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Democracy grows in troubled Iraq

Monday, February 21, 2005

By Lt. Col. Stephen E. Spelman

Editor's note: Lt. Col. Stephen E. Spelman, 48, is an assistant district attorney in Hampden County who is serving with the U.S. Army Special Forces near Baghdad, Iraq. He will be sharing stories with readers of The Republican about the experiences of servicemen and women in Iraq.

The sun rises fast in Iraq.

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One minute it's dark, and the next, the sky explodes in purple and crimson. What seems like seconds later, the bright orb of the sun hunches its shoulders above the far horizon. By that time, your soldiers have long been awake, getting ready for another day.

As the sun pushes into the sky, I walk around my base in the early morning. I see soldiers doing the things soldiers do. Some are stowing their gear after a raid mission the night before. They'll sleep during the day, then prepare to go out again tonight. Other soldiers gather around a large satellite dish, preparing to upgrade some communications equipment. Some walk toward the motor pool. Two scout helicopters flash by, buzzing swiftly just above us. I join a

group of soldiers about to head out on a daylight patrol.

It's cold in the mornings now, far different than when I first arrived in country.

When I first got here, I would wake in the darkness to a heat so oppressive it seemed to push against me. As I rose and began my day, it was as if the heat had already so invaded the world that it overwhelmed all my other senses. The physical press of the air was an obstacle from the moment I woke. And the sun wasn't even up yet.

By noon the world was on fire. There was never a cloud. I went two months without seeing one. And still, your soldiers would be outside, doing their jobs. Patrolling in Baghdad, training Iraqi military forces, working with local construction firms to build schools, fighting Sadr's militia in Najaf, and taking supplies by convoy up from Kuwait, in truck cabs where the temperatures reach 140 degrees.

When the wind blew on those long days, it was like standing in front of a hair dryer. When I first got here, if the wind came from behind, I'd turn and look for the flame.

I did my PT runs at noon. If I had to fight at that time of day, I wanted to be ready for it. I wore a 3-liter Camelbak full of water, and carried two 1.5-liter bottles of water. Half an hour later, I would have drunk almost all the water, still with 10 to 15 minutes left to run. By that time, the water would be almost the same temperature as the air, somewhere between 105 and 110 degrees.

Of course, that's hotter than my normal body temperature, but I had to have the water. It's quite an experience to be thirsty in the desert, and have to quench your thirst with hot water.

Now take those temperatures, and think of the young soldiers out on patrol, wearing body armor, helmets, carrying weapons, water, and hundreds of rounds of ammo. Think of them doing that, day after day, in the burning sun.

It's on days like those that we appreciate so much all you've sent to us. Not just the items themselves, but the cards and letters of support. We read them all. They sustain us.

I've been particularly lucky. So many people have sent so much. Around Christmastime, I got box after box of supplies. I redistributed them, and sent them off to our teams, especially the more remote ones, down in southern Iraq and in the far west, deep in the barren Iraqi desert.

I got a phenomenal bunch of cards from the 4th-grade students at Blessed Sacrament School. Every one of those cards was made by hand, and colored by hand. What a combination of proud Americans and proud Red Sox fans!

The National Honor Society from East Longmeadow High School sent so much stuff that I can't believe they had time to study! All of it was perfect, and I distributed all of it to the soldiers out in the boonies.

Of course, my friends at the courthouse contributed so much as well: my colleagues from the DA's office, the folks from the Probation Department, my friends in the criminal defense bar, the court officers, the court stenographers and the employees at the court clerk's office.

If you'd like to send something, here's how to do it. Go to anysoldier.com. That web site will tell you how to send a package, and what to send. You'll send your package to volunteer soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who are serving overseas. You can pick the service and country you want your package to go to. The volunteers will distribute what you've sent to the young



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men and women who don't get much from home. The anysoldier.com site is a good one, because each volunteer will tell you exactly what the soldiers need where they're stationed.

The weather has turned here in Iraq. For a couple of weeks we had perfect temperatures, just like wonderful Indian Summer days back home. That didn't last long, though. It's actually below freezing at night now. In the vast, open desert, there's nothing to hold the heat in. In the cold air, the stars seem bigger, tossed high against the black sky.

Now when we do our night operations, we're bundled up. We wear gloves, with watch caps and balaclavas under our helmets. It rains once in a while now. When it does, everything turns to mud. So we've gone from burning heat to cold nights, sometimes with soaking rains.

Out in the rural villages, it can be pretty messy going. I was out in one village a little while ago, and it was as if the houses had been set down in a lake of mud. If you've ever been hiking out toward Berkshire County in April as the snow melts, you'll get the picture.

But instead of being on some remote dirt trail deep in the Berkshires, we were in the middle of a fairly good-sized village, with ankle-deep mud everywhere. Yet as we walked through that village, right nearby was one of Saddam's huge palaces, imposing and opulent. He'd spent the money on that, rather than on making sure the people had drainage and a sewage system for their village.

We have Civil Affairs teams that work with local Iraqi governments to provide the things we take for granted in the States: schools, electricity, running water, trash pickup. Our teams provide a start, at least. But there are so few of them, and so many places and people that were neglected for so long. That's the way it was, under Saddam.

But something's different now. It occurred to me, as I walked through that village, that these people have more hope now. They've had an election. There's a difference in the air here.

Groups who two weeks ago bitterly opposed the election have announced that they might be willing to participate in the government. Of course, they've set impossible conditions. But two weeks ago they supported the terrorists trying to bring back the old dictatorship. Now they're negotiating. Like politicians.

Why is this important for the people in that village? Think what we want our local politicians to do. We want them to provide things like police, fire fighters, water, sewage, and trash collection.

As your soldiers move through these muddy villages, it's easy for us to shake our heads, and wonder how things could get this way. Even we forget, at first, that these people didn't want to live like this. Yet they had to. They didn't have a voice. They didn't dare complain.

Saddam and his thugs didn't listen to the people. The people could live in mud - Saddam didn't care. He had palaces.

Pretty soon there will be elected leaders in place here. They're going to have to deliver. This is where democracy really works. Right down on the ground, in muddy villages like these. If the electricity doesn't work, if there's no sewage system, if the school isn't built, somebody is going to tell people: "Vote for me next time. I'll get those things for us."

So as your soldiers patrol through the cities, towns, and villages in Iraq, in many ways our lives essentially remain unchanged from day to day. We soldier on in heat and cold, in day and night. Our physical environment doesn't

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Yet all around us, the human environment is bursting with passion, color, joy, and excitement. Something new is being created. People argue, debate, and dispute. It seems that they take joy just in the open arguing, having lived for so long under a fascist repression.

We're not sure how things appear back home on the news. The brutal men from the former regime haven't given up. They're still killing policemen and judges. They kill them because police and judges bring the rule of law. They know, and fear, that the rule of law will allow democracy to flourish.

And in a democracy, people argue. A lot.

So, if when you watch TV or read the paper it seems that the Iraqi people are arguing over everything, well, they probably are. There's a lot to argue about here. And the people of Iraq have strong opinions. But from your soldiers' perspective, all this argument is a good thing.

The way your soldiers look at it, the more the Iraqi people argue, the better we've done our job to help give birth to a new democracy, and the sooner we can come home to you.

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