

## **IRAQ: SO NEAR AND SO FAR AWAY**

This isn't the column I wanted to write.

I am supposed to be in Iraq, embedded with Georgia's 48th Brigade Combat Team, but I am sitting in an Air Force Base in Ramstein, Germany, watching one of the biggest fiascoes imaginable. I'm not sure how many days I have been here; and that isn't important.

What is important is that there is a group of elite Marines who have been waiting a week to get to Iraq and are having no better luck getting there than I am. They are supposed to join a group of their colleagues who are on the battlefield and are awaiting some heavy weapons that will allow them to get on the offensive. Good luck with that. As I write this, it may be several more days before they get there. These brave young men deserve better.

After more delays, military doublespeak and sleepless nights that you don't want to hear about, we did make it two hours out of Germany on our six-hour trip to Iraq when we had to turn back because there was concern that a window was about to come unglued and suck us all to kingdom come. That was several eons ago and nobody seems to know what to do because nobody seems to be in charge. Ramstein Air Force Base is Dysfunction Junction.

I don't care about myself. After getting you excited about my seeing firsthand how our fellow Georgians are coping in Iraq, and receiving more prayers and good wishes than I deserve, I can handle the frustration if I don't get to Iraq, but I am mad as hell at how our troops are being treated. I watched them on the airplane last night when we all thought we were finally headed to Iraq and choked back tears because I know that some of the kids – and they are kids – won't be coming home.

They are an elite fighting force and, fortunately, nothing bothers them. If they have to cool their heels because the richest and most powerful nation on earth can't get them to Iraq, so be it. When they do get there, they are going to kick some serious butt. Trust me on that.

While I wait my third or fourth day (I am so sleep deprived I don't really know) trying to get to Iraq, let me share an interesting statistic with you. One of my traveling companions is a demolitions expert. He says we are blowing up Iraqi weapons that we have uncovered at the rate of 100 tons per day at six different sites. This demolition has been going on for 15 months and should be finished in another nine months. Some of the weapons are as old as pre-World War II and some are as new as the year 2000. I had not heard that statistic and I doubt you had either. Do the math – 100 tons of weapons per day times seven days times six sites times 15 months. Incredible.

As you read this, I don't know when I am going to get into Iraq. Some say it could even be next week. This I do know. Once I get there, I'm not leaving until I have had a chance to talk to the men and women of the 48th and report back to you.

If there has been anything positive out of this "hurry up and wait" exercise I have been put through this week, it is that I have met some great Americans. A group of Navy Seabees from California has organized a Relay for Life in Iraq that will raise funds for the American Cancer Society. Why would they do such a thing while they are in the battlefield? "First, it is for a good cause," one told me, "and it keeps our minds off the war."

The young Marines trying to get to their buddies on the battlefield, the brave demolition expert, the good and gracious Seabees – all would make you pop your buttons with pride. I have no doubt you will feel the same way about Georgia's 48th.

I just hope I get there someday to tell you about them.