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Iron Brigade Chronicles

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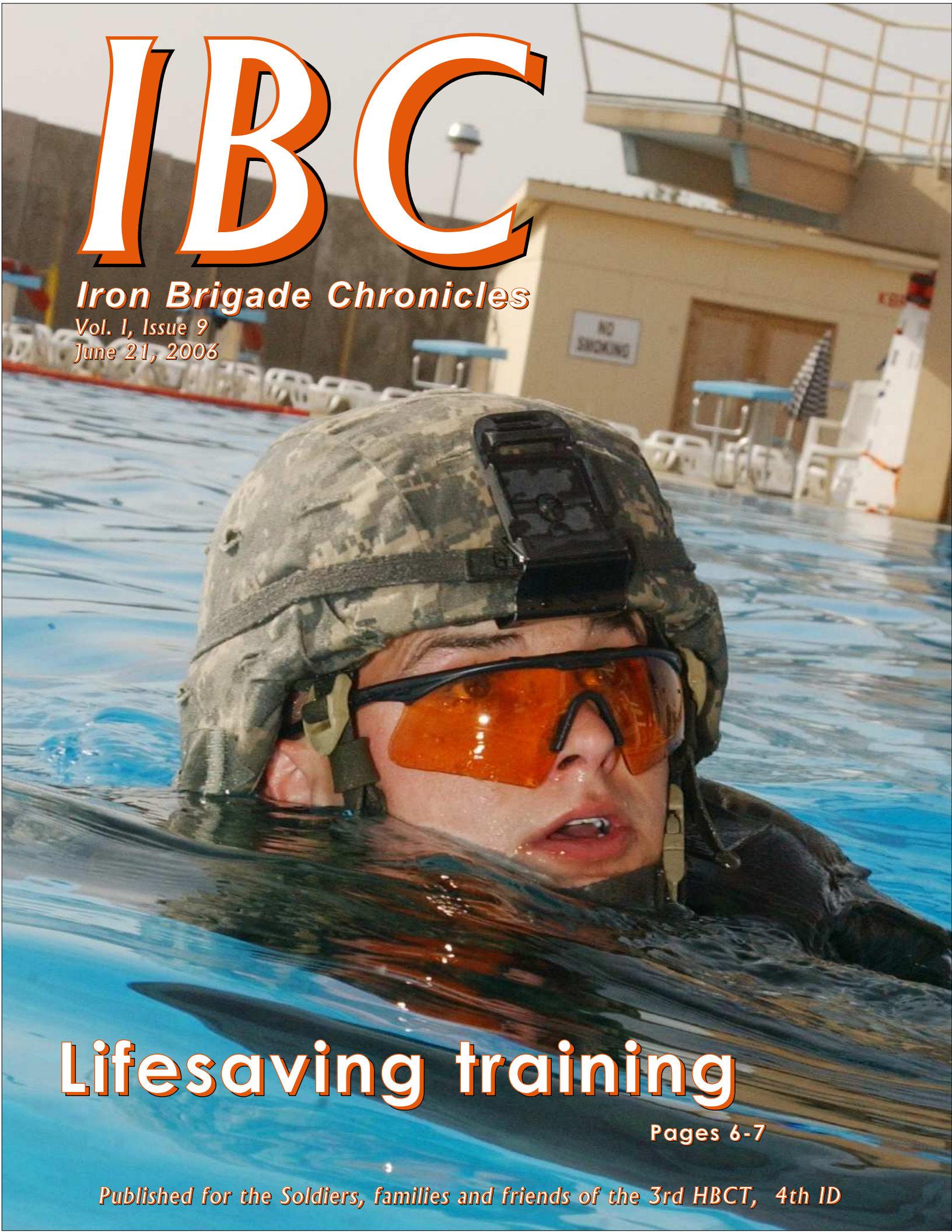

Lifesaving training

Pages 6-7

Published for the Soldiers, families and friends of the 3rd HBCT, 4th ID

Inside this issue

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The *Iron Brigade Chronicles* is published in the interest of the Soldiers, families and friends of the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers.

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Cover Photo

Pfc. Jonathan Gearhart, cannoneer, Battery B, 3rd Battalion, 29th Field Artillery, looks to the side of the swimming pool for instruction from his NCO during a drown proofing class at Logistical Support Area Anaconda.

Photo by Pfc. Paul J. Harris

Table of Contents

Page 3:
Messages from the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team commander and a tribute to fallen Soldiers.

