

# Iraq Diary

By SGT Jay Christenson

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He writes: “While on Active duty I was trained to be an Intelligence Analyst (96B). I have 3 years of law enforcement experience in Greene County, Virginia as a Deputy Sheriff. (After arriving in Virginia late in 2000 I worked part-time between Deployments.) I had been stationed in Charlottesville for over 5 years when I left active duty. I spent a large portion of my assignment in Charlottesville deploying to Iraq, Qatar, Korea and Germany. I kept this journal while deployed on one of my trips in the Middle East. My contact address is [Christenson22902@yahoo.com](mailto:Christenson22902@yahoo.com)”

We publish this material to give our readers an original glimpse of the experience of an American fighting man in Iraq in the current conflict. We have not edited the material in any way so as to maintain its sense of immediacy and authenticity. ED]

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## IRAQ DIARY:

February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004: Iraq

It feels weird being back here. It has only been 40 days since I left here, and volunteered to come back. There have been a lot of improvements on the base in the short time I have been gone. The trailers are up now and Soldiers are on waiting lists 360 long to get a room. I put myself on the list right away, and was told he had one room that opened an hour ago, the other people had to wait because of rank. I was there at the right place at the right time. They have so many rooms for each rank, most of the rooms go to enlisted, because they are doubled up 2 per room, and there are 3 rooms per trailer. The officers get 1 per room and there are two larger rooms per trailer. They have more room in each but there are less of them to go around.

February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I got to take a shower today, and it was hot too, I'm off to a good start. There was no water at all yesterday. I'm not sure what is going on with my roommate situation; he seems to be accepting me. He is not much for conversation, but that is ok. The Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) office sent an Army E5 around with our door key and a foreign Sergeant in tow who was trying to move into my side of the room. My current roommate changed his mind about demanding his own room, and the office doesn't understand the situation now. He thinks he gets his own room as a GG13. Welcome to Baghdad Mr. GG13! We had some good mortars come in the other night. I was sitting on the floor of my room playing a video game on my laptop when the building shook. I took off my headset to listen for distance, my roommate sat up on his bed too. We heard 3 more come in. "That's a close one, hell I got to pee anyways." said my roommate, more to himself than to me. I grabbed my camera and went outside, it was raining yesterday so that made it very foggy last night. I could hear the loud thumps, the sound of automatic fire and the return of our weapons. The sound of a 50.Cal burp is very distinct. I have been going to the PX every day to buy cheap stuff, just to get cash back for Mustafa. Mustafa is an Army and Air Force Exchange Service contractor that supplies the base with things we cant get flown in. The 20-dollar a day limit kills me. The mood has changed in the PX lines too (from my first deployment here last year). The uniforms are fresh and still pressed, from the shins down are muddy of course and they wear galoshes (over boots). The patrols that come in from the roads around Baghdad aren't the zombies I saw last year, these are giddy kids who seem excited to be here. That is what a new unit to Iraq looks like. They have not been here long enough to realize where they are or what they are in for. One story in the Stars and Stripes covered a unit that was attacked on their very first day patrolling. What they failed to mention was that the previous unit assigned to that sector had the express responsibility of drawing fire and weeding out the insurgents. Kind of a crappy job description to inherit without knowing it. The incoming units get to fight the snake without it's head (Saddam), so their job should be a bit easier. When it gets hotter, people will be more miserable, and you will see the zombies walking the PX again. These guys have not been away from home long enough, and still have fresh memories to ponder. I am feeling somewhat better, but still waiting for this crud to break up in my lungs. I drug myself every night before bed, and then try to eat in the morning. I feel sick right now; meds and chow hall food don't mix.

February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I was walking around today looking at all of the different kinds of HMMVs and I saw some that were new to me. There are anywhere from 30-60+ different types of HMMVs, depending on how particular you want to be. The ones I saw belonging to the Reserve and National Guardsmen look like props from a Mad Max Movie. I think they had to get creative because they were sent here with soft side vehicles instead of up-armored ones. Even the armored ones don't stand up to sustained direct fire or an IED. They take off the soft doors and make their own vehicles here. The metal they weld on to their vehicles is about 1/4 to 1/2 inch thick and spot-welded to the hinges from the soft side doors. The panels are shaped just like the old doors and go half way up the door height, then another piece drops down from the roof making a sideways western saloon door. They paint them desert tan, which is odd because the vehicles are mostly green camouflage. Some have metal screens welded to the bumpers and windshields, or metal plates on the sides of the bed. The coolest thing I saw was a turret made of metal that surrounded three sides of the main gunner. The main turret can have a SAW or 50 Cal, and sometimes an AT-4. When the Soldier rides up there he looks like a little tanker with his own castle tower. Some HMMVs have nothing in the back; we call them "open bays". Our HMMVs have become the enemy equivalent of a "technical", which is anything mobile with an automatic weapon mounted on it. The main gunner can stand or sit in a custom made chair (usually an old office chair) welded to the gun mount. The gun mounts vary by each vehicle, and are some of the best innovations coming from Iraq. Soldiers can be very creative when they need to be. Some of the patrol vehicles have SAWs mounted on the passenger side doors on a triangular mount that looks like it came from a large truck driver's mirror. The passenger can reach out while moving and pivot his SAW without exposing much of his body. These mods aren't something you would see back in the U.S., they are designed to serve a unique urban warfare purpose in Iraq. I saw a sign in the chow hall today announcing the arrival of the Redskinettes; I saw them in Bosnia, but I could use another dose of cheerleader energy.

February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Back to another day at the office. I walked about a mile to the showers today, across the base to find only a drip from the faucet. It was hot, so I did a very patient bird bath for about 5 minutes, then the water was refilled and I got a good shower after all. I have been approved for training in another city outside Baghdad, so that means I get another C130 with a combat landing. I should stay overnight and return. I still have the crud and I can't seem to shake it. My voice is a bit weaker too; talking for six hours straight can wear you out. Everyday I watch the news in the chow hall, and at work on my laptop. It is weird to seeing this going on around me within a mile or so. I hear explosions all the time, muffled thumps and booms, usually followed by sporadic small arms fire. I have not seen any muzzle or impact flashes yet. The shock waves are close enough for me to feel in my teeth. Each explosion and its vibration goes into a mental folder where you try to guess the size, location and type. Mortars sound different than EOD blowing things up; car bombs and IEDs sound different than rockets coming in. Rockets make a very loud screaming sound as they fly overhead.

Yesterday I heard some plinking around my trailer; it could have been debris, or stray rounds. I could not find any holes in my trailer. Every now and then I realize that these sounds are considered background noise. These are everyday sounds that in another time, somewhere else, would make you want to run and hide. But here they are common, and Soldiers don't even react to them. Maybe it is our own defense mechanism and our way of adapting to it. I don't think any of us have gotten complacent to the dangers here. We all think that "If it is going to happen to me, then it's just going to happen to me, and there isn't much I can do about it." I walk home at around 2400 hrs and it is quiet, there is a slight breeze and usually around 75 degrees outside. The air is fresh and I look at the old palace buildings, wondering if Saddam ever saw these places. I wonder what life was like here before we took it over. I know the landscape has changed. We tear down palm trees for visibility, put down tarmac - a kind of gravel road covered with tar. Most roads and parking lots are made of this stuff. We add wooden walkways around the corners between buildings to make traveling easier. Except for the architecture and the main palace, which stand about 80 feet tall, it could be any base in the U.S.

February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004

We are on alert again starting tomorrow morning, I can't tell you more. I have to wear all of my gear, carry two medical aid kits and a gas mask (which I do not have), and two quarts of water all day until told otherwise. So I am going to stay in my trailer after work to avoid things like long lines or maneuvering around Porto Johns with my gear on.

March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004

Not much going on here. The weather is good, which means the mosquitoes are out again. I have a lot of itchy bites on my hands. I was in the chow hall today and saw people staring at the ceiling above the service line. A bullet had come through the ceiling just a minute before and landed between the server and the Soldier in line. It smashed the sneeze shield and spread glass everywhere. The workers had removed the remaining shards of glass, the three food bins and then closed the line. I saw the hole in the ceiling; it was very small and had a bit of yellow insulation poking out of it. It is interesting how something so small can cause so much damage. Bullet holes in the chow hall are nothing new. Last year during Ramadan we heard plinking on the roof, we simply put on our Kevlar and kept eating. Every day is Ground Hog Day. My packages have all made it here unopened and undamaged. I went to the Troop Medical Clinic (TMC) today and got some antibiotics for my crud. I have all the symptoms of my body not liking the sand and dust in my lungs. I think about half the soldiers that come here get that. I have had it both times I have been here.

