

The Sandstorm

The magazine of the 2nd BCT, 10th Mountain Division - Vol. 1, Issue 4

**Air Assault into the
terrorist stronghold
Qarghouli Village**

**Task Force
Vigilant
keeps the
peace in
Al-Furat**

*Staking a claim:
Brigade legal
makes sure Iraqis
are reimbursed*

**Plus: Providing school supplies in Al-As-Salem;
Soldiers celebrate Thanksgiving**



The Sandstorm

The official magazine of the
Second Brigade Combat Team

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If you'd like to see something in this magazine, or if you'd like to make contributions, please e-mail us at:
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We're always striving to improve this publication. Remember, this is *your* magazine.

We reserve the right to edit for security, accuracy, propriety, clarity and space.

More information on the 2nd BCT Commandos can be found at www.CommandosOf2BCT.blogspot.com.

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In this issue:



Soldiers of Task Force Vigilant protect and patrol three villages outside the Victory Base Complex - keeping peace in Al-Furat and building strong relationships between U.S. forces and local residents.

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Soldiers of 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment air assault into the Qarghuli Village area, long known as a terrorist stronghold, detaining terrorists and seizing caches.

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Commander's Comments

Commandos,

We recently celebrated the long-standing Army tradition of Thanksgiving.

The command group and I had the pleasure of being out at the various patrol bases with many of you for this festive celebration, and I was honored to serve chow to as many of the Commandos as possible.

My very first Thanksgiving in the Army was spent in the Mountain phase of Ranger school in northern Georgia, over 20 years ago.

We had been conducting a long foot patrol along the Tennessee Valley Divide – in below-freezing temperatures and short of food and rest.

We walked through the night to a truck pickup point where were



Kershaw

loaded into the back of deuce-and-a-half trucks for a long ride back to the Mountain Ranger Camp in Dahlonega, Ga.

My Ranger buddies and I were cold and wet and huddled together trying to maintain our core body heat in the hypothermia-inducing temperatures.

We arrived at the mountain camp and were treated to one of the finest meals of my life—mostly because it was a short chance to eat and rest—and unlike the few other meals we received in Ranger School, we were allowed eat without the harassment that normally accompanied our meals.

I distinctly remember our Ranger instructors attending with their families, showing us not only that they were men to be respected as Soldiers, but as fathers and husbands as well.

This memory has etched in my mind how special this holiday is to me, the Army and our country.

For most of our country, Thanksgiving represents a time for families to gather and spend time giving thanks for the many blessings we enjoy in our country.

Although we are separated from our families, I hope in years to come, you'll be able to reflect on this Thanksgiving as one with your Commando Family.

Whether eating out at the Yusufiyah Thermal Power Plant, on one of the patrol bases or – for the families – celebrating at home and praying for your Soldier here in Iraq, I hope you can look back at this time and understand the importance of the tradition of Thanksgiving to our Army.

COMMANDOS!



Col. Michael Kershaw, commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), serves mashed potatoes to Pfc. Brian Cole, a medic with the 2nd BCT personal security detachment, as Maj. Kenny Mintz, the brigade operations officer, ladles gravy onto Spc. Marcus Slay's plate. 2nd BCT officers served Thanksgiving dinner to Soldiers at the Yusufiyah Thermal Power Plant, now Patrol Base Dragon, on Nov. 23.

4-31 air assaults into terrorist stronghold Qarghuli



Pvt. Arthur Rocha (right), an infantryman with the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), searches a haystack for weapons in Qarghuli Village, Iraq Nov. 25.

Below: Capt. Don Jamoles, commander of Company D, 4-31, gives a situation report to the 4-31 tactical operations center after establishing a battle position in the village.



Photos by Staff Sgt. Angela McKinzie, 2nd BCT Public Affairs NCOIC

Staff Sgt. Angela McKinzie
2nd BCT PAO, 10th Mtn. Div.

QARGHULI VILLAGE, Iraq — Qarghuli Village, Iraq has long been known as a safe haven for terrorists. For several months the area had not been patrolled by U.S. forces because of the danger it posed. Knowing the high enemy threat in the area did not stop Commando Brigade infantrymen from going in.