Page 4:
Toby Keith plays for Warhorse troops during annual USO tour around the world.

Page 5:
100 wheelchairs were delivered the Baqubah General Hospital by IPs, Phoenix Soldier.

Pages 6 & 7:
Pacesetter troops learn water survival skills to prepare to patrol ancient river.

Page 8:
Bulldog Troop first sergeant continues to serve after two artificial hip replacment surgeries.

Page 9:
Fighting Eagles' cooks serve troops at all hours of the day, regardless of the temperature.

Page 10:
Mortarmen train Iraq Army Soldiers to fight fire with indirect fire.

Page 11:
Georgian Soldiers celebrate national independence day at Warhorse with ceremony and awards.

Page 12:
Highlighting FAR #7, comments from the chaplain and the top insurgent in Iraq killed in Hibhib.

Pg. 4

Pg. 6 & 7

Pg. 9

Pg. 11

Pg. 12

Striker Six Sends

Strikers,

I begin this month again reflecting on the high price we are paying to assist the Iraqis in developing democracy. The loss of Corporals Brock Bucklin and Luis Santos serve to remind us how fragile and precious our time is in this life. May they rest in peace knowing their contributions were vital in giving millions of people the chance to live their lives freely. All we can hope is that those people take advantage of the chance we are providing them.

June is winding down and there remain several key events we will witness shortly. Probably the most important of these is the transfer of authority in the battlespace from Coalition Forces to the Iraqi Army. This culminates a two year effort to build an Iraqi Army capable of waging the counter insurgency fight. Through your tireless efforts, and the efforts of those that preceded you, this Iraqi Army now stands ready to take the lead. Are they perfect? No; but I am confident that they are "good enough" for this environment and for this enemy as long as we remain capable of providing them some assistance when they require it. This step is necessary in our overall disengagement process, and I think we'll be surprised at just how effective this new force can be. It's time to let them walk on their own.

The next key event is the realignment of our battlespace. This is already underway in some areas, but a significant change will occur when we bid farewell to the "Bandits" of 1-32 Cavalry (RSTA) and welcome home the "Hunters" of 2-9 Cavalry (RSTA). With the "Hunters" will come some additional battlespace, but I am confident the capabilities, the esprit, and the "We Can, We Will" attitude they bring with them will more than account for this change. Trading one aggressive and effective reconnaissance squadron for another is not necessarily a bad thing. Given the option, we'd keep them both!

The final key event on the horizon is the TOA with our replacement unit. It seems hard to believe we're even talking about it, but the series of meetings, PDSS requirements and the necessary coordination required to redeploy a Heavy Brigade Combat Team are already beginning. This is both a great and a dangerous thing. It's great as it symbolizes the start of our journey home. It's dangerous because we need to stay focused on the present and not get distracted by the future, or everyone will not make that journey. STAY FOCUSED ON THE FIGHT!

There remains much to be done. The police and border enforcement forces still need our assistance to move them to an independent functioning capability. This enemy still requires our undivided and constant attention. To date, we have conducted more than 10,000 combat patrols and executed focused raids that have captured more than 270 insurgents that will stand trial before the Central Criminal Court of Iraq. Additionally, we have discovered hundreds of caches with small arms, munitions and military equipment. Yet we all realize that in this type of environment, this enemy will reconstitute quickly and continue to attack, the Iraqi Security Forces and the Iraqi people. We must continue to press the fight by providing the ISF the intelligence, moral support and enablers that allow them to succeed.

Col. Brian D. Jones

I could not be more proud of the performance of this brigade. You are operating in the toughest environment in Iraq. The combination of the different political, financial, sectarian and religious interests in this huge area of operations make it much more complicated than any other. The combination of insurgent forces representing these different interests makes it much more dangerous. And you are kicking their asses! Stay after it!

Steadfast and Loyal
Striker 6

This is our seventh month in the fight, and as usual, Strikers keep moving forward without hesitation.

For the most part our Soldiers do the right thing; we accomplished our missions by taking down the enemy and we continue moving onto other objectives. However, there are a few that will deviate from the rules and do the wrong thing.

The Army instituted "Core Warrior Values Training." This training is to remind us we must not forget we are professional Soldiers we must follow the Army values whether in peace or at war.

The cornerstone of military professionalism is professional conduct on the battlefield. As professionals, we have an obligation to ensure our conduct is consistent with the values and traditions of our country and our service. This obligation does not end when we go to combat.

