

Salem native Capt. Jason Faler founds nonprofit to help settle Iraqi interpreters in the U.S.

by Julie Sullivan, *The Oregonian*

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Photos by Torsten Kjellstrand,

The Oregonian Capt. Jason Faler of the Oregon Army National Guard poses with his former Iraqi colleague, Ibrahim. After working closely together for a year in Baghdad, Faler helped Ibrahim, whose life had been threatened multiple times, reach Oregon in January. "Capt. Jason represents the beautiful face of America," Ibrahim said. "He told me he would never forget me, and he never did." For fear of reprisals, Ibrahim did not want to be photographed.

The fourth-generation Oregonian reporting to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense in 2005 was no ordinary GI.

He had an Arab wife he'd met in an Islamic law class in Cairo. He was a South Salem High quarterback conversant in the Quran. He spoke Arabic, albeit in a very Egyptian way.

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"He connected," said an Iraqi interpreter called Ibrahim. "He knew how to deal with the Arab people, how to practice our traditions." So much so that the day after meeting, the Iraqi pulled out a blue stone he always carried for protection and gave it to Jason Faler.

Soldiers often speak of leaving their thumbprint, however small, on world history. Still, few may have touched more individual Iraqis than Faler.

The blond, blue-eyed Salem native has become a champion of his Iraqi colleagues, supporting the immigration of 25 translators and their families and calling on Congress for those left behind. Now he has mined the Iraqis' expertise for the Oregon Army National Guard.



Ibrahim helps Arabic speakers Sgt. Gabe Rigall, of Winston, Ore. (left) and Spc. Jacob Hauck, of Billings, Mont., perfect their Iraqi dialect. The two soldiers are headed for Iraq in 2009, along with Capt. Jason Faler, with the Oregon Army National Guard's 41st Infantry Brigade Combat Team. "You can't get this out of a dictionary," Hauck said.

"Jason is absolutely distinct. Of all the people doing this work, this is in his blood; he wakes up thinking about it and goes to bed thinking about it," said Jenny Rikoski, a Boston tax attorney who volunteers to handle Iraqi cases. "We often laugh that it's too bad we have day jobs."

In fact, Capt. Faler's day job is to return to Iraq.

To understand the difference the 31-year-old Oregonian has made, consider Ibrahim, who does not use his full name for security reasons. The 46-year-old father of three was raised in a Baghdad Sunni neighborhood and trained as a veterinarian. When the U.S. invasion began, Ibrahim kept his family inside, emerging, after a week, "to chaos." "There was destruction everywhere. Dead bodies everywhere," Ibrahim said.

Looters were emptying banks and offices, stealing fixtures down to the toilets. The wounded sought help at the public hospital, where Americans had arrived with medical supplies but few language skills. Ibrahim volunteered to help. His mother had taught English, and he had worked for a Western company.

But by the time he met Faler, Ibrahim trusted no one. Mortars rained constantly over the military headquarters where they worked, informants snitched, and, over time, his colleagues were kidnapped, tortured or shot.

At least 300 Iraqi interpreters have been killed since 2003, according to U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore. Thousands of interpreters, drivers and service workers are considered at risk for helping the U.S. Ibrahim told no one about his work. He took decoy buses to his office, traveling to distant markets with shopping bags to fool any follower. Most days, he would drop into a chair as soon as he arrived, drenched in sweat, and exhale in relief. Faler cordoned off a room -- a pot of Starbucks coffee always brewing -- as a respite. As a political scientist who had studied the Middle East, Faler didn't oversimplify the bitterness between sects and tribes.

The men worked long hours, attending meetings, evaluating reports of abandoned dead -- up to 150 bodies a day. And they talked, about art, movies and what mattered. While others made ribald remarks, Faler never did. "He was," Ibrahim said, "very well-raised."

Ibrahim was also distinct: gentler and closer to the Americans. He called Faler and his team "The Irreplaceables." Faler called him "Ibrahim the Dream."

And the dream?

"To come to the United States."

After his tour, Faler wanted to put Iraq behind him. He had deployed with the New York Guard midway through law school at Seton Hall University. He wanted to finish his law studies and a master's degree in public health. He wanted to enjoy his wife, Rita, and their then-3-month-old son, Anthony, whose birth he had missed. After serving in a "hyper-vigilant state 24 hours a day for a year," he was exhausted. Numb.

