

My Deployment to Iraq

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I learned on July 16, 2005 that I would be deployed for a year and ½ with a year of that in Iraq. I reported "for duty" in Ft. Bliss on July 25, 2005, after spending an eight-day vacation with my wife in Hawaii (something we planned and paid for six months ago). Below I've included the newsletters I've written while deployed. I've tried to write one every couple of weeks. *A blank line and the subject of my E-mail newsletters with the date they were sent separate one newsletter from another.* Enjoy!

My First Two Weeks of Army Duty - August 6, 2005

I've been activated!

I spent the first couple of days at Ft. Bliss, Texas getting my uniforms, having my name and rank sewn on everything, getting my boots, and attending a few briefings, learning a little Arabic, Iraqi customs, and why we're there (for "Iraqi freedom," of course!). After a couple of days we were sent to a place called "Dona Ana," a part of New Mexico where we are getting our "training." This is essentially a one square mile compound where we must spend literally every minute of what little free time we have. Apparently, the Army wants us to get used to being confined to a compound, because that is what our life will be like when we are in Iraq. During our training, we also must wear the full protective body gear (weighing between 35 and 40 pounds) that soldiers wear in Iraq. I almost died last Monday when we completed our "Land Navigation" training, where we had to "find" four points in the desert, using a compass and map. I literally consumed 11 liters of water during the four hours of this training. Tina and Booth, I may drink as much water as you do when I return home!

I had hoped the Army would make special provisions for us "old guys," but they really don't - I can't keep up with the 23-year-olds (or 33-year-olds or 43-year-olds, for that matter!) but am given additional time to complete the training and am doing the best that I can. I'm not last, but most of the people are way ahead of me! When I return from Iraq, I will be able to "back pack" with the best of them, due to the pack on my back that I always have! I have always wanted to "back pack," but I was never in good enough shape. Well, I soon will be...

The people in "my" battalion (the 49th Military Police (MP) Battalion (BN)) have been very helpful and supportive -- I didn't know anyone before I got here and have made several "good" friends. We were told we would become as close to our "combat buddies" as anyone in our lives, including our spouses, brothers, sisters, friends elsewhere, and children. The morale here is very positive, which if it weren't, life would be depressing. The food is also good here, much better than when I went through basic training 38 years ago. Actually this feels like "basic training" all over again, except that I must do it at an age many people have retired. In our compound (which can accommodate 1,800 soldiers) we have an internet cafe with 12 PCs, a TV with 20 chairs, a Post Exchange (PX) a little larger than the Isbell Conference Room, a mini gym, a laundromat with 15 washers and dryers, and a cafeteria. I share an "open bay" barracks with 15 other officers.

Every couple of weeks, I'll try to summarize my experiences, because most of us really don't know what happens when our Reservists and National Guardsmen are deployed for 18 months. I certainly didn't (and still don't!!!). My goal is to return safely with my fellow soldiers to the U.S. in 18 months and see every one of you again. Let me know what is going on at DTS and elsewhere. I miss all of you and working at DTS.

P.S. We get off approximately 1/2 day each week here.

August 17, 2005

Approximately two weeks later

Life is starting to become routine around here -- we start training at 8:00 AM and normally are done by 5:00 (or, 17:00 in military lingo!). We must complete three phases of Army training here before being deployed to Iraq -- phase I teaches basic soldier skills (e.g., first aid, weapon cleaning and firing, low and high crawl {or, how to be as close to the ground as possible so as not to draw enemy fire but still maneuver}, orienteering (with a map and compass), and using a GPSS in a field environment; phase II teaches basic infantry squad maneuvers (a squad consists of six to eight soldiers); and phase III which covers infantry platoon maneuvers (a platoon consists of four squads). As you can see, this really is a repeat of many aspects of basic training. The Army wants to ensure we have the basic soldier skills to survive in Iraq. We will spend several days on identifying and avoiding IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device), commonly called Roadside Bombs, possibly the "most useful" class taught here (the Army's words, not mine). We started phase II training today.

Last week while working on the low and high crawl, a very strenuous activity, I suffered from heat exhaustion and got an IV and was confined to quarters for the day, preventing me from participating in any further training that day. I was given a "Go" for this activity -- we must repeat any training in which we get a "No" go. I am now considered a potential heat casualty and, for future activities, may drop out of anything that causes me heat cramps or "light headedness." I don't particularly like being "singled out" but certainly don't want to die during training and will have to pay closer attention to my body's needs.

Oh, we all just completed a four-day, Combat Life Saver's (CLS) course, meaning that we can save our buddy's life if hit. We all had to administer an IV to another soldier. Many people had to poke their "buddy" several times before succeeding. Fortunately, my partner and I only had to poke each other once. One person poked his partner six times before doing it right. With my new CLS skill, I may now qualify as the DTS first aid person! I actually have a nine pound bag that could come in very handy in an emergency. The downside is that we have to lug this bag with us everywhere we go (recall that before this, we were already carrying 35 - 40 pounds of other military stuff!)! On second thought, maybe I should have flunked the CLS class!!!

Oh, as part of a Military Police outfit, once we've completed phase III training here, we will get two-weeks of training in Ft. Lewis on how to treat prisoners; the Army wants to ensure that we do not experience another Abu Grayib incident. No, I won't be interacting with prisoners (since I'm supposed to be the network guy!) but must go through the training anyway. It should be interesting, and it won't be in the desert in New Mexico. Actually, since Ft. Lewis is one of my favorite places in the Army, I am looking forward to going there. We're supposed to get "liberty" there, meaning that we can rent cars and eat at restaurants instead of the Army's dining facility (a fancy phrase for "mess hall"). The dining facility is okay, but it will certainly be nice to eat in a seafood restaurant!

See you in two weeks...

Another Two Weeks Have Passed - September 2, 2005

Completion of Phase II Training

A lot has happened since we last spoke! We completed phase II of our training, placing us (now) in the most difficult but fortunately last phase of Army infantry training. Here we will participate in "live fire" exercises (yes, that means REAL ammunition!). Previously we've only used real ammunition to qualify with our weapon. We're getting very confident in our Army skills here, which is essential to staying alive in Iraq. None of likes the thought of shooting human beings, but it is something some of will face during the year we're "in country!"

Last week one of our soldiers lost his weapon (No, it wasn't me!)... We had to stand in formation starting at 4:45 AM for several hours until the weapon was found. I have always heard that this is what the Army does when such a thing happens (because an Army weapon can sell for \$1,000 on the black market) but hadn't experienced it before. Apparently the weapon was taken while our soldier was taking a shower. The thief stored it in the air duct of our little gymnasium here. Our Command Sergeant Major (one of the few people not in the formation) found it. They have taken finger prints from the weapon and are trying to determine who took it. We'll probably won't hear further about the investigation.

On Wednesday we were given a few hours off and permitted to travel to the mall here (by bus, of course, and in military uniform). None of us bought too many items, since we must wear only the Army uniform for the next 17 months (unless we're home on leave). We did have dinner at the Olive Garden, which "made our day" (and possibly week and / or month!), something that will sustain us for the next few weeks. Having dinner at a restaurant may not seem like much of a treat (and was something I used to take for granted!) but meant the world to us. Yes, the "mess hall" food is "okay" (yes, once I said it was "good," but it almost seems bland now!) but certainly doesn't compare with REAL food. Interestingly enough, I was sick part of the next day, probably because my system isn't used to exotic food!!!

Tonight I will fly an airplane home to attend my daughter Janine's wedding tomorrow... I am extremely fortunate to get "leave" for this event, because it is rarely granted, but my daughter's wedding is apparently the exception. Who said the Army doesn't have a heart? I've asked for this time off since the day I was activated but really didn't expect it. Giving away my daughter is something every father dreams about from the day his daughter is born. I am so thankful to be able to do this; many people in my battalion have been "plugging for me," making this all possible. I will return to Ft. Bliss early Sunday evening and train with my troops starting at 4:00 AM Monday morning.

See you soon...

Army Life Update - September 10, 2005

Update on my daughter's wedding...

I wanted everyone to know that my daughter Janine's wedding was perfect -- it might have been the proudest moment of my life, walking my daughter "down the aisle." Visiting with my friends and relatives, dancing with Janine and my wife Donna, etc., etc. was the perfect ending to a perfect day. I must commend my wife, her sister Nancy, and friend Lavonne for "planning" this day. As you know, I've been "out of the loop" the past 40 or so days and haven't been able to contribute much (other than moral support) to the wedding, but even if I had, there is nothing I could have done to make the day any more successful than it was. Incidentally, Janine married none other than an Army captain, which seems very fitting, considering where I'm spending all my time!!!

As mentioned in my last update, I had to wear my Desert Camouflage Uniform (DCU) on the airplane when flying between Sacramento and El Paso last weekend, the first time I've ever worn a uniform on a commercial flight... I can't believe how I was treated -- whereas I'm pretty much ignored (like everyone else!) when traveling as a civilian, this time people were very nice to me. Some thanked me for my service (I didn't tell anyone that up until now I have been pretty much a "weekend warrior" who has never been sent anywhere overseas!) -- others (including some young, "hot" {believe it or not!} women) started talking to me for no reason other than they were just being friendly. Since I was the only person in "uniform" on the flights, people recognized and helped me (e.g., when I asked someone where the baggage claim was for my flight, several people told me at once, although I didn't recognize any of them!). I felt like I was a celebrity! I was even able to fly "first class" on the last leg of the flight because of my uniform. I

might just start wearing my DCUs when flying anywhere upon returning from Iraq (I'm just kidding!)

Nothing new to report here about Army training except that we are being prepared to protect ourselves and our soldiers once we arrive in Iraq. We are being told that our lives may well depend upon our collective, instinctive efforts and traits; I guess we're being trained to become "killers," which might offend some, but that is really what the Army is all about... In two weeks we will have completed our training here and leave for Ft. Lewis, WA.

I have tried to remain apolitical in my e-mails for many reasons, but we were told the other day that five months ago in a survey of Iraqi people, 53% of the population there doesn't care whether coalition forces are killed in Iraq. Most of the people surveyed wouldn't initiate an act of terrorism against American forces, but they also wouldn't report such an upcoming act against us to the authorities either. I guess the Army wants to affirm that we can't trust any Iraqis we meet, but beside this simple fact, many of us are asking ourselves if over half the Iraqis don't care whether we live or die, why should we, as American soldiers, feel any differently towards them? I am not trying to get into a debate, but this certainly makes one stop and think. Personally, I would much rather be in New Orleans, helping the homeless people devastated by hurricane Katrina, than being sent to Iraq...

Next time you hear from me, I'll be in the beautiful state of Washington...

We're In Washington! – September 27, 2005

We're in Ft. Lewis, Washington...

We finished phase III of our infantry training, have been "validated" (meaning we are "good to go" to Iraq), and arrived at Ft. Lewis a few days ago... Sherman Hensley (aka George Jefferson from the "Archie Bunker" show and then the star of his own program, "The Jeffersons") appeared at Dona Ana (where we spent all our time in New Mexico) with an Army band before approximately 1,000 cheering soldiers in our Dining Facility. He wore a T-shirt stating that "Freedom is not Free," a very popular theme nowadays. He remarked that many actors are known for a trademark, with his being his famous, almost "cocky" walk. He then sang "Walk This Way," practically mocking himself! He came across as a very caring individual. The band was very LOUD, forcing me to use "hearing protection" for the entire concert. I must be getting old if I can't listen to a concert without ear inserts!

