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Body

Jonathan Soltz's unlikely journey into presidential politics began with a graduate-school term paper titled "Secure Intentions, But a Less-Secure America."

Soltz, 27, a Pittsburgh-area Army veteran, argued from a unique perspective: He landed in Baghdad in May 2003, the month he survived a roadside ambush and President Bush declared major combat over in Iraq.

The 16-page paper, forwarded from one e-mail inbox to another, eventually made it to Sen. John Kerry, who recruited Soltz to head Pennsylvania Veterans for Kerry.

Now, Soltz is a veteran VIP at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, sitting on stage with Kerry's Swift-boat crewmates at a brimming rally yesterday, mixing with members of Congress at private parties, and learning ways to spread the campaign's message around the state this fall.

He is also accepting accolades from former U.S. Sen. Max Cleland of Georgia, a Vietnam veteran who lost three limbs.

"His leadership is unquestioned," Cleland said in an interview. "The struggles he is having are the same struggles we had when we returned."

It's an improbable rise for Soltz, a political novice and stoic soldier who was deploying convoys in Baghdad as an Army captain a year ago, his doubts deepening over America's involvement in Iraq.

Soltz left the country in September 2003, finished a 4 1/2-year activation in December and returned to Allegheny County, where he enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh's school of public and international affairs. A native of Maryland, he had moved to Western Pennsylvania after high school to attend Washington & Jefferson College.

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While at Pitt, he began questioning Bush's war policies, in class and in private with his professor, Donald Goldstein. Eventually, Soltz put his thoughts on paper. "A foreign policy too vast, an army too small," he said was the gist of what he wrote.

"You go it alone, that burdens the military," Soltz said, referring to Bush's decision to go into Iraq without U.N. approval. "How do you keep good people in?"

In April, a campaign aide unexpectedly called Soltz, told him Kerry read his paper and wanted to meet him. A 10-minute private talk at Pittsburgh International Airport carried over to a cell-phone call the next day, said Soltz and campaign aides.

"He helped me realize I relate more to a combat vet like him than people my own age," said Soltz, whose job as state coordinator is to recruit thousands of veterans into the campaign.

He will be challenged by State Sen. John Pippy, another veteran of the Iraq war who heads Veterans for Bush in Pennsylvania. "The world will be a safer place because we got involved" in Iraq, Pippy said yesterday.

Soltz said removing Saddam Hussein was "morally right," but with no weapons of mass destruction found - Bush's main reason for going into Iraq - the President has lost credibility, Soltz said.

That's been the rallying point among veterans in Boston, some of whom gathered with Soltz at a chic mansion Sunday with Cleland and former Sen. Bob Kerrey.

"This is a long way from Baghdad," Soltz said.

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Notes

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION 2004

Graphic

PHOTO;

JONATHAN WILSON, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Jonathan Soltz (left) leads the Pledge of Allegiance at a Veterans for Kerry rally in Boston. With him are Democratic strategist James Carville (right) and some of Kerry's Swift-boat crewmates. Soltz, an Iraq war veteran, was recruited by the campaign after he wrote a term paper criticizing the war.

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