March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004

I get to go play outside the walls today. I managed to catch a ride with an official convoy going to another base, and it just so happens to be stopping by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) market in the Green Zone. Hopefully I can do some shopping there. I am dead tired today. I got off at 0200, came back in at 0600. Ah the life of a Soldier. I had a very good day today. I had four hours of sleep but it was worth the trip to the CPA.

The Coalition Provisional Authority is where you see Paul Bremer and the Secretary of Defense do their announcements. I was along for the ride and the guys I went with were nice enough to stop at the market after their mission was completed. I got a uniform, this time the Iraqi enlisted Soldier's field uniform: green with patches and for only 15 bucks. Prices here are

much better than the AAFES vendors on post. I got some money and trinkets from the old regime too. The ride to and from the CPA is very fast, at least 80mph. You drive with your window down, and your weapon pointed at the door. If a U.S. convoy comes past you, you take in your weapon. They will shoot first and ask questions later. So I got to be a door gunner in an SUV I could never afford, with my trusty 9mm. Outside the main gates it is total chaos. There are people everywhere seemingly doing nothing. There is smoke everywhere and the smell of coal or trash burning. It reminds me of being in Bosnia. Driving fast through the dirty air was not fun. The main palace at the CPA is what you would expect of a government building, lots of brass sitting around drinking coffee and chatting about educated things with educated people. Saddam did live in this palace so it was nicer than the palace I see everyday. I did get the impression that the people here were not engaged in anything important at the moment. They seemed to be relaxed and detached from what is going on outside the walls of their own area. There was a three-day memorial for the huge blast there yesterday. No work was being done, so that might explain the atmosphere. I saw tons of armed guards walking around, all some special security detail for one country or another. They have the coolest equipment and weapons, unlike my hand-me-down 9mm. I didn't get to take many pictures; I had a gun in one hand and a water bottle in the other. It is getting very hot here.

March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004

I have more free time to elaborate on being outside the compound yesterday. The drive was very fast, windows were down and we were not alone on the freeway to the CPA. Every so often there were checkpoints and armored vehicles backed into burms. On both sides of the road were bunkers high up on the wall. The Soldiers in each bunker are hidden by camo nets and are manned by one spotter and one sniper. The palm trees in front have been mowed down to provide a clear line of sight. It is no secret they are there; no civilian walks around their towers. The road we drove on is more like a hard gravel path, about 3 lanes wide, very few divider lines along the way. There is no emission standard here, so every car seems to be competing for the "Most Exhaust" award. At each checkpoint there are long lines of vehicles waiting to be mirrored by the Soldiers before going out of the Green Zone. Next to the vehicles, the drivers and their work crews stand around talking; some sit on their haunches and others kneel in prayer. As we pulled up to the main checkpoint, we ran into a traffic jam in the "U.S. Only" lane. I had

my pistol pointed at the door, and I had to turn sideways to watch the rear of the vehicle. Myself and the two others in the vehicle had to talk to one another about who we saw, what they were doing and what was in their hands. Soldiers have been killed sitting in line when kids toss grenades in their vehicle or shoot them at close range. It is not easy to maneuver an M16 in a vehicle. I did not feel our alertness was unnecessary. We had three males in our trail vehicle, but the lead vehicle in our convoy had a female driver. I watched as a dump truck pulled up next to the lead vehicle. The passenger in the dump truck rolled down his window and stared at the female Soldier driving the SUV. He made a comment to someone I couldn't see without turning away from the female Soldier.

He had a look of curiosity and awe on his face. From behind the passenger rose the head of a young boy, maybe 13 years old. He too stared down at the female Soldier. The female Soldier probably didn't notice that she had an audience. Our line moved up and we were now next to the dump truck. The young boy in the cab behind the passenger turned his gaze to me. He could see my pistol pointed in his direction, and lowered his head back below the window's level.

Other female Soldiers and civilians have had problems when traveling on this road. Some women I spoke to told me that the men they encounter love to stare at them, some have even stuck their tongues out and then licked their windows as they drove by. One man tried to run a women driver off the road and yelled something unintelligible at her. All of the men there stared at us as we drove by. They all exude tough street-smart attitude; they look alert and weary of us. One thing I noticed though is in contrast to their tough appearance. Arabic men can be very outwardly affectionate to one another publicly. I saw more than one man holding another's hand, or caressing another's hair as they stood close to each other. I saw the same in Qatar as well. An Arabic linguist told me that it is socially acceptable for this to happen, and there is nothing unusual about it. I was told that it was the equivalent of the way some countries kiss on both cheeks when meeting or saying goodbye to someone you know. On the way to the CPA there are only a few large buildings left in tact. Saddam's palaces were huge and occupied large parts of the urban area. One could guess which buildings were important to Saddam's regime before the war. They were the ones with huge gaping holes in the sides. Whole floors were missing; the concrete and metal rebar pointing outward indicating that a smart bomb was probably used to take out specific floors. I recognized some of these buildings from the news footage as the war

began. There is no sanitation to speak of, so people burn their trash. The whole place smells like burning refuse.

I did not expect to see so many palm trees and the huge eucalyptus groves. Iraq has more palm trees than any other country on Earth. The palm trees on the road to the CPA had been planted in neat rows between the two highway routes. We went in and mowed them down to provide a clear line of sight for snipers and to lessen the chance of an IED being placed on the road. On the other side of the walls are civilian houses. They are stacked at odd angle, and their architecture makes them look like something out of an Aladdin movie or a miniature golf course. There is apparently no building code, so the buildings look very unstable. Whoever invented tan paint is a very wealthy man. The few times I saw Iraqi women they were standing around on the corners in large groups. There is no public transportation system, or even signs around to indicate what they could be waiting for. The children who should have been in school sat on the metal guardrails by the roads, hoping for handouts from the Soldiers. I was not surprised to see so many kids out of school; those outside the Green Zone still have not had the opportunity to go. Or if they do have the opportunity to go, they are sent to the streets anyway to scrounge a living. The CPA is a very well built area. The security is very tight there and a lot of expensive cars are being driven around. The women I saw there wore no head coverings and a ton of “Tammy Faye Baker” style makeup around the eyes. I arrived at breakfast time so people were milling around and eating on cheap white plastic plates. These were in stark contrast to the gold ornaments, marble floors and enormous hand painted ceilings.

No one seemed rushed or in a hurry to do anything. I got the impression they were somehow detached from the mission we were doing just a few miles away. The ratio of officer to enlisted was noticeable. Most Soldiers were Major or higher and their uniforms were clean, hair was cut recently and they didn't look like they were missing any sleep. Another contrast to my presence there and what I see every day at Camp Victory. When our mission was completed, we headed over to the CPA market on foot. It was a bit early, and only a few of the vendors were open. I walked down to the end of a long row of makeshift huts and then back. I was not sure what the protocol was for bartering here, in Mexico if you don't haggle with them they get offended. As if you do not think they deserve your time. I learned from an interpreter that they like to be greeted, and they mirror the way they see you treating them. A typical greeting to them would not just be “Hello”. You would say the equivalent of “A hundred hellos to you.” He

would then say “Good morning, and a thousand hellos to you and your family.” in return. You could then tell him how much you like his shop, and then begin to talk prices. The AAFES vendors on post have fixed prices, and they do not like to barter with Soldiers. They know we are a captive audience and most cannot get off post to shop so they take advantage of us. Being able to shop this way was refreshing. I approached one table, mainly because it was very small, and the women behind it apparently could not afford a booth. The woman was covered from head to toe in black cloth. Beside her was a young girl in blue jeans and a dirty white shirt. She was maybe ten at most. There were very few items on the woman’s table, but they were arranged very neatly and spaced to make it look as full as possible. The men from the other open shops eyed me suspiciously as I talked to her, either from financial competition or just because I was a man and she was an Arabic woman. I asked her how much the Saddam lapel pins were and she told me. I asked about a few other items and she was happy to answer. I put the items I wanted in a pile and added it up, she told me the price, we agreed and she put them in a bag for me. I pulled out a brand new 20-dollar bill from my BDU pocket and handed it to her. Her daughter leaned over the table to look at it. She said “Allah!” in a way that could mean relief or praise. Her mother said something to her and she sat back down. She seemed pleased too, I could almost swear she was smiling under her veil. The eyes do tell a lot about a person, she was no different. I am sure I could have shopped around or bartered with her, but I was sure she needed the money more than I did, and I was grateful to have some Saddam pins. Judging by the reaction of the other men as I walked away, I had just supported the under dog of the CPA market. I was proud of that. To me that was not charity, but maybe a little opportunity for her when there isn’t much to go around. The Soldiers I see in the PX now are no longer the giddy kids I saw when I got here a month ago. They have ring around the collar, sweat stains under each arm, dirty pants and longer hair. They have had time to be on patrol and learn what life is like outside Camp Victory and the Baghdad International Airport (BIAP).

