

## War journalist and veteran finds healing in writing his story here

by Kathy Hanson  
Staff Reporter

*Published: Thursday, August 20, 2009 4:59 PM CDT*

About war, people say it takes no prisoners. But for Fred Minnick, age 31, the Iraq war left him a prisoner and still holds him hostage, right back here in America.<sup>o</sup>

Minnick, a versatile writer and photographer whose work has appeared in magazines all over the world, served in Iraq as an Army journalist when his Wisconsin National Guard unit was activated in 2003. Deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom, he photographed Iraqi and American dignitaries, managed a team of print journalists, went behind enemy lines to get the Army's story, and oversaw a weekly newsletter and production of four magazines. But ask him what his single greatest professional accomplishment is and — in a word — he will say "Iraq."

Minnick came home from the war in Iraq in January 2005, taking a job at Bader Rutter & Associates in Brookfield, Wis. On the surface it appeared Minnick was readily readjusting to civilian life back here in the states. But it was not so.

"I couldn't stand to be around people and felt my sacrifices were hardly appreciated," Minnick said. "My life seemed insignificant to this hustling and bustling world in the Milwaukee area," he added.

Minnick yearned to get away from the "hubbub and find a peaceful place, where people cared more about baiting a hook than talking about Martha Stewart's legal problems," he said. Knowing he was using a cliché, Minnick said all he wanted to do was "write a book in a cabin."

He chose northern Wisconsin as the place to heal, and began what would become a difficult search for the right cabin.

"Amazed at how hard it was to find one that was not a part of a lake neighborhood, I searched and searched," said Minnick. "One cabin was literally five feet from its neighbors; another was a townhouse on the lake, (and) while those worked for some people, I wanted to be far away from other people, plop myself in nature and work out my demons from the war by writing 'Camera Boy,'" said Minnick.

Minnick had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and in his words, he "was a wreck."

"Vivid nightmares kept me up until late at night; I drank myself to sleep and woke up hung over every day," he said. Writing a book seemed the only way to get through it and his therapist encouraged him to do so.

Calling upon the experience of the famous author William Styron, whose bestseller "Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness" was written in the depths of his own depression and suicidal ideation, Minnick knew his Iraq memoir — now titled "Camera Boy: An Army Journalist's War in Iraq" — was the only way to silence his demons.

He found his cabin on a stream that flowed into Lower Eau Claire Lake near Barnes. Owned by the Draganetti family, the white, two-story cabin had a dock where Minnick spent hours looking at the reflection of the Enchanted Inn restaurant in the shimmering, crystal-clear waters.

"During the day, I kayaked and fished," said Minnick, who also said that the boaters laughed at him when they witnessed him trying to cast his line off of a 12-foot kayak while hitting the waves.

He didn't catch many fish but the lake and the gentle breezes soothed his PTSD, so that "I found my

old self and felt so proud, instead of unappreciated, for my year in Iraq,” Minnick said.

One day while he was trying to pull his lure off a stick, Minnick saw a bald eagle circling. Unaccustomed to seeing eagles anywhere but in a zoo, Minnick was struck at the eagle’s beauty and magnificence. To Minnick, it was a sacred moment of pure joy, where he felt the bird was his America — and America’s freedom.

“Alone on the lake, tears fell from my eyes,” he said. “It was an amazing sight for me and I know I would have never experienced such an awesome moment had I chosen anywhere else to write this book,” he said.

Days, Minnick spent in Hayward, checking e-mail, picking up bait, enjoying his coffee at the Backroads Coffee shop, and wandering in and out of Book World, where he read about haunted houses in the area. He wondered if his cabin was haunted but loved the natural sounds of the woods too much to care.

“I fell in love with Hayward,” Minnick said.

Nights, Minnick wrote his story. He keystroked the novel into existence to the sounds of walleyes jumping in the lake, wild dogs howling in the dark and black bears shaking berry bushes in the woods.

“I enjoyed penning every sentence,” he said, insisting that he could not have written this book anywhere else. “There was something special in that cabin and on the lake. When I packed up and moved to Kentucky, it was a sad time for me,” Minnick said.

His book, “Camera Boy: An Army Journalist’s War in Iraq,” published by Hellgate Press, will be available in October. Today, Minnick resides in Louisville, Ky., with his wife Jaclyn, his dog and two cats.

About leaving the cabin, Minnick said, “I have missed it every day since.”