The vast majority of our Soldiers perform magnificent every day; they do their duty with honor under extremely difficult circumstances by exhibiting good judgment, honesty and integrity. We as leaders must set the right tone at every level by encouraging and rewarding honesty, integrity and professionalism.

Sgt. Maj. Guadalupe Aldama

We must help subordinates understand that professionalism and discipline contribute to mission success. Remember our mission is to destroy the enemy and to help Iraqi citizens restored democracy in their country.

In memory of ...

Cpl. Brock L. Bucklin
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1-68 Combined Arms Battalion,
4th Infantry Division

Cpl. Luis D. Santos
Company A,
1-68 Combined Arms Battalion,
4th Infantry Division

Gone, but not forgotten

Country music star visits Warhorse troops

by Sgt. Zach Mott
IBC editor

Toby Keith visited Soldiers at Forward Operating Base Warhorse Saturday during his annual trip to play for troops around the world.

"It's a labor of love," said the multi-platinum recording star before taking the stage at his first concert in Iraq this year. "This is my way to show support (to the troops.)"

Keith entertained the packed hangar crowd with new favorites, audience requests and what he calls "bus songs." He has performed more than 60 shows on tours sponsored by the United Service Organizations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Germany.

"We hit the bases wherever the action is," Keith said.

The Oklahoma native, and country music superstar, has made it a point to go to out-of-the-way places. He was quoted as saying, "we were either gonna go up to the remote places or we weren't gonna go at all," during a pervious visit to Iraq.

"It's pretty cool," said Pfc. Christopher Mitchell, a dismount infantryman from Company A, 1-68 Combined Arms Battalion, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers, as he stood by waiting for Keith to sign his guitar. "I think it's nice that he comes here and plays for us."

Mitchell's sentiments were echoed by the crowd as they sang along to the unofficial military anthem "American Soldier." The horde took a decidedly raucous turn as Keith and writing partner Scotty Emerick strummed through the feisty "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue."

"He definitely supports the troops by doing what he does more so than anybody else that's famous," Mitchell said.

After an hour-long concert, a sweat-coated Keith happily signed anything put in front of him: posters, photos, patrol caps, dollar bills, anything, even a guitar.

His continued support of forward deployed troops shows why he will continue to be a servicemembers' choice for entertainer of the year.

Photos by Sgt. Zach Mott

TOP: Toby Keith sings one of his "bus songs" to a crowd of Soldiers from the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers at Forward Operating Base Warhorse May 27.

ABOVE: Under the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers symbol, Toby Keith sings one of his chart-topping hits to the Soldiers gathered at a hangar on Forward Operating Base Warhorse May 27.

Phoenix Soldier helps deliver 100 wheelchairs

by Sgt. Zach Mott
IBC editor

Iraqi Police braved the heat and hand-delivered 100 wheelchairs to the Baqubah General Hospital to help meet the citizens' needs for mobility.

The delivery was coordinated by the Ministry of Health and the wheelchairs were delivered by members of the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers, who also provided security while the IPs delivered the chairs.

The chairs were donated by freewheelchairmission.org, a company in California, to the 332nd Civil Affairs Battalion. The chairs were then requested by 1st Lt. Nyiesha Smith, project representative, 3rd Special Troops Battalion, 3rd HBCT, 4th ID, who in turn worked to get the chairs to the Iraqi people.

"(The previous unit) delivered wheelchairs before and it was so popular and people continued to ask for them," Smith said.

There are a large number of Iraqi people who require use of a wheelchair. Currently, there are not enough chairs to meet the need.

"We have a severe shortage of medical equipment in Iraq and here in Diyala Province there are 400 or 500 individuals who have a chronic need for wheelchairs — they're going to be wheelchair ridden for the rest of their life," said Capt. John Hughes, the brigade surgeon, 3rd HBCT, 4th ID. "This won't take care of all of them but it will go a long way towards it."

There is a list that a committee generated that will help determine who receives the chairs.

"It feels good (to donate the chairs) because that's what were here to do," Hughes said.

A fully assembled wheelchair is displayed prior to delivering the 100 wheelchairs to the Baqubah General Hospital May 21.

Photos by Sgt. Zach Mott

Iraqi Police unload the components of wheelchairs at the Baqubah General Hospital. The wheelchairs were donated by *freewheelchairmission.org* and delivery was coordinated by the Ministry of Health. Soldiers of the 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers provided security for the IPs as they unloaded the equipment.

