

her memories, both good and bad, about the time spent apart...memories that someday may become a book. "When I reflect back on those e-mails, it brings back those memories," she explains. "I can remember how I was feeling when I received the email or how it made me feel after I read it." And always, Chris would conclude his e-

"He couldn't drive," says Wendy wide-eyed. "We were so scared of him driving." She forms a half inch gap between her thumb and forefinger. "I think his temper got as short as this. He didn't have patience for anything. He could not tolerate anything."

Chris nods in agreement. "That's been a major focus... my patience." He's also had a few nightmares, "It's not a constant thing, but I have had one or two," he confirms. The worst part was, "I couldn't sleep. I could hear a pin drop and I would be jumping." But nowadays they can hardly wake him up. "He's actually mellowed....he's getting back to that even keel," Wendy laughs. She then turns serious again.

"Statistically, the first two years after a soldier gets back, that's when the divorce rate is extremely high...If the marriage or relationship was not stable when they left, that separation does not make it better. So when you come back, nine times out of ten, the soldier is coming back to a brand new person and a brand new person is coming back to you. So, you're trying to match up two people who

well together and we always try to be different," says Wendy brightly. "Helping somebody, that is what we do."

The Coopers are contemplating a move back to Gordonsville, where his family has roots dating back to the late 19th century. His grandmother, Mildred Cooper keeps the Gordonsville fried chicken tradition alive at street festivals and Exchange Hotel re-enactments. Chris, who volunteered for the Army when he graduated from OCHS, wound up playing sports in the service, attending and playing football at Norfolk State, until injury sidelined him. "I came home and worked for a year and said this wasn't cutting it. So I actually went to Piedmont and got my Associate Degree and ended with my Bachelors from James Madison University." Recently, he was honored as a winner of the Bronze Star during halftime at the All-American High School championship football game in San Antonio.

Wendy hails originally from New York. "Of course I'm not from Gordonsville," she says, "but I'm here just as much and I've grown to love this as if it was home." Before Chris was deployed to Iraq, he immersed himself in his youth ministry, trying to organize a Boys and Girls Club chapter in Gordonsville and helping to create Rebuilding Together, a community improvement program. Both efforts suffered from his absence in Iraq, but now the Coopers are back. "It's time to get it back...to get that momentum back," says Wendy determinedly.

"The ministry is first," continues Chris, "helping people, helping to shape the community. I mean this is my home community; it has a special place in my heart, and I want to see the community continue to grow and be strong; the children be given the same opportunity that I was given. I know just about everybody in Gordonsville regardless of race...the majority of their children I know because we grew up together, playing ball. I went to school with them and everything...That type of work has a special place in my heart. It's about helping people and giving back what you've been given so that others can be successful."

A joyous occasion indeed.



Captain Chris Cooper says the Iraqi desert in the northern quadrant of the country is hellishly hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. Still the area where he was stationed was relatively peaceful compared to Baghdad.

Contributed photo

mail with "When I get home, it's going to be a joyous occasion." Wendy smiles adding with a hint of sarcasm, "I'm waiting for this joyous occasion."

To fight the blues, Wendy kept herself occupied... like the time she and her daughter Elizabeth were Virginia's representatives to the national Mother/Daughter beauty pageant in Illinois, which, by the way, was dedicated to all the service men and women in Iraq. "I was the only military spouse that was there, and the only one whose husband wasn't there...so we went and amazingly, we actually won. We won the national title," she says giddily. And that's not all. All the husbands of the entrants wrote essays on why they love their wives. Chris sent his essay by e-mail, "and his was actually selected and he won Husband of the Year. It was so emotional...there was not a dry eye in there. It changed our lives completely."

Wendy also organized a live radio interview at a tree planting ceremony honoring servicemen in Lynchburg. Chris and other men on his team called in by telephone from Iraq. "We were able to speak to our families on live radio," says Chris smiling broadly.

Still, despite these morale boosting events, the families had to learn to cope with another source of stress that is second only to the separation itself...what happens when the service man or woman comes home and is reunited with family,

have changed." She lets that one sink in, adding the Army takes an active interest in saving relationships. "If you save the relationship, nine times out of ten, you're going to save the soldier...it comes to a retention issue as well."