Oh, while attending make-up training (which I missed during my daughter's wedding) with another unit, I heard a 21-year-old soldier comment that he "could tell" that a particular female sergeant in her mid to late thirties "had once been hot!" I knew whom he was discussing and casually mentioned that I thought she was "still hot!" Being around young soldiers certainly can change one's perspective on a whole lot of things!!!

In 1990, the last time I was "in the field," male soldiers would occasionally carry a female soldier's duffel bag, but apparently all that has changed! All the women in our unit (many of whom are small) wear the same 40 pounds of body armor and helmet, carry and fire the same weapon, etc., etc. as the rest of us, and complete every training activity we do. There really is no difference between the performances of the male and female soldiers, with many of the activities being very strenuous. No one seems surprised by the women's success here except me! I have grown in many ways while going through infantry training here.

Oh, we've been told not to talk to or even look at Iraqi women, lest they might be subject to "honor" killings. Since most Americans have been taught from the time we were born to look at everyone's face, I've had trouble ignoring the female "civilians on the battlefield" (COBs, as we call them!) during the practical exercises we've conducted. For the most part, Hispanic women have "acted" as the female COBs here. This is something I will need to master before landing in Iraq... See you soon...

We've arrived in Kuwait...

We arrived in Ft. Lewis, WA (near Seattle) a couple of weeks ago and spent six days or so learning how to handle unruly detainees (another word for inmates), including one day on self-defense. We enjoyed the training but really liked being in the Seattle area, where the weather is very pleasant (not hot like the desert in Ft. Bliss, TX), the area is beautiful, and the restaurants are excellent! We did receive a bit more rain than we (i.e., Californians) are accustomed to, though!

We were able to come home for a week of vacation before leaving for the Middle East. This was one of the best vacations I've ever had (Who said that you can't enjoy vacation at home?), going to lunch and dinner with family and friends each day. I even visited my office, picking up some things I will need to perform my IT (Information Technology) job in Iraq. I was both surprised and amazed how friendly and interested (in Army life!) my coworkers were during what I-thought-would-take 15 minutes but instead lasted over four hours! My wife Donna also had a few "honey dos," most of which I completed.

We returned to Ft. Lewis for a two-day staff exercise, applying what we had learned re: handling detainees, and to leave for Kuwait. Our 25-hour trip from Ft. Lewis to Ft. Hood, TX (to pick up 200 soldiers also headed for Iraq) to Bangor, Maine (for re-fueling) to Shannon Island, Ireland (for re-fueling and to change the air crew) to Kuwait City was rather uneventful, except that we were greeted by 10 people at the Bangor airport at 4:00 AM, literally cheering us on as we got off the airport. The American public certainly has a way of making us soldiers feel very proud to be Americans. Also, stopping off at Ireland was the first time I've been to Europe, a place I intend to visit one day. I guess that I can now tell everyone I've been to Ireland!!!

We arrived in Kuwait and will spend the next few days here becoming acclimated to the weather, receiving more Iraqi cultural awareness briefings and classes on recognizing IEDs, (Improvised Explosive Device), qualifying with our weapons (again), etc, before leaving for Iraq. Kuwait is everything it looks like on TV – a flat land with hot winds (although only 105 degrees this time of year), sand everywhere you can see (but without a beach in sight!), and no vegetation anywhere. The dining facility food here is even better than what we were served in the States, as we were served kiwi fruit, plums, watermelon, plus regular fruit like apples, bananas, and oranges, everything you would want in a salad, made-to-order omelets, fish, corn dogs, pizza, ice cream (including anything your want from a Baskin & Robbins in the dining facility), and regular food, like fish, pork chops, and ribs (I've seen this all in just the five meals I've had since landing here). Based upon the meals alone, some of us will probably want to volunteer for a second tour over here (just kidding)!!!

Quick Note – October 21, 2005

Quick Note...

After chow today, I was able to say "Hi" to my friends and family on camera, which should "air" sometime during the World Series. Apparently, soldiers are given this opportunity every year. So, if you watch the World Series, you might be able to see me "in country" saying "Hi" to everyone during one of the commercials. Again, I feel rather fraudulent appearing on TV, since I've only been in Kuwait for four days and have yet to travel to Iraq, but that will soon change...

P.S. I even mentioned DTS during my 15 seconds of "fame!" Oh, two nights ago, we were served lobster and shrimp in the Dining Facility. Things are just getting better and better here!

We Arrived In Iraq A Few Days Ago – November 3, 2005

We're in Iraq...

We're finally here... I have my own air conditioned room in a trailer with a single bed with fitted sheets and a comforter! We will soon have satellite TV and internet connectivity (via satellite) to each room for approximately \$30 per month with a \$100 startup fee. Since my communication section will need to setup the satellite TV system and internet connectivity, I'll know a lot about satellites when I return to the States. Perhaps I can even setup my own satellite system at my house!!!

We're in a FOB (forward operating base, approximately a one square mile compound) here that has never been mortared or attacked, but we have occasionally "lost" soldiers when they've left the FOB to do their jobs (such as to provide convoy security or to conduct a raid), so life isn't completely safe here. I spend most of my day working in the TOC (Tactical Operating Center) working on computer issues. Currently, the unit we're replacing is showing us how they've conducted their business for the past year -- they will leave in another week or so. My work day (and just about everyone else's) averages 12 hours.

We have a phone center / internet cafe where the typical wait is two - three hours for a 30-minute session. That is one reason we want our own internet access! There is always a TV on that shows "live" games (but rarely the news) -- it is weird to watch a "live" contest at 6:00 AM the day afterwards (With daylight savings time, we're 11 hours ahead of you). We do have a great dining facility that is a smaller version of what we had in Kuwait. We have no access to newspapers or TV news (and haven't for a long time!). For example, I personally didn't learn of Katrina until four days after the tragedy.

We have to use portapotties instead of regular restrooms, which has taken some "getting used to!" The shower facility is located about 140 yards from where we live, so it is a little uncomfortable (i.e., "chilly") walking over there every morning. Fortunately, we missed the hot summer, as the weather averages (I guess) 80 - 90 degrees during the day now and 50 degrees at night. Oh, due to the shortage of water, we must take combat showers, where we spend a minute or so getting wet, lathering up (with the water turned off) for a few minutes, and three - four minutes rinsing off. Although we carry our weapons (and ammunition) at all times in the compound, we don't have to wear our armored vest or helmet, which makes life very pleasant here. This, of course, will change if we're ever attacked or mortared. Outside the wire (or FOB), we must always wear our vests and helmets.

I consider myself very fortunate to be assigned to such a great unit with excellent officers and enlisted personnel. They have been very supportive. Despite the age difference (recall that I am probably 27 years older than the "average" person here), I have made several what-I-expect-to-be lifelong friends. It is absolutely amazing how people "bond" with one another when in a stressful situation for 24 hours a day, seven days a week (with no end in sight!). We have maintained our "sense of humor" in spite of what we have to accomplish here. I, of course, would rather be with my family and friends in California, but Army life has been much better than I had expected, primarily due to the people I've met while assigned to this unit.

Advantages of Living on A FOB (Forward Operating Base) / Being Deployed – November 18, 2005

Advantages of living on a FOB

1. I live a five minute walk from where I work, so I don't have to get up very early to fight the traffic on the way to work. Despite the long hours I put in every day, I am able to sleep until 6:45AM most mornings.
2. Since I must walk everywhere I go (unless I'm in a convoy), I don't have to worry about the price of gasoline. Even if in a convoy, I still don't have to stress about what gasoline costs in the States.

3. I don't have to worry about what I'm going to wear to work or whether I need to buy more clothes, since I'm required to wear the same uniform every day. We are not allowed to wear civilian clothes even when off-duty.
4. I don't have to pay income taxes while in a combat zone (Now I wish I were a little higher ranking!!!), allowing me to save to for the Rolls Royce I'll own one day (just kidding – besides, the military doesn't pay that well!!!).
5. I don't have to worry about completing weekend projects (like weeding the yard, mowing the lawn, trying to fix whatever is broken around the house, etc.), since nothing grows in Iraq (at least the part I'm in). I once thought weeds grew everywhere (at least they do in California) but not here. Also, there is no such thing as a weekend project here, because we work practically every day, meaning weekends are like every other day of the week.
6. I can eat all I want three times a day without having to pay anything for it. As you might recall, some meals include seafood (my favorite!). Oh, I get a made-to-order omelet every day.
7. My clothes are washed for me whenever I want (yes, 24 x 7!), at no cost, and usually returned the day I turn them in (Personally, I'd prefer washing my own clothes, but this option is not available to us).
8. If I get sick or need medical attention, I can get it 24 x 7 within again a five-minute walk from where I live and no more than a ten-minute wait. The downside is that we don't have any medical doctors on our FOB, only physician's assistants. There never is any cost for my medical needs.
9. I get to wear two weapons with ammunition wherever I go, so I don't have to worry about anyone "messing with me." On second thought, so does every other soldier on this FOB, so maybe this is not such a good thing!
10. I live in a relatively quiet neighborhood and don't have to worry about anyone's dog's barking awakening me in the middle of the night, since no animals (other than humans, a few birds, and unfortunately some rats) are allowed within the FOB.
11. I can use the gym 24 x 7 for free, located again just a five minute walk from where I live. I'll probably look rather "studly" when I return from my 18 months of deployment.
12. I can access the internet for free 24 x 7 again five minutes from where I live. The downside is that I usually have to wait two hours for 30 minutes usage.
13. I can literally watch approximately 400 channels on my TV that is connected to a satellite. The TV, satellite dish, connection, and TV cost \$185 with no monthly charge. The downside is that only a handful of channels are in English and those are British – American humor is way different than British humor, almost making me want to learn another language, just so that I can watch and understand something non-British!
14. I live no more than five minutes from everyone I know over here, meaning I can visit them whenever I want. Unfortunately, they can do the same to me!!!

Season's Greetings from Iraq! – December 23, 2005

Christmas Message

I have been really busy the past few weeks and haven't been able to write in quite a while, but I promise to send something longer (than this message!) by the end of the year. I hope you and yours have an excellent holiday season and a happy new year. If you say a prayer during your Christmas dinner, please include the American and coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thank you.

Greetings from Iraq! – December 27, 2005

Thanksgiving and Christmas in Iraq...

I haven't contacted you since before Thanksgiving and Christmas... The Army did what it could to make these days seem like holidays, in that the dining facility was decorated, and we were served holiday meals (with all the trimmings!), but it obviously wasn't the same as being home! Oh, another deterrent was that we had to work both days (like we have every day since getting here) which really doesn't put one in a festive mood! We did have a nice Christmas party on Christmas Eve, however.