March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Today was a great day; I was invited to be a door gunner again with a chance at maybe stopping by the CPA market. The sole purpose of this trip was to go shopping, so I wouldn’t be rushed and we would be able to barter. We always need to have an official manifest to go on

these trips, and they are always mission dependant. If it is dangerous outside the gate, we are stuck on base. If the current operational status is Green, then we get to go the Green Zone.

We got there at around 12:00 and it was much busier then the last time I went. There were a lot of people milling around, children selling stacks of bootleg DVD, and men selling handmade holsters and fake Rolexes. They even had some porn videos for sale. But the kids who sold them had scooters to get away on. The men would see them selling their CDs and chase them off. All of the movies on DVD were American films, the porn CDs were covered with graphically enhanced phallic images of Arabic men, not something I expected to see for sale in Baghdad. The Soldiers would come across them and just start laughing. I had my video camera with me and got some good shots of the area. I had one hour to shop around and check prices. I was able to get some good stuff for fewer than 70 bucks. The kids here are like kids everywhere. They chase each other around the market, playing with plastic nun chucks and race each other on their banana seat bikes. The new Soldiers were easy to spot; they were surrounded by kids with stacks of DVDs. If you stopped to talk to one, you would soon be surrounded with handfuls of movies thrust in your face. Before I got to the market, we stopped at a small PX and a market by the shopping area. I bought four cans of an Italian energy drink for a dollar. It was awful so I gave them to my friends. This is what good friends do, they share. We had one unopened can, so we gave to it a disheveled kid who was trying to sell DVDs. He took it and ran away. Later, the same kid that I had given the drink to was at the market trying to sell it back to me for a dollar. Apparently the kids there suffer from short-term memory loss. The prices had gone up a bit today at the market. I guess the prices reflect how many people there are to sell to.

The woman I had bought from earlier in the week now had a larger table and few more goods on it. Score one for the underdog. We left the market for one last stop a block or two away. I never expected to see this place, so when we stopped at the crossed swords monument I was really excited. I had seen it on the news and heard all about it, but seeing it up close was a real highlight for me. I knew the metal hands that held the swords were supposed to be exact molds of Saddam's hands. On both sides of the monuments is a metal basket that is full of Iranian helmets. The helmets spill out of the metal basket below the hands and then across the road under the crossed swords. There is a white concrete strip between the hands that has more helmets imbedded in it. The symbology behind this is an intended insult to Iran. Saddam's troops would march over these helmets as they paraded in front of Saddam's bleachers. The helmet tops

under the swords were crushed and looked like metal circles. The group I was with ran over and climbed the monument to pose for pictures. Black Hawks were patrolling the sky nearby. To the right of the swords is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier monument; it is on the back of the red 5 Dinar bill. The ride home was a bit more relaxed, not as fast as the ride there. We were all in a good mood. Getting outside the walls can be exciting after you get home safely.

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Reference Abu Gareb Prison: I had my cameras there with me and I asked to be taken on a tour before the class started. They were happy to show me around, and hopefully dispel some of the rumors of the place. They want more people to come see them, especially AAFES, but people are afraid to go there because of IED Alley. IED Alley is a narrow road that connects to a main improved highway that leads to the prison itself. IED Alley is a great place to do your dirty work because the road is narrow, the trees and shrubs come right next to the road and there is a lot of foliage to hide in next to the farmhouses. A man could easily watch us, time his detonation and flee into the farmlands.

After you hit IED Alley and come to the main highway, it is a fast ride. It is 4 lanes, no dividing lines and no traffic laws, so people drive crazy. We had to honk our horns several times, which means people got very close to us. Which means they had at least 3 weapons pointed at them each time. I could see way up ahead. Before we got to the prison I could see two Apache helicopters, both hovering about 300 feet off the ground. One was on each side of the road. I was relieved to see them there, like sentinels guarding our approach. They stayed there even as I turned into the inner walls of the prison. Just a friendly reminder that the cars were being watched from above. I really like that idea. The compound is huge, I am not sure how many acres. There are two sets of walls, about 20 feet high and 3 feet thick. On top is U.S. concertina wire, not barbed wire or razor wire. You have to drive around the base like a maze in between two walls to get to the inside gate entrance. Before you take the first entrance from the highway at the outer wall, there is an in-processing center for the civilians to wait at. They come by the hundreds every day to wait in line and see their relatives. Only inmates in the Iraqi side of the prison are allowed to have visitors. All others are in U.S. custody for crimes against Coalition Forces. We don't have much say in the Iraqi side. They do get visits, but it's on a bribe basis just like it was in the old days. We don't monitor the Iraqi side, and the Soldiers say "occasionally a

guy will fall behind the group and be dealt with” there. They know the Iraqis have it bad on that side of the camp.

I could see women and children lined up, wailing and begging the guards for whatever they wanted. The U.S.-controlled detainees are taken around the maze to the inner processing center. I was dropped off there by the MPs and told how to find my people from there. I had to go through the first floor to get where I needed to go so I got to see the in-processing area. The detainees are still blindfolded when taken off the trucks, and set on the ground next to the building. They are told to put their foreheads on the ground and not to move. The Soldiers still have them at gunpoint as each one is identified and searched. Then he is taken into another room. The first room on the ground floor is the photo room. They have a line-up on the wall where they take digital pics of the guys and assign them a detainee control number. It looks just like the U.S. system of booking and taking mug shots, but these guys hold a single sheet of paper with as much info on it as possible, if it’s known. They are put on their knees again, searched; then the detainee control number information from the paper they held is written on the back of his neck and forearms in English. In groups, they are taken into the next room. This is a hallway about 60 feet long and 20 feet wide. It has a concrete floor, plain walls and a series of offices on both sides. There was a group in there, 4 rows of 7 men all on their knees with their foreheads on the floor. Their hands were over their necks with fingers interlaced. One guy lifted his head, and a young PFC MP was in front of him instantly giving instructions "Head floor now!" He looked terrified, but said "Me piss please, me piss?" It was broken English but I could understand him from ten feet away. The MP said, "Ok, wait 5 minutes, ok piss." He gestured the number five with his fingers and then pointed to the ground again. The detainee put his head back down.

I went into an office with the MPs I came with and told them where I was going to be, made confirmation times for returning home and went back into the hallway. The guy who had to go wiz was on his feet, one hand behind his neck and one holding his crotch. Not like a kid dancing who really had to go, but actually pinching himself off through the front of his sweatpants. He was taken down the hall to, I assume, the latrine.

The room smelled pretty bad where I was. The main hall was where they waited to be screened by the 3 civilians sitting on metal folding chairs. They had DOD Civilian on their uniforms and 2 were women. The people brought in were in all types of attire and stations in society. Some men were in business suits and sandals, some in sweats or robes. All were dirty,

unshaven and looked tired. I left there and went outside the in-processing center to find my students.

Later... everything is set for class and I get my tour....

