

Last night I went out on another patrol with these guys. They set up an ambush around 3 AM near this abandoned village. As everyone moved into position, one of the big Mine Resistant Armored Protection trucks (MRAPs) hit a mine. The blast blew the crap out of it and took off the whole front end and engine. No one was hurt seriously, but the thing caught fire and started popping off ammunition. The smoke and the beat of rounds cracking felt like combat.



It all scared the shit out of me.

We ended up waiting in these reeds until 10 AM. It was so fucking hot that I sweated through my clothes. My boots were soaked. Everyone looked like they'd taken a dip in the pool, and that was before we started marching. They went through this village, and they began clearing houses. Also, scary shit because yesterday, a guy got blown up and killed when he went into the wrong house. I didn't get blown up and killed, however. That was good.

The hardest thing to see was after that, we crossed this canal and went to a little farmhouse, or a compound really. This extended family was there, but the soldiers had intelligence that it was a terrorist headquarters, so they asked for all the adult males.

Four of 'em came out; one was ancient, and the others were in their 20s-30s and 40s. One guy starts shaking all over, and the GIs are like: 'He's guilty as shit.' So they decided to cuff 'em up and take them in for questioning. As they do that, all the little kids, there were four or five of them, and all were under five, start wailing. The women start wailing. Then the interpreter starts yelling at 'em to get in the house and shut up, and the GIs are getting all amped, almost mocking the whole thing.

Then as we marched these guys out on the road, we passed three fresh holes where IEDs blew up trucks, including the one that day.

It was a huge hole, like 10x10. One of the detainees swirls his finger next to his head as if to say, "That's crazy shit," and the other guy loses it. He starts panicking and goes into convulsions, falls onto the road. We were all really, really beat and close to heat exhaustion cause it'd been six hours or so of this. Anyway, I think, 'oh shit, he's going to die,' so I go over and start using the rest of my water to try and cool him off. Then he starts doing this serious jerking around on the ground to the point where it is pretty clear he is faking.

"Get up, motherfucker" they're yelling. "Get up, or we're going to drag you." One of the GIs pulls out a huge knife, and I'm thinking, "This is not good."

Needless to say, the guy got up, and we made it to the MRAPs and turned the three over to the Iraqis.

I'm glad I'm not a soldier.

AFTERWARD: *The three guys turned out to be either al-Qeda or al-Qeda, sympathizers, according to Lt.Col. Robert McAleer, a 2nd Stryker battalion commander. The commander said they had what amounted to a sealed indictment against the guys showing that members of AQI had used the farmhouse in their effort to lay mines. But the operation and how they were arrested wasn't how his men usually do business. Usually, they remove the men from the women and talk to them separately. And explain to the women what is happening. As with all detentions, he will send his men back to the farmhouse, where someone will explain the situation to the family. That the Iraqi Army is holding the men, that they face prosecution for aiding al Qeda, and how they can contact them.*



Duck and Cover

By **Scott Hadly** on July 17, 2008, 7:50 AM

Suppose you look past all the guns slung over people's shoulders, the big-armored personnel carriers, humvees, and Blackhawk helicopters. In that case, you can almost forget there's a war going on.

On the big bases in Iraq, there's a certain normalcy that makes you forget there are still people fighting and dying here. But you get reminded real quick. Sometimes it's sobering, like yesterday when one of the soldiers here in Diyala was killed when he chased an insurgent into a house that blew up.

Every mess hall has a place set for fallen soldiers and a memorial wall to remind you about those who've died.

Sometimes the reminder comes in other ways, like what happened to me last week while waiting for a helicopter flight out of Balad, a vast base north of Baghdad.

While flipping through an old *Business Week* and a half glancing at *Good Morning America*, I was startled to hear a woman's voice come over some hidden PA system say "incoming."

I looked up, wondering what was up, and on the television, a message scrolled on the bottom of the screen saying there was a mortar attack.

