

## MIXED EMOTIONS: LEAVING THE 48TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM

I am coming home.

As you read this, I should be on a C-5A headed for Dover, Del. and then to Home Sweet Home. I leave with mixed emotions. Taking the world's longest shower and sleeping in a real bed with a real mattress will be a pleasure, but leaving behind the men and women of Georgia's 48th Brigade Combat Team wasn't easy. These are good folks and I wish that I had had the time to talk to more people from more places about more things, but logistics, distances and schedules wouldn't allow.

The 48th's mission is about done here. Within the next month, there will be a new mission for them in new locations. Coming in to replace the 48th are troops from the 101st Airborne, headquartered at Fort Campbell, Ky. The citizen-soldiers from Georgia have acquitted themselves well. Give credit to their leader, Gen. Steward Rodeheaver. Gen. Rodeheaver is a warrior who insists on getting in the middle of the action with his men and mixing it up with the bad guys. His Sgt. Major, James Nelson, of Sylvester, just shakes his head and smiles, "The man is impossible to manage."

Rodeheaver is also a diplomat. If the Constitutional referendum passes — and given my travel schedule you may know before I do — he will deserve no small measure of the credit for the work he has done with the local sheiks, Imams and local government officials within his 250-square mile area of responsibility. It hasn't been easy. Egos abound. After a tedious day of negotiating with the sheiks and watching them posture, vent and orate, the general, a regional economic development manager for Georgia Power, said he felt like he was in a county commission meeting in Middle Georgia.

The 48th has had a very dangerous territory to police, including the aptly-named Triangle of Death. It is hard to know who is on our side and who isn't. The Iraqis don't smile a lot, and for good reason. They haven't had much to smile about in their lifetimes. The Georgians are working as hard on community relations as they are at ferreting out terrorists. For example, Lt. Col. John King commands the 1st Battalion, 108th Armor Regiment, headquartered in Calhoun and composed of some 500 fighting men from throughout North Georgia. In addition to managing a significant part of the war, Lt. Col. King has spent much time teaching local government officials the basics of how to conduct a public meeting. He knows whereof he speaks. He is Chief of Police in Doraville, working on a regular basis with his city council.

Which brings up an interesting point: The National Guard is made up of citizen-soldiers. Not only can they can inflict some serious punishment on the bad guys — and do — but they have real world experience to pass along to the locals and help them get their new world up and running. However the war is resolved, this part of Iraq is going to be a little bit better because the 48th was here. I truly believe that.

The strategy of showing the locals an alternative to terrorism is a good one, but it is going to take time and I'm not sure our instant gratification and politically divisive society will allow the time. That would be a shame. If the people of the Middle East ever get a taste of democracy, they aren't going to give it up easily.

As the 48th prepares to leave, they are working with the 101st Airborne to step in and take over the fight and the process of moving Iraq toward democracy. Leading the effort will be Col. Todd Ebel, a West Point graduate and a professional soldier in the finest sense of the word. We forget sometimes the personal sacrifices our military personnel make on our behalf. "I have missed the birth of two of my children," he said, "and will most likely miss two of their graduations."

Col. Ebel has nothing but praise for the 48th. Asked about the differences between his regular army troops and the National Guard, he smiles and says, "Your guys get a lot more candy and cookies than we do." The colonel turns serious and says that to the enemy, there is no difference. That is why the transition between his troops and the 48th Brigade Combat Team must be seamless. "We are going to school learning all we can before the 48th departs," he said, "and the transition is working well." Rest assured, the 48th is leaving their mission in good hands.

The trip to Iraq was hard on this old man. I missed many hours of sleep. I didn't get to eat when I wanted. I almost got my fanny blown to kingdom come. Getting from place to place was sometimes a logistical nightmare. I have sucked up enough Iraqi dust to start my own desert with my next sneeze. But the hardships I have experienced in my short time here is nothing compared to the sacrifices of my fellow Georgians. Some even gave their lives. I hope it wasn't in vain.

Now, I am coming home to my family. My prayer is that the men and women of the 48th Brigade Combat Team will soon join me after a very successful mission in Iraq. They are Great Americans. Bless them one and all.

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