Soldiers from the Company D, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), teamed up with soldiers from the 4th Battalion, 4th Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division, to conduct an air assault mission, Operation Polar Black Diamond, into Quarghuli Village on the morning of Nov. 25.

As the Soldiers boarded one of the four helicopters that took them from Mahmudiyah, Iraq to Qarghuli Village they shared their thoughts of the mission.

“I think this mission will help to eliminate the terrorist activity in the area,” said Sgt Jereme Brown, a 4-31 infantryman. “We are going in there to make it a safer place for the Iraqi people,”

When the Soldiers landed at their interim destination they found themselves on unforgiving terrain. They had to push through canals, muddy fields and even across barbed wire while the night-vision goggles offered their only form of sight. Al-

though the terrain was tough and the company found themselves lying in fields filled with cow manure as they pulled security, they stayed focused on the mission.

The mission would not be complete until they established the battle position in the village. The battle position established would be the westernmost outpost in the Polar Bear area of operations.

During the foot march the U.S. and Iraqi soldiers worked together to clear houses in the area. They found a total of three AK-47s and magazines in the houses they searched.

After seven hours of foot marching the Soldiers had finally reached their destination – the battle position they had to establish.

As soon as the Soldiers arrived at their new home they immediately started pulling security and patrolling the local area looking for any suspicious activity.

Spc. Katherine Cobb, a female search team member attached to 4-31, spoke of what it was like to be a part of the mission.

“I was extremely excited when I found out I was going on the mission,” Cobb said. “I like going on patrols, talking with the local nation-



Photo by Staff Sgt. Angela McKinzie, 2nd BCT Public Affairs NCOIC

Soldiers from the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division (LI), walk towards the newly established battle position in Qarghuli Village, Iraq Nov. 25.

Village, finds caches, detains 10

als and seeing what they need.”

As the Soldiers patrolled the area they saw 10 Iraqis placing improvised explosive devices in culvert locations along Route Malibu. The Iraqi soldiers quickly detained them for further questioning.

“I am happy we found the terrorists who were placing IEDs on the road,” said Lt. Ahmed, and Iraqi soldier with 4th Bn., 4th Bde. 6th IA Div. “I am here because I want to help my country, the Iraqi people and my Army friends.”

Upon further questioning the Iraqi soldiers were given information on terrorists and caches in the local area.

“I am confident with the Iraqi Army,” said Sgt. Albert Lopez, a 4-31 infantryman. “I have worked with the Iraqi soldiers since I have been in Iraq and I am confident about what they are doing.”

One of the detainees led the U.S. and Iraqi soldiers to the weapons caches where items such as spools of wire, two pressure plates and three portable phones were found. They also uncovered a buried container that terrorists use to hide weapons.

“The Soldiers have performed well on this mission, as they do on all missions,” said Capt. Don Jamoles, Company D, 4-31 commander. “My Soldiers have been working well with the Iraqi soldiers on this mission. (The U.S. Soldiers) provided outer security of the area while Iraqis conducted searches themselves.”

Jamoles went on to describe what it was like working with the IA during the mission.

“Two years ago it was difficult to get Iraqi soldiers onto helicopters,” he said. “Now it is second nature. The Iraqi soldiers have done an excellent job and are showing improvement in taking control of situations themselves.”

Although the Soldiers successfully established the battle position

the enemy threat was still present.

“While I was on top of the house I heard a loud bang so I got down on the ground,” said 2nd Lt. Thad Wescott, a 4-31 platoon leader. “I did not realize I was shot until I saw blood. I’m thankful I’m alive.”

Wescott was shot by an enemy sniper while manning the roof of the house.

Sgt. Sean Sanders, a medic with 4-31, described treating Wescott.

“Any time I go on a mission I always hope that I do not have to work ... If I do not have to work, that means no one got hurt,” Sanders said. “But since I do have to work, I am glad that this is all I have to do. I’m always worried (about the Soldiers) because I never want anything bad to happen to them.”

The Soldiers will continue to man the battle position until the area is safe.