We pretty much do the same thing every day – go on convoys, (for me!) solve computer problems, and do other things Military Police (MPs) do. We are in a very small fob (forward operating base), so small in fact, that we don't have a barber. People who go on convoys can get to bigger bases with barbers and get decent hair cuts. As you probably know, the Army is a stickler on hair cuts, especially short ones. Well, even if you can't get on a convoy, you still must adhere to the Army's strict "short hair" policy. In many cases this means having your "buddy," who probably isn't a real barber, attempt to cut your hair. Even though we must all get "crew cuts" (or "buzzes"), they can come out disastrous. We've had a few friendships end, because of the way a person's hair was cut. Some people have tried to wear their hats in buildings (which is forbidden!) to hide their bad "hair" day. It really is quite comical! We even have people volunteering to go on convoys just to get decent hair cuts!!! In some rare cases, people have had all their hair shaved off instead of walking around with a bad hair cut.

We must stay on the fob unless we want to go to the "haji" shop (no disrespect intended, this is what everyone calls it), which is right outside the fob and run by local Iranians, where we can buy just about anything including TVs, satellite dishes, cellular phones, lamps, rugs, furniture, cat 5E cable, and bootlegged (commonly called "knock offs") DVDs, often including the latest films. This is blatantly illegal in the States but apparently not here, a topic we have debated during a few meals. The quality of the films leaves a lot to be desired, but they only cost \$5 each (and \$3 in bigger bases), so no one really complains. One reason practically every soldier over here has a laptop is to play DVDs and CDs. The National Guard gave me a laptop four years ago, but I didn't realize it played DVDs until last August, when, out of boredom, I learned that it did! We share our DVDs with everyone in the unit, so we are entertained at night. Some people don't buy the bootlegged DVDs out of principle, while others don't because they believe the money might be used to buy weapons / bombs for the insurgents. I, of course, wouldn't buy one, but if you'd like some, just give me your order (just kidding!!!).

Oh, we thought cat 5E cable (for connecting computers to a network) is cat 5E cable and ordered six 1,000 foot roles of it from the local "haji" shop, only to learn that it doesn't compare with the cat 5E cable sold in the States. In fact, we had to replace most of it with the "real" stuff. In the States people often complain about Federal and state laws and standards that protect our consumers, but after my experience here where there may be no standards or if they exist, they don't compare with the ones we have in the States, I will never complain again.

We have just completed two months in Iraq and only have nine or ten months to go. This might seem like a long time, but we have already completed five months of active duty. I'll probably take two weeks of R&R (rest and relaxation) in June or July, further reducing the amount of time I will be here. See you in a few weeks!

Welcome From Iraq! – January 14, 2006

Welcome from Iraq!

It has been a couple of weeks since I last contacted you... Life is becoming more and more routine here everyday, but we still try to have fun. We have an E-8 whose teddy bear was "kidnapped" from her office and held hostage for \$20 with the threat that, unless the money was

paid immediately, the teddy bear would be thrown into a portapotty. This went on for several days with pictures of the teddy bear appearing in different parts of our fob, each demanding immediate payment and suggesting harsher treatment. Eventually the E-8 figured out who had her teddy bear (No, it wasn't me!) and retrieved it without paying the ransom. This behavior might sound rather juvenile (which it is!), but we all had a lot of fun trying to identify the culprit and the location of the next photograph. We also enjoy our meals (my favorite part of the day!) here where the entire table (consisting of eight people or so) spends most of the time joking with others, giving each other a "bad" time. It really is a stress reducer and actually quite fun. We laugh more there than anywhere I can remember.

There is something I have wanted to mention before but haven't been able to... Four days after I arrived here, a soldier of ours was killed in a raid, the first soldier ever "lost" from our fob. He was from a company out of Ohio and wasn't one of the soldiers from California, meaning that none of us had actually met him, but we felt as though we knew him, because he was one of our own. I don't know if this makes sense, since it may sound illogical to care for someone you don't know, but that is the way it is here. Yes, we read about American soldiers dying elsewhere in Iraq, but we probably don't feel any differently here toward them than you do in the States.

We held a memorial service for him which everyone (except for people on guard patrol or convoys) attended. It was the first such service I have ever participated in (and hopefully the last). Six or seven friends (and fellow soldiers) of his told us how great he was (which he really was) followed by an anecdote about him. In this way we became familiar with the soldier we had just lost. This was emotionally very draining on everyone. I can't recall being anywhere where practically every person, male and female, cried at one time. We then waited in a very long line to walk to the front of the chapel where we saluted his boots, helmet, and picture and afterward hugged 20 or so people in a type of receiving line, consisting of the key battalion and company staff. Again, this process was very emotional, and I can't recall ever seeing so many men hugging one other. We then each signed a book that was sent to his family. All told, this was a very moving memorial service.

I try to make my newsletters "up beat," but there are some aspects of war, such as death, that we can't avoid, even in our relatively peaceful fob, and something I wanted to "share" with you. Yes, we have had several IED-related injuries but no deaths before or since. Incidentally, writing this newsletter has been very therapeutic for me -- it has made me a very positive person. As you might recall, I really didn't want to be deployed and wasn't really looking forward to coming here, but I had to fulfill an oath that I had taken many years ago, agreeing to go wherever our president sent me. I wanted to write about my experiences, but at the same time, I wanted to write about things that I thought people would be interested in. I decided early on to write about only my positive experiences and tried to make them somewhat light-hearted, because no one would want to hear me complain. That goal changed my outlook here -- I became a more positive, happier person, because that was the image I wanted to portray in my newsletters, and in the process, that is how I have become to be perceived by my colleagues (and now friends) here. So, thanks to you, I am almost enjoying (if that is possible!) life here. Don't get me wrong, I miss my family, friends, and colleagues "like mad" and would give my right arm to return home ASAP!

P.S. I have recently been assigned the "job" of writing and editing our monthly fob newsletter and will try to have the same outlook in writing it, that I have in writing "ya' all" every few weeks. I am actually looking forward to the challenge! See you in a couple of weeks...

Greetings from Iraq – February 3, 2006

Greetings from Iraq!

Hi,

It has been a few weeks since I “talked” with you last... We, probably like you, are getting ready for the Super Bowl! Our party is probably a little different than yours in that we’re going to actually have four former NFL football players (i.e., Christian Okeye, Nick Lowery, Keith Byars, and Bryan Cox) and a former Dallas cheerleader, Bonnie-Jill Laflin, join us on “Super Bowl Sunday” for a couple of hours. Since I have to write an article about the event for our FOB Newsletter, I will certainly take a few pictures of the stars and might even get in one or two (perhaps with Bonnie-Jill!!!). The guys want to see Bonnie-Jill, while the women want to see the football players. So what else is new??? Unfortunately, they will not be around during the actual Super Bowl game, which starts at 4:00 AM Monday morning.

On February 11th we’re going to have our equivalent of “American Idol,” except that we can sing, dance, or tell jokes – either individually or as members of a group. We’re going to have our own Paula Abdul, Randy Jackson, and Simon Cowell imitators. They look just like the critics and have spent a lot of time “learning their lines.” The highlight of the evening will probably be their commentary on everyone’s talent. I can’t sing and certainly can’t tell jokes, but I might do the “Cha Cha Cha” (Yes, that is a very old dance, but it something I learned {and still recall} with my wife in college many, many years ago!) with a fellow soldier. If we do well, I’ll let you know our ranking!!!

Have you ever heard of www.anysoldier.com? One of our soldiers visited the website, requesting a few things. We can’t believe the number of people who responded to her inquiry. Many people from the U.S. have written us letters and sent pictures of their families. The “letter writers” vary in age from a high school sophomore to a grandmother who has been married over 30 years. They thank us for our service to our country and tell us a little about themselves. They ask that we write back if we have time but really don’t expect anything in return. Those letters have lifted the spirits of our soldiers here. In some cases some of us will meet the people we’ve been corresponding with (or, “pen pals,” as we call them). We live in the U.S. where we’ve become conditioned to avoiding strangers (because they “can’t be trusted” and “probably are up to no good”), but after reading the heart warming letters from typical Americans, I am no longer going to live that way. If you could read their letters, you would feel proud to be an American. I know that is a corny expression but when you see the generosity from regular “American folk,” you can’t help but feel the same way. I actually love my country now more than I have ever before. If you have some spare time, you might want to visit www.anysoldier.com/Wheretosend website and write a letter or two to a soldier. Believe me, you will make someone very happy and will probably be enriched in return.

We’re getting rain here like you guys did a little over a month ago... See you in a couple of weeks...

Greetings from Iraq - February 27, 2006

Following the Super Bowl...

Hi Y’all,

As usual, a lot has been happening here (well, maybe not a lot!) since I talked with you last... I’ll update you on a few things:

1. Our FOB (Forward Operating Base) now had a REAL barber whose sole purpose in being here is to cut people’s hair, eight hours a day, six days a week. He just sort of magically appeared here one day (Could any of you have had anything to do with this?). Thus, friendships have been

restored (due to someone causing someone else's "bad hair" day). I knew you would be very interested in knowing this tidbit!

2. Bonnie Jill and the four former NFL football players were unable to join us on Super Bowl Sunday, apparently due to "bad weather," although the weather seemed fine that day. Personally, I think they tried to cover too much ground in too short of a time frame and were probably exhausted. Regardless, there were many disappointed soldiers that day.

3. Our "American Idol" show has been postponed for a month due to lack of interest – we'll just have to do a better job of promoting the event. Oh, I also am having difficulty finding a dancing partner. Apparently, the "Cha Cha" is not very popular with the younger set. I can't imagine why!!! I guess I'll just have to learn the Salsa very, very quickly!!!

On Saturday forty of us were allowed to take a three-hour tour in a village of 3,400 people, approximately 15 minutes from our FOB. We didn't have to wear our helmets and body gear; yes, we had to wear our uniforms (something we must do 24 X 7) and weapons! We toured two museums, a mosque, and a park. We learned the history about the people around us. With the exception of the tour guides, none of the villagers could be seen. They obviously were told to avoid those places on that day. We took pictures and felt like tourists. I can't tell you how much this meant to us – for three hours we felt like civilians, laughing and taking photographs of our silly poses. It was really a carefree day, something we don't experience very often.

Oh, we noticed there were two Olympic-sized swimming pools in the park, one for men and one for women. Despite the many cultural briefings we've had on how to understand and treat Moslem people, I think we had forgotten that men and women can't swim in the same pool, because men are forbidden to see women in bathing suits. When a female soldier asked the 40-year-old guide whether women were allowed to wear two-piece bathing suits, he said that he didn't know, because he had never seen them swim. I guess we understood that, but it seemed so strange that he didn't know the answer to the question. Wouldn't he have asked a sister, his mother, or girlfriend this question? Apparently not!

See you soon...

Greetings from Iraq – March 9, 2006

A couple of weeks later...

One thing I haven't done since arriving here is describe the makeup of the people on our Forward Operating Base (FOB)... We live in a small FOB containing less than 1,000 soldiers (with 50 being female), less than 200 male Third Country Nationals (TCNs), less than 50 male civilian (or contractors) who supervise the TCNs, and about 15 (three female) interpreters. The TCNs are unskilled laborers from India, Pakistan, and the Sudan and average \$400 or so per month. Most of the civilian contractors are from the U.S. – they start at \$7,000 per month with approximately half earning \$9,000 to \$10,000 per month. The interpreters earn \$13,000 per month. The first \$90,000 an Americans earn each year is tax-free. Many are retired military who plan on spending several years here building up a sufficient "nest egg" to never have to work again. The contractors and TCNs probably average ten hours of work per day, seven days a week. Believe it or not, the interpreters work the least number of hours yet earn the most money! I wish that I had learned to speak Arabic years ago!!!