And so, for the time being, Iraq is behind the Coopers. Yet the possibility he will be re-deployed still hangs over their heads. But instead of sitting around fretting that this axe may fall again, Wendy and Chris Cooper have moved forward. She has started a production company, Lizzay's Productions that includes a series of children's books that Wendy has written and her daughter, Elizabeth has delightfully illustrated. They are also organizing beauty pageants together, music and modeling events, and the mother/daughter team appear regularly on a live public access TV talk show in Charlottesville. "It's family-based," says Wendy of the company. "The thing we try to do is bring the families together."

Wendy and Chris met in 2001 when they were both United Parcel Service supervisors. They married in 2003, and although Chris is still working for UPS, their hearts are really in their ministry. Deeply devout, they both earned their licenses to preach the gospel on the same day. Chris is looking to earn his Masters of Divinity degree from Virginia Union Seminary and Wendy is currently working on a Bachelor of Theology degree at Infinity Bible College. "We work really



Wendy Cooper and her daughter Elizabeth won the national Mother/Daughter beauty pageant while husband, Chris Cooper was called away to Iraq. The mother/daughter team has since launched a production company that includes organizing beauty pageants, writing and illustrating children's books, and appearing live on public access TV.

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A Joyous Occasion



"When I get home, it's going to be a joyous occasion." From August 2005 through July 2006, U.S. Army Captain Chris Cooper of Gordonsville concluded every e-mail to his family with those words.

And when that day finally arrived, when he returned home from a year-long stint in Iraq, "The entire community that we live in, everyone had a flag posted in the yard, and they had the park decorated for me," he says softly "Welcome home Captain Cooper." It was pretty awesome."

Chris Cooper and his wife, Wendy, cuddle on a comfy couch in his mother's Gordonsville home...a million miles away, it seems, from the stark tabletop-flat desert of northern Iraq with the bare craggy mountains of Kurdistan looming on the horizon. Soft spoken, almost shy, this Orange County High School sports standout has come home in more ways than one. Although he and Wendy currently live in Richmond, they come back to Gordonsville every chance they get to pick up from where they left off before he was deployed to the Middle East. More on that later. But first... what is it really like in Iraq?

Actually, Chris Cooper's latest deployment is not his first taste of the Middle East. With 21 years active and reserve duty under his belt, Captain Chris Cooper, soon to be promoted to Major, served in the first Gulf War in 1991.

"I was a military policeman and I spent the majority of my time in Saudi Arabia in main supply route security," he explains. "Fuel, logistics, it was absolutely phenomenal, the pace at which we were able to accomplish our mission. It just seemed that the planning with all of our leaders was well thought out, and it seemed as if we had everything in place. Everywhere you went we had a phenomenal amount of troops on the ground. It was no comparison to Iraq this time."

The consummate loyal soldier, Captain Cooper is reluctant to criticize his country's leadership, but what he doesn't say speaks volumes. "The leadership makes the decisions and we as soldiers have to work with what we're given and do the job the best we can," he says, choosing his words carefully. "We're talking about two totally different combat experiences, where you're talking about urban warfare as opposed to open

desert last time. And in the Gulf War, we just had overwhelming combat power."

It also should be noted that in the Gulf War we evicted the invaders of Kuwait. Now the table's turned. We are the invaders and the Iraqi insurgents are trying to evict us. They have the home field advantage. Another difference: technological advances since '91. But that's a double-edged sword; a cell phone rigged as a triggering device and a smart bomb are just as deadly in the hands of insurgents as they are in the hands of soldiers.

Chris Cooper points to other glaring differences. "It's just a tougher environment. The type of combat is totally different, when you're going door to door, fighting urban combat, it's extremely difficult, and it takes its toll on the soldiers. In that environment, you don't know who's who. You don't know what you're going to encounter... It's tough. It's extremely tough."

Cooper is part of the 80th Infantry Division;



Based out of Richmond, families of the men in the 80th infantry division, prepared an elaborate welcome home ceremony. Still, the stress of the deployment and separation lingers.

Contributed photo

reservists based in Richmond. Their mission: to train the new Iraqi army in the relatively peaceful northern quadrant of Iraq, bordering and including Kurdistan. "Basic soldiering skills, weapons qualification, being able to conduct operations on their own, being able to supply themselves logistically and insuring that they were ready and capable," he ticks off the specifics.

