

Update from Baghdad

April 06, 2004

Family and Friends,

Thought I'd send out a hello to update everyone about life in Baghdad. 2 months 20 some days into deployment so far. Feels like an eternity yet not even 3 months. The novelty is gone as we settle into our "routines." Troops struggle to keep morale up. Now we look ahead only to see and endless tunnel of time. Maybe 10 more months (hopefully), maybe 15 more months. Nobody knows. Time just keeps ticking. And ticking. And ticking. And ticking.

Days here seem to just turn like the pages of a book exposed to an unpredictable wind. On one page I take care of several marines. They have been getting hit pretty hard as well. On another page we prepare for missions attempting to arrest an Anti-American leader here who is stirring up much of our troubles. Another page caring for ambushed civilians or prisoners of war and children. Other pages are about preparing for possible convoys into nearby town Fallujah for upcoming operations due to recent events. This morning I ate breakfast and saw a new friend of mine. We exchanged hellos. This evening I pronounced him dead and saw the contents of his breakfast in his ruptured intestines. This book gets uglier and uglier...and the ending does not seem happy.

No new bruises for me thankfully. No more getting pelted with stones. Unfortunately cannot say the same for everyone else. Plenty of injuries. The enemy is faceless and cowardly. They set up explosive devices or fire rocket propelled grenades from a distance and are often never to be found again. Only to leave someone blinded, paralyzed, permanently disabled, or lifeless. Things have been exploding left and right here. 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. Anti-American protests everywhere. Some Iraqis are pro-American. Some are not. Probably more eventful here than the news ever portrays....then again I do not regularly get the news here...

Recently we (the 1st Cavalry) participated in a series of intense raids called Operation Iron Promise aimed at catching people firing mortar rounds at us and seizing their weapons. Raids happen daily and nightly here. Often I accompany. Often I stay back on the street corner in my vehicle waiting for patients. Often I wait in my aid station and patients are evacuated to me. Often I am at the 31st Combat Support Hospital in the Green Zone of Baghdad. All I know is that I am keeping busy...Often....

Few weeks ago we moved into a new building about 1 block away from our last building. It is located about a block west of the Tigris River. This river has a lot of history behind it and was supposedly once one of the origins of human civilization. Our building looks like it has been there since then! It was in a state of shambles. Several days spent sweeping, mopping, cleaning, trying to fix plumbing and electricity, putting hinges on doors, and painting (actually a nice break from seeing patients). The buildings are filled with rats and these are no ordinary rats. These are Darwinian rats... "survival of the fittest" rats. They are nearly a foot long with long tails and they pop out of nowhere! We place mousetraps with peanut butter on them and they lick the peanut butter and walk right over the traps! They climb walls and gnaw through food containers. They can be heard running above our heads on the other side of the ceiling panel and sometimes they fall through and land on our beds. We have been getting used to being attacked by mortar rounds and bombings here in Baghdad....but frankly at times I think the rats freak us out more! In the states you see the movies where people jump on the couch and scream when they see mice. Here the rats jump up there with you. Thrilling....

Experience here is truly enlightening. There are several things I miss....things that I often took for granted.

- 1) Peace. I cannot imagine life in Israel/ Palestine/ other places in the world where people constantly live in fear of death/explosions/terrorism. For me it is only temporary and the memories will last for life. From personal experience, it is terrifying to be sitting in a room and have the window explode from a mortar round that landed few feet away...especially when I just decided to stick around in the building a few minutes longer and could have been outside right where it landed! Also terrifying examining the bullet holes through our ambulance door by the seat that I was going to sit in but decided not to (the person sitting there was not so lucky). Going to the grocery store or to our jobs without losing a limb is not something to take for granted. I pray that the world does not crumble to terrorism or other evil forces where this is taken away from us. We had a taste of this on September 11, 2001. Some people live it every day. It is truly miserable.
- 2) Fast food. I never thought I would crave Pizza Hut and Taco Bell like I do. I think the first month I return will be a dedicated "fast food" month. The local food here is risky at times...several diarrhea cases...we have nicknamed the syndrome "Saddam's revenge"
- 3) Porcelain toilets (see Saddam's revenge above)
- 4) Showers. Warm showers. Clean showers.
- 5) Family and Friends...and thus I write this letter to you all. Thank you so much for your support.
- 6) Etc...etc...etc...

On the other hand, there are actually certain things I do not miss so much....

- 1) The daily "rat race." Things that I used to find "annoying" are not an issue here. For example, paying bills, filling up the gas tank, sorting through junk mail (all mail is good here), deadlines, routines, commitments, exams, errands around the home, etc... In a weird sense this is an interesting getaway with a whole different set of stresses. Puts an interesting perspective to prior stresses. Instead of worrying about the "rat race" I worry about rats....
- 2) Not having to prepare my food or figure out what to eat. There is one choice...the chow hall...take it or leave it. Like it or not. If it's moldy just don't eat it! Kind of like a college cafeteria (except you are getting shot at).

Every day we try to find something positive, no matter how small, and try to hang on to it until bedtime. Sometimes it is the grilled steak night at the chow hall (rare) and other times it is the nice email or letter. We savor those moments and use them to drive on...

Take care!

Keep in touch (and sorry if I cannot do so very well)! You guys are still in my thoughts.

Sudip