On the way to the chow hall we walked by the different housing areas. To the right was a cellblock section, 3 stories high, maybe 30 windows on each floor and it was surrounded by a high chain link fence with razor wire on it. This block was right next to the inner wall. I asked who these detainees were, and the Soldier said, "These thugs are the MI Hold Detainees". They had on bright orange jumpsuits that came to just below their shins, and seemed too short for their arms. Which was interesting because they all looked really scrawny. Some had their jumpers pulled down and tied around their waste and white tank tops on. It would have looked intimidating if they were over 100 lbs apiece. Some smoked, some chatted in groups. All of them glared at us. None were smiling or laughing. I asked if it was true that the US Soldiers live in cells. The Soldier said, "Yeah some of us do, the rest do shanty town". I knew that meant a make do city within a building, with sheets for privacy and hand made furniture. I lived like that in Bosnia. He took me there since it was next on the way to chow. The US Soldiers live in the cellblocks for their own safety. Mortars can't touch them in there as apposed to the rest of the usual inmates now living in tents.

MI detainees are in the nicest of the inmate housing areas. The barracks for the Soldiers is like any other headquarters. The first floor has the company rooms for each unit, supply rooms and meeting areas. Farther down the long corridor, the cellblocks come into the main hall on the right and left, I think 6 in all. There are no lights in there, so open doors provide you the means to navigate. Some doors open to courtyards, like the U.S. prison recreation yard. The first cellblock I went in on the right was for Long Range Surveillance Detachments (LRSD). The cells were boarded up to make privacy walls, the doors were secured with personal locks and the ceiling was the only light source. High above us were open windows letting light in. A few bulbs were in use on the first floor. In the middle of the hall was a TV and an ugly couch, some mismatched chairs and other homemade furniture. Two Soldiers sat there watching TV without paying attention to us. The walls were corroded, chipped concrete, and they looked to be in serious disrepair. The metal railings on all three floors were rusty and it reminded me of being in a Navy ship. Some parts had been painted gray over the rust. I videotaped that area and left. All of the meat hooks in the Soldier living area have been removed. Next I saw the Soldier

shantytown. Tall wall lockers made a maze of fortified bunker-like rooms, some had beds with stained mattresses and some had cots. Footlockers and cardboard boxes lined the floors and doubled as tables. I taped that and left. On the way out, I noticed the roof of the building had a layer of green sandbags at least 3 deep with fighting positions built into the corners of the buildings. There were wooden showers along the inner walls, and hand painted murals next to them. Each seemed to depict a different sport, rowing, soccer etc. They were unfinished and seemed to be drawn with a black marker. I doubt the U.S. guys did them.

I already told you about the chow hall sucking. And it did. The rest is just little details and incidentals. It sucks there, and it is really hard duty for these Soldiers. They get mortared all the time here.

March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Last night I was lying on my bed watching a movie on my laptop, just like any other night. My roommate was lying on his bed half asleep. At 2104 (9:04PM VA time) the mortars started coming in again. I heard a loud thump-bang followed by the usual vibration that shook the trailer. In the time it took to sit up and take off my headphones, my brain opened the “sounds” folder and started to estimate the type, distance and direction of the sound I had heard. I was sure it was a mortar, not another rocket. This one was close to us, and down the access road bit. I looked over at my roommate who was now awake, looking over at me and listening. “That was a good one.” I said to my roommate as I put on my shoes. He put on his shoes too and sat at the edge of his bed rubbing his eyes. The second mortar hit and it sounded close, but off to the right of our trailer. “That’s a better one”, said my roommate as we stood and headed for our door. I opened it enough to stick my head out (we do that so we don’t hit people walking by). The coast was clear so we stepped out and walked about ten feet to our left. We walked out to the access road that surrounds the area we live in (Dodge City). The road is about 15 feet wide and covered with about three inches of gravel. This road serves as Dodge City’s main footpath to the center of the base. About 150 feet down from where we were standing was a large white cloud of dust. The dust cloud was illuminated by a street light on the corner of the block. There are street lamps about every hundred feet, so could see all the way down the access road to the impact site. The white light from the corner lamp illuminated the dust cloud and turned the tan sand into a white fog. The fog was about 40 feet wide, 25 feet tall and slowly spreading out away

from the impact area. From where I was standing I could not see if the round had hit a trailer or the road across from the last one in our row. Soldiers began to come out of their trailers to stand on the road I was on. Some had on full gear, some had just their PT clothes like my roommate and I. I followed one other Soldier and began to jog to the end of the access road. My roommate stayed with the weapons in the trailer. We were not worried about needing guns, we were in the middle of the base, and any insurgents would have passed a few thousand Soldiers to get to us. When I got to the impact site I could smell the explosive from the mortar. Two other Soldiers had beaten us there and had then crossed the road to the dirt trail across from Dodge City. They walked along the wall looking for any injured Soldiers in the brush. The back road is used for running at night, as we have one of the few housing areas with working streetlights. I crossed the road following behind them and I could see the impact crater. The mortar had come down on our side of a 20-foot wall, and hit the top of a sand bag pile. It knocked over a wheel barrel and made a semi circular fan pattern spreading away from the wall. There were bits and pieces of woven plastic on the road.

Behind me I could hear gravel crunching. Soldiers in full gear were running towards us. Over their shoulders were the standard issue Combat Life Saver bags. These Soldiers were probably from the TMC, which was only about 300 feet away. "Anyone injured?" yelled one of the medics. One of the two guys who beat us there replied, "Clear over here, check the other side. The second one came in over the wall!" The medics passed us and rounded the corner, heading to the other side of the wall.

The dust had mostly settled when another group came running towards us. They looked scared, wide-eyed and unsure what to do. An older Soldier in that group, maybe in his forties, tried to give orders and take control of the situation. He was too late for that. Myself and the other Soldiers had started to wander back to their trailers. Some came out to smoke and watch the new guys run around.

The ones who had been there a while knew the drill, if no one is hurt, we go back to bed. It's just another day in Baghdad. I had no gear on, but I wasn't afraid of more mortars coming in. These "hit and run" tactics are very common here. The insurgents will use a commando mortar, a very small portable launcher to send a few rounds at different angles and then pack it up. They disappear back into their homes and call it a night. Like clockwork the Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) would be coming around and helicopters would be flying by looking for the launch site.

The way people reacted to this was like any accident in the U.S. Some come to gawk at the carnage, some leave as fast as they can, others go and help. When you have been here long enough to see people get hurt, you know you need to go see if a Soldier needs help.

March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2004

We had more mortars come in last night around 2200 hrs (10:00pm VA time). None were close by, but you could hear them coming in at different places around the base. I went outside my trailer and sat on the retainer wall next to it. I could see small flashes off in the distance, followed by the echo of the sound it made. Some came in quick succession. I counted nine in all. So that means they only sent nine or only nine detonated. I heard yesterday when the two mortars came in, one actually did hit a trailer. The third one did not detonate. A Soldier returning from the PX opened his door and saw one lying on his bed. The guy who told me this said he even got a picture. So that can be interpreted two ways. One - he is lying. Two - he was dumb enough to get close to a live mortar and take picture. That is the kind of crap that gets Soldiers killed here. A mortar not going off is fairly common. I recall one picture taken outside the building I am in now. A Soldier was going to the Porto John when a mortar came in and hit the roof of the box; it made a hole in one but didn't go off. The roof was smashed in and the door was on one hinge. The Soldier probably messed himself. The other happened to a Soldier we sent to the motor pool to dispatch a vehicle. A mortar came down and hit the camo net above the tent he was in, bounced back up and landed in the net next to them. The EOD guys had to come by and pluck it off the net like a Christmas tree ornament. I had two Soldiers verify that one.

March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2004

I am back from Basrah. I got to work with the Coalition Forces this time. The British run Basrah, and a few other countries have Brigades and Battalions there. Americans are outnumbered. The British say and do things very different then we do. We both speak English but they are very hard to understand. They say, "Cheers" like we use the word "Hoorah". It can mean Yes, No, Ok, Maybe, Hello or Goodbye. What we call "Lunch" they call "Tea Time". The New Zealanders call it "Scoff". It is much hotter there and more humid. It is all flat and nothing but sand as far as the eye can see. I lived in the old Basrah International Airport. I had no AC, no bathroom (it is on the ground floor outside).

I woke up with a spider in my mouth. I half crunched and then spit him out. The building looks abandoned on the inside. When we arrived there we had to smash the doors open, so none of the locks work and there are holes in the walls. The decorations were sparse and reeked of the 70s. Large clear plastic bubbles hung on the walls where phones used to be. The British Soldiers asked me about Baghdad and how it was living there, as if I was a ruffian from the wrong side of the tracks. I was relieved to get back to Baghdad.

