

WAR IN IRAQ

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SPECIAL EDITION

MAY 27, 2003

Embed Reporter Reflects on War

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I was standing about three feet away from Spc. Daniel Starkey, his machine gun hanging by a sling over his right shoulder, its barrel forward. Our backs were to our Humvee, and we stood facing a crowd of about two-dozen loud, curious and very excited Iraqis. Most were boys and girls not yet teenagers. About a half-dozen older men stood behind the crowd and watched interestedly.

It was Friday, April 10. We were somewhere in the middle of Nasiriyah, a city of about one-half million in southern Iraq. Our officers had left us and gone into nearby buildings to buy building supplies. Starkey, a few other soldiers, and I had been left in the street to guard the Humvees.

At first the kids wanted food or water. We convinced them, falsely, we didn't have any. Then they wanted their picture taken or for us to write our names on scraps of paper. I took a dozen photos. Then they asked us where we were from and what our names were.

After what seemed an eternity, an American Civil Affairs officer came over to us and introduced an Iraqi named Haider Alaaam. He was about 5 feet 5 inches tall, had short black hair, a mustache, and tired gray eyes. He also spoke English.

Alaaam told me how it was during the fighting. How he had helped bury 27 people in a schoolyard on the other side of the river and how his daughter became sick after she drank water out of the polluted Euphrates River because there was no running water in the city.

Then he talked about how life had been before the war.

"For 30 years we have lived in a bad situation," he said. "Saddam Hussein killed us. All of us are bodies without spirit."

Then he smiled a little.

"We are very happy now, all the Iraqi people," he said. "You see it in the eyes of the children and the women."

He had hope for Iraq now. He wanted a new democratic government, freedom, safety, electricity and water. I told him I hoped he would get it, that it was up to the Iraqi people.

When he finished speaking, he paused. I stumbled over the word for thank you in Arabic. He looked at me and asked for "something to remember" our conversation by.

I quickly searched my pockets for anything. I found a notebook and a Daily Titan pen. I gave it to him and showed him where the writing on it was the name of my newspaper.

He took it and looked at it almost reverently. He seemed moved. He looked at me with his tired eyes and said thank you. This man, his story, his gratitude, and his eyes, have stayed with me. I often think our two situations parallel those of our countries. The disparity of wealth and opportunity between his life and mine, between his country and mine, is almost obscene.

As an embedded journalist with U.S. forces during the recent war in Iraq, I had an unusual opportunity to report on the war, the American soldiers who fought it, and some of the Iraqis it affected.

Instead of being some nosy reporter intruding into the soldier's world, I was a part of that world. But, I came very close to not being there at all.

Because of technical problems with my laptop and satellite phone, I didn't leave Los Angeles until Saturday, March 15.

In London, my flight to Kuwait — which also carried Christiane Amanpour and Wolf Blitzer — was delayed; I didn't get into Kuwait City until late Monday night.

I arrived at the Army's embedding office at the Hilton Resort the next morning. As I approached the counter of the CFLCC, PAO, or Coalition Forces Land Component Command,

EXPERIENCE/4



A machine-gunner with the 82nd Airborne Division watches on a defensive perimeter at Tallil Air Base in early April.

Scud Alarms Signal War

FRIDAY, MARCH 21
Camp Camden, Kuwait

Stories and photo by Daily Titan War Reporter Ronald Paul Larson, who was the only college correspondent embedded with troops in Iraq.

There were eight Scud alerts yesterday and this morning at Camp Camden as Saddam Hussein responded to American bombing and fired his opening salvo of the war.

The first Scud alerts happened during lunchtime. I arrived at the camp for the unit I was to be embedded with, the 36th Engineer Group, less than an hour before and had gone to the dining facility.

We went through the serving line and sat down to eat. I had just eaten a spoonful of beans and was about to bite into a cheeseburger I had painstakingly built when somebody either heard three short blasts of a horn or the code words "Lightning, Lightning, Lightning," both of which are signals for a confirmed Scud launch.

