

War hero doc from Naperville goes from Iraq to 'Untold Stories of the ER'

'You have to treat everybody' whether serving in Iraq or working in ER, Naperville doc stays cool, collected

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How Dr. Sudip Bose reacted when a dancer got a stiletto caught in her cheek on "Untold Stories of the ER" tonight. Discovery

In tonight's Discovery Channel episode of "Untold Stories of the ER," Naperville native Dr. Sudip Bose treats a crash victim covered in cow feces and removes a stiletto heel from a stripper's cheek. It's all highly entertaining. But if he really wants to grab your attention, Bose can tell you about that time he took care of Saddam Hussein.

Having joined the Army as a way to help pay his staggering medical school bills, Capt. Bose arrived in Iraq soon after that nation's longtime dictator had been found hiding in a hole near his hometown of Tikrit.

"Shortly after capture, he needed medical attention. There wasn't much notice at all," recalls Bose, who made the required house call on Hussein. "We spent eight to 10 hours in a small room just doing our examination."

The doctor recaps the moment as if the entire episode was routine. He adheres to doctor-patient confidentiality.

"He was one patient out of 15 months," says Bose, who treated thousands of his fellow soldiers, Iraqi troops, enemy insurgents and the men, women and children wounded in the war. "After the fact, I kind of realized the weight of the moment."

In the moment, he had far bigger concerns. His "emergency room" generally was a city sidewalk, narrow street or dusty road where he tried to keep people alive, including himself. The sound of mortar explosions, bombs and gunfire provided a soundtrack for his service.

"Things have been exploding left and right here," he wrote in a blog he posted for loved ones in April 2004. "Bombs in hotels. Bombs in cars. Bombs in trucks. Bombs in soda cans. Bombs in dead animals. Bombs in tree branches. Bombs in potholes. Bombs in people."

His Iraq experience helped him be a better doctor later in his civilian life, Bose says, so he was prepared when a guy drove his convertible into a cow and came to the emergency room with serious injuries and covered with a brown substance.

"What looked like mud did not smell like mud. Having been in combat in Iraq, having taken care of many, many trauma patients, I've smelled many foul odors, but this was beyond all of them," he says.

If he can save a life on the street while ignoring rocks hitting his helmet and the sound of gunfire and helicopters, working in an emergency room defiled by manure is nothing.

"We can't get distracted by the smell," Bose says. "It's the whole concept of focusing on your job."

The Michigan-born son of Indian immigrants from Calcutta, Bose grew up in Naperville, where he graduated from Naperville Central High School in 1992.

"I grew up like every other suburban kid. I ran track, ran cross country, went to prom, and I still enjoy hanging out with my friends from school," says Bose. He even can spin a book on one finger, a trick he learned while working as a doughboy at the Little Italian Pizza eatery in Naperville.

Accepted into a special medical program at Northwestern University right out of high school, Bose now has military awards to add to his academic and medical achievements. His service in combat earned him a promotion to major and the Army's Bronze Star. Many of his fellow soldiers gave their lives, some lost limbs, and many came home with deep physical and emotional scars, says the doctor, who says he was lucky to survive.

"There were definitely some very close calls," he says. He remembers the time he and a buddy played "rock, scissors, paper" to see who would sit in the front of their vehicle, and then a bullet narrowly missed his friend. He remembers another time he dodged death while moving on short notice.

"It's 130 degrees. I had my stuff in a room in Baghdad, where I'd sleep some nights," he says, recalling how he poked along and griped about the unexpected chore. "Thirty minutes after I left that room, a mortar hit and reduced it to ashes."

Young doctors in the states probably were complaining about being on call for weekend shifts in air-conditioned hospitals.

"Iraq was kind of like being on call 24/7 for 15 months," says Bose, who treated the wounded during some of the war's worst action, including the Battle of Najaf.

"It was one of the bloodiest battles of the entire war," Bose says. Dozens of Iraqi police officers were wounded in a bomb blast, and then mortars, grenades, rifle and small-arms fire continued around him while he worked. He still has a photograph of him working on an Iraqi police officer's wounds, oblivious to the chaos around him. The doctor says he kept the officer alive but thinks he probably died later.

"You don't get final answers, but that's part of the game," Bose says.

Answers can be painful. He remembers one fateful day when he lost a buddy.

"You're eating breakfast with a friend in the morning and then, in the afternoon, you have to pronounce him dead on the street," Bose says, "And then, 20 minutes later, you have to treat the person who shot him."

His training as a doctor won't allow emotions and prejudices to affect his treatment.

"You have to treat everybody," he says. "Whether it's taking care of people on the battlefield or in emergency rooms, I want to keep Americans healthy."

That's why he has homes in Illinois and Texas and works in hospitals in both states, is on the faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago, travels the nation giving motivational speeches, runs his "The Battle Continues" charity (thebattlecontinues.org) to benefit veterans, and appears on "Untold Stories of the ER" at 8 tonight on the Discovery Channel.

"It's all about education," Bose says. "I grew up watching a lot of Discovery Channel. You can learn a lot watching Discovery."

His boyhood dreams went from "mailman to fireman to policeman" until he saw his first medical show. "I was 8 years old, and I saw an operation on TV and I thought it was fascinating," Bose says. "I saw that surgery and became interested in that."

Occasionally appearing on TV health and news shows, the 39-year-old unmarried doctor says the teamwork and camaraderie needed by the entire Discovery staff to shoot his story called "Cows & Stilettos" reminds him of the way everyone works together to save lives on a battlefield or in the ER.

"Emergency rooms are sometimes like war zones. It's never a dull moment. The underlying themes are kind of the same," he says, emphasizing the need to focus, avoid distractions and work together.

Dealing with cows and stilettos might not seem as important as saving lives in Iraq, but Bose says the show gives people a realistic glimpse at bizarre cases as it educates.

"It's entertaining, but you can take home a few tidbits," Bose says. "People can learn lessons from the show: Watch for cows in the road and do not get angry at people with stilettos."

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