April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004

People have asked me why I volunteer to come back to places like this. I can't say I have an answer for that. The first time I deployed to a dangerous place was Bosnia, but it was pretty calm compared to this. I joined the Army to travel, so I jumped at the chance to come here. It even cost me a promotion. I could be in Hawaii right now, but Iraq was something I wanted to do more. When I came home from Bosnia and then Iraq the first time I knew I had changed. I was no longer worried about the things I could not change, like waiting in line at the supermarket. I could not identify with people who complained about not having everything they wanted. I knew from first hand experience that there are people who have never had electricity or running water in the house. The other day when we came back from the CPA, we stopped at the usual vehicle inspection checkpoint in the Green Zone. The kids were out in full force begging for food or whatever they could get. One kid ran up to our vehicle and said, "I love you America, give me dollar!" If you make eye contact they will stay there until you give them something. I looked right at him and I had my gun aimed at him from behind the door. He couldn't see it, but I'm sure he knew it was there. He was anticipating a handout but I had nothing to give him. He had some softball size bulges in his pants where he tried to hide food. He made an effort to hide it by holding one hand over his crotch. He continued to beg with: "I am hungry, can I have MRE?" This Iraqi kid knows maybe 10 American words and one of them is "MRE". The kids in Bosnia knew that word too. A Soldier in the SUV with me told him to go away, and he wasted no time in moving down the line of vehicles parked behind us. I felt humbled being here. I am in Iraq with most of the comforts of home waiting for me. Things he will never know. In just a few months we have moved in and set up a life as close to home as we can possible make it. The Soldier who told the kid to go away said "He didn't look too hungry with all that food in his pants." I have heard comments like that before from people back in the states. Stuff like "He

looks pretty clean to be homeless”, or “Poor people don’t wear those shoes!” I wish those people could come here and see how people live from day to day. I never understood how someone could think people need to be poor enough to deserve their help. These kids are living free for the first time, and their parents are the ones who were kids in Desert Storm. We cleared the checkpoint and went home.

Home for me is a metal connex, 2 per room, 3 rooms per trailer. I have a small wooden porch in front of my trailer, a single bed with a generic mattress and one lamp by my bed. I use my footlocker for my table, desk and chair. I live out of my laundry bag and hope my AC unit doesn’t break again. Life is good for me this time around. Other than walking long distances to showers with no water and Porto Johns with no bun tissue, I can’t complain about life here. Living in a place like this can set your priorities straight. Today more Soldiers died nearby, it is not something we take lightly. We will likely lose more Soldiers before this is over, but I do not think it will be in vain.

For those of us here, we see how life can be without freedom, and even if it sucks to be here day after day we want to feel we earned the right to go home. Once you come play in the sand you can’t go back without paying your dues.

April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I came to work today and was told we are on alert again. This means we wear all of our protective gear until further notice. We aren’t thrilled about having to wear our gear in this heat, but we know the consequences if we don’t. We have to react to every possible hint of danger at our gates as if it is the real thing. We are still pretty upset about the stuff going on in Falluja. I was in the chow hall this morning and overheard some guys talking. “What’s going on over in Falluja?” “The marines are going in and taking care of it, doing their thing.” “Yeah, I heard they caught a guy doing an IED too. He tried to put in on the road right in front of their vehicle.” “Really, what happened?” “He didn’t make it!” “How’d they get him?” “He walked in front of a Bradley, it wasn’t pretty.” We all laughed at the last comment. Anyone who reads this that has been in Vietnam knows that the guerilla tactics here are nothing new. When you cannot take on your opponent directly, you take on the civilians that support them. You make the civilians live in fear for so long that they just want you to leave, regardless of who the bad guy is. I see the change in tactics as a desperate measure that shows how afraid these guys are not to have the

power and influence they once took for granted. People ask me how the Iraqi people really feel about us being here. I tell them all the same thing, it is all relative to where you are in Iraq. Some cities have never had electricity, water or any kind of school before. Now they are buying electronics faster than they can be put on the shelf. There are anywhere from 80-140 new newspapers now, and a talk radio show. All Pre-Saddam information was controlled by the state, so people only got one side of the story. Cities close to Saddam and his chain of command had an infrastructure, money and amenities. The people close to Saddam who lived with all the amenities are the one now afraid of change. Their way of life is being threatened. I do think the average Iraqi does appreciate us being here. The social barriers are now slowly coming down and the rumors about us are being found untrue.

When we first got to Baghdad, the men spread rumors that we had X-Ray vision in our sunglasses and we would defile their women. The kids would come up to us and ask to try on our glasses, all the while looking for secret buttons that would turn on the X-Ray vision. They would walk around staring at each other with confused looks on their faces. My favorite one was the rumor about Marines being robots. They had no other explanation for the Marines being able to wear all of the hot and heavy clothes in this heat. They thought our Camelbacks were air conditioners. These people have relied on what they were told for so long that they are not used to thinking for themselves. The average Iraqi is like a college freshman, full of ideas and energy, and not sure what to do with their freedom.

April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I just got back from Mosul/Tikrit this morning. I went there to train the Stryker Bde, which has been a hard deal to work out transportation wise. One of the guys up there knew someone in the flight wing that does regular courier runs back and forth from Baghdad. So I got lucky and landed a seat on a Black Hawk flight.

I packed my backpack, a few days of clothes and headed for the flight pad nearby. I knew where it was because these birds fly over my trailer like clockwork every day, and every night unfortunately. I was packed in the bird with 5 other people, which left little room to maneuver. I was told it would be at least a two-hour ride, depending on how many times we stopped to refuel.

I didn't care how long it took; I was looking forward to going. The last two times I had a flight lined up I was either sick or it was cancelled due to weather.

We flew over Camp Victory and the dense city of Baghdad, to the outer city limits and then to the farmland in the suburbs. I was very surprised to see very little land area that was not green. I thought Iraq was all desert, but there is a lot of vegetation, palm trees and a very well planned irrigation system that pulls water from the Tigris River. I knew there were ruins all over the county that go back to biblical times, but seeing them was something I never expected to be able to do. No houses were built within a thousand yards of the old cities. The sand had covered them over but you could still see the outlines of walls and other structures. The farther away you get from Baghdad the more farms you see, and the farther apart the farms get. The people I flew over I would call the "Average Iraqi Citizen". They earn an honest living farming whatever they can from the dry sand. They have no power lines or plumbing visible. There are very few vehicles or anything mechanical for that matter on their farms. But no matter how poor the farmers look, they all had some kind of water pump for their fields. There seemed to be more sheep than there are people in Iraq. I could see many large herds of sheep and goats roaming around the fields, usually a lone man would be standing amidst them with a staff in one hand. The sheep would scatter in all directions as we flew overhead, and the farmer would wave to us. We flew about 100 feet off the ground most of time, but we went as low as maybe 50 feet. It all depends on whether or not there are power lines ahead of us. The few main roads or highways we crossed had power lines, but they didn't connect to the farmhouses.

About every mile I could easily make out the fighting positions designed for tanks and infantry. They seemed to be preparations for an attack from any direction. A few burned out hulks were next to them, usually not in one piece. Some turrets were lying upside down a few meters from the main body. They were all rusty and had been scavenged a long time ago. The houses are very small, and have mud walls around them to keep in the animals at night. The buildings are all very plain, straight edges and very few windows. Some of the larger homes had trees and standing water in ponds. These nice houses would sometimes have a Toyota truck or SUV parked outside. The clothes worn by the people were a stereotypical desert outfit made of rags and bright colored fabric. Some of the turns we made took us very close to the ground, and the children would try to chase our helicopter on foot or throw rocks at us. They seemed very interested in our flight, as if they had never seen a helicopter before. I could see no sign of fear in them, like they were somehow detached from what is going on in the rest of their country. I was surprised to see a scarecrow in the middle of one field, complete with bright red clothes and

turban. Some things are universal. One of the larger houses I saw must have belonged to a wealthy family. It had a lot of trees and green plants in a courtyard around the multi-room house. Under the largest tree was a circle formation of brightly colored mats. There were a few men lying around on big pillows. In the middle of the circle of mats was the biggest bong I have ever seen. This thing had to be at least 6 feet tall. They are actually called “Hookahs” here and they smoke some really strong wet tobacco. Soldiers try to bring Hookahs home, but Customs usually takes them.