I looked around from some cue about what to do, but all the soldiers waiting just kept watching television or reading. I figured they must know what to do under these circumstances, so I tried to go back to reading, but I just looked at the page and waited. Then I heard a muffled explosion and rumble.

"OK, you've officially been fired upon," said James Lee, the photographer I'm traveling with.

Two days ago, at a base in Diyala province, where the war is very much front and center, I was awoken around 3 AM by a loud explosion.

The little shack I'm staying in shook, and the windows rattled. Over the next hour, there were about half a dozen more. I thought they were a volley of mortars hitting the base.

"Should somebody do something about that," was all I could think of. Again I had no idea what to do.

I asked a few soldiers the next day, who all said they slept through it. A captain later told me that it'd been outgoing artillery. The battery was firing illumination rounds for a group of soldiers on patrol. I nodded as if I knew that all along.

Excuses, Excuses

By **Scott Hadly** on July 16, 2008 6:01 AM

There are phones here, plenty of computers, and Internet connections. But the effort to file stories from Iraq and to blog has been difficult, to say the least.

The cell phone I got with coverage in Iraq was helpful for about a day while in Baghdad. But I have yet to make a call on it since.

My laptop's great if I can get a connection, but it's been so slow that it's taken half of a day to send even small files.

Plenty of people blog from here and do just fine, but bopping from place to place, as we have been over the last three weeks, has required a constantly changing set of resources.

Beyond the computer stuff, the stories themselves take a lot of work to get some basic reporting done.

We often do not know what we're going to get before we get to a place, and once there, we've had stories sort of fall apart.

Just before leaving Ramadi, we were scheduled to head with a convoy to a very remote outpost in the desert on the border with Syria. It was supposed to take six hours. We'd stay about 12, then turn around, drive back, and then onto our next destination.

It sounded good, but we waited in the convoy for about five hours, with one mishap after another delaying us before they ditched the trip.



Physically I'm feeling old.

Much of the travel has been in MRAPs, these big lumbering mongrel vehicles that are part Brinks truck and part Humvee. They're pretty safe but very uncomfortable. Especially when driving in them for six hours, wearing a 40-pound Kevlar vest with armor plates and a helmet. (I'll spare you the details on trying to go to take a leak in on one of these patrols.) It's the same get-up you wear in helicopters and cargo planes. Doing this for 24 or 36 hours at a time takes its toll.

I've also marveled at how much sweat the human body can produce. It's very hot (115-120), of course, but in your Kevlar and long pants and long sleeves under an intense sun, the body just starts shedding water. After a patrol through a small town in Diyala, my shirt, pants, and socks were soaked through. As they dried, they stiffened, and the salt left white powdery salt stains. I could take the pants off and stand them up on their own they were so stiff with salt.

Things they carry

By **Scott Hadly** on July 12, 2008 9:19 AM

Sometimes in reporting, I'll take random notes of details to sprinkle them into a story, but mostly they stay in my notebook. While reporting over the last week or hanging out with some Seabees, Marines, and a few soldiers, I scribbled short lists of stuff they had with them in their pockets, rucksacks, and stuffed in the corners of an MRAP.

Nothing came of the notes, but here's my list:

Stridex pads

Maxim magazine

A commemorative Operation Iraqi Freedom mug

Protein powder

Oil of Olay

Jolly Ranchers

A creased, stained copy of a wife's college biography

Peanut M&Ms

A folded white handkerchief with five pictures of a week-old baby girl he's never held

A pirated copy of the movie 300

Divorce papers

Terps

By **Scott Hadly** on July 12, 2008 8:56 AM

'We're here to help you.'

Nuha and "Zak" sat on a concrete block, smoking in the dark.

From this little perch on the rise in the camp, you can look down on the tents and SWA huts below. You see the desert bluffs outlined in the dark set off by a chandelier of stars in the sky. A low rumble from two massive generators and a steady resounding thump from a .50 caliber machine gun being test fired in the distance drive.

Both are Jordanians and had spent a long day working with the Marines in western Iraq.

Jordanians, they'd come to Iraq to work as interpreters, or Terps as the military called them.