This involved actively accompanying his Iraqi counterparts into dangerous places. "We conducted several missions to the villages, meeting people and searching for bad guys," says Cooper matter-of-factly. "That's a way of insuring that they have gained the knowledge to be independent." He pauses to make a point. "Everything in Iraq is live, so it's not like you're going on a training mission. It's live. Everything's real. You don't have any room for error."

The Iraqi units they trained were made up of Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis, all training and fighting side by side. Although that sounds like a sectarian recipe for disaster, Cooper is emphatic: "Those soldiers were good...quite good... they got along quite well." He is particularly complimentary of the Kurds, calling them,

"good people."

And how did these good people get along with their American counterparts? "The younger soldiers really took to the American soldiers and leadership," answers Chris. "They really respected us and wanted knowledge and they were willing to do whatever they could to help. They wanted to work together. Our interpreters educated us in the Muslim culture, and we had training prior to going."

Asked what was the hardest part of the mission, Cooper responds with a faint smile. "The tempo, getting them to understand that they need to be able to move when it's time to move and to train on a consistent basis." Captain Cooper, a former star running back, his trapezius muscles taut as tightropes under his shirt, gives the distinct impression that he has little patience with anything short of perfection. "The more you train, the better you're going to be. That continues to be a challenge," he says through tightly pursed lips. "As Americans we like to get things done." He refers to his Iraqi trainees. "They're kind of in the laid-back mode. They don't have that up tempo that we have. So that was the frustrating part."

When Chris Cooper's unit pulled out last July, he left confident that their mission had been accomplished. For one thing, the area is more secure than it was when they arrived a year prior. "When we first got there, there was no way that any of us wanted to get out of a Humvee and walk

the streets even though that was our job," he points out. "Coming home, my last convoy, we had equipment failure. We all got out of the vehicle in the middle of street. There is no way we would have done that going in."

"We made progress, regardless of what anyone says or what you hear in the media. Progress has been made. We wanted to do the job. The specific mission that we had was accomplished. We turned over the battle space to the Iraqi Army." For security reasons, Captain Cooper can't reveal just how big that space is. All he'll say is "they were handed a large area."

Overall, "We were extremely fortunate," continues Cooper. "We lost one soldier to combat operations out of the division. That's 750-plus soldiers that we took with us. We had a couple injured in an IED attack; but my team, we were pretty fortunate."

As Chris tells this story, he scrolls through digital photographs that he took in Iraq. One image is particu-

larly shocking. It shows four dismembered human fingers lying in a pool of blood on the street. Cooper explains that they belonged to an insurgent who was trying to arm a roadside bomb. "It actually blew up on him... actually killed him before he could plant it for us."

And although he never had to fire his weapon while there, the day-to-day stress took its toll. "As a soldier you never get thick-skinned to that stuff, because that's

could not really function like I knew how to function," she states flatly. "The military cannot prepare you for everything that goes on during a deployment...it does not prepare you emotionally. At the time, you may feel like a tower, a pillar of strength, but until that soldier actually leaves, you have no idea what your emotional state is going to be," she warns. "The families were not emotionally equipped, and I was one of them," she

deployment." She became the unit's Family Group Leader. "My focus was on all of these families, making sure they had all their wills and information together...things that came up, direct them to a resource, because we had a lot of hardships in a lot of families. I tried really hard to keep the families together by planning activities, and meetings and dinners. It was an outlet for me, and it provided a source of strength and

"True heroism is remarkably sober, very undramatic. It is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost."

—Arthur Ashe

On the cover

Top photo, Gordonsville native and OCHS sports standout, Captain Chris Cooper takes a helicopter ride in Northern Iraq. Cooper was a team leader in his unit's mission during 2005 and 2006 to train Iraqi soldiers to fend for themselves.