As you can see, there is a tremendous disparity in pay between the TCNs and their contractors. The TCNs prepare the meals in the Dining Facility, wash the clothing, clean the Dining Facility, keep the FOB clean, water the plants we just added to the FOB (i.e., over 100 palm trees

were recently planted here), fix electrical and heater and A/C problems we experience (under the careful eye of their supervisors, the contractors), and construct whatever is needed here.

At first it bothered me that the TCNs received no more than 1/17 the salaries of their supervisors, but in many cases they have no idea what they are doing when they arrive here and must be taught everything and closely supervised. They have very little education and receive very good salaries compared with what they would earn at home. In the U.S. everyone makes at least minimum wage with the TCN salaries probably being half that, since they have free “room and board.” Again, we are not in the U.S. and our standards do not apply here. As an example, we just hired a “local” interpreter for \$1,000 a month (supposedly a very good salary here) which is 1/13 of what he’d earn if he were from the States and did the same job here. Well, that is not entirely true, since there are many classified meetings (requiring an interpreter) that he can not participate in, because he really can’t be trusted (How does one perform a security clearance for a local Iraqi?).

Note: The heaters and air conditioning units, electrical outlets, lights, faucets, construction materials, and just about everything else, etc. here were purchased locally (to add to the employment here), don’t meet our strict U.S. standards, and consequently only seem to last a few days or weeks before they breakdown. When I got here, my new trailer had a leaky roof after the first rainfall (approximately 35% of the roofs leaked), the door to my room broke off after two months (another common problem for 25% of the rooms here) and had to be replaced, and my room’s compressor has been replaced, like another 20% of the rooms here. You might think the harsh weather conditions contributed to the problems, but we’ve had much better weather since we arrived here in October than you’ve had in California!!! The quality or craftsmanship here just doesn’t compare with what we have in America.

We have had people from every military discipline except the Coast Guard stationed on our FOB. One third of the military here are Marines with the rest being predominantly from the Army. We have had a very small contingent of coalition forces here with a couple of hundred more joining us soon with 1/3 of them being female. That should make life interesting on this FOB! No, they aren’t from Britain!

Greetings from Iraq - March 29, 2006

The month of March is over! We’re ½ way home!

A few days ago we just had our best time since coming to Iraq by being allowed to attend a village’s Iranian New Year celebration from 9:00 PM until midnight in a park with people singing and dancing on stage; the entire village of approximately 3,400 people sat in chairs and watched the performers. This is the first time we’ve been able to interact (“see” may be more accurate, as you will see!) with the people here. As is customary, the 800 women sat by themselves, completely separate from, and in front of, the men. The fourteen American soldiers attending sat opposite the women. We watched the women as they walked past us (perhaps five feet away) but, as is their custom, they refused to make eye contact with us. Thus, we were treated like we were invisible!

There were many singers, musicians, and dancers, although only the men are able to dance, because having women dance is apparently too “sexually suggestive.” So, the women were only allowed to sing, usually in groups, and play musical instruments. All performers live in the village and were very talented. They even had a group of men doing the Irish step dance, who also danced very well, I might add! They performed as well as (or better than!) most performers I’ve seen at Christmas presentations hosted by large churches in the States. We each had an interpreter telling us what was being spoken or sung.

There was no charge to attend the celebration, and there are no concessions to be seen. We were each given an apple, tangerine, banana, and pastry halfway through the presentation. To-

wards the end of the evening, we were given hot tea and candy. As you might have guessed, only men served us, and everything was free. Also, everyone in the audience was given the same food.

I realized when I visited the village several weeks ago that public restrooms seemed non-existent. So, I thought I came prepared for a long evening (by using a restroom right before leaving our FOB), but after drinking the tea, nature called. The interpreter next to me told me to wait a few minutes when I told him of my need... Rather than walking to a nearby restroom, two men led me to a car and a few minutes later I was “whisked” away, suddenly realizing that I could be kidnapped! Yes, I had a weapon and ammunition, but I could have been easily overpowered. I knew that other people had used the facilities in the village that evening, but I momentarily felt vulnerable. Fortunately everything turned out alright, but I need to be more careful...

I Finally Get To Go On a Convoy!!! – April 11, 2006

I finally get to go on a convoy!!!

It has been a very long time since I have been on a convoy... So long, that I had forgotten all that is involved! The Army is distributing a new uniform, called the Army Camouflage Uniform (ACU); we have been wearing the Desert Camouflage Uniform (DCU). Well, someone decided rather than send Army personnel to the FOBs (Forward Operating Base) to distribute the new uniforms, soldiers should instead go to Kuwait to get their ACUs. This seems like a huge waste of money, as well as putting each soldier’s life in jeopardy due to IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device) and Vehicle-borne IEDS (VBIEDs), the primary way Americans are being killed over here, but one can’t really argue with the Army.

Anyway I was told that we would go on a convoy to LSA (Logistical Supply Area) Anaconda and then fly to Kuwait. We left late at night, primarily because there are very few IEDs or VBIEDs at night, but you can’t enjoy the beautiful countryside during darkness! I had to wear my body armor, ammunition, helmet, rifle, and pistol, all weighing over 50 pounds! We rarely wear all this stuff “inside the wire,” and I wasn’t, quite frankly, prepared for it! Last summer I told you that at the end of my “validation” training at “Dona Ana” (or, Ft. Bliss, TX), I was in excellent physical condition and could go “back packing.” Well, I’ve let my body deteriorate a little since then (i.e., I haven’t been going to the gym as often as I should) and don’t feel like “back packing” any longer!!! Anyway the convoy was rather uneventful, meaning we weren’t attacked by any “bad” guys, which is a good thing!

We were dropped off at the airport at 11:00 PM and told to be prepared to leave on an airplane at 3:00 AM. So, we lied down on cots for a few hours in a tent with 50 or so people in it with the lights on. Needless to say, we didn’t get much sleep and had to wait four hours after reporting at 3:00 AM before we actually got onto an airplane. The Army just likes everyone to be early – no, this “policy” isn’t related to anything that happened on 9/11!!! We were in an airplane less than 200 feet off the ground for two hours @ 200 mph, flying into Kuwait. I thought we were a “sitting duck,” but I don’t think the Army is interested in my opinion, although we were able to see the beautiful (?) Iraqi and Kuwaiti countryside. We actually had to make one stop for other people and landed in Kuwait at 11:00 AM. We then ate lunch and got our new ACUs a few hours later.

It felt so nice to be in a country which isn’t at war. It was weird seeing military people from all over the world (my favorites were the Australians, due to their accent!) not carrying weapons. Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan wear their “combat patch” (because we’re in a combat zone!) with pride and receive combat pay and hazardous duty pay (collectively amounting to \$400 or so per month); benefits some don’t believe the American soldiers in Kuwait are entitled to. We enjoyed being on a “big” base with a large Post Exchange (PX), other stores, and fast food restau-

rants and pretty much “hung out” all afternoon, since we couldn’t return until the next day. It was almost like being on vacation.

The best part of the trip was using regular restrooms (instead of port potties!) and taking “Hollywood” showers (like showers you take at home) instead of “combat showers,” where, your might recall, to conserve water, we get wet, turn off the water, “lather up,” turn on the water, and quickly rinse off. Being in Kuwait with these “basic essentials” was like being in heaven!

Our return trip was very similar to our original trip except in reverse order. Yes, we “convoyed” at night again, arriving at our FOB at 8:30 PM. Oh, to pick up another passenger, we landed at the “international airport” in Basra (about the size of the Sacramento airport before it was recently expanded), once a thriving airport (we were told) but now almost a ghost town.

Oh, when we entered the Dining Facility, one of our female sergeants noticed a red headed female whose hair, instead of being in a bun, was “all over” her uniform, a definite no-no! She was about to tell the soldier to correct the deficiency, when she realized that she was dining with two female officers and decided against it. When I walked by the pretty soldier, I noticed that she was wearing a lot of make-up (again, a taboo in the Army!) and figured she must be somebody famous but couldn’t place her. Later that night I realized that she was Kathy Griffin, who was very funny during her (free) comedy routine. Montgomery Gentry, two country western singers, performed at our FOB approximately a month ago. I almost see more performers “live” in Iraq and Kuwait than I do in the States!

I’ll write you in a couple of weeks...

P.S. We had the equivalent of “Daylight Savings Time on April 1st, not April 2nd, like you guys. When I tried telling several people about it late on March 31, many of them didn’t believe me, because they, in fact, thought I was trying to play an April Fool on them!!! Consequently, some of them missed chow the next morning and were late to work.

A Couple of Weeks Have Passed – April 27, 2006

Another Two Weeks Have Passed

We recently celebrated Easter, but it was like any other holiday -- our Forward Operating Base (FOB) did what it could by having Easter eggs, chocolate Easter candy, etc., but the day really didn’t seem like Easter. The other night I watched the Christmas film, “Noel,” and for the first time realized how much I had missed Christmas, by being here instead of at home.

Have you heard of EFPs (Explosively Formed Projectile)? They have apparently replaced IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device) and Vehicle-Borne IEDs (VBIEDs) as the insurgent’s weapon of choice. Our M1114 vehicles (or Humvees, as you civilians call them!) are very good at withstanding IED and VBIED attacks. They’re so good, in fact, that I’ve seen several vehicles “close up” (but not personal!) where the windows were shattered and the doors had one inch deep gouges, but none of the passengers was seriously wounded. You might recall about a year and ½ ago when a soldier asked Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in Iraq why our vehicles weren’t better protected, Mr. Rumsfeld was embarrassed and answered the question very poorly. You might also have read a year or two ago that our bullet-proof vests (with “sappy plates”) were inadequate, deteriorated over time, and had to be recalled. I feel very safe in my body armor and helmet. Actually, my sappy plates and helmet have been replaced in the six months I’ve been here (not because I’ve worn them out!), because safer models have been developed, tested, and distributed. Thus, the U.S. government is spending a lot of money, doing all that it can to keep us as safe as possible. I’m not saying this because it is the “expected answer” -- it is what I firmly believe.

The reason I brought up “EFPs” is that one of our soldiers was killed by one a few days ago. He was a 23-year-old sergeant from the Iowa Army National Guard – he had just returned from leave, where he had learned a few days earlier from his fiancée that he was going to become a father in nine months. In an earlier newsletter, I described in detail a military memorial service. This one was very similar but was much harder on us, because the young man was “one of our own,” not a member of the unit we were replacing.

On a lighter note, last Friday I got my first full day off work, since arriving in Iraq six months ago. There isn’t a lot to do here – we don’t have a theater here, but we have an MWR (Morale, Welfare, Recreation) center with two TVs, a lot of books, a ping pong table, a pool table, telephones (which are always being used!), and computers with internet connectivity (which are also always very crowded). We don’t have a swimming pool or even a large Post Exchange (PX) to shop! On my day off, I “vegged” out most of the day, watching three DVDs (“Noel” being one of them), reading a little, and relaxing. That was the best day I’ve had since coming here. Some soldiers have actually complained they’ve had trouble transitioning to life back in the States, because they’ve forgotten how to enjoy their free time with so little of it here. I hope I don’t have that problem! One thing I enjoy each night is watching a DVD – I befriended a KBR employee whose company has several hundred of them. I’ve been borrowing eight from him each week for the past month and one-half. Watching films almost makes me forget I’m here.

