier and trooper having a common purpose — "to make peace."

In both Bosnia and Afghanistan, Zabawa served with the 401st Civil Affairs Battalion, based in Webster. Zabawa was among 40 or so reservists who returned from Afghanistan Dec. 11, after a tour that began in February.

In both Bosnia, where he served in 1999-2000, and in Afghanistan, Zabawa said he worked with the civilian population to help rebuild their shattered communities, and to mediate disputes between opposing groups of civilians and between civilians and the U.S. Army. In both countries, he said, he and his fellow soldiers would assess villages, investigating possible sites for U.S. aid to improve or establish schools, water systems, irrigation, roads and health clinics.

He added that his job in both countries also brought him into contact with civilians who had disputes with the U.S. military over such issues as Army vehicles tearing up a villager's land. Civil-affairs personnel investigate such disputes, he said, and in certain instances will call on the military to compensate people for damage done to their property. In Afghanistan, he noted, the U.S. Army has the added burden of civilians' memories of Soviet occupation.

"When the Soviets came in, they pretty much did what they wanted," he said. He added that he and his fellow civil-affairs soldiers had to assure Afghans that they were "not here to hurt the average local or



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Staff Sgt. Joseph M. Zabawa has worked with local civilians in both Bosnia and Afghanistan.

Afghan." But when innocent civilians are unintentionally killed by U.S. military action, such incidents "put pressure on civil affairs."

"How do we assure them that we

didn't mean it?" he asked rhetorically.

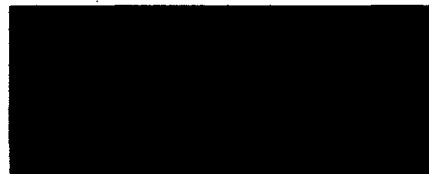
Zabawa added that it's difficult to understand some of the pressures U.S. soldiers face in other countries. He noted, for example, that U.S. soldiers often draw crowds of curious onlookers in other countries, and that crowds can mean trouble.

"If you do something, and all of sudden you've got a crowd of people around you, it makes your job harder."

As for Afghanistan, he said the people were generally friendly, and that many were relieved to be rid of the Taliban's onerous rule. He said he formed friendships with some of his translators in Afghanistan, and noted that he and his fellow soldiers spent one night listening to Afghans play music — a practice banned by the Taliban. Zabawa said that he hoped his work in Afghanistan would help to end terrorism.

"Hopefully, my little part that I did will help eliminate what (created) the Taliban," he said. He cautioned that the Afghan people still live in an uncertain situation, but concluded his observations on a high note.

"I think it may take some time, but they know their future is hopeful."



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