“We will continue to provide force protection for the battle position until there is freedom of movement along Route Malibu,” Jamoles said. “And we will provide security for coalition forces and the people of Qarghuli Village.”



Sgt. Sgt. Sean Sanders, a medic with the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), climbs down the stairs of the battle position that the Polar Bears established in Qarghuli Village, Iraq Nov. 25.

Below: Iraqi Soldiers from the 4th Battalion, 4th Brigade, 6th Iraqi Army Division, foot march in the village. They were part of the air assault mission with the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI).



Task Force Vigilant keeps peace in villages near BIAP

By Spc. Chris McCann
2nd BCT PAO

CAMP VICTORY, Iraq — “I love my job. I love the little (children).”

Not many Soldiers in Iraq can say they love their jobs, but Pfc. Adare Cleveland, a gunner and dismount with Team Hellcat on Task Force Vigilant, says it with complete sincerity. The task force is a battalion of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI).

The team guards the Victory Base Complex, Iraq, and patrols villages immediately outside the complex – Al Furat, Iraqi Family Village and Airport Village.

Platoon sergeant Staff Sgt. Desi Johnson said that the villages are largely quiet.

“They just established a council in this town,” Johnson said of IFV. “They have a mixed community, Shia and Sunni, and they’re trying to make it livable for everyone.”

While the residents get along, the mixed families mean contention when other family members come to visit, Johnson said.

“They come over to see their friends and they get into it with the neighbors,” he explained. “What we do is more of a police

and investigative thing than a Soldiers-against-insurgents” thing.”

A large field outside IFV is covered in thick brush and tumbleweeds. When the TFV checked it for improvised explosive devices, they partially cleared it.

Since then, said Sgt. Shilo Harris, a team leader with the Hellcats, the locals have been clearing the field of their own accord.

“We’ve seen some tremendous changes here,” Johnson said. “They’re more than willing to help us, and we’re more than willing to help them.”

The Soldiers of Team Hellcat have been building relationships with the communities they patrol, and even with the residents.

Harris carried a bottle of lotion for a child he’s met on several patrols.

“My little buddy, he has bad dry skin. So I’m bringing him some lotion,” he said. “I feel like we’re doing good here.”

Some of the problems, though, can’t be fixed.

Harris explained that a woman with cancer was clearly in the last stages of the disease, but her husband asked the

Soldiers for help.

“It would be nice to help,” Harris said with a shrug. “But there’s nothing we could do. It broke my heart.”

The Soldiers patrolled Al-Furat on Nov. 20, searched a house and assured the man of the house that his one AK-47 was authorized. Women and children waited patiently, smiling, as Soldiers carefully checked for contraband and asked about the water, electricity and sewer service.

“No sewer or water at all,” the man said. “Electricity for four or five minutes at night, that’s all.”

The streets, while full of children, were quiet.

The team has been engaged by small arms a few times in the past, but there are seldom IEDs.

“The best part of this is not having to worry about IEDs,” Johnson said. “That threat is very small.”

The Soldiers work with each other just as closely as they do with the Iraqis they protect.

“I enjoy the people I work with,” Harris said. “I feel like I’m part of a good team.”



1st Lt. Alex Payne, platoon leader for Team Hellcat, Task Force Vigilant, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), discusses infrastructure at the Al-Furat school with the school guard and Hellcat interpreter Adam while on a patrol in the village Nov. 20.

1-89 Cavalry finds cache of ready-made IEDs

AL TARAQ, Iraq — Soldiers of Troop A, 1st Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI) found three caches of explosives in a field and unused house near this small village Nov. 16.

Mortar rounds, many of which were pre-ripped with detonation cord for use as improvised explosive devices, and other ex-

plosives were destroyed by an explosive ordnance disposal team.

Spc. Christopher Kelley, a forward observer with the troop, was one of the Soldiers that found the caches.

“We like (finding explosives). It gets the stuff off the roads,” Kelley said of the discovery. “We’ll stay out here as long as it takes.”



Photos by Spc. Chris McCann, 2nd BCT PAO

Above: Spc. Christopher Kelley of Troop A, 1st Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), watches over a cache he helped find Nov. 16. Left: a cache explodes in a controlled detonation.

