

# 'He's found a way to do his own therapy for us'

By Kelly Kennedy  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

When "Doonesbury" cartoonist Garry Trudeau decided his character "B.D." would lose his leg in combat in Iraq, he didn't know how that loss would affect real troops.

Or how many of those troops would come to call him "friend."

He chose B.D. — a character once known for never removing the football helmet he had worn since the strip began in 1970 — because he was "available."

"It was at a time when U.S. troops were taking heavy casualties," Trudeau said in an e-mail interview, "and I wanted the strip to reflect the sacrifices that our countrymen were making."

It did more than that: It reflected the dark humor, the anger and the sentiment every wounded



Metzendorf



Pepper

service member voices — "it could have been worse" — even as they face fractured lives. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, so does the tally of troops suffering grievous wounds. As of June 1, said Army Medical Command spokesman Jaime Cavazos, 432 service members had lost at least one limb.

After losing limbs, eyes or goals they've held since childhood, the troops say Trudeau captured their

souls, mapped them out in comic strips, and helped Americans understand how it feels to be deserted by friends, or to not want to be a burden, or to gain a moment of hope.

His visits to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., inspired some of that hope.

"He's such a boost of morale for soldiers," said Staff Sgt. Daniel Metzendorf, who spent seven months at Walter Reed. "He'd visit, and then you'd see some comment a soldier made show up in his comic strip."

Metzendorf, a career counselor for 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, at Fort Bragg, N.C., lost his right leg above the knee to a roadside bomb in Iraq in January 2004. Three soldiers died that day, and three were wounded.

"My wife thought I was thinking about her," Metzendorf said, laughing. "No, I was really thinking about how much blood I could lose in a five-minute period."

Trudeau drew as the patients at Walter Reed suffered through physical therapy, Metzendorf said.

"He asked us to tell him our stories," Metzendorf said. "He's found a way to do his own therapy for us."

Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper, who was medically retired Jan. 1, spent almost two years at Walter Reed and still keeps in touch with Trudeau.

"He's a really great guy — the kind you could kick back with and have a barbecue," Pepper said from his home in Clarksville, Tenn. "He spent numerous hours with the soldiers, and everything in his book is real."

Pepper lost both eyes in May

2004. As a rocket-propelled grenade headed toward his team leader and M249 Squad Automatic Weapon gunner, Pepper pushed the two out of the way. But it wasn't the RPG that hit him — it was the improvised explosive device hidden nearby.

The explosion incinerated his left hand. He has two glass eyes. A piece of shrapnel still rests on his brain. Doctors are afraid they'll do more damage if they try to remove it, Pepper said, and the metal serves as a reminder that he might not live through the morning.

In early June 2004, Trudeau asked Pepper whether he could "do something special" for him.

Soon, a comic appeared. "See that guy in the other wheelchair?" B.D. says. "His name is Sgt. Jason Pepper."

"Sgt. Pepper?" Zonker replies. "For real?"

"Yup," B.D. says, "and he is, in fact, guaranteed to raise a smile." □

## Doonesbury

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of something [President Johnson] once said about co-opting people — it's better to have them inside the tent pissing out than outside pissing in.

**Q** What, from your visits with patients, has stayed with you or made the biggest impression?

A The same thing that stays with most visitors — the positive mind-set and lack of self-pity. This is a population that tends to view physical injury more as challenge than calamity.

Initially, almost all of them want to return to their units, as unrealistic as that is in most cases.

Lives have been altered in fundamental ways, and later, after they acquire a more complete understanding of what goals are actually attainable, many are left facing a lot of pain and frustration. And yet, there's no culture of complaint. Of course, this can be a mixed blessing — it masks a lot of [post-traumatic stress disorder], against which there still remains considerable stigma.

**Q** On your Web site, [www.doonesbury.com](http://www.doonesbury.com), you say you keep in contact with some of the soldiers. Are any of them from Walter Reed? Do you seek out correspondence with soldiers? What kind of feedback do you get from them?

A I regularly give out my contact info to soldiers, but I only occasionally get updates from soldiers after they leave WRAMC, understandably.

They want to get on with their lives.



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**Q** Some of your recent strips seem a bit sentimental. Is this work — the characters since the war began — different for you from previous strips?

A I hope you don't really mean sentimental. I've tried to make the strips about B.D.'s ordeal as tough-minded as possible. Of course, I'm covering a great deal of emotional terrain with his story, so I guess in that sense it's something of a departure.

**Q** How did the idea occur to you for B.D. to lose a limb? And why B.D.?

A He was available. It was at a time when U.S. troops were taking heavy casualties, and I wanted the strip to reflect the sacrifices that our countrymen were making.

**Q** People constantly talk in this war about the difference between supporting the troops and supporting the war. How do you strike that balance? Nothing's sacred politically, yet the troops are presented as real and human — even when they're cocky or underinformed. Is that something you do intentionally?

A I try to take people one at a time, with all the contradictions and compromises that most of us live with.

The characters are no longer the archetypes they were when I was first starting out and needed them as tent poles. (Only Duke is free of ambivalence, content to live the binary life, asking only, "Is this in my self-interest or not?") In the B.D. story, I've intentionally left the politics out. I

don't want to give readers any reason for turning away, for dismissing the story because of some inferred agenda. In any event, it's not exactly a secret to regular readers what my views on the war are.

But you're right about much of the country being caught in a kind of riptide. How do you support troops if you're in doubt about what they're doing? I don't know how long we can stand that kind of cognitive chaos.

**Q** Have you been to Iraq or Afghanistan?

A No. My main exposure to the Army in the field was as an embed at Camp Thunder Rock in Kuwait right after [Operation] Desert Storm [in 1991].

**Q** I've heard soldiers and former soldiers say you relate well to the troops in Iraq now. What kind of research have you done to get it right — not just the facts but the language and issues of those serving?

A Well, apart from surfing [military blogs] and talking to veterans, I research stories the same way I always have — by marinating in the journalism produced by my betters. If you look for it, there is a great deal of first-rate, detailed reporting about our troops.

**Q** What or who would you recommend for service members?

A [The] two best books on [the] Iraq war so far seem to be "The Assassins' Gate" [by George Packard] and "Cobra II" [by Michael R. Gordon and retired Marine Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor].

**Q** Have your children affected the way you write?

A I don't think so, but it's always in the back of my mind that many of the soldiers being wounded and killed in Iraq are about the same age as my kids. My godson is going over soon, so the war's about to get personal for me.

**Q** What is his rank and job? What, if any, conversations have the two of you had about the war?

A He's a Ranger [lieutenant] leaving for first posting in Europe ... then likely on to Iraq or Afghanistan. Interestingly, he opposes the war in Iraq — and did when he joined — but we don't discuss it anymore. We only talk about his training, of which he has mostly good things to say. □

Kelly Kennedy covers the Army.