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## Park Record 12-24-09

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### Vets, wounded in Iraq, appreciate Park City spirit

Their stay was part of a program meant to recognize the military  
**Patrick Parkinson, Of the Record staff**  
Posted: 12/24/2009 02:23:11 PM MST

For a veteran visiting this week from the Nevada desert, battling traffic on snowy roads in the Park City area at times compared to fighting insurgents in Iraq. "While you have a convoy and you are going through Iraq, you are on high alert for sniper attacks and mortar rounds and RPGs. But I've got to admit, driving through that snow, I actually was feeling the tension in the back of my neck looking for black ice or whatever," said 43-year-old Joseph Perez, a veteran of the Iraq war. "The same type of feeling you have to protect your troops in Iraq, you have that same feeling when you've got your wife and three daughters in the back seat."

Perez, of Logandale, Nev., and fellow Iraq war veteran Bradley Chidester, of Fountain Green, Utah, spent last weekend with their families in Park City enjoying a wintertime vacation on behalf of the Christmas Can Cure charity, which seeks to recognize soldiers wounded in combat.

The men were picked to stay with their families at Silver Star from Dec. 18-22.

"Being on the Polar Express as a family was something I never grew up with and now to be able to have this experience with my family, I've got to admit, I felt like a 12-year-old again," Perez said about his family's stay.

While in Park City the families were honored at a flag ceremony at Miners Hospital and rode sleds at Soldier Hollow.

"The beauty, the way you guys decorate the town and the snow itself, if you went to a dictionary to look up white Christmas, that would be

it," Perez said. "Living here in Nevada, it snows every seven years. We're talking early in the morning you see a couple little flurries coming down and you run outside and you try to catch one or two on your tongue."

In 2003, Perez suffered head, leg and spinal cord injuries in a mortar attack during a prison riot in Iraq. Chidester, 27, was hurt when shrapnel hit his face, arms and upper torso as he exchanged gunfire with attackers in Iraq in 2004. Shrapnel remains lodged in Chidester's left arm.

Twice Perez said he has attempted suicide since exiting the battlefield about six years ago.

"I was done. I was drinking and I didn't want to be a burden to my family anymore," he said. "It just goes to show you how extreme it can get. A guy survives combat and comes back and gets himself to a point where, after he had fought for his country and survived, he is just ready to end it. It doesn't even make sense."

Veterans suffering from the effects of post traumatic stress disorder and other injuries sustained in combat should seek counseling, he stressed.

"There are a lot of young families out there that are just not prepared. The wife is maybe not strong enough to handle a husband who just got back from war, he's injured and now he's having a hard time adjusting," Perez said. "That causes bitterness."

Upon returning from battle, troops struggle to reclaim the role of husband and father, he explained.

"By bringing my family and doing this for my family, they're more than looking at me as a wounded warrior, they're now looking at me as a provider," Perez said about his extended weekend on the Wasatch Back. "But it's not about just getting better and getting back on track. It's about getting better, back on track and then helping out the next guy."

Key to the success of the veterans' stay in Park City was the massive involvement of the community, Christmas Can Cure Park City cofounder Greg Lee said.

"The effort we extended to make it a community celebration was more important because that's what gave [Perez and Chidester] the feeling of self worth and that their sacrifice was worth it," Lee said. "That's what tells them that, when you fight for freedom and you fight for your country, that's what tells them it's true."

Stores and restaurants in Park City donated to the event while developer Rory Murphy allowed the veterans' families to stay free at Silver Star on the slopes of Park City Mountain Resort.

"I had no hesitation in saying 'yes,'" Murphy said. "These guys have basically paid the ultimate sacrifice with their bodies, their families and their mental well being. They have paid the ultimate price and they need to know that the people of this country appreciate it."

Murphy himself is a disabled military veteran who was injured in the 1980s while training as a paratrooper.

"I understand what this means to them," Murphy said, adding that he was not wounded in combat. "What these guys do for a living, there truly is no correlation in the civilian world. This is the reason we enjoy the prosperity that we do in this country."

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From the left, Christmas Can Cure Park City cofounder Greg Lee, veteran Joseph Perez and veteran...

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