Most Terps have nicknames because using their real name can become deadly for them and their families.



In Jordan, Nuha ran an Internet café while Zak taught high school math in high school.

"I'm here for my family, my mother, my father, and my son," said Nuha.

The money she makes keeps them afloat.

On a remote base, the interpreters must stay at least three months and often can't get a vacation. They work as subcontractors. An American company with a government contract subcontracts to foreign firms to find Arabic speakers. Everyone takes a cut of the money on the way.

They're here for the money but would never be rich. They're paid about \$1,500 a month for daily risking their lives.

If they had Green Cards or were American citizens with higher security clearances, their pay would be more than ten times that amount.

"They make \$200,000," said Zak. "I'm not saying I should make \$200,000, but that's unfair."

His job is one of the riskiest in Iraq.

The danger is even greater for Iraqis who have worked with coalition forces. If identified, they or their families are at risk of kidnapping or assassination, and the list of those who have been killed is long.

Zak isn't really worried about dying.

"In my culture, we believe it is already written what will happen," he said.

He'd like to go to America, where he has two brothers. One is working for Google, and the other is an engineer, but he can't get a visa to visit.

Nuha, too, isn't worried about the dangers.

"I love this work," she said. "I just love this kind of work. I love going out and helping people 'cause my job is just communication between civilians and Marines in a good way."

She likes the officers she works with and admires their efforts at getting to know the locals. One captain has started smoking because he is so often offered cigarettes when he visits, and he doesn't want to be impolite.

If she's sitting around too long, she goes and asks if she can go out on patrol with a squad. She's taken to teaching a handful of Marines Arabic. They're a bit obsessive about learning swear words and putdowns.

For a time, her 23-year-old son was here working too, probably the only mother-son interpreting team in the country. He went back to Jordan to finish his studies. Now she wants to go back for a vacation but hasn't been allowed to.

"Seven months I've been here, and I haven't had a vacation," she said.

Her own mastery of English curse words emerges when she talks about how she's been treated by the company that has the interpreter contract. They've imposed new rules on how she behaves and her training. It's little rules, like not being allowed to wear shorts while off work, taking morning classes in military-speak, and being asked to pick up trash around camp.

"I didn't leave my family and my kid just to come pick up trash," she said.

And she's disturbed by how she's treated by the US authorities here. At one point, she had to go to the dentist at the big military base at Al Asaad. It turned into a 12-day ordeal, where she was kept in a room and could only leave with an escort because of security issues with third-country nationals.

"We feel like we live in jail here," she said. "It's like, 'guys, we're here to help you.'"

The Tao of Chuck

By **Scott Hadly** on July 7, 2008 9:26 PM

I first saw them among the hieroglyphics of obscene graffiti in the bathrooms on a base in Kuwait.

Scribbled in there with graphic cartoons and misspelled bad words were "**Chuck Norris Facts**" - the War on Terrorism's version of "Kilgore was Here."

The satirical *Facts* first took hold on a website dedicated to Norris, but the sayings have found their true forum on walls, stalls, and Post-It notes in Iraq.

The facts are silly haiku about just how tough Chuck Norris is.

Last year visiting Al Anbar province, he told the Stars and Stripes newspaper that his favorite was:

"There is no Theory of Evolution. Just a list of animals Chuck Norris allows to Live."

The first one I saw was:

"Chuck Norris *Can* Believe It's Butter."

I didn't get it.

But at the time, I had not yet seen the significance of Chuck "Walker, Texas Ranger" Norris.

I didn't know this almost 68-year-old television and B-movie star, who was the World Karate Welterweight Champion when the war was in Vietnam, held such sway.

I didn't know some young soldier had proposed renaming Iraq "Chuckistan."



While waiting for a helicopter, I read through a list of them posted anonymously on a bulletin board.

Among them were:

"Chuck Norris destroyed the periodic table because he only recognizes the element of surprise."

"Chuck Norris doesn't kill birds with one stone. He kills two stones with one bird."

