

## **WELCOME HOME TO GEORGIA'S 48TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM**

That giant “WHEW” you hear is a collective sigh of relief that the 4,400 members of Georgia’s 48th Brigade Combat Team are coming home after more than a year of active duty in Iraq. Even as we speak, planeloads of our fellow Georgians are safely on the ground, and more are en route.

Back home to black-eyed peas, collard greens, corn bread, hot showers, sweet tea, flush toilets, green grass, plenty of pine pollen (this IS Georgia, after all), loving family, grateful friends and the appreciation from us all for their unwavering devotion to duty.

The 48th fought fiercely in Iraq. They also ministered to the sick. They built infrastructure and brought electric power to local communities. They fed and clothed the Iraqi people and provided children with school supplies. They helped get local governments up and running. All of this while putting their lives on the line every single day. Twenty-six of their comrades made the ultimate sacrifice.

I was due to return to Iraq last week to fly home with the troops but received an apologetic call from Lt. Selena Owens, the 48th’s public affairs officer, telling me that the brigade’s timeline had been moved up from what had been originally scheduled and earlier than I could get there. No need to apologize. Getting the troops home early was welcomed news. Plus, it was nice to know that I could continue to sleep in my own bed.

Unlike my first trip to Iraq last October, I knew what I would have been getting myself into this time. Iraq is a dangerous place. There is no “safe haven.” The enemy is all around you. You are subject to a mortar attack, a suicide bomber or an IED (Improvised Explosive Device, or in plain English, a roadside bomb) at any time and anywhere. That is what makes the men and women of the 48th such heroes. I was subjected to that kind of danger for two weeks. They were in harm’s way a lot longer than that.

As I was in the process of cancelling my trip, I received a package from Iraq. In it was a Combat Action Badge, certifying that while with the troops of Alpha Company, 648th Engineer Battalion on October 13, 2005, I was “personally present and under direct hostile enemy fire.” That was the day our Humvee took a hit from an IED while on patrol. I have read and reread the citation several times to be sure it doesn’t mention that said recipient of said Combat Action Badge almost wet his drawers that day.

A word of thanks to the 48th’s commanding general, Stewart Rodeheaver, for giving me the opportunity to visit with his troops in Iraq. I had heard the Army tended to keep visiting journalists in safe areas, or Green Zones. I wrote the general directly and said if that was the case I wasn’t coming. Although he had never met me, he wrote back and said I had his personal assurance that I could go where I wanted, talk to who I wanted and see what I wanted. No filters. No handlers. He was good to his word. No one — including General Rodeheaver — saw what I wrote until it had been published in the newspapers the next day. He is a Great American.

I hope to be at Hunter AFB when members of the 648th Engineers return in a week or so. I am going to try to find the guys I was on patrol with on October 13: Sgts. James Rackley of Montezuma, Eric Farmborough and Mahlon Williams, both of Statesboro, and Bruce Robinson of Buena Vista. If so, I plan to shake their hands and thank them for their service to their country and for taking care of a know-it-all columnist who got the bejeezus scared out of him when the war got a little too up close and personal.

William Tecumseh Sherman said, “War is hell.” The citizen-soldiers of Georgia’s 48th Brigade have been to hell and back. Welcome home, troops. I raise a glass of sweet tea to you all.