Floating in a b

Photos by Pfc. Paul J. Harris

Sgt. Augustin Granados, Bulldog Battery, 3rd Battalion, 29th Field Artillery, waits for the jolt of being shoved into the pool and then completes the certification process while conducting drown proofing training at Logistical Support Area Anaconda.

ulletproof lifejacket

by Pfc. Paul J. Harris
IBC staff writer

June 6, 1944 hundreds of Soldiers died in five to six feet of water before reaching the shores of Normandy, France — they died because they did not know how to tread water in their heavy gear.

In Iraq there are a lot of canals adjoining the Tigris River. The insurgents are using the waterways to transport weapons while avoiding coalition forces on the streets. Caches have also been found in many of the riverbanks along the Tigris River.

To date, more than 50 U.S. service members have drown in Iraq. Not wanting to repeat history, the command group of 3rd Battalion, 29th Field Artillery, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers decided to develop training to help Soldiers survive in full combat gear if they happen to fall in water.

A Soldier going out on patrol wears about 40 to 50 pounds of gear. With that, there was concern a Soldier would sink in a canal.

"I wondered to myself how much survivability a Soldier would have if he ended up in the river or in the canal," said Command Sgt. Maj. Dean Keveles, command sergeant major, 3rd Bn., 29th FA. "Could they surface and get themselves to the bank of the river to survive?"

With river boat patrols becoming an increasing reality, Keveles and a team of senior NCOs decided to test the buoyancy of the interceptor body armor system at the outdoor pool at Logistical Support Area Anaconda. Sgt. 1st Class Ralph Cook, Bradley Fighting Vehicle platoon sergeant, Bulldog Troop, 2nd Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 3rd HBCT, donned the vest, plates et all and jumped in the pool to see what would happen.

It turns out the Kevlar inside the IBAS will float and support the weight of a Soldier. If a Soldier rips off his IBAS upon entering the water, they will sink, said Keveles. It is like having a bulletproof life vest.

From what they learned at the pool, Keveles and his NCOs were able to put together a training exercise for Soldiers. The exercise would have a Soldier in full Army Combat Uniform wear an IBAS vest with plates minus the ammunition pouches. The Soldier would crouch on one knee near the edge of the pool and hold an M-16 rifle in the ready position. The M-16 rifle would be connected to the instructor by 550 cord for quick retrieval. Before hitting the water the Soldier would be instructed to throw his weapon away to lessen his weight.

"We know that you will automatically drop your weapon when you hit the water," said Keveles. "Soldier survival is first and if we have to, we will drudge the river for the weapon later."

The instructor would give the Soldier a swift kick in the back to simulate the surprise of falling into the water. After a Soldier fell in, he would have to swim 15 meters before coming out of the pool.

Not every detail could be simulated at the pool, but Keveles was happy with the program.

We don't have a way to simulate river current in the training but at least the Soldiers can build their confidence by doing the training, getting to the surface of the water and using their energy to get to the side, said Keveles.

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Maynard, platoon sergeant, Battery B, 3rd Bn., 29th FA, took his Soldiers to the pool recently to teach them what he learned from Keveles' team.

Before putting on the IBAS, Maynard had the Soldiers jump into the pool in groups of eight to determine how strong of swimmers they were. Lifeguards were on-hand to assist the Soldiers if they began to panic.

1st Lt. Sean Craig, platoon leader, Battery B, 3rd Bn., 29th FA, felt no initial discomfort after hitting the water.

"I am a pretty strong swimmer so it felt fine, felt like I normally swim," said Craig. "It felt like a life jacket, a secure feeling because as soon as you get in it pops you back up."

Not all Soldiers had the same reaction, especially those who do not swim well.

"I was nervous because I had never done this and I don't swim at all. It was tough for me," said Spc. Albert James, gunner, Battery B, 3rd Bn., 29th FA.

James struggled in the water but was able to complete the 15 meter swim. He was confident his vest would keep him afloat if he had to do it again.

The last stage of the exercise was to move to the shallow end of the pool where Sgt. Justin Folts, treatment NCO, Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 3rd Bn., 29th FA, set up a demonstration on how to use the National SCUBA Divers Association approved bottles that every Humvee in the battalion now carries.