Soldiers provide needed supplies to Ali as-Salem school



1st Lt. Jeffrey Archer (above left) and Pfc. Charles Marty (above right) hand out school supplies at the Ali As-Salem school Nov. 22 as a part of the 1st Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI)'s efforts to build relations between the community and U.S. troops.

Marty, a Soldier with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1-89, received most of the supplies that were distributed on the 22nd from members of his family in the U.S.; the boxes included pens, pencils, chalk, glue and markers.

“It was really cool,” Marty said of the day’s operation. “It will



Photos by Spc. Chris McCann, 2nd BCT PAO

definitely be one of the highlights of my deployment. The future of Iraq is in that classroom, not in what’s going out here now.”

2nd Lt. Jim Taft, leader of a platoon with Troop B in the squadron, agreed. “Iraq is doing the right thing so long as kids are going to school. This is a war between economic classes.”

The squadron is active in the villages of its area of operations, distributing food, school supplies, candy and other goods to Iraqi families and children.

“We’re showing the Iraqis we’re here to make their country better off,” said 1st Sgt. Dave Bowman, HHC first sergeant.

Operation Iron Claw keeps routes clear, Soldiers safe

By Spc. Chris McCann
2nd BCT PAO

CAMP STRIKER, Iraq — Improvised explosive devices have been a problem for both the Iraqi people and the U.S. military since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI) have been doing their best to reduce the numbers and effects of IEDs — finding caches containing materials for over a thousand IEDs, patrolling roads to prevent placement of them and building civil relations to discourage people from setting them at all — but some still remain. To get rid of them, there is Operation Iron Claw.

Using what is officially known as the Mine Protected Vehicle-Buffalo, or just “the Buffalo,” the Soldiers of Company A, 2nd Brigade Special Troops Battalion and attached Soldiers from Company A, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment patrol roads in slow route-clearing convoys on a regular basis.

“I enjoy the mission,” said said Sgt. Brandon Hasson, a Soldier assigned to Co. A, 4-31 and a Buffalo operator. “It’s a good task, and it makes me feel good, knowing I helped somebody not get injured, whether we find something or not. If we didn’t find anything, it means there’s no bad guys around, and if we do find something, it’s just that much more rewarding.”

Armored Humvees protect the Buffalo and the “Husky,” a contraption that looks like a road grader, Hasson said. But the Husky, instead of a blade, carries a very sensitive metal detector.

The Husky passes over the road, and when it senses a metal object that could be an IED, it marks the spot with paint, Hasson said. The Buffalo takes over from there.

Watching on the camera and using the movable iron arm and claw — hence the operational name — the Soldier in the passenger seat of the vehicle carefully digs away whatever is covering the possible IED. When it is laid bare, Explosive Ordnance Disposal moves in and neutralizes the threat.

“This vehicle is able to pinpoint, open up and expose a round for EOD to dispose of,” Hasson said.

But sometimes even the most careful manipulation will trigger an IED, especially those made with volatile homemade explosives. The Buffalo’s thick armor makes it nearly impervious to blasts, but missions can still be a little unnerving, said Hasson.

“When we were out at the Yusufiyah Thermal Power Plant, there were two directional charges up on the wall. I had to go in with the arm to get them and pull them out of the sand piles, and put them out on the road for EOD without them blowing up.... I don’t worry about it too much, because we’re protected. But there’s still some fear, because anything manmade will err,” Hasson said.

Sgt. John Slempek, also of Company A, 4-31, and attached to the BSTB, has even more faith in the vehicle. “You’re not going to get hurt in a Buffalo,” he countered.

The Buffalo have weathered tremendous numbers of explosions — in-

cluding anti-tank mines, according to online defense news magazine Defense Update.

The magazine cited an example of a Buffalo in Iraq that ran over an anti-tank round. The blast blew off a wheel and destroyed an axle, but no one was hurt inside the vehicle, and the Buffalo drove to safety on its own, was repaired overnight and back in service the next day.

The 2nd BSTB has discovered and neutralized 110 IEDs since the transfer of authority on Sept. 20, on missions that happen almost every day, rain or shine, Hasson said.