Contributed photo

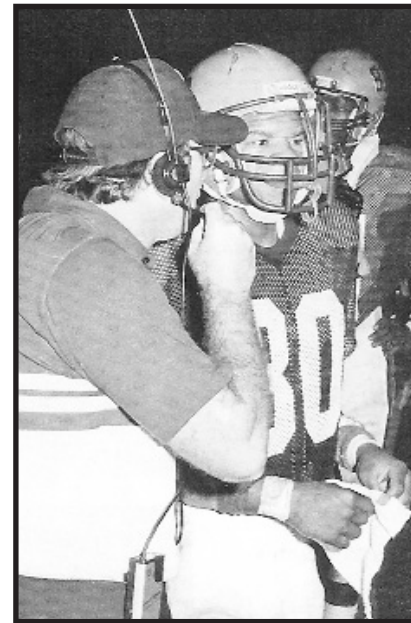
Bottom photo, Wendy and Chris Cooper relax on the couch of his mother's Gordonsville home. Although they live in Richmond, they come to Gordonsville as often as they can to minister to the community.

Photo by Phil Audibert

By Dona Fair
Army Hometown News Service

When the son of a Gordonsville woman checks his uniform in

the mirror every day, he sees an Army soldier. But when the crowd of 35,151 fans saw him enter the Alamodome for the Army-sponsored "All-American" Bowl high school all-star football game, they saw more than a soldier; they saw a "hero."



Army Reserve Capt. Christopher A. Cooper, son of Herman Coleman of Orange and Carolyn Rankins in Gordonsville, was one of 86 Army active duty, Reserve or National Guard soldier heroes who earned a Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, or Purple Heart medal for their efforts in

Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom, who were honored during the "Army-Strong" pre-game activities. Each soldier hero was matched to an All-American high school athlete, who represented the East and West squad prior to kick-off.

During the past year, the soldier heroes have participated in various military deployments, and because of their dedication, leadership and teamwork skills, were rewarded for their distinguished service to our country.

"I received a Bronze Star Medal for my military service during Operation Iraqi Freedom," said Cooper, who graduated in 1985 from Orange County High School, and received a bachelor's degree in 1995 from James

Madison University, in Harrisonburg.

San Antonio opened its arms to Cooper and his fellow soldier heroes in what has become one of the largest events of its kind in high school sports. "During the past week, I was involved with the player-hero fanfare, given the opportunity to mentor a young high school All-American football player, attend an awards dinner and private reception with the Secretary of the Army and several key leaders," said Cooper.

Being able to represent the Army in this way only brings home the importance for young people to serve in the military today.

"The military paves the way for many of our future leaders. It is important to serve in the military today for the continued protection of our homeland and our families," Cooper said. "The things that you learn through serving provide you with a sound foundation on which to grow and to become a productive member of society."

Cooper and his fellow soldier heroes, will continue to do the job of "heroes" without the pageantry and fanfare of a nationally-televised football game. For them it's a simple matter of loving what they do and the country they serve.



Above, Army Reserve Capt. Christopher A. Cooper, left, was one of 86 soldier heroes honored at the Army-sponsored "All-American" Bowl all-star high school football game held at the Alamodome in San Antonio, Texas.

Photo by Daren Reeh

At left, Chris Cooper was a running back on the 1985 OCHS varsity football team. Here, Coach Hromyak sends Cooper in with a play. Cooper went on to play football and fast pitch softball in the U.S. Military and at Norfolk State for one season before injury sidelined him.

Photo from the 1985 OCHS yearbook, The Golden Horseshoe

your brother out there that's getting blown up or injured. We may not show it, but it takes its toll on us."

Meanwhile, a different kind of stress was taking its toll on the families back home.

Wendy Cooper, who has remained quiet during this conversation, stirs on the couch. "It probably took about three or four months before I actually came back to myself because as soon as they left, physically I was just no good at all, I mean emotionally stressed out,

admits readily

But then something happened; Wendy shifted into high gear. Chris shakes his head in wonder. "It's been a phenomenal year, especially for my family. They did more while I was gone than they did when I was home." He turns toward his wife. "You did all the work."

She smiles demurely, saying, "The deployment is hard in itself, but I chose to take advantage of every opportunity that was afforded to us because of the

unity." It kept her from stewing in her own misery.

"That was the key for me was to stay busy, and I...stayed...very...busy," she emphasizes each word. "It helped a lot, and being able to communicate with your soldier makes a lot of difference."

Unlike World War II, when mothers, wives and girlfriends didn't hear a word for weeks, months even, we are now in an age of instant communication. The e-mails: Wendy kept them all and uses them to trigger