When a Soldier rolls over in a canal or starts to drown they will panic, said Folts. The oxygen in the bottles will calm you down, allowing oxygen to be received by your vital organs. This will help you to regain composure and allow you move to safety.

We are the only task force in Iraq that has a mandate of two oxygen bottles per vehicle. I think the rest of the brigade will adapt as they see how useful these bottles are, said Folts.

I felt funny trying to breathe underwater, said Staff Sgt. Derrick Gwin, gunnery sergeant, Battery B, 3rd Bn., 29th FA. I got used to it after a while and I definitely would rather have it than not.

At the conclusion of the training Maynard was pleased with the way his teammates from Battery B preformed. With the possibilities of water operations becoming more of a reality the training will aid in the Soldiers' confidence to do their job.

"(The training) is going to take their mind off of being nervous and keep it on the mission," Maynard said.

First sergeant 'hip' to game

by Pfc. Paul J. Harris
IBC staff writer

In the early morning, against the sounds of cadence and the thunderous noise of feet hitting the pavement, Soldiers from Bulldog Troop, 2nd Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers conduct their daily run.

The Soldiers are fearful not to fall out of the run for two reasons: fear of the repercussions and for respect of their first sergeant who is there with them, keeping pace and calling cadence.

1st Sgt. Martin Kelley, first sergeant, B Troop, 2nd Sqdn., 9th CAV, commands respect from his length of service and the long road he has fought to stay in the Army. Kelley was diagnosed with bilateral avascular necrosis in both hips while serving as a drill sergeant at Fort Knox, Ky., in 1997.

"At that time the doctors told me that my Army career was over," Kelley said.

I was in the prime of my career and to be cut down, I felt like a failure, Kelley said. I had only 11 years of service at that point. For a doctor to tell me that my Army career was over was not an acceptable answer.

Photo by Pfc. Paul J. Harris

Capt. Toby Austin, commander, Bulldog Troop, 2nd Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers, has a laugh with 1st Sgt. Martin Kelley, first sergeant, Bulldog Troop, as he fixes an M-16 rifle at the troop's command post on Logistical Support Area Anaconda near Balad, Iraq.

Bilateral avascular necrosis is a bone disease that kills the femoral head of the joint. Kelley thought it was a hip bruise or a groin strain initially, but as the months passed it never got better. It deteriorated to the point where it was bone-on-bone when he walked.

After fighting through the pain for a year, while continuing his drill sergeant duties, his condition was finally diagnosed.

After three unsuccessful major hip operations, it was decided in the latter part of 1997 to have a full hip replacement of his right hip. In 1999 Kelley had the second hip replaced. After two artificial hips, Kelley still did not want to take a medical discharge from the Army.

Kelley fought his case up the chain of doctors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Silver Spring, Md., and eventually received a medical evaluation to say he was fit for service.

"I have limited movement as far as bending," Kelley said. "I am still able to run; I am still able to don all my protective gear and equipment. I am not supposed to run at all due to the hip replacement, but if you can't run, you can't be out with the Soldiers and you need to be out there with them. I still do everything the Soldiers do."

When Capt. Toby Austin, commander, B Troop, 2nd Sqdn., 9th CAV, first came to the unit and was informed of Kelley's condition he was concerned.

"It was a concern when I found out; given the nature of the mission in Iraq I was worried that it was going to take its toll on him," Austin said. "He has not ever let that slow him down. He has never come to me and said 'I need a day off because my hips are bothering me'."

Austin never has to worry when planning a mission if the trucks have fuel, if the Soldiers have water and if they are in the right uniform. Kelley has firm control on making sure everything is in place for the mission to be successful. Not only is he a master planner but with his wealth of experience he is a father figure as well.

He has been in the Army more than I have been alive and has kids that are around the same age as some of us, said Pfc. Nickolias Sauceda, cavalry scout, B Troop, 2nd Sqdn., 9 CAV. He gives us a lot of advice and one of his favorite sayings is "there is a reason behind the madness." Whatever he tells us is to better ourselves and we take it in kindness and with a bit of tough love.

Kelley has been playing with idea of teaching junior ROTC after retiring. He would like to stay in Colorado with his wife, Sgt. 1st Class Michelle Kelley, senior court reporter, 7th Infantry Division.

"90 percent of the reason I wanted to stay in was to make it to the retirement point and have her retire with me," Kelley said.

Besides wanting to retire with his wife, Kelley felt obligated to give back to an organization that took him from his humble beginnings in Laurel, Del., and sculpted him into the man he is today.

