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Photo Caption: INTO the ordinary: Pfizer's Martin Bischoff, an Army Reserve lieutenant colonel, says that some things that seemed important before his tour of duty are now trivial.

Photo Credit: buck ennis

## New battles await vets returning to daily grind

They face hurdles in resuming careers; uncertainties in jobs, promotions and pay

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In April, after 13 months in Iraq subduing riots and uncovering mass graves, U.S. Army Reservist Martin Bischoff was getting ready for his first day back at work as a district sales manager for **Pfizer**, when it occurred to him that something was missing.

"I was thinking, 'Now, where did I put my 9 mm?' " he says.

That's the kind of adjustment that thousands of New Yorkers must make as they return to the daily grind of their white- and blue-collar jobs after life in a combat zone. Most employers have gone beyond what the law requires of them to ease the transition back, but these workers, from the Wall Street investment banker to the firefighter, are left to play catch-up after a long tour in a fraught environment that couldn't be more different from the office cubicle.

"Their level of adrenaline doesn't just end like it would after a long day; it gets carried over," says James Tomney, corporate vice president of human resources at New York Life Insurance Co., which has had seven full-time employees and 26 agents deployed to the Middle East since Sept. 11.

### **Older units**

Between 7,000 and 8,000 members of the Army Reserve and National Guard from New York state are currently on active duty—most from units based in and around New York City—and hundreds more are being deployed. About 1,500 men and women have already returned.

It's not the first time that so many people have had to leave civilian life to serve their country. But the number of older reservists and guardsmen with families and careers in full swing who have been called to active duty since the Korean War is unprecedented.

Mr. Bischoff, a lieutenant colonel in the 353rd Civil Affairs Reserve Unit at Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, is typical of this new breed of soldier: a white-collar executive in his prime moneymaking years forced to put his career on hold and leave behind a wife and three children. Often, these troops are returning to a workplace transformed by turnover, restructuring and downsizing in a turbulent economy.

"These folks were on a life's path, as opposed to 18- or 19-year-old soldiers in Vietnam," says a National Guard spokesman. "That path has been dramatically altered."

Mr. Bischoff counts himself lucky. While he was gone, **Pfizer** held his job open, paid the difference in his salary, which isn't required by law, and allowed his family to keep his company car and full benefits.

But much has changed since Mr. Bischoff left for the Middle East. The pharmaceutical giant acquired Pharmacia, and the veteran is now leading a whole new team of salesmen and having to teach them the **Pfizer** way of doing business.

Mr. Bischoff says the changes have given him enough challenges to keep him engaged after his adrenaline-charged pace in Iraq.

#### **Fatigues for suits**

As thrilled as he is to be home in one piece, he admits that life feels unsettled. He's still getting accustomed to wearing a suit after more than a year of donning desert camouflage and combat boots. Things that seemed important before his tour often seem trivial now. He confesses to being irritated at having to perform routine chores, like taking the family car in for an oil change.

"I told my wife, 'Are you kidding; I'm a war hero,'" he recalls. "She said, 'Welcome back, pal.'"

At best, the ordinariness of life back in the workplace for returning reservists feels a bit strange. At worst, many of the demobilized must deal with combat traumas while fighting for relevance in a business environment in which they've been sidelined or replaced.

Col. Jeffrey Smith, a reservist who serves as vice president of acquisitions at Sterling American Property Inc., says he found it difficult to wait out the transition before his employer found him comparable responsibilities when he returned from Iraq in January.

"I felt uneasy during the process, because I like to keep busy and I like to lead," he recalls.

Federal law requires all employers to protect the jobs and benefits of employees on active military duty, either by keeping the positions open or finding comparable work. But "it's commonplace for reservists to be passed up for promotions," notes Norbert Rappl, New York state ombudsman for the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.

#### **Time lag**

Few employers could have foreseen how long some of their key employees would be kept in the Gulf. Called up in January 2003 to go to Iraq, Mr. Bischoff was sure that he'd be back by September of that year. Instead, that month, his unit was sent to Kuwait. He then thought he would be going home, but he was told that he would be posted to the Sunni Triangle for several months.

"That was a bad day for me," he says.

The sales executive isn't sure if his extended leave has hurt his chances for a promotion, but he's certain that his experience of working closely with Iraqis has given him a better perspective as a manager.

"So some big customer decides not to use your product. Is it as bad as having to quell a riot under gunfire?" he says.

He's also learned that whether he's working with Iraqi police or Pharmacia sales representatives, the stimulation that he gets as a leader comes from helping people to be their best and get through problems.

As a member of a civilian affairs unit specializing in nation building, Mr. Bischoff was based south of Baghdad in the province of Babylon, where mass graves of 3,500 bodies were uncovered near Hillah. One of his duties was to watch as thousands of people dug in the graves to find their loved ones.

#### **Changing commutes**

His last posting was in Ramadi, 30 miles up the road from Falluja and on the edge of violent outbreaks of its own. Traveling by Blackhawk helicopter to Baghdad in the line of fire was a typical commute for Mr. Bischoff.

"From that, I went to concerns about traffic on Route 80 and my computer not working right," he says.

Demobilized to Fort Bragg in February, Mr. Bischoff took time to decompress and be with his family before returning to work. He was nervous about the kind of welcome that he would receive. Given how badly operations were going in Iraq, he feared that his colleagues might think that he didn't do a good job. Instead, all of his district sales managers threw him a dinner party.

"I was surprised by how respectful people were of my service in Iraq," he says.

But any plans that **Pfizer** may have for his next career move could be tenuous. Mr. Bischoff's skills are in demand in the Gulf, and several members of his unit have been called up for second and third tours.

"I'm hoping to God that doesn't happen," he says.

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