Mosul is very different than Baghdad. The Saddam palace compound that the Stryker Brigade (Bde) is using looks like a college campus. There are very tall eucalyptus trees and flowers neatly arranged around the buildings. The structures themselves look to be intact and untouched by our missiles. The city around the base seems to be organized better. The streets are in straighter lines and the buildings are in better shape too. When I got there I checked in at the place I was going to do my training and then found my temporary quarters. I got to bed around 11pm and was just about to fall asleep when mortars came in again. We only got two, but they were very close. The only thing that kept our trailers from getting hit was a 15-foot mud wall next to our housing area. The mortar hit a generator and destroyed it. No one got hurt.

The flight back was just as fast as the trip there. We flew a bit closer to the ground and I had the bird all to myself. I took the headset off the seat and put it on. I talked to the flight chief about where I was headed and then listened to the group’s conversation on the internal system. The guys talk about everything from politics to movies. I had a lot of gear in the back with me; the other four guys were up front. There is one door gunner on each side and two pilots. I sat in the middle of the back seat and taped as much as I could with my video camera. I don’t know if it was the vibration of the bird, or the fact that I didn’t sleep much since my arrival there but I soon fell asleep. I’m not sure how long I was out before I was startled awake by gunfire. Apparently the crew had come to an open salt flat (like our salt flats in the U.S.) area in the desert and decided to test fire their 60 guns into the sand. So here I am sleeping soundly and I hear automatic gunfire six feet away. I went from sleep to fight mode in two seconds. I looked out the fiberglass window in time to see the bullets impact the white sand in a zippered pattern. The adrenaline hit my body so fast my hands began to sting. I was awake for the rest of the flight. We stopped a few times for fuel and to swap cargo. The area around the Balad Airfield was littered with destroyed vehicles. The hulks were arranged in neat rows. There were seven planes

in various states of disrepair, maybe MIGs of some kind, next to the runway. The crew that took me home seemed to have more fun. They flew low until coming close to power lines then pull back hard and clear them, which gave me a few seconds of zero gravity each time. I was having a blast back there. I would take a Black Hawk flight over a convoy any day.

April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004

It is getting hot over here, ever since the beginning of February the heat has been slowly creeping up on us. Now when we go outside we get hit with a heat wave of at least 100+ degrees. The shop I work out of runs all of the computer servers so we get our own air conditioning unit. It sits right by the door so every time someone comes in or goes out we exchange some cool air for dust. We drink lots of bottled water at work, but as soon as we go outside our lips stick together and we realize how dehydrated we are.

We got mortared again last night. I stopped counting after five rounds. They were scattered all over the base. During the attack I thought I heard a siren and a fire tuck. I have heard they are here, but have yet to actually see one. If it was a fire tuck, that is another sign of improvements here in Iraq. I heard through Rumor Intelligence (RUMINT) that some body armor plates had arrived.

I went to the area where it was supposed to be handed out and waited for about an hour. A civilian on a John Deer six-wheeled buggy came up to the supply point and started issuing plates. I was lucky enough to get two of them.

Not everyone has these yet, especially the loner TDY guys like myself. Everything here is first-come first-serve when you are TDY. We found out a few of the units will be staying here longer. For us that means longer lines for the chow hall and PX. People will start hoarding rolls of bun tissue again. There is nothing more fun than to walk half a mile in this heat to the box and find it empty. The units told to stay will continue to do a great job. They want to feel they earned the right to go home, the same as anyone else here.

These guys have paid their dues and then some. I tried to get into the PX twice yesterday. The lines snaked around one isle, out the door and around the corner. They have added clearing barrels outside most buildings now. Usually there is a Soldier standing there checking each weapon barrel for rounds. That Soldier is hand picked for the detail based his ability to meritoriously discharge his weapon into a metal can, when his weapon should not have been

loaded in the first place. It is a pretty embarrassing detail. All of the Soldiers, like myself, are wearing full gear. We are hot and sweating from places we never knew possible. We won't complain about having the extra guys here. Any one of us could be extended just like them when our time is up.

When I got here last year there was a large round pond in front of the chow hall. It had a small rowboat in it, 10-15 ducks and 2 geese. Soldiers would take food out of the chow hall and feed them. The chain of command put up signs telling us not to. So in turn we fed them even more, and even built them a shelter for them to hide under when it got really hot. One goose laid a single egg under a generator shelter near by. It stayed out of the water and hovered over its egg. The Soldiers started bringing fruit and bread in plastic bowls, leaving offerings at its nest as if it were a Buddha shrine. The chain of command tore down the shelter, removed the old generator and put up a memo in the CJTF-7 building that said, "The ducks at the chow hall will be relocated." Someone decided the pond was a safety hazard, probably due to the bats that fly over it to eat the mosquitoes, and then started to fill it in. The water level drops each day and now they can barely swim in it. The dirt, bricks and other debris have filled all but a few feet of muddy water on one side of the pond. The ducks' anonymous supporters have posted a spray painted sign that reads "We will not be defeated, save our pond. Quack!" Under the sign were two blue jean pant legs filled with sand. On each foot is an old combat boot. One final act of defiance on behalf of the ducks' supporters.

April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Last night I was lying in bed watching a movie on my laptop as usual. I had one ear phone off so I could hear incoming rounds. I looked at my watch at around 10:PM. The last few times we got mortared it was around 10-11PM. I watched another few minutes of my movie and then paused it; I could hear muffled whump whump sounds followed by faint cracking. It sounds like two pieces of plywood being slapped together. Living in metal boxes, we hear thumping all the time, but these are different because of the percussion you feel following the sound. Just like the last few times they were "zipping" us as we call it here.

When you get "zipped", the mortars come in patterns, about 100 feet apart. They are being fired blindly over the wall so the thugs stagger their rounds a few feet apart hoping to hit

something. The sounds grew louder until they were close enough to worry me, and wake up my roommate. One hit very close to the right of our trailer, it shook the whole thing.

My roommate had been asleep for about 30 minutes, but he was up and out of bed before me. We put our shoes on, walked to the door and killed the lights inside. The round sounded so close this time I expected to see sand blowing around as we opened the door. To our surprise it was clear. We stepped out the door and walked around to the access road by our trailer. We could not see the dust cloud from the impact site. It may have hit the soft mud between the trailer divisions and not landed in the gravel. Soldiers began to come out of their trailers to stand behind us. Some Soldiers came out in full gear, some in just their personal unmentionables, a Kevlar and weapon. If not for the seriousness of the situation it would be a funny thing to see. They tell us not to sleep in our underwear in case we have to go outside in a hurry, but its so hot here that we take the chance. We stood there looking at each other for a few seconds and then made the customary walk to the latrine. If you are already up and dressed it's not such a big deal to walk all the way to the Johns. Except for the crunching of my shoes on the gravel, there were no other sounds. The birds had stopped chirping, no bugs were around the zap lights. It was probably the quietest I had seen Iraq since my arrival. Just like every night, the combat medics would soon be running around looking for wounded, and the QRF would be driving by looking for the launch site. A helicopter or two would be racing overhead. I was fully alert on my long walk to the John, and I realized my hands were stinging again. Just like when I fell asleep in the Black Hawk and was awakened by machine gun fire, my body had the adrenaline rush. Unless you go running there isn't much you can do to get rid of it. I hate that 0-60 feeling. I didn't hear anything at chow this morning about where the mortars came in, or if they hit anyone. The duck pond is no more. Today the last load of debris came and filled in the muddy section. The geese moved to the main palace and claimed an island with reeds in the middle. The ducks have not come back after leaving their defiant sign in the mud.

I think I should clarify why I go outside after a mortar attack. I don't go outside when they are coming in. I do not go looking for mortars, but I do go looking for those whom the mortars have found. If you sit still and do nothing at times like that you will drive yourself crazy with worry and anxiety. Moving around afterwards helps me focus on something beside myself. I know if I were hurt I would want someone to come help me. I have the same chances as the next guy of getting a direct hit while I'm sleeping. The trailers are one layer of thin aluminum and

will not do much to protect you. We have concrete shelters outside our trailers. They don't have sandbags around the openings yet so Soldiers don't use them.