"I came from a family with nothing," Kelley said. "As a kid growing up I bounced from foster home to foster home; from trailer to trailer. I believe my parents moved 20 times in one year. So all the knowledge and experience I have gained over the past 20 years I feel some obligation to give it to the young Soldiers who are now entering the United States Army in a time of war."

Army cooks still stirring pots

Photos by Pfc. Paul J. Harris

Pvt. Jereny Trahan, cook, Forward Support Company, 1-8 Combined Arms Battalion, dishes up dinner to hungry Soldiers on Forward Operating Base Paliwoda.

Spc. Al-Lorenzo Williams, cook, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Special Troops Battalion, attached to 1-8 Combined Arms Battalion, prepares a batch of French fries in preparation for an evening meal on Forward Operating Base Paliwoda.

by Pfc. Paul J. Harris
IBC staff writer

The dining facility at Forward Operating Base Paliwoda is a wall of sounds that would make Phil Specter proud. American Forces Network plays sports and news on two big-screen TV's in the front corners of the room.

Soldiers are coming and going with sounds of laughter because someone told a funny "your mom" joke at one of the dining tables. In the background are the sounds of clanging metal pots and pans slightly drowning out the lone Army cook chopping away at a cucumber.

Wait, Army cook? Yes there are Army cooks that actually cook for Soldiers in Iraq. Kellogg, Brown and Root provide most of the culinary staff for the dining facilities across Iraq. Most of the Army cooks have been tasked out to other units performing various jobs like gunners on logistics patrols or pulling force protection on different FOBs. There are a select few that still cook, an example being FOB Paliwoda.

The dining facility on FOB Paliwoda feeds about 750 Soldiers per meal, according to Staff Sgt. Solangie Bandon, dining facility manager, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Special Troops Battalion, attached to 1-8 Combined Arms Battalion, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Task Force Band of Brothers. The food is brought from Kuwait through Logistical Support Area Anaconda before reaching FOB Paliwoda.

On LSA Anaconda there are four DFACs that serve a wide variety of foods from fish to Mongolian stir fry. On FOB Paliwoda there is one DFAC and is limited on the items it can serve due to it being classed as a field DFAC.

"We cannot cook any raw food," said Bandon. "All of our food must arrive pre-cooked."

Even with limited items available for ordering, Bandon and her team make sure Soldiers have three nutritious cooked meals available seven days a week. A recent meal consisted of T-bone steak, fried scallops and corn-on-the-cob.

"We do not serve Meals, Ready to Eat," Bandon said.

The day starts early for the cooks, around 5:30 a.m., and ends late usually around midnight. Staffing an operation that is almost 24-hours is a constant challenge, especially when Soldiers are not available because of mid-tour leave, said Bandon. Most of the cooks work all day, seven days a week with little time off.

Though the hours are long, Spc. Kenneth Jamerson, cook, HHC, 3rd STB, attached to 1-8 CAB, is happier about the conditions of this deployment compared to the last time he was deployed to Iraq in 2003 with the Iron Brigade.

"We have a place to sleep, a place to shower and you can go to the latrine instead of going in the woods," he said. "Last time we were cooking in full battle rattle."

The thought of cooking in full gear in 120 degree heat is something Sgt. Jason Miller, cook, Forward Support Company, 1-8 CAB, does not want to remember. He deployed with the Iron Brigade in 2003 and this is his second time cooking here.

If it is 120 degrees outside, it feels like it is 100 degrees warmer inside the kitchen especially when you have all the burners going at once, Miller said.

Soldiers drink fluids and take breaks when the heat in the kitchen goes to extremes. Additional air conditioning units have been ordered to combat the heat problem but the cooks are used to dealing with adverse conditions.

"You suck it up and drive on," Miller said.

Photo by Spc. Lee Elder

Staff Sgt. Patrick Stack, Company C, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, demonstrates how to properly load a 60mm mortar. The demonstration was part of daylong training to help Iraqi Army Soldiers become proficient with the weapons.

Fire for effect

by Spc. Lee Elder
133rd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

Iraqi Army Soldiers guarding a key checkpoint here will soon be able to fight fire with fire, mortar fire that is.

To ensure Soldiers with 3rd Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 5th Division know how to use these weapons U.S. Soldiers with Company C, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, spent a day and night training their Iraqi counterparts with the 60 mm mortars. Day and night live firings were conducted with high-explosive and illumination rounds.

