



HOWARD HOEGA STANDS AT THE VIRGINIA WAR MEMORIAL IN RICHMOND. PHOTO BY SCOTT ELMQUIST



ONE TRAGIC EXPERIENCE

shaped his life & his leadership

IRAQ WAR VETERAN HOWARD HOEGE
NOW LEADS A CONSULTING FIRM
AND TEACHES AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

BY **Peter Galuszka**

The sun was murderously hot in Iraq's northern Nineveh Province on July 3, 2003. Howard Hoega, an Army soldier and lawyer, his assault rifle at the ready, was with an American and Iraqi team searching for a mass grave of some of Saddam Hussein's victims.

A guide wandered around empty gullies before settling on one. "The ground was really too hard to dig by hand," said Hoega, a West Point graduate. The backhoe operator started digging. "Before long, he had pulled up a brightly colored fabric – part of a woman's clothing," Hoega said.

The experience unnerved him. Uncovered were the bodies of mostly Kurdish women and children. Many had been executed by gunshots to the backs of their skulls. He felt a rush as he gingerly removed the remains of a toddler.

"I deployed on my son's second birthday and while I was deployed, my daughter started kindergarten as a 5-year-old. I got a little emotional," he said.

Still military-trim at the age of 44, Hoega now lives in Charlottesville where he runs 3H3 Leadership LLC, a consulting firm. He also teaches at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia where he was on staff for four years.

Sitting in U.Va.'s Harrison Library, Hoega described his wide assortment of leadership experiences. After graduating from West Point as first captain of the Corps of Cadets, he further honed his skills as an Army ranger, an infantry commander, a Judge Advocate General lawyer, Iraq War veteran and Senate investigator of wayward private contractors hired by the U.S. government in Afghanistan.

That one experience – picking up the body of the murdered Kurdish child – was an epiphany that brought together his intense concerns for

service, ethics and wise public policy-making. When he returned home after his 11-month tour in Iraq, he said he “personally became very interested in this question of how policy-makers internalize the human cost of decisions they make or don’t make.”

That’s a lesson for anyone in a public leadership position, including local, state or federal government, said Hoega in a deep voice that could be mistaken for actor George Clooney’s. Public action has to be thoroughly planned with an eye toward unexpected consequences. Officials must behave with the highest of standards and intentions. They must put themselves last.

If there were ever a need for enlightened public leadership, it is now, said Hoega, noting recent police behavior and race-related disturbances in places such as Ferguson, Mo., and Baltimore. What

Cathy Lewis, president and chief executive of Norfolk’s CIVIC Leadership Institute, said that Hoega has worked with her nonprofit group “and we hope to work with him again.” Her 19-year-old institution links senior executives in the Hampton Roads area and helps them leverage their skills to service work.

Hoega was especially useful because he helped the institute and some of the senior corporate executives involved with it understand that they may need to explore new approaches when they do service work.

“Their skills with corporations may not be readily transferable,” she said. Their employees are on payrolls and can be told what to do. But when the executives work with nonprofits, “they need to persuade people” and learn how to negotiate in different ways, she said.



I personally became very interested in this question of how policy-makers internalize the human cost of decisions they make or don’t make.” – Howard Hoega



The 2003 photos show Hoega with an Iraqi law clerk in Sinjar, Iraqi men sharing a meal and the remains of a Kurdish child murdered by Saddam Hussein’s forces. Photos courtesy of Howard Hoega

may be instructive is the experience of a group of American soldiers who were surrounded by hostile civilians in Iraq.

“Rather than becoming hostile, they took a knee, pointed their weapons down and smiled. That broke things up,” Hoega said. “We could spend hours and days talking about the relevance of that.”

He brings such insights to clients and associates at Hampton Roads institutions such as the CIVIC Leadership Institute, the Hampton Roads Community Foundation, Norfolk Academy’s Center for Civic and Global Leadership, and the Mariners’ Museum.

“Howard’s very creative, very personable and has a wonderful way of enhancing leadership,” said Bruce Bradley, a retired publisher of The Virginian-Pilot who is on the board of the community foundation. He said Hoega worked for about nine months with his group and made big improvements by understanding the needs of nonprofits and encouraging them to do a better job negotiating with disparate groups and dealing with the news media.

Another area where Hoega may be useful is helping the institute come up with a longer-term strategic vision that is carefully thought through. “We want to have the time and skills to do the most good for the community,” she said.