April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004

We got a reprieve last night. I was able to watch my entire movie without having to get up in a hurry. This morning I slept through my alarm and was awoken by three incoming rounds. No need to go into where they landed, I'm not a spotter for the enemy. One was far from my trailer; the other two were close by. I got dressed and opened the door to the trailer to find a very overcast sky. It had been sprinkling for a few hours and the ground was wet. Usually the bright hot sun is waiting for me when I open the door. I start sweating the minute I walk outside.

This was a nice change. I guess it is somewhere in the 70s today. I can't remember the last time we were mortared during the day. I saw the impact crater from one of the mortars, it was smaller than I expected. It came in and hit an underground water line. They moved in a generator to pump the water away from the trailers. The debris hit an SUV nearby and totaled it. I got pics of that too.

April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I got word today in the chow hall that the mortars coming earlier this morning as I woke up had killed a few people. I think they said it was two dead and one wounded. One guy got hit while on the running trail, one while in a building and the injured one was sleeping nearby. So far, that is the first death I have heard of on base this year. I think these came in about 300 feet from my trailer.

April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Today has been a good day so far. No mortars came in last night, and the weather is good. We have clouds today, and they are not common here. One of the guys in our shop is going home. He says he isn't excited, but we know he is. The Navy guys do 4-6 months, Air Force do 4-6 and the Army and Marines do 12-18. We adopted a mascot for our shop today. After seeing how hard it was to get back to our systems shop, someone made a joke about us being castaways on a desert island. We tried to think of things to use as a "Wilson" substitute, like the volleyball that kept Tom Hanks company on his island. We chose a 3-inch chocolate Easter Bunny from the

chow hall. They have been giving us a lot of Easter leftovers for the last few days. We put our new “Wilson” mascot above the door in our office and labeled him with a red marker. People would come in and see him perched up there and ask what we were doing. We told them “Wilson watches out for us, no one is allowed to eat him!” Soldiers have a sense of humor like cops, and will find another group’s mascot and kidnap or defile it in some way.

They expect the favor to be returned of course. We always have people in the shop to answer phones, so the chances are slim that someone could get in there and nibble on our mascot. Things like this keep us amused here. If you don’t do something to break the monotony you will go crazy. When I went to chow hall today, there was an Australian guy sitting in the foyer with a box of pins on his lap. He was taking donations for the Australian version of a Veteran’s Day fund. I thought the cause was worthy and the pins were cool so I got the five dollar one. It is gold plated with a blue capitol A and says “Anzac Appeal” on it. We wear different uniforms and are from different countries, but our mission is the same and so are the families of the veterans.

April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Not much going on, it has been sprinkling all day. I like the cooler temperatures for obvious reasons. We only had one rocket/mortar last night and some sporadic gunfire. None of it was close to me so I slept pretty well. When I was walking home last night I saw a group of Soldiers sitting in lawn chairs between the trailers in Dodge City. They had their snacks, some sodas from the chow hall and a laptop.

Someone brought a projector and connected it to the laptop so they could watch a movie. I saw a few seconds of the movie “League of Extraordinary Gentlemen” as I walked by. I might have joined them if the mosquitoes were not out in full force, and the sky wasn’t falling every night.

April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004

I went to the CPA Market today after we finished some work at the main palace. I saw some medals on a table that I did not have and asked the man behind the table how much they were. He said “For you, three dollar.” I asked what the medal was for and he picked it up, held it to his chest and said “This medal from Saddam to Army for good in battle. It come with 150,000 Dinar, car and house for Soldier. Soldier in Tikrit only get this!” I knew Saddam was from up

north so it wouldn't surprise me that he kept his people close by buying them off. He continued with "Army of Baghdad, Samara, Basrah no get this, only for Soldier of Tikrit Army." I bought two of them for 6 bucks and moved on to other trinkets. We never really have a long time to walk around and barter. The clouds are very low today so we are working in some unusually humid weather. We don't mind the lack of direct sunlight, its nice. But the humidity is like walking through water here. At the CPA Market lots of vendors have drinks on their tables, but only two have refrigerators. I bought two imitation Pepsi cans for a buck. They are taller and narrower than ours and written in Arabic it says "Pespi". I could see some JAG officers and MPs bartering for rugs that were lying on the ground, they are large hand-made area rugs. I wonder how they will get them home. The kids were out in full force again selling bootleg DVDs and watches etc. I have no doubt we have a strong impact on the economy here. The small tables I saw a month ago have grown to include more items that only Soldiers would want, or be able to afford for that matter. I doubt the average Iraqi wants Saddam paintings, shirts and pins. The Soldiers get a lot of paintings from personal wallet sized photos and Cuban Cigars too. I'm sure there will be Saddam stuff as long as there are Soldiers to buy it. The old Iraqi Dinars are looking like bad photo copies now, they must be running low on old currency. The ride back was very fast as usual, and we seemed to hit every traffic jam on the way. We were moving very slowly down the main road, and all of the cars ahead of us were zigzagging back and forth. When we have to stop or slow down we become a bit more cautious and watch everyone. As we moved around the cars on the road by taking the shoulder we saw the cause of the traffic problem. An M1 Abrams tank was driving down the center lane of the road, with its main gun pointed to the rear. The Soldier sitting on top had the hatch open and the 50. Cal gun in his hands, that too was pointed down at the cars around him. When the Soldier swung his 50. Cal to one side, the cars would slow down and move to the other lanes. He was doing his job and watching the rear of the tank, the drivers were doing their job of staying away form the barrel of those guns.

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004

It is windy today; the palm trees are bending close to the ground. The clouds have stayed the last few days, which makes it dark and very humid at night. We have not been attacked much the last few days either. We still have occasional "gunfire conversations" far off in the distance. One side shoots and the other returns fire. Usually you hear a few 50 Cal. burps and then silence.

You hear those sounds and wonder what was happening outside the perimeter wall. Our mascot only lasted two days before we discovered his demise. Someone had come into the shop and nibbled on his head, then folded the aluminum back up to conceal their crime.

It looked fine from a distance, but as I got closer I could see the dented aluminum. No one in the office claimed responsibility for the sabotage, but everyone thought it was funny. I cannot rule out an inside job. I had to go over to the main palace so I decided to scout possible targets belonging to other groups.

In one of the rooms off of the main hall, the floor area has been converted to cubicles with four-foot wall dividers. On each wall divider was their group's mascot. I could see a pink flamingo; the kind you put in your yard with the metal pole under it, a rubber frog, a plaster gnome smoking a pipe and a really ugly stuffed camel complete with red plaid pattern and button eyes. The problem was each desk was occupied, and the mascots were in plain view. I would have to wait and come back later to handle my business. You can't help but wonder what people were thinking when they sent this stuff in care packages.

I got a new issue of equipment today. A civilian contractor came in with a warehouse full of items we really need here. I got some much-needed boots and other protective equipment. Things like that do a lot for our morale here. We have had a good amount of rain the last few days. Usually the water evaporates after hitting the ground, but we had enough for puddles this time. Nothing goes to waste here. Workers went outside with brooms and swept the sidewalks to make use of the water while it lasted. Dust gets into everything. Sweeping the floor without water just creates a breathing hazard.

I found a box of letters in the Chaplain's Office that were addressed to "Any Soldier", so I took a few and read them. Some of the letters had drawings of battle scenes that the children envision us taking part in. Even the most hard-core Soldiers will stop and look at the drawings. Most of the letters had questions about daily life and our families, but unfortunately there was no return address. We get packages with the usual hygiene stuff; occasionally some have junk food. What we really need is a treadmill and sit-up machine for all the Easter candy we eat. We watch CNN on our laptops at work and follow the POW situations. That is not something we take lightly here. It could easily be any one of us in that situation. We have some good branch rivalry here, but when it comes to POWs we are undivided and we support each other.

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I took a short trip to another part of the base today. The base I went to is across from Camp Victory and is run by another unit. This compound was also used by Saddam and his Ba'ath Party at some point. To get there we drove down narrow roads and through the usual checkpoints. I and two other Soldiers were in the SUV. I never pass up the chance to do some liaison work and see more of Baghdad. As we drove around we discussed what we knew of the buildings there and wondered what life was like before we got here. One round building sat on the edge of the man-made lake; it was in good shape and was now being used as a unit headquarters.

The Navy Commander I was riding with said, "That's one of Saddam's brothels, but only the Ba'ath Party members could use it." The other person in the vehicle said "That building out there on the pier was an interrogations building." The only building I recognized was a very large palace. This palace could be seen from the roads that surround this base.

