

DRIVING THE DANGEROUS ROADS OF IRAQ WITH A BAND OF BROTHERS

With Georgia's 48th Brigade Combat Team in Mahmoudiyah and the Lion's Den.

This morning General Stewart Rodeheaver, commanding general of the 48th, had a meeting scheduled with General Mahdi, brigade commander of the Iraqi army, to discuss last minute preparations for Saturday's vote on a new Iraqi constitution. It is everyone's wish, of course, that all goes smoothly. This being Iraq, however, means the possibility of bombings and potential disruptions, lest the people actually vote for a democratic form of government and put a few hundred bomb makers out of work.

The meeting was in Mahmoudiyah, south of Baghdad and a place fraught with danger. It is not unusual for our troops to be fired on in the town, usually from rooftops. Therefore, when the general goes there, so goes his Personal Service Detail, or PSD. I was invited to tag along.

As we gathered to head for our assigned vehicles I ran into Lt. Col. Tom Carden, of Rincon, near Savannah. Col. Carden is the Effects Coordinator for the brigade combat team, which means absolutely nothing to me. He gave me a quick job description. "What we do is find out who are the good guys and who are the bad guys," he said, "and then we get rid of the bad guys." May he prosper.

I was in the lead car of the second caravan. The crew for each vehicle consists of a driver, a tactical controller and sitting up top, a gunner. On rare occasions they will add a Doofus First Class. This is a person who can't figure out how to put his communications headset on without knocking his helmet off and dropping his sunglasses, and who is unable to lock the door. I was a natural for the job.

Driving our vehicle was Bill Huffman, from Gray, who operates a hyperbolic chamber —don't ask — in Macon, when not dodging road bombs. The tactical controller was a Great American named Lars Williams, or Will. Will moved to Mobile recently from Temple, which is in West Georgia. As we were leaving Camp Stryker for Mahmoudiyah I asked how far the trip was. "Not far," he said, "About like going from Douglasville to I-285." That was the first answer I had heard since being here that didn't contain a military acronym. Our gunner was Shaun Todd, from Claxton, a former corrections officer. Gary Thurman, from Winder, a Gwinnett County Deputy Sheriff came along as a member of Gen. Rodeheaver's staff and to assist Doofus First Class Yarbrough with his headset. Our medical person was Ann Bielefeld, who overcame the handicap of being from Buffalo, New York, by moving South to attend Kennesaw State in Cobb County. When we left on our journey we were polite and proper. When we returned we were a Band of Brothers.

The trip was scary, nerve-wracking, tense and at times, all of the above. This crew has made 150 of these dangerous trips since they have been in Baghdad. Two days earlier they almost bought the farm on Tampa Highway, considered the most dangerous road in the world, when a bomb narrowly missed them. We saw so many situations that could have easily been fatal on our trip down Tampa Highway. As we zigzagged around suspicious looking potholes, Gunner Todd aimed his weapon at vehicles that looked like they might try and block our way, and even fired warning shots at a car that didn't stop when it was supposed to.

All of this stress is met with nonchalant gallows humor. Going slowly over a bridge that had the crew worried about an ambush or a bomb, Huffman said, "That was a good job of driving, particularly since we didn't get blown up." Everybody laughed but me. Coming to an intersection Huffman commented to Williams, "You know, it has been a long time since we have been shot at at this intersection." Everybody nodded. I dry heaved.

General Rodeheaver's meeting with the Iraqis in Mahmoudiyah was fascinating. Most of the meeting concerned coordination between Iraqi military, Iraqi police and the U.S. for the Saturday vote on a new constitution for the country. I will have more to say about Stewart Rodeheaver in the future, but he is equal parts charming and hard-nosed with the Iraqis. Rodeheaver has a critical role in transitioning Iraq into a democracy and I can't think of a better man for the job.

An explosion was reported about five kilometers south of where the meeting was being held. No one, with the exception of Doofus First Class Yarbrough, seemed particularly agitated by the news.

From Mahmoudiyah we headed to the Lion's Den, a notoriously dangerous place where American and Iraqi troops are searching for a crazy with too many rockets and too much time on his hands. This territory was controlled by Uday Hussein, Saddam's son, and was deserted by his loyalists when Americans arrived. It looks like a ghost town now, except ghost towns are cleaner. It was on this trip that the crew showed me the two spots where eight of their comrades were killed in two roadside bombings. There was no gallows humor about what happened at those sites. The result of the killings was to establish a joint military operations there between the Iraqi forces and a U.S. contingent of 22 people, including the top non-com on site, Sgt. Curtis Williams of Valdosta.

I watched Lt. Col. Mark London, of Cleveland, Georgia, exchange warm and genuine greetings with the Iraqi commander Major Dayass, who in another life had been a member of Saddam's army. Both men planned a follow-up meeting and exchange of paratrooper wings. I wish I could be there.

Finally — finally! — we got back to camp, whereupon Doofus First Class Yarbrough exhaled for the first time in several hours. I came back to my tent to write this account to you. Those guys went back to their tents to relax before they go out and do the same dangerous job again tomorrow. They will always be my Band of Brothers.

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