I’ll write you in a couple of weeks...

Note: The insurgents are very tenacious here, seeming to remain one step ahead of us at all times, by, for example, developing more powerful weapons, such as EFPs. Incidentally, as the FOB Newsletter (called the “Grizzly Roar,” since we’re on FOB Grizzly) editor here, I received a threatening e-mail message in February, indicating the sender knew our convoy schedules and would use this, as well as other information, against us. My e-mail address appeared in the “Grizzly Roar,” asking for contributions. I immediately forwarded the e-mail to our Intelligence Officer. I am including this item just to let you know that nothing is really safe here...

Another Convoy Trip! – May 13, 2006

Another Convoy Ride

I was able to go on a convoy ride during the daytime a few days ago to witness a citizen naturalization ceremony for two of our soldiers. The rules of the road here dictate that all Iraqi vehicles pull off the road whenever a coalition convoy is present. Thus, in the fairly long convoy (19 vehicles) that we had, we saw a lot of unhappy Iraqis sitting in their vehicles as we passed by. None of them smiled or waved at us. Interestingly, we haven’t seen any female Iraqis drive a vehicle here – I’m not sure whether it is illegal or just discouraged for women to drive. We did see a lot of Iraqi children by the roadside, some waving and others giving us the “thumbs up” sign, which, in Arabic, means “Up Yours.” I hate to say it, but we aren’t very popular over here.

As the “Grizzly Roar” reporter, I attended the “Naturalization Ceremony” for 123 American soldiers (88 male, 35 female) from 52 countries, speaking 18 languages, ranging in age from 18 to 57. Normally, to become a citizen of ours, one must be a permanent resident of the U.S. for at least five years, be at least 18 year so age, speak English, be of “good moral character,” and pass an exam indicating one’s knowledge of our history and Constitution. The residency requirement is waived for soldiers in the military. This was the fifth naturalization ceremony in Iraq, since Operation Iraqi Freedom started over three years ago. Another one is planned on July 4th in Baghdad. We take our citizenship for granted, but watching these American soldiers was thrilling, very moving, and made me proud to be an American. That might sound corny, but being over makes me appreciate everything we have in our country, which I never used to think about.

Not that it matters, but the two soldiers from our unit who became citizens are outstanding people and will become great Americans.

The ceremony itself is like a high school graduation... Several people spoke before the soldiers took their citizenship oath affirming their allegiance to the U.S. They then individually “walked the stage” to receive their citizenship papers and an American flag. President Bush spoke to everyone, via a taped video display, congratulating them on becoming American citizens. The ceremony lasted a little over an hour.

The return convoy ride was in the middle of the afternoon and was very similar to the one in the morning, lasting about an hour each way. We did see a lot of children in the morning, making me wonder how many children go to school over here. We also didn't pass any gas stations or grocery stores, making me wonder how gasoline or basic necessities, for that matter, are purchased. We did see several fresh vegetable and fruit stands along the road, however. As American soldiers, we can't stop along our route unless under attack or vehicle breakdown. Several times during the trip coming back, we had to stop (for no apparent reason other than the Humvee in front of us stopped!) occasionally but sometimes for several minutes, each time making us feel very vulnerable as we stared at the people in the vehicles alongside the road. Iraqi vehicles are frequently over-crowded, often with many people in the back of a pick-up truck, something forbidden in the States. Few Iraqi people seem to wear seat belts. We did see a few donkey-led carts along our route, as we did sheep herders, flocking their sheep. Again, the convoy was uneventful (a good thing!) in that we didn't come under an IED attack in either direction.

Oh, as a side note, I had the honor of re-enlisting a soldier atop a 117-foot communication tower a couple of weeks ago. We had to climb the tower which was quite a work out! Three of us were up there for almost two hours, far too long as far as I'm concerned! There isn't a lot of room up there and the wind makes the tower sway. I have never suffered from any motion sickness before, but up there I was starting to feel queasy! I have “Bungee jumped” and even jumped out of an airplane “tandem” but never had a real fear of heights until I was up there for such a long time! The view was spectacular, though. This is the first re-enlistment from the top of a tower that I know of. Incidentally, the soldier will receive a \$15,000 tax-free bonus by re-enlisting here vs. doing the same in the States.

FYI... When a soldier dies or is killed in combat, all communication with the outside world (i.e., cell phones, telephones, and internet access) ceases (“blocked” is more accurate – call phones are confiscated) pending the notification of the next of kin.

Incidentally, I will be able to leave our FOB on June 28th for 15 days of Rest and Relaxation (R&R) with my family and friends back in the States. This will be the first time I've been home since arriving in Iraq last October. I can't begin to tell you how much I'm looking forward to spending a little time back home with the people I love!

Greetings from FOB Grizzly! – May 27, 2006

Greetings from FOB Grizzly

Hi,

There was a lot of interest in the re-enlistment atop the tower in my last newsletter... I'm attaching two photographs (*Note: The photos are on the next page*) so you can see how high we were and can get a bird's eye view of our FOB. In the first picture, you can see me smiling as I finally reach the top. You can also see a few soldiers over 100 feet below! In the second picture you'll see me giving the oath to the soldier re-enlisting. We aren't supposed to “fly” the American flag on any FOBs, because we don't want the Iraqi people believing that we want to colonize their land. Nonetheless, we were permitted to place an American flag briefly on the tower (as you will see) for the re-enlistment ceremony. If you look in the lower left corner of the second picture, you'll see some metal trailers, similar to what we live in. Each trailer contains three

separate rooms, which some soldiers share with another soldier. Fortunately for me, I have my own room. You'll see a lot of gravel on the ground – without it, the rain would turn the dirt to mud (which is no fun to walk through!), and it reduces the amount of dirt or sand in sand storms, which are common here. Supposedly, if we didn't have the gravel, the storms would get so bad that we couldn't see five feet in front of us! We have invested over half a million dollars in gravel here. Oh, we weren't wearing our shirts (for some reason the Army calls them "blouses!") on the tower due to the heat. The temperature has been over 110 degrees the past four or five days and should get hotter very soon. Fortunately, we haven't had very many "really hot" days so far this year, but the temperature will exceed 140 degrees a dozen times or so this summer. Sacramento's heat suddenly seems bearable!



Several people thought we'd be vulnerable to snipers being that far off the ground. That certainly is a possibility, but since our FOB hasn't been mortared since its inception several years ago, we weren't too concerned about it. Normally, people only climb the tower to fix a broken antenna or to take care of other problems; thus, we don't "hang out" on the tower, and people aren't allowed to climb "for the heck of it." Nonetheless, climbing the tower was probably the most reckless thing I've done on this FOB. Although our FOB is our sanctuary, we are very vulnerable once we leave the "wire," as our convoys are hit by IEDs several times a week.



A coalition army company (from one country) with less than 200 soldiers (mostly male but with some females, including one 6'5" tall) recently joined our FOB to perform what an American unit can do with one-fourth the number of soldiers. The coalition forces (from this one country) don't have to work as many days per week or as many hours per day as American forces. Each coalition soldier (again, from this one country) is given a 50% pay raise and \$80 per day (that I believe the U.S.A. pays) for each day served here. American soldiers get approximately \$400 per month in extra pay for coming here. Like American soldiers, the coalition forces (again from this one country) don't pay income taxes on income earned here. Also, whereas we can't discuss our mission with our friends or relatives, our mission was discussed freely before the coalition forces country's parliament and on their national television, apparently to convince their people of the need to be here. I performed a simple Google search and verified this; no, I don't speak their language – the webpage is in English! The coalition force's highest ranking officer here, a lieutenant colonel, told me everything I've included in this paragraph; I interviewed him for a "Grizzly Roar" article. Oh, we will soon have volleyball and basketball tournaments involving the various companies on our FOB. When we realized the coalition forces didn't have

a PT (physical training) uniform, the American army decided to purchase one for them. This way they will all be uniform.

Note: Interestingly, other countries (such as our coalition force) can fly their national flags on our FOB. We do fly the California state flag in our living area, though.

P.S. Our barber recently transferred to another FOB, meaning we're back to cutting our buddy's hair! From all my practice, perhaps I can give my friends and colleagues free hair cuts when I return to the States!!!

Daily Life in Iraq – June 10, 2006

Daily Life in Iraq

Hi,

This will be my last e-mail before I leave for “Rest & Relaxation” (R&R), or 15 days with my family. My leave doesn't actually start until I arrive at the Dallas airport, so the time spent getting there is time off work! We must leave our FOB and convoy to Anaconda (an hour trip), wait a day, and fly to Kuwait. We spend a day or two there before flying 20 some hours to Dallas, stopping in either Ireland or Germany along the way for an hour or so to re-fuel, and from Dallas to Sacramento!!! I plan on doing a lot of “fun stuff” while I'm home to make-up for lost time!!!

The weather is getting very warm here, with temperatures in the late 120s and early 130s. Just thinking about the heat makes me start to perspire! I thought that being here since last October, I would be able to “acclimate” to the heat, but this is just not possible. One advantage of being in such a warm climate, though, is that mosquitoes can't survive in it. More than one person has told me this here, and I haven't seen any mosquitoes in the past few days, so this info must be true! I am so glad I won't have to put on Deet mosquito repellent each night. Some people use nets when sleeping (which I consider “over kill!”) to avoid mosquitoes and other pests and should be able to put the nets aside for the next three months.

We've just formed a FOB volleyball league, consisting of ten teams. I played with our team a few weeks ago, pulled a muscle (serving of all things!), and had to “bow out,” but I agreed to be one of the league's referees. Some of the coalition forces are very competitive players. One argued about several calls we made. We can penalize a team for complaining or disrespecting the umpires, something we would only do as a last resort. The “complainer,” a major from a very small country once part of the Soviet Union, apologized for several minutes the next day. Since there isn't a lot to do at night, everyone seems to “root for” their team Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. We will have a tournament (which I will miss due to R&R) over July 4th to determine the league champion.

I spend most of each day working in an air conditioned building, eating in an air conditioned Dining Facility, and sleeping in an air conditioned room. When I do go outside, I ensure I am hydrated, always carrying one or two water bottles with me, like “healthy” people do in the States! Hot wind is something we seem to experience all the time, making a day seem hotter than what the temperature really is (just the opposite of the wind chill factor!). I can't complain, though, because we have internet connectivity (for \$30 a month or so) in our rooms, refrigerators and microwaves (if we bought them – I only have a refig!), TVs connected to a satellite dish (if we bought them), DVDs and CDs we can purchase inexpensively or borrow from friends, and great companionship. I know that I've mentioned before how much I enjoy being part of this unit, because morale is so high here. Everyone seems positive almost all the time. In fact, people are as happy here as you are in the States, where you have more free time, theaters, newspapers, restaurants, cars, American TV, freedom, things to do, etc. than we do, and you don't face the threat of death (but you may see “road rage!”) like we do. I can't explain this phenomenon, but it

is very real. Several people in the States have commented that I act like I am having fun here. I don't believe it is possible to have fun when you're at war (Isn't war supposed to be hell?), but we're certainly making the best of the situation here.