Public service comes naturally to Hoega, who was born in Germany where his father, a West Point graduate, was stationed. The family moved around Army posts before eventually settling in the Houston area where his father worked for an oil firm. Hoega wanted to go to West Point as well, but did not make it on the first try.

“I didn’t make it into any college but one – the University of Texas at Austin. And that’s because they had a law on the books that said you were guaranteed admission if you had certain grades or SAT scores,” he said.

Not quitting, Hoega reapplied to West Point and was admitted

the next year.

The service school's rigorous environment and discipline was one of his first tests as a leader, but it wasn't quite what he expected.

"There's a crucible aspect to it. You have to discover yourself. Leaders have to be really self-aware," he said.

The military, he discovered, did rely on many of the familiar trappings of formality, structure and tradition. What was "really eye-opening" for Hoege was that the truly effective leaders managed others without having to "leverage those instruments."

An example was Gen. Robert Foley. The Commandant of Cadets was a physically imposing former basketball player who had won the Medal of Honor and had a highly visible scar to prove it.

"There was an aura around this guy but you'd never meet a more humble man with a more self-deprecating humor. He would hug you. He showed some vulnerability.

"As a result, all of us who knew him would run through walls for him," said Hoege who graduated from West Point in 1994.

Next came Ranger school, a tough, 72-day-long training program for assault infantry troops. Hoege had selected infantry as his specialty and getting the coveted Ranger tab was strongly encouraged. Out of 385 students who started, only about 20 or 25 would make it through all phases without being kicked back or having to drop out, he said.

"It was physically demanding and emotionally stressful," said Hoege who made all phases, which included the rugged mountains of Georgia, arid Texas desert, and the snake and alligator-infested swamps of Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

One way Hoege says he made it through the ordeal was by cooperating with three other students who made a pact to help each other as they rotated through practicing leading small groups of soldiers.

"With all four of those guys, we went straight through. By committing to someone else first, it benefited each of us," he said.

At Fort Hood, Texas, he became a platoon leader with a mechanized infantry unit and served as aide-de-camp to Gen. Russel Honore, who won attention for organizing relief activities in the Gulf Coast area after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Hoege then decided to apply to a special Army program to go to law school and become a Judge Advocate General lawyer. He was accepted and went to the University of Virginia. Being in Charlottesville had the added benefit of being home to the Army's JAG training center.

The newly minted military lawyer was assigned to the famed 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky. He was there for six weeks – long enough to get his family settled, when he was deployed to Kuwait in preparation for the invasion of Iraq.

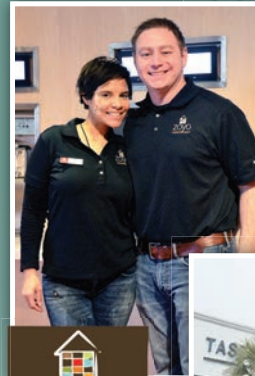
His unit mounted on trucks and headed north across the border.

"It's the thing of which I am most professionally proud," he said. "There was nothing that made me feel more honorable, more needed and more purposeful."

But he added that involved only the invasion phase, which took him to Iraqi cities Iskandariye, Mosul and Tal Afar where he spent most of his tour. The post-combat, occupation part was a mess, Hoege said, because policy planners had not plotted out how to handle the next phase of the war.

"So, you feel that this is the very essence of everything I have ever worked for, you had the sense that, boy, this is the most futile

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The 2003 photos, clockwise from above, show Hoege with a group of Yazidi children in Sinjar, trainees at the police academy in Sinjar, Hoege teaching at that academy and more Yazidi children. Photos courtesy of Howard Hoege

thing I've ever done," he said.

As a JAG officer, Hoege wasn't involved directly in combat. "I wasn't kicking in doors or anything," he said.

But he did have some interesting experiences. He was involved in a court martial at an airfield near Mosul. The case involved a soldier accused of conspiring to smuggle assault rifles taken from Iraqi civilians to the U.S. In the middle of the trial, two large rockets struck the airfield.

"Everybody hits the floor. We check ourselves and we're OK. There was not damage to the building. Then the defense counsel, who had been reviewing evidence, looks at the judge and says, 'I am sorry, your honor, but I lost my train of thought.'"

Aside from the tragic incident uncovering Kurdish bodies, other experiences in Iraq forged Hoege's views on public policy. Part of his duties included training Iraqi police and border guards in Western legal concepts in a courthouse in Sinjar in Northern Iraq.

