

Trek aims to support Iraq free of U.S. troops

By Adam Benson
staff writer

A week before Marshall Thompson left Iraq to come back home to the United States, the simple request of a military chaplain changed the direction that his life would take.

"As you're going home, don't forget about us,"

Thompson recalled the man saying to a group of



departing soldiers in July.

"Right then I knew when I got back, I'd have to do something to help them get home," said Thompson, 27 and a member of the U.S. Army Reserve since 1999.

Beginning Oct. 2, Thompson will walk the state from its northern to southern border, in a gesture that he hopes draws attention to his vision of an Iraq free of American forces.

He plans to set out from the Idaho border and walk 20 miles a day — one day for every 100 soldiers killed in Iraq — before ending his 500-mile journey on Halloween, at the Arizona border. He'll be joined by his wife, Kristen.

"It's going to be a sacrifice, this walk, but we feel we owe it to the people that are there," Thompson said. "I think people would be surprised at how much support there is for this."

Thompson said more than 100 people have logged onto his Web site, www.soliderspace.com, since it was launched on Sept. 10.

Thompson, a Logan High School and Utah State University alumnus, said he's

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prepared to hear from people along the way who disagree with his anti-war stance.

"I'm prepared for people to be mad at me," he said. "We are expecting some opposition. If you say you want to bring the troops home immediately, people assume certain things about you, and they're angry."

Thompson has been on active duty since 2003 and has been deployed to Kosovo, Macedonia, Korea and Iraq. A sergeant in the Denver-based 207th Mobile Public Affairs Unit, he worked as a military journalist during his time overseas.

It bothers him when people accuse media outlets of not telling positive stories coming out of the country.

"Since I've been back, a lot of people have been asking me, 'What are the good things happening in

Iraq, what is the media not telling us?' and I'm almost offended, because why are you striving so hard to find something positive in war? It's a pointless question," said Thompson.

He one day hoped to make the military a career, but that option was derailed once he arrived in Iraq, Thompson said.

"All wars are not equal, and people need to understand that," he said. "This is a superfluous war. We made a conscious decision 3 1/2 years ago to start a war in Iraq, and right now we can make a conscious decision to end the war in Iraq."

Thompson's statewide journey is not endorsed by the state's Army Reserve, although a spokesman stood behind his right to embark on it.

"All of the leadership of the Army Reserve, from one end to the other, is in favor of supporting our basic freedoms, and one of them is freedom of speech," said Claude McKinney, public

affairs specialist for the 96th Regional Readiness Command. "I don't believe we'd find members of leadership who would support his position, but they support his ability to have and demonstrate a position."

Thompson said his aim isn't to be provocative or upset people, but to bring to light the daily struggle that American forces face in Iraq.

"It's a total stalemate. We are in a holding pattern, and it's survival mode," he said. "We really don't do anything except for try to survive."

And while he's ready for people to question his position, Thompson refuses to allow anybody to challenge his loyalty to the country he served for seven years.

"I love serving my country and I'm very proud of my service," he said. "It hurts me deeply when people question my patriotism and my bravery, because I think those are two things I've proven to myself and everybody."

He also acknowledges the

political message underlying his walk, but said he's frustrated in the deadlock that has gripped the nation's leaders.

"The Republicans want to stay the course and the Democrats want to cut and run, and while they're arguing people are dying," Thompson said. "I think being a soldier puts my foot in the door and makes people consider my argument just a second longer. If it opens their mind just a little bit, maybe some reasonable truth can get in."

Thompson said he'll measure the success of his march in relative terms.

"The biggest success I can see happening is for the world to realize that Utah, the last bastion of support for war in the United States, has a lot of support instead for peace," he said. "In the end, I'd like the goal to be peace in Iraq but if that doesn't happen, I'll have peace in my soul."

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