"Chuck Norris' tears cure cancer. Too bad Chuck Norris has never cried. Ever."

Travel

By **Scott Hadly** on July 3, 2008 8:33 PM

It would be great if the recent ebb in violence in Iraq meant you could fly into Baghdad International Airport and hail a cab to go downtown. But despite attacks having slowed in the last month, with fewer Americans being killed, Iraq is still a very dangerous.

Coming to Iraq as an embedded reporter involves an elaborate choreography of transportation on everything from planes, helicopters, or **Rhinos**, a sort of monster truck armored plated bus. For photographer James Lee and myself, it amounted to three days of slight discomfort, boredom, and no sleep. It sometimes felt tortuous for someone like me who can't sit still for very long.

The courtesy of the military will dictate our time here. We are their guests, and as such, that limits the kinds of stories we can do. The war itself, where everybody is a potential target, is the most limiting of all, making it very difficult to talk to Iraqis who don't have a connection with the military. Beyond that, it also changes what you see.

Like most Americans, I need to be more educated about the rich history that traces itself to the beginning of civilization. This part of the world is where the Biblical tree of life grew, where the first prophet Abraham was born, and Noah buried. It is where the tower of Babel stood. It is where Alexander the Great died—once called **Mesopotamia** or the land between the two rivers (the Tigris and Euphrates).

I'm not even going to attempt to make a thumbnail history of the country, and it's unlikely I'll take any sort of historical tour. The best I got so far was a view of Baghdad from rooftop level aboard a fast-moving Blackhawk helicopter swooping over the squat brown outlying towns, an orchard of date palms, and then the rows and rows of brown block buildings and apartment complexes that make up the grid of neighborhoods around the Green Zone.

I couldn't see and wouldn't have been able to identify it if I could, the Khulafa Mosque or Tahrir Place or make out ramshackle shops of Rashid Street.

But as a chopper skirted over the city, occasionally dropping decoy flares, I got my first and only view of an ancient, and once great city.

Be Warned

By **Scott Hadly** on July 3, 2008 7:30 AM

I'd been warned.

My co-worker Zeke Barlow, who reported poignantly on how the **family of a Seabee** officer dealt with his deployment to Iraq, said it was the unspoken secret among military families.

And then last month, while waiting on a tarmac for a battalion from the Navy Mobile Construction Battalion to return home after six months in Asia, one of the wives, with her 2-year-old and 10-year-old daughters clinging to her, boiled it down for me.

"It sucks," she said. "That last two weeks before he goes, all we do is fight."

It's the way all the stress and anxiety of the separation comes out.

In those final days before leaving with emotion so close to the edge and departure looming like the scary part of a movie, everything inside that you try and hold back starts bubbling up in strange ways. Instead of milking the last few days for all their worth, you and the ones you love are snapping at each other.

For me, it came out in stupid last-minute home improvement projects and a lot of cursing. For my wife, it came in waves of tears, interrupted conversations, and having to leave the room to collect herself.

My 7-year-old daughter Isabel seemed fine until two days before I left and then broke down, holding onto me for an hour and asking me why I had to go. My son Finn, 5, didn't seem too troubled. Especially since I promised we'd have a little vacation when I got back. But the night before I left, he wanted me to lay down with him as he tried to go to sleep, and he asked me to stay home now instead.

At some point, my wife said she couldn't see how all those military families manage. A year away, or six months seemed like an eternity. At least spending a month in Iraq embedded with troops would give me a taste of what they had to endure during their time overseas.

It's not as if I didn't know that. One of my first childhood memories was of my dad coming home from Vietnam after his second tour. Sitting on the basement floor as my mom was folding laundry, I saw this tall, skinny guy who hadn't shaved tip-toeing down the stairs to surprise her. He looked over me and put his finger to his lips. I didn't know who he was.

A Naval officer told me about a month ago that all his deployments were hard. He ached for his family and for lost time, but the separation had also made them stronger.

But all that feeling is a bit too much to handle in the final days before leaving.