The Soldiers who drive the Buffalo constantly — there are route-clearing missions going on every day — know that their efforts are critical to the brigade’s transport.

2nd BCT Soldiers who perform the route-clearing missions will go on, as engineer Soldiers do all over Iraq, as long as the 2nd BCT is deployed.

“Without this vehicle,” said Hasson, “The mission cannot go.”



Photos by Spc. Chris McCann, 2nd BCT PAO

The Mine Protected Vehicle-Buffalo rolls out of the 2nd Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI)’s motor pool on an Iron Claw mission to clear routes of improvised explosive devices.

Legal team ensures Iraqi locals receive compensation

By Staff Sgt. Angela McKinzie
2nd BCT Public Affairs NCOIC

MAHMUDIYAH, Iraq — Mohamad, an Iraqi farmer, found it difficult enough to survive on what produce he could get out of his small desert farm. But when some of the carefully constructed irrigation channels were destroyed, he had no way to provide for his family.

Mohamad's land was partially destroyed when the U.S. Army closed roads for military purposes. While the roads were closed a vehicle drove across his land, stopping the water flow to his crops. Mohamad had nowhere to turn - except to the U.S. Army's Brigade Operational Law Team for help.

The 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, claims mission plays a vital role in promoting and maintaining friendly relations with the local people.

"Money is essentially another weapon system on the battlefield," said Capt. Nate Hummel, who serves as the 2nd BCT's Foreign Claims Commission. "Not only are we living up to our moral and legal obligations in taking responsibility for our actions, but we truly are helping the Iraqi people."

The BOLT is able to help the Iraqis under the provisions of the Foreign Claims Act.

The FCA allows compensation for local nationals who suffer damage, injury or death as a result of non-combat activities, negligent or wrongful acts or omissions committed by the U.S. military personnel.

"The (FCA) is good because we are trying to do some right to the accident that was done," said Staff Sgt. Daniel Davis II, who serves as the 2nd BCT BOLT noncommissioned officer in charge and the claims pay agent. "Sometimes this is their only livelihood and their only means of survival. Our claims mission is primarily to help the Iraqi people."

Every week the BOLT works hand-



Photo by Staff Sgt. Angela McKinzie, 2nd BCT Public Affairs NCOIC

Staff Sgt. Daniel Davis II, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI)'s Brigade Operational Law Team's noncommissioned officer in charge and claims pay agent, hands an Iraqi man money for a claim settled at the Civil Military Operations Center at the Radwaniyah Palace Complex.

in-hand with the Iraqi claims personnel to provide assistance to the locals at either the Radwaniyah Palace Complex's Civil Military Operations Center or Forward Operating Base Mahmudiyah, southwest of Baghdad.

The CMOC is fully staffed with several Iraqi interpreters, claims specialists and attorneys who review claims and assist in advising claimants on collection or proper documents, photographs and other evidence.

"When the locals come here (for help) we make sure to treat them well and help them try and find a solution for their current situation," said Saladin, the CMOC general information manager. "We try to help them so they can progress their future."

While the Iraqi claims specialist and attorneys play a vital role in making sure the claims are legitimate, the paperwork is filled out correctly and the proper evidence is submitted the BOLT is hard at work ensuring the claims are paid.

"We try to make sure the claims are paid in a timely manner," said Spc. Patrick Burtt-Henderson, the 2nd BCT claims paralegal specialist. "We want to establish a good relationship with the locals."

Since the 2nd BCT has arrived in Iraq, only a few months ago, the BOLT has helped many Iraqis, but not all cases are approved.

"A difficult part of the job is when

we have to deny claims that do not qualify under the FCA (Foreign Claims Act) due to the combat exclusion," Hummel said. "Many local nationals find themselves in the wrong place, at the wrong time - caught in crossfire or escalation of force incidents, where U.S. Soldiers were doing their job and following the rules of engagement."

Although some of the locals' claims do not get approved, the BOLT tries to help the Iraqis in any way they can.

"Sometimes there are other avenues if the FCA doesn't apply. "One of these alternatives is using a Commander's Emergency Relief Program (CERP) funded condolence payment," Hummel said.

