

October 8, 2005

Dear Folks:

It has been the Week from Hell, but (famous last words) it may be over shortly. It is now midafternoon Saturday at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany. After our aborted flight to Baghdad, there have been no planes to take troops or people like me to anywhere. That is about to change.

Our plight has finally received the attention of State Adjutant General David Poythress and a bunch of brass in Washington and voilà, we are about to take off for Incirlik, Turkey, and then be ferried into Baghdad about 4 AM Baghdad time on Sunday. Isn't it funny how those things work?

I have written about the screwups, but in my opinion one column on that subject is enough. Two sounds like whining, and what I am going through is nothing compared to what our troops are experiencing. The Marines I mentioned in my column yesterday still have not been shipped off to Fallujah with the heavy weaponry for their colleagues already on the ground there. This is a group of antiterrorist fighters and they can't get to the battlefield to fight. I love these guys. One of the grunts told me yesterday that their biggest obstacle is the U.S. government. "If they would get out of the way and leave us alone," he said, "we would have won the war a year ago." Based on what I have seen of our government and our Marines, I believe him.

If I have learned anything from five days of no sleep, little food and no change of clothes (my clothes are on the C-17 with the broken window that still has not been repaired since our harrowing turnaround two hours into the flight to Baghdad), it is that our troops have more patience than Job. The kind of jerking around I have received over the past five days is routine with them. They just go with the flow. Nothing upsets them.

The other thing I have learned is that the sergeants run the military. If you want the skinny, ask a sergeant — any sergeant — and you can make book that they will know what is going to happen about four hours before the officers do. It hasn't failed yet. I wish I had known that Wednesday. I'd be in Baghdad by now.

The long flight means that I will probably miss my deadline today because I will be in the air for the next 12 hours. That is the bad news. The good news is that I will finally be able to sit down and talk with the Georgians of the 48th. Look for a daily column from my filing on Sunday afternoon until I leave (probably next Saturday).

Two final points: One, it is Ramadan and that is a very dangerous time; two, the 48th is going to receive a new — and less dangerous — assignment soon after I leave. Also, while I am with the 48th, it will be the week immediately preceding the constitutional vote in Iraq. This will be a very interesting time to be reporting to readers back home on the 48th.

I will be back in communication tomorrow afternoon, which at this moment sounds like the second biggest lie since "The check is in the mail."

Dick Yarbrough