

Thunderhorse Battalion Newsletter

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29 Aug 2004

Well it's been over six weeks since my last newsletter and a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. During the thirty-day period that began in the middle of July, the enemy was the most active since our arrival. This in turn kept us quite busy also; but we've got the bull by the horns again and things have quieted down considerably in the last ten days. As I mentioned in my last newsletter, I went back to Ft Hood for temporary duty to train our replacement unit, the 256th Brigade of the Louisiana National Guard. So, I was in the States during about half of this very busy time. Needless to say, Major Kendrick the outgoing Executive Officer stepped into the command position during my absence and performed admirably. Major Kendrick was supported by two new members of the team, Major Paul Horlacher, the new XO and Major Chris Wilbeck the new Operations Officer (S3). They both came on board the day before I left and were immediately thrown into the action. I can't say enough about how well the whole team did while I was gone. It is further proof of what a great group of soldiers and leaders we have.

Unfortunately, the period since my last note didn't pass without us suffering some losses. As I'm sure many of you know by now, the month of August was a tragic one for 2-12 CAV. On August 2nd, we lost two soldiers when a "road-side bomb" destroyed their truck. Specialist Harry Shondee, the driver from C Company and Sergeant Justin Onwardi the medic from HHC were both killed instantly by the explosion. Two weeks later, on August 16th, tragedy struck again. 2LT Mike Goins and Specialist Mark Zapata of A Company, 2-12 CAV were killed by gunfire while fighting the followers of insurgent cleric Muqtada Al Sadr down in An Najaf. Our A Company, 2-12 CAV (tanks) is attached to Task Force 1-5 CAV (infantry) and they continue to conduct offensive operations down in Najaf.

As we do to honor all of our fallen soldiers, we held a memorial ceremony for each pair of soldiers to honor their sacrifices. We held the first of the two ceremonies here at Camp Black Jack, just outside of Baghdad and we said good-bye to Sergeant Onwardi and Specialist Shondee. Then on the 19th, Task Force 1-5 held the second ceremony, this one honoring 2LT Goins and Specialist Zapata, on their base camp outside of Najaf. Command Sergeant Major Booker and I flew down to the ceremony with the Commanding General, MG Chiarelli, Colonel Formica and CSM Ciotola, along with many others.

The scene at these ceremonies has become all too familiar to us: the Command Sergeant Major posts all of the colors behind a solid black two-step stand. The first step bears the boots and a photo of each of the fallen. Their rifles stand alone on the top step with their muzzles pointed down, the bayonets inserted into a slot to hold them fast. Each soldier's dog tags hang from their rifle's pistol grip and sway in the wind during the ceremony. Tears flow freely as their fellow soldiers recount all of the good and bad times they have made it through with those who have fallen. Grown men embrace one another without embarrassment because each loss is the loss of a brother, for the bonds formed amongst brothers in arms is often tighter than blood-kinship. The twenty-one-gun salute and solitary bugler blowing taps closes the final chapter on these young heroes. At the end, each commander from the Division Commander on down steps forward to the black stand one at a time, salutes to the sacrifices of each soldier and lays a unit coin on the step next to the soldier's photo. Then it's done. The unit has to move on and continue with the important mission that lies ahead. All were great soldiers, leaders and men. We will miss them all and we pass our most sincere sympathies to their families.

It is so very hard not to loose faith during times like these, to question whether the sacrifice is worth the end gained. We've known from the beginning that this would not come without a cost. Yet we all pressed forward because that is our duty as soldiers and because we are committed to ultimate cause for which we sacrifice. We

continue to drive toward the goal of ridding this country and this region of the seeds of hatred that would continue to grow unless checked and eradicated. What we face everyday are symptoms of the infection of terrorism that was spreading from this region to places all over the world. Those that orchestrate the attacks against us here are prepared to take their fanatical ideals and desire to kill to any place in the world and fulfill what they see as their destiny. As I've heard more than one soldier say: it's better to fight them here than in Des Moines—we're going to fight them one way or another.

Don't be fooled into the line of thinking that if only we were nicer to the world or if we had different leadership in the White House that things would be better. These terrorist organizations have been gaining strength and global reach for at least the last twenty years. They've attacked us many times over the last fifteen years in particular and they won't go away if we ignore them. We saw that on September 11, 2001. These organizations are comprised of angry young men that are mostly from desperately poor or backward countries with leadership that has told them that the US and other economically successful countries have robbed them of their future. You see it's easier for their national or religious leadership to blame us than to accept the responsibility for their own failed policy. So many people in this part of the world have grown up being told that we are the root of their problems, not failed leaders like Saddam Hussein. They have been shielded from the truth because they haven't had the right to have a free press and free speech. Their ignorance about what our true intentions are is sometimes amazing. We have a lot of work to do and that work won't get done if we as a nation hide our head in the sand.

However slowly though, we are winning and just like with an infection in the body, we will have to be able to withstand some high fevers and a deep cleaning of the wound if this is ever going to heal. Doing nothing or running away is not an option. I know I've been a bit philosophical here, but it's important to review why we embarked on this perilous journey in the first place. Keep up the faith. Finally, on a lighter note, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all of you for your overwhelming support. The boxes of supplies, letters, baked goods and other assistance you all take the time to provide to us truly helps all of us to continue to face the dangers of the day. The support of those at home is an essential element of soldier morale and motivation. While I was back at Ft. Hood a few weeks ago, I took all of the FRG leaders and co-leaders and Rear Detachment chain of command out to lunch to thank them for all of the hard work they do. When we return, I intend to invite you all to a thank you picnic. Your efforts are a key part of our success. Keep those cards and cookies coming and hang in there, the end of the deployment is drawing nearer.

Always Ready! Thunderhorse!

LTC Tim Ryan
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