

A soldier's promise to unlikely informant

By Associated Press

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FORT CARSON, Colo. - First Sgt. Daniel Hendrex was getting ready to leave the war when he went to see the Iraqi teenager one last time. He roused the boy from sleep and gave him his floppy camouflage hat and a promise.

Stay safe, Hendrex said. We will do what we can to get you out of here.

The 13-year-old clutched the hat and held out his arms. They hugged, teary-eyed. And then Hendrex was gone.

It had been four months since the skinny, street-smart Iraqi blurted out to U.S. soldiers at a border checkpoint in Husaybah, Iraq, that he wanted to turn in an insurgent: his father.

The 100 Army soldiers of Fort Carson, Colo., Dragon Company, 1st Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, had seen informants before.

Something was different about this one, though. He was willing to turn in his own father.

With that one decision, the teenager's life, full of horror and abuse, would change forever, and so would the lives of the soldiers.

He became an informant, giving the soldiers the best information they had yet.

They protected him like a brother.

And now they were leaving him.

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He was known as Steve-O to the soldiers; the Army keeps his real name confidential, to protect him. He grew up in Husaybah, a town of about 100,000 near the Syrian border. The oldest of his three brothers and two sisters, Steve-O lived with his family in a small, dirt-floor house.

His father was once an army captain in the Republican Guard, the core of the Iraqi military. His father beat him and Steve-O's body bears the scars.

After America invaded Iraq in March 2003, his father led a 40-man insurgency group. His father wanted him to fight the Americans.

Steve-O, who only has a third-grade education, tried to run away to Fallujah, but was caught and reluctantly accompanied his father on four missions.

One day last December, Steve-O told his family he was going to Syria to find work. Instead, he walked to the border checkpoint and said he wanted to turn in his father. He told them he had information on a 40-man insurgency cell and knew where a weapons cache was.

The soldiers were leery.

Steve-O started naming names, and some matched names on a wanted list the soldiers had.

Maybe he was the real deal. Either way, they would find out during the raid that night.

When they arrived at Steve-O's house, his father and a Syrian man were there, along with Steve-O's mother and siblings. Both men were blindfolded and arrested.

The teen pointed to an empty lot next to his home, and the soldiers and Steve-O started digging. Rockets, grenades, a land mine and a weapons system were all there.

Steve-O was legit.

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A few days later, Steve-O, who slept on a cot on base, asked to see his mother.

He went home in the morning, but quickly returned and told soldiers his mother had been beaten. She told her son she had a week to turn him over to an insurgent or his family would be killed.

Go back to the Americans, Steve-O's mother told him.

Several days later, Hendrex,35, was going through pictures of captured insurgents.

Steve-O casually looked at the computer screen and said he knew the person. He did it repeatedly, naming insurgents as Hendrex clicked through the pictures.

"He knew who was bad and who wasn't," Hendrex said. "He probably ID'd that day 20 people."

Other soldiers were still skeptical.

But, as they would come to find out, Steve-O would become their most successful informant.

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Steve-O was barely 5 feet tall then, and in the crowded Humvee, he rode between the legs of the gunner, watching out the window for people he knew. He went on 20 missions and raids with his new American friends, several times coming under attack.

Some 40 insurgents were caught by Steve-O identifying them and the soldiers comparing the information to their own.

Steve-O was happy living with the soldiers. They were all he had.

The soldiers couldn't help but smile at his big, silly grin.

In late February, while on a mission near Steve-O's home, the teen wanted to make sure his mother and siblings had left.

Steve-O stayed in the Humvee while Hendrex went inside. An uncle said Steve-O's mother had been shot in the stomach. The children had made it to Fallujah.

Tears rolled down Steve-O's face. Hendrex embraced him and cried, too.

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By late March, Dragon Company was preparing to hand off the area to Marines. Hendrex was already trying to figure out what to do with Steve-O. He hoped to bring the teen to the United States.

They inquired about political asylum, humanitarian parole or relocation to another country, but Steve-O's options were running out.

Hendrex gave Steve-O the note promising to get him out of Iraq, and his floppy hat with "Hendrex" stitched in the back. Keep it, he said, until we see each other again. Hendrex didn't know if that would happen.

Steve-O never lost hope. He trusted Hendrex, the man he calls "my brother," and believed he would come for him.

Finally, Hendrex learned Steve-O would be granted a special parole to come to the United States for a medical evaluation and intelligence debriefing.

Just weeks ago, Hendrex met Steve-O, who was holding Hendrex's hat and the note, in Frankfurt, Germany.

The next night, the soldiers of Dragon Company gathered at the Colorado Springs Airport to welcome the Iraqi teenager. Here he was, now 14, in America, flashing that infectious smile.

The last member of Dragon Company was finally home.

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