

The Daily Roar

VOL. 1, NO. 7

MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION -- BAGHDAD

DECEMBER 25, 2007

Hidden Baghdad

*By Staff Sgt. Mike Pryor
2nd BCT, 82nd Abn. Div. PAO*

BAGHDAD – Sgt. Nicholas Hardebeck’s platoon was about midway through their afternoon patrol when the sound of explosions began echoing from a nearby street.

Hardebeck cocked his head to listen for a moment. “Fire crackers. Just people celebrating,” he said casually.

At the beginning of their deployment, Hardebeck and the other paratroopers from his unit, Company A, Special Troops Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, might not have reacted as calmly. But after almost a year on the ground, the paratroopers are accustomed to the sights and sounds of Baghdad. What was once alien and strange – and liable to cause overreactions – now seems commonplace.

“We know when something’s not right. We know when we need to react and when it’s just an everyday occurrence,” Hardebeck, a St. Louis, Mo. Native, said.

“This is almost like a second home in some ways,” said Staff Sgt. Eduardo Ojeda, a Los Angeles, Calif. native and squad leader with A Co. “You learn (how to operate) in your sector just like your city back home.”

The hard-won knowledge gained from hundreds of daily foot patrols allows the paratroopers to see a side of the city most Americans don’t see on



by Staff Sgt. Mike Pryor, 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division PAO

St. Louis, Mo. native Sgt. Nicholas Hardebeck, Los Angeles, Calif. native Staff Sgt. Eduardo Ojeda, and Englewood, Fla. native Sgt. Ellis Catchings pull security while on a patrol of Baghdad’s Suleikh neighborhood.

the nightly news.

Ojeda described going home on mid-tour leave and having to answer crazy questions about what life in Iraq was like.

“People think it’s a day-in, day-out, in-your-face battle all the time,” he said.

The reality for the paratroopers of A Co is both less dramatic and more complicated. Several times a day, every day, they roll out of the gates of their base on the Tigris River and head into Suleikh to conduct patrols. When they first arrived, they concentrated on raids and making arrests, but over time, as the security situation improved, their focus shifted. Now they spend most of their time engaging the population, trying to help the people in

their area find solutions to the multitude of problems that life in Baghdad presents.

“It’s put more of a human side on the Iraqi people for me,” Hardebeck said. “You realize they want all the same things we want.”

A patrol conducted Dec. 21 was typical, although it began on an unusual note. It was Ojeda’s birthday, so the platoon sang happy birthday for him during the pre-mission briefing.

Once they were out on the street, the platoon began conducting what’s called a “soft knock” operation. It’s where the paratroopers go door to door, politely asking if they can come in to look around and talk with the

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by Staff Sgt. Mike Pryor, 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division PAO

Who invited this guy?

Pfc. Alexander Cesario of Somerville, N.J., a forward observer with A Co, Special Troops Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, joins in an impromptu dance party after his platoon came across a wedding celebration while on patrol in Baghdad's Suleikh neighborhood Dec. 21.

Baghdad Three Day Weather Forecast

Tuesday
Partly Cloudy
HI: 59F/15C
LO: 39F/4C



Wednesday
Sunny
HI: 59F/15C
LO: 39F/3C



Thursday
Partly Cloudy
HI: 59F/15C
LO: 37F/3C



The Daily Roar

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Baptism encourages Soldiers in Kuwait

by **SpC. Katrina Faulkner-Brown**
4th BCT, 10th MTN Div. PAO

CAMP BUEHRING, Kuwait – Soldiers from 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division displayed a public confession of religious faith through baptism at Camp Buehring, Kuwait while waiting to transition into Iraq, Dec. 7.

Chaplain (Capt.) Ronnie Fisher, 2nd Battalion 4th Infantry Regiment, noticed Patriot Brigade Soldiers had an interest in and need for a baptism service at the transitional camp, and so the process began. Acting quickly, Chaplain (Capt.) Brian L. Eastham, 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment; Chaplain (Capt.) Jon J. Knoedler, 3rd Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment; and Pvt. Dustin Napier, chaplain assistant for 3rd Sqd. 89th Cav., established a transit baptism ceremony for 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division Soldiers.

“People are kind of thinking about their (lives) more seriously while going to Iraq, (and) there was a need to address spiritual concerns,” said Eastham.

“These Soldiers needed this service before they head up north,” said Napier.

Each Forward Operating Base in Iraq has an assigned chaplain to minister to, encourage and support Soldiers, said Chaplain (Maj.) Cloyd L. Colby, brigade chaplain, 4th BCT, 10th Mtn. Div. Patriot Brigade Soldiers baptized at Camp Buehring were from both 3rd Sqd. 89th Cav. and 2nd Bn. 30th Inf. Knoedler baptized Staff Sgt. Daniel Dobbs, Spc. Steve Mrazik, Pfc. Thomas Fotta, Sgt. Shawn Hummel, and Pvt. Matthew Leue. Eastham baptized Pvt. William Simmons, Spc. Kenneth Harker, Sgt. Paul Mandrell and Spc. Aaron Stephenson from 2nd Bn. 30th Inf.

