On Campus

A Student in Full

Fall 2006

Spectator reporter Matt Mireles ’08GS knew he had a story when the question-and-answer period began at one event during last fall’s World Leaders Forum. It had nothing to do with the man on stage, Iraqi president Jalal Talabani.

“A guy got up and asked a smart question about the war,” says Mireles. “I noticed that he had a metal prosthesis. I introduced myself and sure enough, he’d lost his leg in Iraq.”

Retired army Specialist Garth Stewart ’09GS agreed to meet Mireles at the West End a few days later, and for three hours he described in unflinching detail what it’s like to kill, to be nearly killed, to leave your buddies in the field, and to readjust to life as a student. “I sat there listening to Garth, saying to myself: This guy is golden. I banged the story out later in one sitting.”

Mireles’ profile, “The Untroubled Soldier,” was published by the Spectator in February. It so impressed The New York Post that it gave Mireles its Breindel Award for Excellence in Journalism this summer, with a $10,000 cash award and a newsroom internship at Fox News.

What’s remarkable about the piece is the complexity of Stewart’s voice. The 23-year-old history major reflects on the ethics of war and yet describes his combat experience matter-of-factly and insists he is completely at peace with it. He’s proud of his platoon’s 500-plus body count, he cherishes, “like a blanket,” his memories of fighting beside his comrades, and he’s certain that he ultimately saved lives. If his outlook is a social handicap at Columbia, Stewart doesn’t let on. But Mireles knows his audience and zeroes in on this theme — the thoughtful Ivy League student who killed with a clear conscience — and tempts readers to find contradictions.

But mostly what they find is an honest guy trying to explain what he’s been through. His stump, we learn, looked like a red rose immediately after his leg was blown off, which in retrospect seemed “pretty funny.” Coming home, he was afraid of what

girls would think, but thankfully “got laid” the very next weekend. He regularly visits wounded soldiers in a vet hospital, although he finds it hard to empathize with the most self-pitying ones, for example, having drunk beer from his prosthesis.

“There were some arguments in the newsroom where I insisted that the raw language stay in,” says Mireles, a 25-year-old former forest firefighter who works full time as a paramedic in the South Bronx while studying political science. “I felt too strongly about the piece for it to be made PC.”



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