Someone said "shit." Everybody stood up, opened their gas mask carriers and started putting on their masks. The masks are worn on the left hip and closed by a Velcro fastener. I opened the carrier with my left hand and pulled the mask out with

my right.

I remembered my training on the tennis court of the Hilton in Kuwait City when I first received my protective suit from the Army.

I held my breath as I fumbled with the carrier, pulled the mask out, and put it on. I blew out to clear the mask and then sucked in while holding my left hand over the air filter to seal it.

The Army standard for performing all of this is nine seconds. But, as the sergeant who instructed me on how to properly put the mask on told me, "You have the rest of your life."

As soon as soldiers had their masks on they started leaving the mess hall. I followed them, not knowing where we were going. I soon realized we

were heading for the bunkers: three large metal cargo containers put in excavated ditches surrounded by sand berms and covered with sandbags. When I got there, there were already about 50 soldiers in the bunkers, all with their masks on. After a few minutes we got the message to put on our entire protective suit, which included boots and gloves.

It was the early afternoon and it was warm. After putting on the suit I was drenched in sweat. In only a few minutes the part of my face touching the mask became uncomfortably wet and I began to feel clumsy and lethargic. I quickly saw why it would be impossible to fight in those suits in warm weather.

After 10 minutes or so, one long blast on a horn — the "all clear" signal — was given. We were told we could take our mask and gloves off but had to keep the suit on.

The soldiers emerged from the bunkers, took off their masks and returned to wherever they had been before. The mess hall was closed so I went to the headquarters tent. There I learned that we were now in "Threat-Con Delta," the highest of four threat levels.

Within 10 minutes there was another confirmed Scud launch, and we put on our masks and went back to the bunkers. Throughout the afternoon we had repeated Scud alerts.

After the fourth alarm, a soldier in the bunker said with a little frustration, "Somebody needs to find that launcher and take it out."

A few minutes before the fifth Scud alert, we heard a distant boom. We didn't know what it was. It might have been an airplane breaking the sound barrier. Then the alarm sounded.

While in the bunker two jets passed overhead.

SCUD/3

Soldier Life: Haircuts are Essential

SATURDAY, APRIL 26, 2003
Tallil Airbase, near An Nasiriyah, Iraq

I don't know that 1st Sgt. Tony Williams waits for many people, especially if they are enlisted, but he was forced to wait last Saturday. Spc. Tory Martin was supposed to give him a haircut.

In the tent of the 36th Engineer Group headquarters company, the imposing 6-foot-3 inch 1st Sgt. with 22 years of service carefully moved a large green plastic footlocker out of the way and stood a medium-sized box on its side in the center of the tent, then hovered by his desk.

Martin's haircuts are "better than the regular one," Williams said. "Everybody comes to Martin; the colonel, everybody, if they want a good one."

Lt. Julie Campbell, from Tennessee, also uses Martin's skills.

"The eyebrows. That's the big thing for me, the eyebrows. It's great. He takes his time," she said. Many of the unit's females go to Martin to get their eyebrows cut, Campbell said. "I better be able to get my eyebrows done," she said, eyeing the growing crowd.

Martin arrived through the back entrance and put on a maroon barber-type shirt.

"Where do you want me?" Williams said as he drifted over to Martin. Martin motioned to Williams to face the center of the tent and sit on the wooden box.

By now, three soldiers were looking on as others went about their business in the tent.

"Don't let everybody crowd up here now," a soldier said, as some soldiers tried to edge their way toward the center of the tent. Apparently word had gotten out that Martin was giving haircuts.

While Campbell was watching, presumably calculating her chances of getting her eyebrows done,

HAIRCUT/3

Sgt. Chad Sheir at the Camp Bucca location. It was in this barren place where the 36th Engineer Group suffered through a sand storm.