The claims mission seems to be paying off. Mohamad said he has decided to join the Iraqi Army.

"Since I have seen the (U.S.) military helping the Iraqis I wanted to do something for my people," Mohamad said. "I have already got my identification card and I am joining the IA."

Mohamad was just one of the many locals who the BOLT has helped. Each week at least 50 locals ask for help.

"Paying claims to the locals helps promote and maintain friendly relations in the 2nd BCT's AO," Hummel said.

"This builds on the local population's trust and confidence in (the U.S. Army)."

The BOLT will continue to run weekly meetings with the Iraqis throughout the deployment to help the Iraqis with their claims.

Soldiers make Yusufiyah safer for residents

By Staff Sgt. Angela McKinzie
2nd BCT Public Affairs NCOIC

YUSUFİYAH, Iraq — In the town of Yusufiyah, Iraq stores are starting to open again and people are coming out of their homes. The locals are no longer scared.

Soldiers from the quick-reaction-force platoon, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment “Polar Bears,” 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), have been patrolling the streets of Yusufiyah for the past six weeks in order to reduce the amount of terrorist activity in the area.

“We conduct patrols and recons to disrupt enemy activity in the area,” said Sgt. 1st Class Paul Burk, the 4-31 QRF platoon sergeant. “We knew there were signs of terrorist activity in the area from the graffiti on the walls and information the locals gave us.”

The QRF Soldiers have a good relationship with the locals in the area. Each time they patrol the town, they ask the locals how they are doing and what they (the QRF Soldiers) can do to help.

They know all the families in the area and are often greeted with a smile when they stop to talk to the family members.

“When we talk to the families it makes me feel good that they are able to share the problems they are having within the town,” Burk said.

Although the families feel comfortable when the Soldiers are in the area some of them still receive death threats from the terrorists.

The Soldiers make it a habit to check on each of these and other families when they are in the area.

“It is good to see that we are doing something positive (for the local nationals),” said Pfc. Timothy Grom, a 4-31 QRF gunner. “Since we have been here we can see that our efforts (to help the locals) have not been a waste.”

Part of the QRF’s mission while patrolling the area is to look for any suspicious activity and check the lo-

cal’s identification cards.

One local shared his thoughts about the QRF Soldiers.

“I am happy to see them (the Soldiers) here,” said Mahamad, an Iraqi local national and resident of Yusufiyah. “They are helping to make the town a safer place and keep the bad guys out.”

Since the QRF has been patrolling the area of Yusufiyah, there has been less

terrorist activity and the locals seem like they feel safer, the Soldiers said.

The QRF Soldiers continually go into the city of Yusufiyah to check on the locals and respond to any terrorist activity in the area, as well as training to respond to terrorists.

“We stay ready,” said 1st Lt. Alan Vargo, the 4-31 QRF platoon leader. “That’s what we do.”



Soldiers from the quick reaction force platoon, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI) practice battle drills before they depart to patrol the village of Yusufiyah, Iraq on Nov. 22.

Opinion: A different view of the country of Iraq

By 1st Lt. Serena Merrill
2nd BCT Staff Officer

Since I have been in Iraq I have had mixed emotions. Going into “the war” I believed in everything that we were doing, but my feelings changed when I watched a live feed of a cordon-and-search near an Iraqi farm.

The Soldiers I saw wanted to detain farmers for suspicious activity. I remembered being on my dad’s farm as a child. I wondered how I would feel if my father was questioned just because he was working on the farm. A week later I went on an aerial recon. I saw families playing with their children and dogs. I was upset at how much we have interrupted their lives. I started to disagree with our intentions here.

I was struggling internally with some of the things going on and I took what I had for granted - until yesterday. Yesterday was my first real patrol - my first real experience in a “combat zone.” My entire outlook changed.

I was excited and nervous when we drove out the gate. As we crossed “the wire,” the patrol leader told me to lock and load my weapon, which took me a while as I fumbled with my ammo pouch. I was embarrassed because everyone was waiting for me (such a rookie). As we turned onto the main road, the landscape was a lot bigger than I expected. It amazed me that everyone let the U.S. convoy pass. We had total control of the road.