Life on this FOB is certainly better than at other FOBs which get mortared daily and where people have to wear between 40 – 50 pounds of body armor, a helmet, rifle, and ammunition everywhere they go (including to the showers!). We only wear our M-9 (our pistol) in the FOB; we wear everything else (including the M-4 rifle) when we leave the FOB (on convoys). Life is so much better here than it was last summer at Dona Ana (or, the desert, part of Ft. Bliss, TX), where we had to wear the 40 - 50 pounds of body armor everywhere we went and spent what-seemed-like every waking moment outside in the heat!

I'll write you when I return from my R&R...

“Soldier” Art

My 15 Days of R&R (Rest and Relaxation) Has Ended! – July 17, 2006

Rest & Recuperation (R&R, or my return to the States)

Hi,

My R&R went by way too quickly... I left the FOB on Monday, June 19th, on a one-hour convoy to Anaconda (a large base in Iraq), spent the night there but swam in a pool on a day with a temperature of 117° F. and watched two current films (one being, “The Break Up”) “for free” in a theater there (making me almost feel a civilian!), flew to Kuwait and spent a night there, while waiting for a flight to Dallas. Each night I slept in an air conditioned tent with ten to sixteen cots on which we placed our sleeping bags. We began our supposedly 16-hour flight from Kuwait to Dallas on Wednesday with a one-hour lay-over in Shannon, Ireland for refueling and to get another air crew. During the lay-over someone realized we had a mechanical problem, requiring another part from the States, not Ireland, forcing us to spend 38 hours there.

When we were told we'd spend the night in nearby hotels, I thought two of us would share a room, but Irish hotels have five or six small beds per room (which are no bigger than hotel rooms in the States), meaning five or six people were crammed into a room with one bathroom. Since we only had our Army uniforms (and no civilian clothes), we were restricted to the hotel grounds and thus unable to see much of Ireland (Darn!), including a pub! We did get through the night, though! Although I had never been to Ireland before (except for the airport) but spent the night there, can I say that I visited Ireland? I'd like to add it to the list of countries I've been to!!! Incidentally, we stayed in a hotel approximately 10 miles from our hotel, allowing us to see what driving on the left hand side of the road is like. It would take a little getting used to!!!

We did get to meet other soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan and were able to share “first hand” experiences with them, which in many cases were similar to ours, except for one. I met a soldier from the unit which had had two soldiers kidnapped, tortured, and murdered a few days earlier. He said that twelve soldiers from his company had been killed in combat during the prior eight months and all but 20 soldiers had received the Purple Heart, meaning over 100 of his soldiers had been injured in combat. In our battalion we've probably had 30 Purple Hearts awarded while here. Some units are much more fortunate than others...

On the nine-hour flight from Ireland to Dallas, the airline played five full-length films, one right after another. Have you ever watched nine hours of film with no break? I was so glad to get off the plane!!! You might recall the day I “vegged out” all day watching just three movies – this was so much worse! I had trouble distinguishing between fact and fiction afterward!

I had a great time with my family, traveling to Lake Tahoe, San Luis Obispo, Disneyland, and white water rafting down the Merced River, near Yosemite. A bunch of my family and friends go white water rafting every year. I would have missed the annual event by one day if we

hadn't been delayed in Ireland. So, I'm glad we spent an extra day there! We actually were delayed another day flying from Dallas to Sacramento, giving me a day to spend with my family after the white water rafting trip.

Coming back, we were stuck in Kuwait for three days, waiting for a flight to Iraq. Our base there is a very hot, windy, dusty place with neither the theater nor pool that Anaconda has. Ugh! I had been in the States for so long that I was in the middle of a "Hollywood" shower (like the ones we take at home!) rather than a "combat" shower (i.e., get wet, turn the water off while you lather up, and rinse off) in Kuwait when I realized I'd committed a horrible sin!!! I immediately turned off the water and soaped up! I don't believe I'll have any difficulty transitioning from active duty to civilian status once we return home.

Once we arrived in Anaconda, we spent the night there and waited to be picked up by a convoy the next day. I was in the "lead vehicle," something I had never experienced before. All Iraqi vehicles are supposed to "pull over" and let us pass (for our safety) when we are on the road, but several resisted but eventually yielded. It was a little scary at times, reminding me of how the French drive! No, I've never been to France, but I've seen a lot of French films and have heard a lot of horror stories!!!

I am back on the FOB and look forward to spending less than three months here before finally returning home "for good!" I am having a little difficulty re-acclimating to the unbearable heat over here, though... As always, I'll write you in a couple of weeks!

"Almost a Civilian" Art

Army Medical Treatment! – July 30, 2006

Army Medical Treatment

Hi,

You've probably heard horror stories about Army doctors and might have thought I would avoid using the medical facilities here, waiting instead for my deployment to end before seeking sound medical advice. Well, that is not exactly what has happened!

Until my deployment, for the past twelve years I suffered from acid reflex disease at least twice a month, meaning that food would get stuck in my throat and not dislodge for up to 40 minutes, during which time I had to "walk around." This can be very embarrassing when eating with friends or family in a restaurant. I thought this disease might cause a problem if I were to have "an attack" while engaging the enemy with my M-4 rifle. I didn't expect this condition to bar me from deployment but needed to discuss it with someone. An Army doctor prescribed a stronger dosage than the over the counter drugs my regular doctor had recommended. I haven't experienced the acid reflex problem anytime in the past 12 months during my deployment! I have almost forgotten about those horrible acid reflex episodes that I used to have.

I had a mole on my forehead that I wanted removed which I discussed twice with my doctor over a two-year period. Each time he told me that he would try "burning" it off, but that I might need to see a dermatologist or plastic surgeon. The mole remained on my forehead after the two burning attempts. I was having lunch with our Physician Assistant (or PA, but not a medical doctor), the senior medical official on the FOB, when he casually mentioned that he would be able to remove the mole, but he would need seven or eight sessions to "burn it off" completely. He was right – the mole is no longer on my forehead! He also removed six or seven other moles on my head that were mostly in my hair line during my "visits," each one taking no more than five to ten minutes. Why couldn't my regular doctor have done the same thing? Incidentally, I only saw the PA once – during my remaining visits, usually the lowest ranking person (with the least medical training) "burned off" my moles. Thus, practically anyone in my doctor's office could have performed the treatment without burdening him.

I have another story involving Army facilities and civilian, but not Army, medical personnel... In 1999 I had a nagging back pain that bothered me for a number of weeks before I finally decided to see a chiropractor to hopefully fix the problem. I faithfully visited him for ten weeks or so, sometimes twice a week, letting him “do his thing” and following his advice. He finally told me that there was apparently no cure for my back problem, and that I would need to learn to live with the pain. I figured he knew what he was talking about and decided to do as he suggested (get used to it!). In 2000 I enrolled in a two-week, Army IT security course on “Ethical Hacking” at CP Murray, WA (next to Ft. Lewis). I was assigned to a very small room with an old Army cot that looked like it had been manufactured during WWII. I really wasn’t looking forward to sleeping there, but it was only for two weeks. Well, after three days of sleeping on that ugly cot, my back pain suddenly disappeared. I am not lying or exaggerating!!! When I told my classmates of my good fortune, they looked at me like I was “nuts!” I kept expecting the pain to return, but it hasn’t, even after six years! I wanted to buy the cot from CP Murray, but neither the Army nor my wife Donna was very interested in this arrangement! I thought about telling my chiropractor of my success, but he probably wouldn’t have believed me and might have felt insulted. This really did happen, just as I described (except for trying to purchase the Army cot)!

Bottom Line: Join the Army and come to Iraq! Just kidding! Get a second opinion when someone tells you something you find unacceptable or is unable to provide the results you’d like. Incidentally, I will get a new doctor when I return from active duty! I also go to CP Murray every time I can!!! I am also a healthier, “better looking” (well, that might remain to be seen!) person since my deployment!

See you in a couple of weeks.

“Healthy” Art White

Sports on the FOB! – August 12, 2006

Sports on the FOB

Hi Y'all,

Since we don't have access to American TV to watch the NFL, major league baseball, or even the Sacramento Monarchs, we have filled that void by developing our own athletic program here... The battalion (BN) that we replaced last November had boxing matches every Saturday night during the summer. As you might have guessed, the Marines and Army units (including the company of NATO forces from a European country {i.e., Bulgaria} I mentioned a few weeks ago) here wanted boxing reenacted as well. Our BN commander balked at first, probably due to the possibility of serious injuries, but finally relented. We purchased a new boxing ring and three weeks ago on Saturday evening, for the first time this year, held ten boxing matches at FOB Grizzly! Each match consisted of three, two-minute rounds. That might sound like a short fight, but boxers get fatigued very fast – I recall how quickly I tired while “boxing” in ninth grade, just a few years ago, when I thought I was in pretty good shape! Anyway, this was the most popular activity we’ve had with probably 1/3 of the service members here watching people “go at it.”

Twenty brave, daring souls signed up to box a few days beforehand and were matched with people in their same weight class. For the most part, Marines fought U.S. Army soldiers. The Marines include boxing (actually, “hand to hand” combat) in their basic training, while the Army doesn’t. People who never participated in a particular sport before wouldn’t think of competing against an expert in that sport, but that is *not* what happened on “fight night!” Yes, we had soldiers who had never boxed taking on the mighty Marines. As you might have guessed, the Marines won all the matches, with some being “land slides,” and others (a few) being close...

There have been a few changes since the first night of boxing -- women are now boxing, just like the men! Also, the boxers have been building up their endurance by jogging at night and

during the early morning (but not the middle of the day when the temperature everyday is much hotter than Sacramento's high for the summer) to withstand the three rounds of boxing. They also "pace" themselves now, instead of burning themselves out in the first round. An Army soldier finally won a boxing match, but only because he fought another soldier – no soldier has yet defeated a Marine or Bulgarian boxer.

We also have had soccer, basketball, volleyball, ping pong, Halo II (a computer game), and chess tournaments in the evenings the past few weeks. The Bulgarians don't enter anything they don't expect to win and have thus taken first place in everything but basketball and Halo II, two sports they didn't compete in. They even took first, second, and third place in both ping pong and chess! I thought about "signing up" for chess (something I figured I could keep up with the younger set!) but changed my mind after only winning half my matches against people who didn't think they were good enough to compete in the tournament!

We've actually had two chess tournaments with a Bulgarian private and Lieutenant Colonel (also, the Bulgarian commander) taking first and second place, respectively, the first week and their roles reversed the second week. Apparently in the Bulgarian Army, a private shouldn't defeat the Bulgarian commander. I've seen similar things in the Army, but that was almost 30 years and doesn't seem to apply in today's U.S. Army.

The Marines won the basketball tournament, while the Army consistently wins the Halo II tournaments. We, the proud, the brave, Army soldiers see ourselves as rather "wimpy," winning the only nerd (excluding chess) event on the FOB. There are a lot more Army soldiers than Marines or Bulgarians on the FOB, contributing to our ever-growing inferiority complex. Fortunately, the Combat Stress Team will visit us next week and assist us in coping with this sudden loss in self-confidence!!!