Soldiers who need someone to talk to for encouragement or spiritual guidance or who would like to volunteer to help with the music ministry should contact any of the



by Chaplain (Maj.) Cloyd L. Colby

Chaplain (Capt.) Jon J. Knoedler, 3rd Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, dunks and lifts Pvt. Matthew Leue, Company C, 3rd Sqd. 89th Cav., 4th Inf. BCT, 10th Mtn. Div., Dec. 7.

following chaplains on their respective FOBs. FOB Rustamiyah contacts are Chaplain (Capt) Brian Cieslukowski, 5th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery Regiment; Chaplain (Capt.) Alexander Loya, 94th Brigade Support Battalion; and Chaplain (Capt.) Brian L. Eastham, 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment. FOB Loyalty contacts are Chaplain (Capt) James Pritchard, 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion and Chaplain (Maj.) Cloyd L. Colby, brigade chaplain. The contact for FOB Falcon is Chaplain (Capt.) Ronny Fisher 2nd Bn. 4th Inf.

“These are really dedicated chaplains and chaplain assistants. They are ready to minister to the AO {area of operation} Patriot community, and I have total confidence in them,” said Colby.

Together for the holidays

By **Pfc. April Campbell**
27th PAD

Iraq might be the last place Soldiers expect to spend quality time with loved ones during the holidays. Two Soldiers here will spend their first Christmas together as a married couple. Making the most of every moment they have together is nothing new to newlyweds, 1st Lt. Tabitha Hernandez, the battalion personnel officer with the 1st Battalion 64th Armor Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd In-

fantry Division, and 1st Lt. Francisco Hernandez, a rifle platoon leader with Company B, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division out of Fort Carson, Colo., who said they have spent most of their relationship living in separate cities.

“This is my first Christmas being married. Being able to spend it with my him is immensely important to me because it is such a family holiday and both of us are very, very big on fam-

ily,” said Tabitha, a Wellsville, N.Y., native.

Tabitha and Francisco said they met in Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Ga., in March of 2006, and they began dating about a year ago when she arrived at Fort Stewart, Ga., after completing Transportation Officer Basic Course at Fort Eustis, Va. At that time, Francisco was scheduled to go to Fort Stewart as well.

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owners.

Ojeda took his team into one house. It was owned by a woman who lived alone except for her sister and her sister's three little children. When he saw the kids, Englewood, Fla. native Sgt. Ellis Catchings brought in an enormous box of candy from his vehicle. Catchings and Hardebeck watched laughing as the kids rummaged through the box and tasted all the candies and lollipops inside it.

"Sorry. They're probably not going to sleep for days now," Catchings joked.

In the other room, Ojeda was talking to the woman who owned the house. Ojeda was asking her about her family's circumstances. In a roundabout way, it came out that her brother-in-law was living with another woman, and had basically abandoned her sister after the kids were born.

"Well, you know, he's a man . . ." she said, shaking her head in a gesture women all around the world would probably recognize.

In the next house down, they found an old man and his grown son sitting in their frigid house next to a space heater, a few red coils providing the only warmth, surrounded by shelves holding old photographs and mementos from Iraq's history. The entire house was decorated with heirlooms and antiques. The old man said his father had worked for the king of Iraq, back when Iraq had a king.

He had a granddaughter start a pot of Chai tea, but the paratroopers had to leave before it was ready. He had been just about to tell a story about the king, and looked upset

that they had to leave suddenly.

"You can't stay?" he asked. Briefly he seemed disappointed – he hadn't had visitors in a while - but he quickly hid it behind a dignified smile.

The paratroopers moved back outside and continued their patrol up the street. At an intersection, their path was blocked by a wedding procession. Cars garlanded with pink and red flowers crept slowly past, with people hanging out the windows waving their hands and throwing confetti. At one point, the cars stopped moving and everyone got out and started an impromptu dance, banging cymbals and drums and blowing trumpets.

Somerville, N.J. native Pfc. Alexander Cesario moved into the crowd, shimmying and boogying around to the delight of the partiers. The other paratroopers shook their heads at his antics, but couldn't keep the grins off their faces.

By that point the paratroopers had been out for almost five hours, and it was time to head back to base. Later, Ojeda wondered what all the interactions added up to. He thought they meant something.

Young couples getting married, an old man remembering the past, a woman worrying about her sister's love life - these everyday human experiences reveal a city on the mend, as life in Baghdad returns to normal after years of out-of-control violence, Ojeda said.

"People back home don't see the milestones that are being set," he said, "but we get to see the progress. Here it is, right in front of us, right now."

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"At the beginning of 2007, I found out I was going to Colorado instead of Fort Stewart," said Francisco, a Montrose, Colo., native.

"When I proposed, I got a box ready and I sent her a letter saying, 'when you get the box, call me and you can open it and I'll tell you about everything inside,'" Francisco said.

The two celebrated their wedding with their families at the base of Pikes Peak near Colorado Springs, Colo., during Tabitha's leave in November, said Tabitha.

Although they were married, the challenges of being separated by distance were not over for Tabitha and Francisco, because he was originally expected to be deployed to Camp Liberty, the couple parted in November expecting to see each other in Decem-



by Pfc. April Campbell, 27th PAD

1st Lt. Francisco Hernandez, and his wife, 1st Lt. Tabitha Hernandez, will be at Camp Liberty together for their first Christmas as a married couple.

ber, Francisco said.

"He called me, the night he found out his unit was not going to be here," she said, "one of the comments I made was 'When we said 'I do', we knew that it might be this way.'"

The night he arrived at Camp Liberty, the two figured out they would have Christmas together.

"It'll be special just being able to see her for our first Christmas being married," said Francisco. "We've got a little tree that we'll stack up with small Christmas gifts that will be worth more than any other gift you could possibly get during the Christmas holidays, just simply because of where we are and what we're doing here."

While many Soldiers here may look to their comrades for support as part of their Army Family, the Hernandez couple seems to be especially blessed this holiday season in Iraq.