

**GEORGIANS HELPING TO BUILD SCHOOLS AND TRUST  
With the 118th Field Artillery Battalion in Taji.**

Today we went by helicopter to Camp Taji, south of Baghdad and the headquarters of the First Battalion of the 118 Field Artillery Regiment. This regiment, composed mainly of Georgians, has a myriad of responsibilities including overseeing various construction projects in and around Baghdad, gathering intelligence about the bad guys in the area and then “targeting” them. In laymen’s terms, “targeting” means getting the terrorists to the twenty-four virgins awaiting them in paradise a little earlier than they had planned.

I walked into the operations room and thought that I had stumbled on the Iraqi campus of The University of Georgia, the nation’s oldest state chartered university, located in Athens, the Classic City of the South. Guarding the door is a concrete Bulldog painted in the appropriate Red and Black. Georgia flags are on the wall. There are UGA bottle openers, pompoms, photographs and computer screen savers. Clearly, this is a group of distinction and worth my full attention.

A group of soldiers from Savannah and Jesup were hunched over tables, putting together maps in preparation for Saturday’s Constitutional referendum. They will act as a liaison between the Iraqi military police and its civilian police in monitoring the election. “We want to be sure that every Iraqi has a chance to vote,” says First Sergeant Bruce Oliver, a former Sylvania police officer and now on the staff of the Georgia Department of Corrections. “Whether they vote for the Constitution or not is up to them, but we want to be sure everybody has the opportunity.”

Sgt. Oliver did three tours of duty in Vietnam. He sees similarities in that war and this one, in that we are fighting a “hit-and-run” enemy. “There is no geographic line that you can cross and declare victory,” Oliver says, “You have to take away their support by the local people.” He and the others see a marked distinction between the two wars. Groups like the 118th are showing Iraqi citizens that there is more to be gained from cooperating with Americans than with the terrorists. They are building sewer systems and trust with the Iraqi people.

Major John H. (last name omitted for security reasons) is in charge of the various construction projects underway in this part of Iraq. His biggest is a sewerage project in the city of Husseniya, a city of 500,000 people crammed into an area of less than six square miles. Half a million people and no indoor plumbing. Makes me queasy just writing about it.

His team hires Iranian construction firms who then hire locals to do the work. This gives Iraqis the opportunity to make good money at honest work and lessens the temptation to blow up people, places and things for a few bucks. It also lessens their chances of getting killed by either side. Not a bad bargain.

People like Russell Dinkins, 35, of Darien, work with the Iraqi workers to make them self-sufficient. Many Iraqis don’t have the skill sets or the equipment to do many of the jobs necessary to put an infrastructure in place, and it is Dinkins’ job to teach them — kind of a variation on “teaching a man to fish.” Currently, he is helping them with a pump house on the Tigris River leading into Husseniya.

Critical to the success of the rebuilding of Iraq is the not-so-surprising matter of security. Cpl. Roy Chalkley, of Savannah, works in military intelligence — tracking the enemies’ movement and habits and helping ensure they don’t disrupt the construction projects. Sometimes, it happens anyway. A school in the town of Boob al Sham (I don’t make this stuff up) was destroyed just after construction. Local leaders were told unless they find the bad guy and turn him in, all future projects there would be moved to other locations. I’m betting against the bad guy. You just don’t mess with Boob al Sham.

One thing I have noticed since coming to Iraq is that most every office is chock full of fruit, candy, cookies, canned goods, peanuts and other assorted goodies from back home. Harry Campbell, of Swainsboro, a postal clerk at the 118th, showed me his office and some huge boxes, about three feet high. "I usually get two of these boxes a day," Campbell says. "Sometimes, I get as many as six. They are filled with gifts and mail and are a real boost to our morale."

Candy is also a weapon in the war. Our troops enjoy sharing their largesse with the local children. One child got some goodies from the soldiers and showed his appreciation by ratting out a bad guy. Sgt. Major Alfred Woods says, "Sometimes we have more success with a box of candy than a box of bullets." Woods, of Fleming, is the top enlisted soldier among the 570 located at Taji. It is his firm belief that the effort in Iraq depends on our winning over the young generation. Most people I have talked to over the past several days agree with him. If they get a taste of democracy, they won't give it up. I pray he is correct.

It was another long, hot dusty day in Iraq. Tomorrow I am going to ride with the 648th Engineering Battalion from Statesboro as we look for IEDs, or Improvised Explosive Devices, along Route Aeros, a notorious area. (Don't tell The Woman Who Shares My Name. She won't be a happy camper and I'll be eating broccoli three times a day for the rest of my natural life.)

Before I go, let me correct an error. In yesterday's column, I misidentified Dr. John Vogel, of Atlanta, who runs the health clinic at Radwaniya, and who gave up his family practice to help the people of Iraq. Good men like Dr. Vogel deserve proper recognition. I deserve a shot in the fanny.



Sgt. Russell Dinkins of Darien works with Iraqis on a major construction project.

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