"A not so mighty American soldier" Art

P.S. Several weeks ago, while watching an American soldier apparently win a boxing match against a Marine, I exclaimed, "An American finally won," momentarily forgetting that Marines are *also* Americans! The referee disagreed with "my call," awarding the victory to the Marine. It probably didn't hurt matters any that the referee was also a Marine!!! Actually the Bulgarians are pretty good boxers themselves and have given the Marines "a run for their money" and, like the Marines, have devastated the American Army boxers!

The Bulgarians start chanting, "Bulgaria, Bulgaria," whenever they win anything.

Trip to Qatar – August 28, 2006

Trip to Qatar

Hi,

Qatar is a small, very rich, oil-producing country on the Persian Gulf, north of the United Emirates. The country has approximately 165,000 Arab citizens and 700,000 "workers" from third world countries. Soldiers in theater are permitted to spend four days there "on pass," provided their unit can do without them. The four days "on pass" are not counted against one's vacation time. While in Qatar, American soldiers can wear civilian clothes and visit the Persian Gulf, the malls, and restaurants there. Some units permit most of their soldiers to go there, while for others, only a select few may leave.

When given a chance to go to Qatar, I "jumped" at it! One advantage of going to Qatar is that we will be away from our FOB for approximately 11 days (missing work!!!), since we must "convoy" to Anaconda and fly from there to Qatar. Since we only run a few convoys there a week, we must get to Anaconda one or two days early so that we don't miss our flight to Qatar. The same process is repeated when returning to Anaconda.

The convoy to Anaconda was quiet without any IED incidents. Once there we're permitted to enjoy ourselves, swimming in the pool, going to the movie theater, reading, surfing the web, playing games in the MWR (Morale, Welfare, Recreation) building, like foosball, air hockey, pool, ping pong, etc. Thus, being in Anaconda a few days is like being on a mini vacation.

After flying into Qatar, approximately four to eight people are assigned to a room (with bunk beds), none of whom know each other, but since we're all soldiers, we've learned to introduce ourselves almost immediately and "get along" Oh, we're stationed on a military base there that is very well guarded... There were seven of us from our FOB with five of us being from the same battalion headquarters. None of us was assigned to the same room, but we did participate in some of the same activities. We spent one day on the Persian Gulf jet skiing and riding atop a giant inflated "hot dog" behind a motor boat. It is difficult holding onto the hot dog but very fun. I really enjoyed jet skiing, my first time ever for this event. We also spent another day on the Persian Gulf "four wheeling" in the sand dunes and swimming and resting on our own private beach. The Persian Gulf is very salty and the water is very hot, approximately 95° or so. Several people were bitten by jelly fish while swimming. While on the base, we all were able to participate in the same activities that we had in Anaconda, including miniature golf.

We also went to the mall in Doha... Doha is a very modern city with sky scrapers as large as the ones in San Francisco. I've spent a lot of time in Canada (including Quebec) but never really felt like I left the U.S. until I visited the Doha mall. There, 75 - 80% of the people wore their Moslem dress with men in white "gowns" and women in their black covering. Most women covered everything but their eyes and some even covered those! Women stick with women and men with men unless people are married. Even teenagers are segregated by sex. People treated us like everyone else, but we did "stick out." We weren't permitted to wear shorts or shirts with anything on them mentioning the U.S. or the Army. The mall had more people than any mall I've ever visited, including at Christmas time. It took us over 30 minutes to find a parking place. Of the probably four thousand people I saw at the mall that Friday evening, only two people wore shorts, on a day of 135° and 80% percent humidity. **Note:** Whenever we left the military base in Qatar, we had to wear civilian clothes.

On our two-day respite in Anaconda while returning to FOB Grizzly, I was in (I-hate-to-say!) the library reading a book when we were hit with mortar fire, a first for me, since this hasn't happened in FOB Grizzly. Not knowing what to do, I followed the lead of the people there -- we immediately "hit the ground" (i.e., lied on the floor!) and waited. We didn't receive the "all clear" signal, but when a person entered the library, we, all at once, decided to get up rather than appear foolish! I kept wondering whether we were any safer on the floor than in our chairs. If we had been outside, we would have hid in a bunker. Everyone acted like it wasn't a big deal, since Anaconda is a very large base that gets hit all the time. **Note:** I wish I had been in the pool or involved in an activity more exciting than reading when hit with mortar fire!!!

We'll be picked up later today and return to work tomorrow -- I've enjoyed my 11 days off! We'll be leaving Iraq in a little over a month.

See you soon

Death of a Soldier – September 8, 2006

Death of a Soldier

Hi,

This will be hard for me to write... Another one of our soldiers was killed by an EFP (Explosively Formed Projectile) IED (Improvised Explosive Device) a few weeks ago. I've mentioned EFPs before – they're the latest weapon used by the insurgents here. An EFP, when it hits something such as a vehicle, burns through everything it encounters -- metal, steel, re-enforced glass, flesh, and blood. If an EFP is setup properly and its target is stationary (as our vehicle, unfortu-

nately, was), there is little protection against it. Outside Baghdad, an EFP burned through the driver's window of the Humvee, hitting his face and killing him instantly, before exiting through the passenger's window. Fortunately, no one was sitting in the passenger's seat; otherwise, that person would have been killed as well.

The soldier was just 21 years of age, an only child and only grandchild, who married his high school sweetheart 10 months earlier, just prior to his deployment. He joined the Army to become an MP (Military Policeman) to receive training that he hoped would help him become an FBI agent one day. He only had a little over two months left here, before he would have returned "safe and sound" to his "military home" at Ft. Hood, Texas. He was born and raised in California. He was a very special person (but then, isn't every 20-something soldier?), someone anyone of us would have been proud to call our son, friend, brother, relative, or colleague.

I was part of the "detail" selected to inventory his clothing and possessions before they could be returned to his family. This includes reading his personal letters and destroying any that might offend family members. We also had to search his computer for potentially offensive pictures. This is not something we arbitrarily decided to do but instead an Army requirement. Yes, we do have a certain amount of latitude. We deleted a picture of him pointing an M-9 (a handgun) at his forehead. I'm sure it was meant "in fun" but might have upset his family. We also discarded "used" items – such as, tooth paste, shaving cream, his razor, etc., none of which could have been shared with anyone, since no one can "benefit from his death." We washed his clothes, packed his possessions, and sent everything to an Army mortuary unit that will re-inventory everything and forward his belongings to his family. I wonder whether his family wants his clothing, including military uniforms, boots, underwear, etc. His family is supposed to verify that everything we sent was delivered; a task, I doubt, will be completed for at least six months.

I've recounted the memorial services we've held for two fallen comrades and will not re-live this one other than for one detail. At the service's conclusion, we each walk to the front of the chapel and salute his picture, boots, ID tags, and helmet; some of us remove the patches we have received and place them alongside his. It is emotionally draining to get through and for me even to describe. We have dedicated certain parts of the FOB to our dead soldiers, including the MWR center, the gym, and now the PX.

Like apparently so many other soldiers, this particular one has a website (through <http://legacy.com>) where friends, family, and strangers can express their sorrow, condolences for his family, recall memories of the dead soldier, etc. From the website, I learned that when his casket was driven to his grave, hundreds of people from his hometown along the way applauded, cried, waved American flags, and touched the vehicle, as it passed by. I hadn't realized the impact his death had on his community or that such a website existed. Over a 100 people have written messages, so that the dead soldier will never be forgotten. It was particularly painful reading the contributions from so many of his admirers. Men and women recounted their childhood memories of him... He was portrayed as an all-American kid who gave his life for this country... Even his mom and wife posted their heart-wrenching messages on this website – neither appeared bitter or angry that we are in Iraq or that he had died.

Over 2,600 U.S. service members have died and practically 20,000 wounded, since we invaded Iraq nearly three and 1/2 years ago... I have only experienced the deaths of three soldiers and can't imagine losing any more... I'm sorry to deliver such a depressing message, but I sometimes think that we, as a nation, forget the ultimate sacrifice that some of us make over here. Also, all year I've tried to describe my experiences here, most of which have been upbeat, but occasionally they are disturbing and can't be ignored.

Changes on the FOB

Hi,

You all have expressed an interest in haircuts on the FOB... Well, the Army Air Force Exchange Service (AFEES) finally “broke down” and sent us two barbers from India, six weeks before we leave Iraq. Since the barber shop was crowded on “opening day,” I went there the second day and requested the “regular” cut. After my standard, army crew cut (which the Army pretty much requires!), the barber offered to give me a massage, which I gladly accepted, because no one was waiting. The massage covered my head, neck, arms, hands, upper and lower back, and stomach and chest, lasting 15 minutes, longer than my haircut! The “barber / masseuse” also popped my knuckles and neck. I am very ticklish and could barely contain myself during part of the massage, which the barber apparently enjoyed! He did a better job than my chiropractor and was much, much cheaper. The hair cut and massage cost three dollars – even with a two dollar tip, that five dollars went a “long way”!!! I usually get a hair cut once a month but might start getting one here once a week! I will be very spoiled when I return to the States and probably won’t appreciate American barbers for a while! I’ll also make a point of getting a haircut from an Indian barber if I am ever in New Delhi!!!

Oh, there are two types of Army hair cuts, a “regular” haircut (or, just a haircut), and a “get by” haircut, where one’s hair length is the maximum length allowed by the Army, thus the reason for the “get by” expression. I would get a “get by” haircut one or two days before each weekend “drill” with the National Guard but, as you might have expected, have gotten “regular” hair cuts since being deployed a little over a year ago. I might keep the crew cut look, because a lot of friends and family prefer it.

Oh, I’ve been assigned a couple of new jobs since the last time we “talked”... I am (and have been) the Equal Opportunity Representative (EOR) for the Battalion (BN) and recently became the BN historian. As the “old white guy,” I didn’t expect to be the BN EOR, but no one (including me!) expressed a desire in holding this position. I was supposed to take an EOR class in Baghdad, which would have allowed me to see another part of Iraq, but there haven’t been any class vacancies. So, unlike many of my colleagues, I guess I won’t be able to see any of Saddam Hussein’s castles there. Thus, I’ve had to learn EOR the hard way, via “OJT!” Incidentally, there have been a couple of EOR complaints filed this year, which I’ve handled.

As the BN historian, I would rather put together a “yearbook” than be responsible for a “stuffy,” historical document. Besides, I can get other people to work with me on the yearbook project, but not an “historian” one. It is amazing how more motivated people can be due to a name change! We might have fun working on the yearbook, normally something done while in high school, but certainly not in combat!!! **Note:** No, I didn’t volunteer for this position either, but the Army is very good about finding positions for people, even if they are already over-taxed!!!

I just had lunch in the close-by village whose museums, pools, parks, and New Year’s celebration I described a long time ago... Apparently we are now permitted to have lunch there (in small groups), assuming we can find a ride! As before when we visited their museums and pools, just two locals and four American soldiers (us!) were there. The Persian food was delicious, so different than “Dining Facility” meals (which are outstanding but now, after practically a year here, very predictable!). The “restaurant” is the same place I earlier called the “Haji” shop, which, for political correctness, is now called the Local National Vendor shop (LNVS)! If I were to stay here another year (No, that won’t happen!), I’d probably eat there once a week, just to get off the FOB. Oh, everyone is served the same meal, which changes every day, for just \$7.50, a real bargain! **Note:** We still go to the LNVS, as we did before, to buy “knockoff” DVDs, cigarettes (No, I don’t smoke!), small appliances, etc., to get electrical items fixed (such as DVD

players), and to have rugs cleaned. Also, the LNVS, which used to be just outside our FOB (a ten-minute walk), was recently re-located nearer the village, so that “local” people could use it, but all I’ve ever seen there have been American soldiers.