I saw so many holes and craters from previous improvised explosive devices. I noticed many houses with graffiti, blown-out windows and trash. I thought of all the things that the Iraqis had been through. I wondered if we had any control of the situation.

I saw people sitting alone outside and wondered what they were thinking - I often sit alone and think back on the farm. I wondered how many people hated us for being here.

We stopped at a school and met the security officer. As we walked around, I couldn’t believe how many girls were there- it was the girls’ time to attend classes. They whispered and pointed at

me, and when I waved at them, they would giggle.

Some were well dressed in western style clothing. Others wore make-up, and some wore worn-out clothing.

While we were in the school yard, a little boy touched my soul and I will never forget it...all the children crowded around me and asked for anything and everything that I could give them, they called me “Madam.”

When I tried to tell them that I didn’t have anything, this little boy looked at me and tapped on my arm. As he spoke, it was like I couldn’t hear anybody but him.

He said, “Madam, what is your name?” I answered, “Serena.” Then he replied with, “Serena, it is nice to meet you, I am Salam.” And he walked away.

I couldn’t believe how well he had spoken and it felt amazing that this little boy knew exactly what I was saying. It made my heart smile. The security guard then shooed all the children away, and we left the school for the Yusufiyah Market.

When we pulled into the market, Col. Kerhaw began talking to a local man about the situation. He said that they didn’t like leaving the market area due to the fact that they feel safe there. They said that Yusufiyah had a lot of terrorists and that we needed to do something to make them feel safe.

During this conversation, two little girls captured my attention. I asked an interpreter, how to say “pretty” in Arabic. I said pretty in Arabic to the little girls they said, “me?” I nodded and said it again, and they smiled, embarrassed.

Then they followed me everywhere. Their father got mad and told them to get away from me, but every time he wasn’t looking they would come back. All they would do was stare, and smile. I hated the fact that I didn’t know more Arabic. They probably would have talked to me more if we could have understood each other. After our visit to the market we began to head to Patrol Base Yusufiyah. I got a tour of the patrol base and saw the gym (with no roof), the internet café and all the new buildings they were working on.

I asked how often the Soldiers get to call home, and...they don’t since there are no phones. A lot of the Soldiers there

haven’t spoken to their family since they have been here.

I saw the latrines - a row of porta johns that get cleaned once a week.

They get only two rolls of toilet paper daily and they have to use baby wipes sparingly. I remembered complaining earlier when the rest room trailer was closed for cleaning and I had to use a porta-john.

We loaded up and headed to Rushdi Mullah. As we arrived I saw a very familiar face...Sgt. Dombrow, who used to work with me back at Fort Drum. He offered me a tour of the command post. He pointed out that he shared it with a lieutenant, a captain and a first sergeant. I reflected that I had complained about the mattress in my trailer. At this point I actually felt completely secure and safe being in a dangerous area around so many fellow Soldiers and comrades. I wasn’t scared anymore. I reflected that if I can feel safe, anybody can. On the trip home we got caught behind some shepherds.

As the commander got out, I took the opportunity to join him and his PSD. He approached a family sitting in a yard, and once again I was the center of attention with the kids. An Iraqi man approached our interpreter, Primo, and me and said that he would exchange his baby girl for me, and everyone laughed. Primo and I started drawing more attention so we asked them, how the situation was there, and they said it is very good now. They said all the terrorists left for Yusufiyah and that they live in the “castle.”

They asked about life in America and what religion I was, and what the norm was for having children, and if I had family. We got back into the Humvees and I reflected on my experience the whole way back. I experienced something yesterday that I will never forget as long as I live. The Soldiers I saw showed pride, devotion and a love about what they are doing in their eyes.

I felt proud of being a part of such a great team that is changing things in a country that needs our help. I can only hope that someday everyone will see the good that we are doing.



1st Lt. Serena Merrill, a staff officer for the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, takes a photo with Iraqi children during a visit to the Yusufiyah Marketplace Nov. 14.

Photo by Command Sgt. Maj. Anthony Mahoney

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