

October 9, 2005

With Georgia's 48th Brigade Combat Team at Camp Striker on the Outskirts of Baghdad.

Just when I had decided that the United States military couldn't organize a two-tank parade and that I would spend the rest of my unnatural life in that Garden Spot of the World — the passenger lounge at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany — voilà, I am in Iraq. It took five days to get here and probably would never have happened without the divine intervention of the head of Georgia's National Guard, Adjutant General David Poythress and the 48th's commander in Iraq, General Stewart Rodeheaver. Consider them my heroes.

Until these two intervened, those of us trying to get to Iraq began to get the queasy feeling that the World's Greatest Superpower (a) didn't have an airplane that worked, or (b) if it did, would let it fly into Ramstein. Finally, on the last night we could get into Iraq, a C-17 miraculously showed up with a bunch of Marines and motor vehicles and the crew crammed us in like sardines and took off immediately for Incirlik, Turkey. From there on to Al Sada, a dangerous spot on the Euphrates River near the Syrian border. There have been a number of American fatalities in that area.

When we landed at Al Sada it was suggested that we move quickly to a little hut off the runway before some crazy decided to take a potshot at us for no good reason, other than he thinks that it makes him a big shot. It wasn't hard to convince me of the logic of that suggestion. As I ran in the door I immediately bumped into two Marines working there. One was Jeremy Carr, from my childhood home, College Park, and his colleague Matt Hersey from Valdosta. (Matt later admitted that he was really from Coffee County, but didn't think anybody would know where that was. I congratulated him on his logic.) Matt's brother, Michael, does live in Valdosta. I told him I thought he could claim citizenship too and that nobody in Lowndes County will make a big fuss about it.

From Al Sada we boarded a Blackhawk helicopter for the flight to Baghdad. Sitting immediately behind me was a no-nonsense young man with a machine gun aimed out the window the whole trip. It was at that point that I tried to remember why I had chosen to come to Iraq. Then I remembered. I was coming to see and report to you on the selfless men and women of Georgia's 48th Brigade Combat Team. There is no group of people anywhere for whom I have more admiration. They are worth all the effort I can expend, and more. The brigade has lost 18 of its fellow Georgians since its deployment to Iraq last year. Theirs is not an easy job.

Iraq is not a place I would recommend for your next vacation. It is hot (106 degrees today), the dust sticks to you like tar paper and there isn't a lot of prosperity since Saddam left town. Iraq reminds me of Honduras, except Hondurans don't plant roadside bombs, and The New York Times doesn't care squat about the place.

I have only been here a few hours but I can tell you with certainty that your friends, neighbors and loved ones in the 48th are being well treated at Camp Stryker. Clearly, Camp Stryker is not a safe place, but there are no safe places in Iraq. The troops all carry rifles on base, even to the cafeteria. I thought about telling The Woman Who Shares My Name that I might bring my authentic Red Ryder BB gun to the table next time I am served broccoli, but decided that wasn't a good idea. She doesn't have a sense of humor about broccoli.

I ate lunch with the troops today. The food is excellent. The morale seems good and they are proud of what they are doing. I have been invited to attend a dedication of a new hospital in Baghdad, an event you are not likely to see or hear about from the national news media. I have lost count of the number of rank-and-file soldiers — including members of the 48th — who have asked me to "show what is really happening in Iraq," because much of it is very good and they don't think the elite media is interested in reporting good news. They may be right. Why show a new hospital, built in partnership between Georgians and Iraqis, when you can feature 10 scumbags shooting their weapons in the air and looking mildly insane?

You clearly feel the tension of war when you are on the scene up close and personal. It's scary to me here, and it has to be scary to them too. Remember, these are not professional soldiers. These are mechanics, firefighters, schoolteachers, postal workers and the like. I plan to accompany some of them on their missions out into the countryside of Iraq this week and give you an idea of what they go through every day while they are here.

As you know, I can get downright bullish on the Great State of Georgia and run on and on about our mountains, our seacoast, our sweet tea and the University of Georgia, the oldest state chartered university, located in Athens,

the Classic City of the South. Now that I am on the ground in Iraq, let me offer an additional reason why it's great to be a Georgian — the 48th Brigade Combat Team. They are worth the Trip From Hell. That says it all.

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