Soon-to-be “Ex-Soldier” Art

We Left Iraq! – October 6, 2006

We've left Iraq!

Hi,

Approximately two weeks ago our replacement unit, an Army Reserve MP Battalion, came to our FOB to learn our responsibilities and assume command. The process is called a RIP, or "Relief in Place," where we show our successor what we do for five days, and then they take over for five days. The Army calls it “left seat, right seat,” where each of us rules the “roost.” At the conclusion of the ten days, we have a “Transfer of Authority” (TOA), a rather formal military ceremony, where the FOB command is transferred to our successor. After the TOA, we are no longer needed and get the heck “out of Dodge” ASAP.

As you might have guessed, we left FOB Grizzly and spent a few days in LSA Anaconda, Iraq, waiting for a flight to Kuwait. The helicopter to Anaconda was very late. So late in fact that we had to sleep along the rocky landing strip from 2:00 AM through 7:00 AM, waiting to be picked up. My body armor prevented me from feeling the rocks, though! At 7:00 AM we finally gave up and went to our rooms for two hours of sleep before returning to the landing zone to be picked up at 10:00 AM. Due to the sharp increase in IEDs, we now occasionally fly to places (like Anaconda) where we used to exclusively convoy. We spent four days waiting in Anaconda, going to the theater (seeing movies like “The Guardian,” “Monster House,” “Clerks II,” and My Ex-Super Girlfriend, some of which were good and others horrible), swimming, reading, and just enjoying our time off.

We flew into Kuwait at something like 3:00 AM and left about 15 hours later to return to the States. I didn’t mention that we’re supposed to be safe in Kuwait, but every time we’re there, while taking the 90-minute bus ride to the airport in Kuwait, the shades in the bus must be drawn at all times, and we have an armed guard escort. Yes, we do have our weapons but not any ammunition, so we can hardly defend ourselves, if necessary. As American soldiers, we are not used to feeling vulnerable and would prefer providing our own protection.

We had planned on stopping in Germany and Maine to re-fuel before continuing to McChord Air Force Base, WA (next to Ft. Lewis). When we landed in Köln, Germany, a mechanic realized our DC-10 (a commercial airliner) had a hydraulic problem, requiring up to 20 hours to repair (the part will be flown in from Helsinki, Finland). Doesn’t this sound like a repeat of my R&R trip home where we had to spend the night in Ireland due to mechanical difficulties? We were transported to a hotel in Bonn, Germany where we will be fed, take a shower, and get some sleep. We are about half an hour from the airport in a four or five star hotel with two people per room, unlike in Ireland where five to six people shared a room. Our lunch was delicious; we’ll eat dinner in a couple of hours. Thus, I’ve visited five countries while deployed -- Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar, Ireland, and Germany. I’m becoming quite the little traveler without a passport, huh?! Incidentally, Germany is a beautiful country!

The good news is that we’re out of the Middle East and heading home, albeit not quite as fast as we would like. I can’t begin to describe the joy we feel for finally completing our year-long deployment to Iraq. We will spend a few days at Ft. Lewis, learning how to adjust to living as civilians. Apparently returning to society from a war zone is quite stressful.

My tour is almost over...

We're in the States!

Hi,

On October 8th, 2006, we flew into Ft. Lewis where we were briefed on “easing into civilian life,” turned-in our military equipment (for me, a duffel bag and a half of stuff), and were given whatever medical exams we felt were needed. I had a hearing exam and an eye exam, both very thorough and more extensive than I expected. Many people had tests for their knees, backs, hearts, feet, jaws, and / or heads (i.e., psychological). Twenty-five percent of our unit stayed behind at Ft. Lewis for additional medical screening rather than fly home with us last Friday (October 13th) evening.

While at Ft. Lewis, we stayed in “open bay” barracks, in fact, the same ones we used before being deployed! We were fed “hot meals” for breakfast and dinner but were given MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) for lunch. I only had a few MREs while in Iraq, and only when we were on a convoy and couldn't get back to a FOB during normal Dining Facility hours. While at Ft. Lewis, we were able to wear civilian clothes after regular working hours and permitted to drink alcohol, although in moderation.

When I turned in my equipment, I was missing a \$500 Marine body armor vest. I tried to tell the civilian that it might have appeared on my “hand receipt,” but that I certainly didn't have one. Military abbreviations are so cryptic that few people understand them – I obviously didn't! I was a little worried until another civilian suggested using the Marine vest one of our female sergeants had turned-in but hadn't signed for. Thus, her equipment was transferred to me, letting me “off the hook.” This is really how the military supply system works – if someone is missing something, the supply people try to find a surplus item somewhere and give it to the person without it. If supply people go “by the book” or don't like someone, the person missing the equipment often has to purchase it.

Speaking of military terminology, the Army sometimes uses words that don't make a lot of sense. For example, when I transferred to the 49th Military Police Battalion, the Army “cross-leveled” (i.e., not transferred!) me into my new unit. Also, when we demobilized (were released from active duty), the Army said that we were “re-deployed.” Most people would think that re-deployment means being sent *back* to Iraq, but not the Army!!! When I first heard I was being re-deployed, I almost had a heart attack!

Have you heard of a camelbak? I've wanted to describe this marvelous invention for the past ten months but always forgot to include it. Basically, a camelbak is a three-liter “water jug” in a backpack, with a long plastic tube that can be inserted into one's mouth. Thus, backpackers, hikers, bicyclists, and now soldiers can drink water from a camelbak, while leaving their hands free for more important things! We are still issued canteens but rarely use them. Imagine being on one's stomach on the ground in a “fire fight,” somewhere in Iraq and having to stop to drink from a canteen. A soldier would become an easy target. Using a camelback, we can now drink water (or Gatorade) while engaged with the enemy. We must coordinate with our “battle buddy,” so that while one of us is changing our ammunition, the other continues to fire. We actually practiced this at Dona Ana, NM last summer. I can't imagine trying to coordinate re-loading a weapon (with one's battle buddy) and drinking from a canteen at the same time.

The past few summers while hiking with my son and nephew in the Santa Cruz Mountains, I would laugh at my nephew when he used his camelback. I am now a convert and will use one whenever hiking or bicycling. Sorry, Tyler!

Last Friday, while dressed in our military uniforms, forty of us were dropped off at the Seattle – Tacoma airport approximately four hours before our flight to Sacramento. We were permitted to use an airport's “Admiral's Club” while on R&R. The “Admiral's Club” is in a separate room in an airport which first-class travelers use to unwind, access the internet “for free” wire-

lessly, eat and drink “for free,” and have a great view of the airport. Well, last Sunday a soldier and I were admitted into the Admiral’s Club where the four hours went by very quickly! We were almost disappointed when we learned that our flight was on schedule!

I can’t describe how thrilled I was when 13 friends and family members met me at the airport, as I exited the airplane. The Adjutant General for the National Guard also greeted us as we de-planed. There were many people cheering and applauding as we came into Sacramento, making us feel like celebrities.

For the next three weeks I will be on leave (from the military). On the day that I had intended on returning to work, I will have to report for jury duty. I served my country and now must serve my community!

"Finally Civilian" Art

My Final Newsletter! – October 26, 2006

My Final Newsletter...

Hi,

I completed my tour in Iraq and have demobilized... I’d like to summarize the positive and negative aspects of my deployment. First off, I am amazed at how generous and caring the American public is: I received food, books, DVDs, games, “clean wipes,” etc., from family, colleagues, and friends. Thank you, all of you, for your support and prayers. Also, I mentioned the website, www.anysoldier.com, where soldiers can “post” their Iraqi or Afghanistan “snail mail” address and receive practically anything they want from strangers. One of our soldiers received 29 packages in one day and gave the items he couldn’t use to others. We’ve rewarded two women with plaques for their support of our battalion and have included them in our “Grizzly Roar.” In neither case did they want the publicity. Another website, legacy.com, allows families with dead members to create a webpage for them (that expires in the year 9999!). The sympathetic messages, posted for families of soldiers killed over here, have helped many with the grieving process. Again, in many cases Americans do not know the families they are supporting.

I want to include two items about the negative aspects of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), one briefly mentioned several months ago. We, as a country, boast of the support we receive from others for OIF but don’t mention that in many instances we pay the salaries of their soldiers, often four or five times more than their regular pay. Also, some countries dictate the number of soldiers needed and the job(s) they will perform. For example, the Bulgarians use four times as many soldiers as the Americans did (for the same job), refuse to go on convoys, and will only defend themselves if we are over-run. Thus, Bulgarians fly into our FOB, while most American soldiers arrive here via a convoy. The Bulgarian mission is a non-combatant one. American soldiers feel their lives are less important than the Bulgarians’. If I paid you \$100 to send your child to my son’s party, you would be motivated by greed, not an interest in my son’s welfare. Some countries involved in OIF act the same way – they appear more concerned with improving their soldiers’ lives than with forming a stable government in Iraq. This might be somewhat understandable, however. For example, one Bulgarian major who hasn’t heated his apartment for the past four or five years is saving money from his six-month tour for this purpose.

When people ask whether conditions are improving in Iraq, I tell them, “We are, at best, treading water, and that is probably being generous.” For example, there are two water pumps that needed to be replaced along the Tigris River that provide water to over 10,000 Iraqi and Iranian people’s (in Iraq) homes and farms. We paid over \$50,000 for the water pumps but practically every time we tried to install them, we were hit with IEDs along the 20-mile route to the pumps. The Iraqis know that we are providing the water pumps for their benefit but continue to attack us with IEDs anyway. Insurgents, in some cases, pay Iraqis to use their property to set up

IEDs. This is in rural Iraq, a long way from a major Iraqi city. Incidentally, we finally completed the installation of the water pumps, only a few days before leaving Iraq. **Note:** A few days after I returned to the states, our replacement unit lost a soldier due to an IED that hit a vehicle on its way to test the recently-installed water pumps.

Although our FOB hasn't been mortared, approximately 25% of our soldiers, both male and female, have received the combat action badge (CAB) for "combat action," usually on a convoy when their vehicle was hit, or nearly hit, by an IED. Between 20 and 25 of these soldiers were wounded and received the Purple Heart. During the four days we waited at Anaconda to be flown to Kuwait, we were mortared several times and were forced into a bunker three times, usually for 20 – 30 minutes. This is such a common occurrence there.

The soldiers' attitude over here has been outstanding... This may be the first war we've fought since 1812 without the draft, perhaps the reason people rarely complain over here. We volunteered to serve our country, knowing full-well that we might be deployed to a combat zone. Our Command Sergeant Major said that one reason he has stayed in the Army as long as he has is that, "American soldiers are the best breed of people I have met." I have to agree with him – the soldiers have served selflessly here. We all hope that one day our contributions will lead to a stable, Iraqi government.

I am finally no different than you, a civilian! Thanks again for supporting me during the past year. "Over and Out!"

Now Just Plain Ole' Art