In something of a moment of clarity, Hoege learned firsthand how Iraqi justice operated under Saddam Hussein. A judge thanked him for saying that coerced confessions were a bad idea. Hoege also found that in a murder case, tribesmen would finger people from rival tribes as the perpetrator. A suspect was arrested according to the one paid the smallest bribe to police.

Nearly a decade after Hoege performed his community outreach in Sinjar, however, the area was in the middle of new fighting. American forces had withdrawn and fundamentalist insurgents from the Islamic State had invaded and had been locked in tough fighting with Yazidis. At one point last year, the U.S. Marines

considered intervening but their action was called off.

Years before, as he was returning home, Hoege was struck by how poorly the occupation of Iraq had been planned in contrast to the shift and successful military invasion.

"I was struck by the fact that – coming back from Iraq – this is a policy choice to invade a country," he said.

"There was a significant human cost to that policy choice on human lives in terms of the impact on soldiers, to military families, in the form of impact on Iraqi civilian lives. All right. This was an enormous resources commitment, and there was not a robust plan for Phase Four – stability and support operations."



Hoege returned to Fort Campbell and worked as a senior JAG officer, but his war experience and thinking about public policy issues surged in his head.

He handled some high-profile cases that got national attention, such as one in which a staff sergeant in an engineering unit out searching for beer and chicken hijacked an SUV from an Iraqi civilian, but Hoege ended up requesting to go back to teach at the JAG school in Charlottesville.

One April day in 2007, he was sitting in his office and his wife, who was working in U.Va.'s engineering school, burst into his room and showed him a copy of the Cavalier Daily, the student newspaper. There was a headline that Frank Batten, then-chairman and chief executive of Landmark Communications, was donating \$100 million to set up a

school of leadership and public policy.

"This is exactly what you should be doing," his wife said.

Hoeye was intrigued. He got in touch with the founders and resigned from active Army duty in 2008. There was a delay as the school got under way and Hoeye got work as a majority counsel on a Senate Armed Services Committee probe of private security contractors in Afghanistan. Highly critical reports had been out about contractors, including the former Blackwater firm based in Moyock, N.C., but there was more to uncover.

Such political luminaries as Sens. Carl Levin of Michigan and John McCain of Arizona led the committee.

The report centered, in part, on two Afghan warlords code-named "Mr. White" and "Mr. Pink" who in 2007 supplied security for ArmorGroup, a British company that has since been taken over by another firm. The British firm had a contract to protect an airbase.

"We did a terrible job of vetting the actual guards," said Hoeye. The contractor would go to a subcontractor – essentially a local warlord – and say, 'Look, we need 250 guys with AK-47s to staff this contract.' The Department of Defense had no good system in place to actually vet the guy."

The investigation finished in 2010 and some procurement rules were changed. By that time the Batten School was hiring and a delighted Hoeye became admissions director. He did that for three admissions cycles before branching into strategic planning and fundraising, which he did until last fall. He also taught classes.

During that time, he got involved with Hampton Roads groups such as the community foundations where he worked with civic

leadership development. That led to an assignment with the CIVIC Leadership Institute and also with Norfolk Academy's Center for Civic and Global Leadership, which identifies bright students with public leadership potential and provides special instruction.

Hoeye was briefly president of a group designed to help veterans assume public service positions at the state and local levels. In March, he created his own consulting firm, 3H3 Leadership. Its mission, he says, is to "partner with business organizations and communities to inspire, develop and support a robust culture of highly impacted, strategically focused service leaders."

The firm's moniker is a play on Hoeye's name, Howard H. Hoeye III and a way to honor his grandfather who died when his father was 12. He sees it as a reminder that the real issue is not about him but servant leadership.

As recent headlines show, the need for enlightened and courageous public leadership at all levels is intense because of current bloody fighting in Iraq and racial tensions in this country.

He said it all goes back to the dead Kurdish toddler. "I want my life to be about fostering communities – a society – in which there is a strong culture that values human life."

Without such an approach, Hoeye said you have situations "of some Iraqi official putting a bullet through some Kurdish child's head, or an ISIS (Islamic State militant) laying siege to and massacring Yazidis" – a religious minority living in the Iraqi town of Sinjar.

He added: "Somewhere on that spectrum lay the longstanding race-based evidence in Ferguson or Baltimore or other communities that community policing is meant to mitigate. A strong ethic of servant leadership is needed to move the needle there." – **IL**

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