Then, Ibrahim and two other interpreters e-mailed Faler about a special immigrant visa program for 50 translators who had worked for the U.S. government for at least a year. The program, which would eventually extend to those who also worked for contractors, was considered a bureaucratic nightmare that required an in-person interview outside Iraq.

"These are the people who have worked with us, side by side, facing the same bombs, the same bullets, but at the end of the day, they go home and answer to the neighbors," Faler said. "This was no way to treat our friends." Faler wrote three \$180 personal checks to cover initial fees, and then he began helping the Iraqi interpreters obtain marriage, passport, military service and employment documents. Other individual soldiers, airmen and Marines across the country were trying to do the same.

But Faler went further. He formed a nonprofit, [Checkpoint One Foundation](#), to finance the resettlement. He figured it would take at least \$20,000 to relocate each family: "I was naive."

In Baghdad one morning in 2007, Ibrahim's daughter opened their gate to a dead woman, a well-regarded television personality and mother of three who had been kidnapped, then dumped. "I just want my kids," Ibrahim told Faler, "to grow up normally."

Ibrahim was at a bus stop when Rita Faler called about the visa. He immediately dialed his wife. "We're going to a wedding party," -- code that their visa interview had been scheduled in Damascus and they needed to slip away that night. "You need to hurry."

It took months, but by January 2008, Ibrahim and his family had arrived in the U.S. Faler then escorted them to Oregon. Faler had grown up the middle child of a Salem certified public accountant in a Mayberry-like blur of sports, studies and Young Life. He loved politics, interning for former U.S. Rep. Jim Bunn. But he was also fascinated by the Middle East, the cradle of so much history, art, religion and, now, terrorism.

Faler moved Ibrahim's family into his parents' Salem home. He tapped his best friend since third grade -- mortgage banker Brian Cross -- and Cross' parents. He asked Salem's leading citizens for donations.

It is impossible to know exactly how many Iraqi translators have made it to the U.S., said Ruthie Epstein, a project coordinator at Human Rights First. An estimated 1,782 people received the special visa through Aug. 31, 2008. Faler has helped resettle 25 interpreters, many with families, as well as three Afghans.

But all have struggled to become stable. Ibrahim applied for 55 jobs before finding work at a restaurant and grocery store. Other translators have left Oregon to find work. Almost all have considered returning to Iraq -- and lucrative contracting salaries -- now that their families are safe. That frustrates Faler, who sees them as a national security resource.

"We have a treasure-trove of people who worked with the U.S. military," Faler said. "We're holding up white Anglo-Saxons with Ph.D.s as experts, yet we have thousands of people who've lived it, and we haven't tapped any of their expertise."

Faler has worked to change that. Since 9/11, the Department of Defense has maintained "there is a critical need for foreign language and cultural capabilities in the United States," said Eileen M. Lainez, spokeswoman for the assistant secretary of Defense.

Through Faler's effort, interpreters are giving 45 members of the Oregon Guard who will deploy to Iraq in 2009 intensive Arabic instruction. Ibrahim teaches the advanced students. He meets them daily, poring over books and dictionaries. "I'm teaching bad words, too, because you want them to understand good people and bad people," he says.

Says Spc. Jacob Hauck from Billings, Mont., "Whatever they're calling me, I'd like to know."

Maj. Michael Braibish, spokesman for the Guard, said the detailed courses set a new bar. "Jason Faler absolutely gets the credit."

He also gets the calls. Faler left Providence Health & Services earlier this year for active duty with the 41st Infantry Brigade Combat Team. He also teaches a graduate health care law class at Portland State University and devotes all outside time to his foundation. "The foundation is Jason," his wife said. "It's kind of crazy."

His efforts are also opening Oregonians' eyes.

"Now, when I hear 100 Iraqis died in a bombing, it hits home. I think, what if this was happening in Portland? It connects," said his boyhood friend Cross.

Faler and his wife said it is because of Faler's native state.

"Portland, Oregon, has taught me to be so much more accepting," Rita Faler said. "I come from a place where you keep to your own, where there are a lot of prejudices. I have learned to be so much less judgmental here."

It's a sense of community that doesn't exist in other places, Jason Faler said. "When someone is trying to pull out of the parking lot, we're the ones who are going to put on our brakes and give you that cushion."

"We're going to let you in."

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