

DUSTIN VAAL

We're Not in Indiana Anymore: A Soldier's Excursion in Iraq

Graduate: Class of 2003

Occupation: Indiana National Guard Soldier

Dustin Vaal hasn't worked the job of the average man. In a simmering wasteland plagued by furious sandstorms during summer and a wet, treacherous mud pit during winter, his office sat lonely and desolate. As a "specialist" vehicle gunner, he protected his fellow soldiers. By escorting semis hauling military supplies across the enemy line, he-with the aid of a 50-caliber machine gun-guarded against roadside bombs and the constant threat of insurgents. From his naked perch atop an armored truck, Dustin endured just a few of the daily obstacles a soldier in Iraq faces. "It's not a very nice place to be," he sums up.

A reserve soldier of the Indiana National Guard, Dustin Vaal began his life in Dubois County. His mother moved to Florida after she and his father divorced a few years before Dustin completed high school. He spends time with both his mom and dad, visiting his mother every year a few times and bonding with his father who accompanies him on his hobbies. Now residing outside of Jasper, Indiana, Dustin enjoys his time home by riding his Harley-Davidson motorcycles and attending Indianapolis Colts' games. He is currently working on a degree in law enforcement at Vincennes University at the Jasper Campus.

Graduating from Forest Park in 2003, Dustin appreciated high school for its little gifts: he made friends, he liked the girls, and he had a few noteworthy years in band. School held little interest for him otherwise. He did realize there that he did not wish to go to college-not yet, anyways. To avoid that route, he instead enlisted into the military, willing to sacrifice a few years of his life to serve his country. Before leaving the United States, he first trained in boot camp for three months in Fort Stewart, Georgia and one month with the National Guard before going overseas. Afterwards, he joined the war effort in Iraq, living one year of his life there and leaving only when the military allowed him. Dustin valued these rare times at home; he wouldn't quite call Iraq the zenith of his life.

Lonely and weary, Dustin had only a television, the Internet, and his fellow soldiers to entertain him. He gratefully spent his valuable pockets of free time chatting with his family and friends back home-all who missed his warm smile. Amazingly, despite what this soldier endured, Dustin believes the people back home struggled more. "I for sure think it's harder for them than what it is for us," Dustin speaks of his family.

With its searing heat, constant danger, and absence of friends and family, Iraq, as Dustin feels, makes a person appreciate the United States all the more. He returned to Dubois County satisfied with ending his war tour and ready to leap into another career. "I took pride in wearing the uniform," he states; clearly, he will look back on his army years with few regrets.