"The checkpoints get hit from time to time," said Capt. Andrew Berry, a member of the 3rd Battalion Military Transition Team. "A 60 mm mortar will give them approximately 30 seconds of illumination which is the equivalent to a bright searchlight. That will be very beneficial."

Checkpoint 346, which overlooks a major thoroughfare, has been a frequent target of nighttime insurgent small arms and mortar fire. Iraqi Army forces often have been unable to return fire because they were unable to see the enemy or the fire direction of the fire. Having mortars with illumination rounds should change that, and allow Iraqis to stage a more effective response.

The training was planned by Capt. Erik Schweppe, Company C's fire support officer. He said this checkpoint was chosen because it was surrounded by open fields behind it and had been a frequent target for insurgents.

"They have good visibility from the hill," said Schweppe who hails from Schaumburg, Ill. "Plus, safety had a lot to do with it."

Iraqi Soldiers responded quickly to the training they received from the fire support teams despite blazing afternoon heat. Team members set up targets for the live fires while their noncommissioned officers drilled their Iraqi counterparts on the finer points of mortar deployment.

"Look at the smiles on those guys faces," Berry said pointing to the Iraqis eagerly practicing with the mortars. "They've been on the wrong side of mortar fire too many times."

Seasoned Company C NCOs like Staff Sgts. Patrick Stack and Dylan Spang conducted the training. They first gave a class on setting up the mortar tube and then reviewed the capabilities of the rounds that were being fired this day.

Then, it was time for hands-on training. The Iraqis were led through a series of drills to make them comfortable with loading, aiming and firing the mortar rounds.

The camaraderie between the U.S. and Iraqi forces was almost instantly established. As the firing began, Soldiers from both nations congratulated each other as rounds landed near the down-range targets. Cheers went up and high-fives were exchanged.

"I've been working with these guys for one year," Berry said. "We've been through a lot of different scenarios with them.

"Right now, I have one of thex best mortar teams out, and they really enjoy trying to teach their trade to the Iraqi Army."

Stack, a Maumee, Ohio, native who serves Company C's mortar section sergeant, agreed. He and his Soldiers enjoyed being on the giving end of the training process.

"They are usually pretty excited whenever we get to come out and work with them," Stack said concerning the Iraqis. "They are always very motivated to work with us. They usually do very well."

Iraqi Soldiers value the one-on-one instruction they receive. Stack said they respect the American Soldiers' skill and knowledge.

"They are anxious to learn with the Americans," Stack said. "Every time we have trained with them, they are very anxious to learn what we know."

Stack said the addition of mortar capabilities will be a big plus to the Soldiers manning the checkpoints. It will give them a quick response to any attacks.

"If they do get attacked or if they take small arms fire, the illumination that they can provide organic to this checkpoint will usually scare off any major attack," Stack said. "Once they fire the illumination round, they will want to get out of here."

When night dawned, the training continued. Illumination rounds were fired that lit up the desert floor. Crews scrambled to site the targets and deliver fire on them before their light vanished again.

Once the rounds were all fired, Soldiers congratulated each other on their achievements. It was clear that the Iraqis were no longer intimidated by the mortars and looked forward to adding them to their arsenal.

"When we make the battlefield a little bit more level, they gain a lot more confidence," Stack said. "Then, we see them make major steps."

Georgian army celebrates indepencence

Photos by Spc. Michael Pfaff

ABOVE: Georgian Armed Forces 23rd Light Infantry Battalion Soldiers stand in formation beneath the flag of their nation during a ceremony on their Independence Day.
LEFT: Flanked by a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, members of the Georgian Armed Forces 23rd Light Infantry Battalion stand in formation during an independence day celebration.

by Spc. Michael Pfaff
133rd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

From across the base, a massive Georgian flag, flanked by two Bradley Fighting Vehicles, could be spotted dancing in the desert wind.

In front of the flag, a large formation of troops from the Georgian 23rd Light Infantry Battalion celebrated their Independence Day by holding a battalion ceremony, awarding troops who have performed exceptional work in the war on terrorism.

"Every Georgian celebrates that back in Georgia, and we are celebrating it outside of Georgia," said Maj. George Babunashvili, the battalion commander of the 23rd Light Infantry Battalion. "As this is very important, we decided to hold a ceremony today with the battalion that is replacing us."

Despite the intense heat, the Georgian Soldiers seemed in high spirits, bellowing Georgian anthems and sounding off with mottos for their battalion commander.

