

Dispatch 5: Warriors for Peace

Wednesday, March 22, 2006



Hooked up with the 1st Platoon, A Company 3/320FA. It's a field artillery battalion that transitioned to an infantry role before deployment to Iraq.

They made the transition from "cannon cockers" to grunts. This was a joint patrol with Iraqi Army (IA) forces. That's how things are being done now. It's no longer left entirely up to American units. The 101st has been training the IA for a while, and the Iraqis have demonstrated their abilities well enough for a small portion of the 101st's Area of Operations (AO) to be turned over to them.

We received the pre-mission rundown at "o-dark-30," along with an update regarding IEDs in the area. Then we saddled up in the convoy vehicles. Intel had it that some bad guys who had been conducting kidnappings were supposedly making plans to do it again. Sources put them somewhere north of Tikrit. The job of the 3rd Platoon and the IA unit was to check it out, see if they were still around. Then, they were to hold and question suspects and collect any additional intelligence regarding insurgent activity.

I was assigned to ride with Convoy Commander, SSgt Brantlee and his team: PFC Shy (Hannibal, MO); the team medic, PFC "Papa Doc" Zuniga (Daytona, FL); and the top-side gunner, Sgt Campos (Tule Lake, CA). We were accompanied by IA translator "Jose" (can't use his real name for fear of reprisals against his family).

We headed up "Tampa Highway" and took the bypass going north, around downtown Tikrit. Mission planners intended the team to hit the enclaves and towns of Al Sequor, Hamadi, Shab, Maysen, Maskarat and Al Hambra.

Just east of Al Hambra is a deserted military complex (NMC) where a number of structures - including old barracks - still stand relatively intact. There is a lot of transient activity and Al Qaeda has been known to use it. The IA and 101st had reasonably solid intel that Al Qaeda or insurgents had cached explosive material there and were using the NMC as a base for construction and disbursement of IED material.

Enroute to NMC, the IA team leader, Lt. Abdillah, radioed SSgt. Brantlee to pass the word

about complaints from the citizens of Al Hambra of intimidation by a group of "unknowns." Some of the populace claimed it was a band of IA soldiers donning ski masks who were shaking them down and attempting to extort cash from them.

And since having one's door kicked in, being roused from bed in the middle of the night with an AK shoved in one's face by a masked man certainly qualifies as a legitimate beef, we were on our way to check it out. FYI, if anyone is wandering around at night, odds are it's a bad guy since there's a 2000hr-0600hr. curfew (that would be 8 p.m.-6 a.m. to all of you civilian types).

If I wanted to set an ambush anywhere, it would be in Al Hambra. It's a perfect killing field. There's only one way in and one way out of the place. The narrow road is squeezed between the base of steep and undulating hills to the west and to the east runs the Euphrates. The river provides nourishment to the otherwise arid soil, and as such, thick nests of shrubs and dense stands of palms provide ideal cover for any sniper, mortar or RPG attack. There are perfect fields of fire from any vantage point ... except from on the road.

The road is not where any grunt would want to be.

We were on the road. And not moving. Stopped. Standing still.

Now we're out of the vehicles, listening to the concerns being voiced by multiple families and citizens about the men who have been terrorizing them. The stories all pretty much jived. Four men, all in IA uniform, in a white truck on the road at night, beyond the bounds set by the curfew. But all IA patrols in that area are done jointly with teams from the 101st.

An Iraqi woman raged at the IA team members ... screaming at her children not to get near them, not to acknowledge them, calling them "dogs."

Uniforms can be purchased on the cheap. Odds are it wasn't IA at all, but rather insurgents bent on planting and cultivating seeds of mistrust among the locals. The 101st and the IA have worked very hard to demonstrate - to prove to the citizenry - that they have nothing to fear from the military, especially their own military.

The 101st has been at this a long time - through several wars and conflicts - and understands that killing the enemy is what happens when you go to war. But they also know that you don't win a war unless the shooting stops. That winning the hearts and minds of a people are, at the very least, equally as important as a body count.

And that's why the soldiers, the grunts of 3rd Platoon, A Company are out there with the IA. Not only teaching them to be effective against Al Qaeda and insurgents, but to be effective guardians of their own people. Teaching them to look to the needs and concerns of those they serve to protect. That's why the Civil Affairs Battalion is worked beyond belief, because they want to see the people of Iraq finally become free of the fear and terror that has shackled them for so many years.

SSgt. Brantlee, his team and the entire 3/320th are as much peacemakers as they are warriors. As warriors, they yearn and hope for peace ... as only warriors can.

This war is being fought differently than my war was. That's because it has to be done differently. There aren't any pitched battles against battalions or regiments of enemy military units. This war is being fought "onesies" and "twosies." The bad guys skulk into an area, plant their IEDS, fire their rocket, mortar or RPG rounds, and then they slink away.

It's obvious that most of the insurgents aren't terribly fond of the idea of martyrdom. And although the troopers of the 3/320 FA hope for peace, they'll be more than happy to accommodate those who feel differently ...