There are large cranes on three sides of it. Saddam called this particular palace the "Victory Over America Palace". I could not help but note the irony in that name, and the fact that Americans are overseeing its completion.

One of our stops took us around the lake to the other side of the base. I looked to my left and noticed an odd-looking set of brown stone buildings in the corner of the lake. I asked if anyone knew about what they were for. "The cave looking things over there?" "Those are the playground tunnels for children of the Ba'ath Party". The tunnels look like they are made of the same fake rock material that you would see at Disneyland's Matterhorn ride. There were several cave entrances about five feet tall and some built-in features for them to play on. It looked like a small city for the kids, and it reminded me of a Flintstones cartoon. The play area dropped down to the waterline and had a small retainer wall around it. The best way to get to it seemed to be by boat. This play area was within 100 feet of the brothel building. As the road we were driving on turned to the left, there were two large pontoon style boats pushed up on the sand near the road.

They had been pushed up on the sand and tilted on their side. All of the windows had been smashed out and it looked like something very large had hit them and caved in the side of the boat. Our last stop before heading home was the car wash station. We pulled up to the wash area and waited. A very thin man came out from the building next to us and gave me a near toothless smile. He was wearing blue overalls and brown sandals. He washed our vehicle very

thoroughly and helped us find every leak in the doors and windows, most of which were on my door. I was soaking wet when we drove off. It was very hot and humid so I couldn't complain. I was dry before getting back to Camp Victory. One of the Soldiers in my vehicle had been to the same wash rack the week before, and seeing no one around decided to wash the vehicle himself. The same Iraqi man we saw had come out while he was washing his truck and gave him a very indignant look. He was insulted that the Soldier had not allowed him to do his job. To someone in another culture, it may not have been as serious an insult. But in the Middle East, a man's job is his station is life and they take that job very seriously.

April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004

Yesterday when I came out of the chow hall I saw a group of Soldiers standing next to the rear of a semi truck that was parked in the gravel lot. Our food supply had been getting lower and lower for the last few days. At first we had lots of hamburgers and main course choices, but recently we had only side dishes and leftovers. The Army is good at making goulash out of just about anything. The sandwich line was put away and we were down to rice and some noodles today. We were wondering what happened to our food supply until we saw this truck in the parking lot. The crowd had grown in the time it took me to cross the old duck pond and get to the vehicle. On the left rear side of the truck's trailer was a hole about the size of volleyball.

There was a spiral pattern of holes emanating from the opening. The spiral pattern encircled the hole a few times and covered maybe six feet of the truck. The pattern looked like a shrapnel pattern for an RPG. Apparently this truck had been hit on the way into Baghdad a few days ago and was just now cleared to get on base. Some trucks were still being inspected, and others were totally destroyed. I got up close to the hole and could see all the way through the truck. On the opposite side was a hole about the size of a softball.

The driver of the truck stood proudly near the shrapnel pattern and adjusted his clothes. The Soldiers took turns posing for pictures with him. One Soldier said "This is one more that won't make it home to the Mrs." A few of the other Soldiers laughed. They too had pictures that wouldn't make it home to show their wives how dangerous it was here.

April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2004

I am in Qatar awaiting my flight home. I should go through Kuwait to Germany then back to Baltimore Washington International (BWI). I am in temporary quarters for my stay here. Qatar is a flat, very hot, very humid country. The sky goes on forever. I took shuttle buses around, saw a movie and ate some Burger King. I came back to my dilapidated tent and found mice nibblets all over my bed. I knew they would be in the tents, just like Iraq. I had left some Cheesits out and they managed to climb my bed and bite holes in the bag. I dressed down and read from my book for about 30 minutes until the mice came back. They run really fast, little blurs of brown fur. I had a gray metal folding chair next to my bed. Finally a mouse came from under the tent flap and ran to my chair. He sniffed around, stood on his hind legs and checked me out. He must not have considered me a threat because he started the climb the metal legs of the chair in front of me. He got all the way up to the top, and jumped into my plastic PX bag. I was waiting for him with my video camera ready. I taped him doing this several times over the next hour. I was surprised to see him climbing smooth metal chair legs so easily. Anything I left on the floor he would carry away. I had an empty drink bottle so I tied a string to it and put some food in it. I waited for him to climb inside. He came around and smelled the bottle, jumped inside and grabbed the Cheesits and ran back out before I could even lift the string. Amazingly fast little bugger.

The tent is about 30 feet long, 15 wide and covered with rubber patches. The wind blows and lifts the window flaps, which make the room change from light to dark. It feels very deserted in there. When I went to sleep I tied my food on a window flap above my bed, camping style. I had no sheets or blankets, but the bed next to me did. I woke up around midnight freezing. So I took the cover from the bed next to me. If the guy who owned it was a shift worker I would have to give it back. I slept pretty well until the AC kicked in. I was too cold to sleep even with the blanket. When I got up in the morning I put the comforter back and noticed, much to my dismay, that the bed next to me was covered in mouse droppings. I had taken the blanket off the bed in the middle of the night and not seen the mouse nuggets under the blanket. They had climbed that bed too and made some nests under the covers. So I had been snuggling with a blanket covered with miniature morsels of unwholesome goodness last night. It would have bothered me if my uniform hadn't stunk and I had showered in the last 4 days. At this point I would do just about anything to get home.

The flight to Kuwait was pretty fast. When I got there I had a few hour layover with the other 20 or so people. About half of the people left for other flights, and then we were taken to a bus to drive out to the tarmac. Our bus stopped and we were told by the civilian driver that we had to wait an extra 30-45 minutes while “Items were being loaded.” The civilian lady left the bus and a young Airmen got on, took off his hearing protection and said “This flight is being delayed for operational reasons, sorry for the delay, but our new cargo takes priority. This is now a HR flight. Does anyone have an issue with this being an HR flight?” No one said anything, I don’t think anyone knew what an HR flight was.

He said “HR means human remains, we have two deceased Soldiers on this flight.” No one said anything so he left the bus. You could hear a pin drop in there. I couldn’t help but to feel choked up by this news. I was proud to have these Soldiers on my flight. The idea of them flying home unaccompanied did not seem right to me. We got on the plane about 30 minutes later. The plane had been emptied, and reloaded with our cargo in the back of the plane. I sat in the middle seat, and to my left were the casket carriers.

I had the urge to reach out and put a hand on the casket, or do something to pay my respects. One of the two crew chiefs was standing next to the rear of the carriers. He waited until we were all on board and gave us our safety brief. He ended the safety brief with “Do not touch the HR carriers!” We taxied out and did our usual combat take off, very fast, hard turn and then leveled out far away from the airport. One Soldier, a Major, was sitting next to the carrier and under the spotlight above them. He stood up and walked to the cabin. He returned later with a crew chief. They stopped by the carrier and the Major pointed to the bags in front of them. The crew chief gave him a thumbs up sign and proceeded to clear the bags out and move them to the rear of the plane. One civilian luggage bag had rolled over and was touching the corner of the casket. That bothered the Major enough to do something about it. When the bags were cleared the crew chief went back up to the cabin and the Major sat down again. He buried his face in his hands and wiped his eyes. I could see his chest rise and fall. He took one big sigh, rested his head and arms on his knees. I don’t know if he knew the two Soldiers going home. But in a way I think we all knew them, we had just come from Iraq.

When we landed in Germany we were told to debark the plane and wait on the tarmac. The bags were removed and a refrigerated truck came to the back of the plane. The ground chief asked for 8 volunteers. Every hand went up in our group. We made two lines on either side of the

loading ramp and stood at attention. The plane's crew and four others from the truck carried the two caskets out of the plane. Four Air Force Security Police Officers were stationed around our group. The engines were turned off and there wasn't a sound to be heard. Very unusual for an airport. The caskets were walked out of the plane, and loaded on the truck. We all saluted, the civilians had their hats off and one hand over their heart. No one cried, but I could see teary eyes all around me. The Major that helped clear the fallen baggage again wiped his eyes. I never found out the names of the Soldiers we took home. Of all the things I had experienced in Iraq, that one event is the one I will remember the most. It is very humbling to be able to take part in that kind of event. It leaves you wishing you could have done more for your country. You go home thinking you had not paid your dues and it puts everything in perspective for you.