The ceremony included the current Georgian military element stationed here as well as the newly arriving replacements.

During the ceremony, Babunashvili awarded several individual Soldiers, chosen for their exceptional behavior and handling of missions during the seven months his battalion worked in this area.

"It's a motivation for each Soldier," Babunashvili said. "We can always tell a Soldier he is a good Soldier, but when we tell it to them on such an important day like independence day, we give them more respect and more responsibility to carry on."

Among the Soldiers awarded, two lost their parents during the deployment. Babunashvili commended them for having courage during such a trying time, and continuing on with the mission.

"We know it is very painful to lose a parent when you are so far from your motherland," he said. "But, that didn't affect their mission or behavior. They still continued to serve without asking for leave."

Babunashvili said it was important also to recognize these Soldiers in the face of the entire battalion for morale reasons.

"The motivation, when one sees another awarded on a day like today, he will also be willing to do the same," he said. "Every Soldier wants to be a general, but that is to be deserved first."

After the ceremony, the Georgians held a feast in the dining facility and watched a parade, with 18,500 military personnel participating, in their country on television.

Although today was a day to be celebrated, Babunshvili knows that his unit still has a mission to adhere to.

"We are taking time to celebrate, but that doesn't interfere with what we are here to do," he said. "And, that is to help the Iraqi people have an independent nation one day."

FAR # 7

FAR #7 Always travel with a buddy (beside you or within eye contact): always take care of each other.

Whether outside the wire or within the mentally soothing gates, it's vitally important to have a buddy watching your back and vice versa.

When on a mission throughout Iraq, getting separated from your team can be a dangerous situation. We are facing an enemy that is constantly looking for ways to exploit us. By presenting a single, isolated target, you are giving that enemy the opportunity he is looking for; do not give him that chance.

If you are entering a house, rounding a corner or moving under fire, ensure you have a buddy providing security and watching your back. Communicate and let other members of your team know your actions.

While on the various forward operating bases in our area of operations it is important to travel in pairs or more in case of an indirect fire attack and for personal security reasons.

If something happens to one person and you are in a remote location on the FOB, it is important to have someone to communicate your location to assist aid in reaching you.

A group also poses more of an imposing target than one person for a potential attacker.

We work too hard to allow something as careless as not communicating with others to result in tragedy. We owe it to our families and our friends to work together and return home safely and not let personal freedom be a cause for harm.

Random Thoughts

Commentary by Chaplain (Maj.) James Hartz
3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team

"A permanent solution to a temporary problem" is the way suicide is often described. And it is true in a general way. But for the person who is facing the three-headed dragon of worthlessness, helplessness and hopelessness, suicide is a very real option.

Worthlessness -- A person who feels as though their personal worth has sunk to "next to nothing" or "lower than dirt" can't appreciate their unique contributions to other people's lives. We give something just by being a part of people's lives. We add value to the world just by being in it. Flawed as we are, our personal strand is critical to the tapestry of life we are creating. Every one of us is a priceless gift to the world.

Helplessness -- In my experience, only the rarest of people never fall, never fail or never feel like a situation is beyond their control. So rare, maybe, that such people do not exist. All of us struggle, all of us reach the end of our own strength and all of us need help from family, friends -- or from God. A careful look around reveals leaders, co-workers, friends and family who want, and are able, to help. You just have to ask.

Hopelessness -- I have been told that hope is not a battlefield operating system. But it seems to me that only the foolish or insane continue to battle on when there is no hope. There is always hope. It is hope that draws from us that "one more try." It is hope that sees light in the darkness, peace out of war and order emerging from chaos.

So how do we help someone who feels devalued, invalided and who sees no hope? By, identifying with them, becoming a resource, and sharing a realistic vision of the future. You can make a difference!

Photo by Sgt. Zach Mott

Got him ...

Rubble and debris litter the site of the last safe house to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Hibhib, Iraq. The top insurgent target in Iraq, along with several associates, was killed during an air strike on the house June 7, 2006.

The mission involved two, 500-pound bombs by U.S. Air Force fighter jets and coordinating efforts by the Iraqi Security Forces and coalition forces. Al-Zarqawi survived the initial blasts only to succomb to wounds sustained from the blast less than an hour later.

Within days of the blast, engineers from Company C, 14th Engineer Battalion, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) cleared the site by pushing the debris into the 40-foot hole left in the wake of the bombing.