



Hoosiers on the Front Lines

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Wednesday, August 16th -- Posted by: Karen Hensel, Reporter

In Theater -- Once in Baghdad security is very tight for us. We meet with General George Casey and then we fly Blackhawks into the Green Zone. We are trailed by two Apaches ready to shoot anyone who approaches. We are traveling as part of a bi-partisan congressional delegation led by Indiana Congressman/House Veterans Affairs Chairman Steve Buyer. With him on the trip is a member of the president's cabinet, VA Secretary Jim Nicholson. On the road we travel in armored vans -- the tops, sides and bottom. We pass "Duck and Cover Bunkers" on the way.

15 Minutes to Baghdad -- It is now 15 minutes to landing. We are instructed to put on our kevlar vests and helmets. The card games stop. The plane is still. All we hear is the heavy drone of the engines. I am wondering why -- going into a war zone -- I am not nervous. I guess it's because I know I am only here a short time and others endure the daily grind to stay alive for over a year. Somehow, my job as a reporter seems so simple. The plane is now filled with quiet contemplation and anticipation.

7:15 am -- We are preparing to fly into Baghdad. We are sitting on a C-130 on our 1 hour flight and my first trip into a war zone. Surprisingly, I am not nervous. Perhaps it is an effect of being surrounded by armed and trained soldiers. We are catching a ride in with a plane full of troops also going into Baghdad. They are calm and quiet and clearly ready to do what they have trained for. We are sitting on red webbed seating. It is not a luxury flight that drop our soldiers into war. The heat is stifling. As we gain altitude some of the soldiers play cards to pass the time. Others sleep. We've already learned the military lesson from one day in Kuwait: never turn down an opportunity to eat, sleep or use the bathroom. You don't know when it will come again. As I watch them one leaps up holding a Texas flag to cheers in the plane. They are war buddies but they are also clearly friends with a bond few of us will ever understand.

7:00 am -- As we arrive at the Ali Al Saleem Air Base in Kuwait you see damage on the hangers. That is from us hitting them in the first Gulf War. It is now a U.S. Air Base. The moment we exit the van we are immediately issued Kevlar helmets and vest. The vests are much heavier than what I expected.

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Tuesday, August 15th -- Posted by: Karen Hensel, Reporter

We spent our first full day in Kuwait with troops, many from Indiana. We are embedded with a congressional delegation that includes Indiana Congressman/VA House Committee Chairman Steve Buyer and VA Secretary Jim Nicholson.

We toured the hospital and dental clinic at the Arifjan Air Base in Kuwait. It is also a major supply hub. Most soldiers going into Baghdad stop at this base on the way in for two weeks of training and acclamation. This is also one of their first stops on the way out. Army Master Sgt. Peter Chadwick of Bloomington described



24-Hour News 8's Karen Hensel talks with soldiers.



Buyer stands with Hoosier soldiers.



Buyer eats with Hoosier soldiers.



Hospital beds at the military hospital.



it best saying "if Indiana is the Crossroads of America, then this is the crossroads into Baghdad."

An operating table at the military hospital.

Camp Arifjan sits in the middle of the desert -- but doesn't everything here? As you enter the base, you go through two security checkpoints. The lines were long on the way in, with 10 soldiers checking with mirrors in and under the cars for bombs. As we drive in on Patton Blvd we see large signs along the roadway -- "Act Like a Leader," "Be a Leader," "We Need Leadership, Not Likership." Humvees and tanks are parked in rows as crews work maintenance on them to get them back onto the battlefield. Security is so tight, we were not allowed to video much except the tours of the hospital and the dental clinic.

Soldiers talk of the heat and they are right. It is 100 degrees in Kuwait even at night when the sun is down. It reached close to 118 today. There are signs posted everywhere reminding troops to drink water. It is so hot here the soldiers do their required physical training at night or 3:00 am. We saw them running in the dark as we left.

Congressman Buyer (R-IN) and VA Secretary Nicholson met in a private briefing with the base commander Lt. General Steve Whitcomb. The mission of the trip is to determine how best to treat injured soldiers: what is working and what needs to be improved. Buyer ate dinner tonight with Indiana soldiers. Afterwards, they unfurled the Indiana flag together. They are humbled to eat with a Congressman and told me it was good to be able to talk to him about home.

What do Indiana soldiers miss about Indiana in August?

"Right now my wife is in Indianapolis taking our daughter to Butler. She'll go to the Indiana State Fair and I miss her, the roasted corn and Red Gold Tomatoes," said Army Master Sgt. Peter Chadwick of Bloomington.

"I miss my friends and family," added Col. Kent Halberstadt of Greenwood.

"I miss seeing grass and driving down the road and seeing the corn grow," said Major Mark Ehinger of Fort Wayne.

It is almost midnight as we are 7 hours ahead of Indiana. Our day begins again in 5 hours. I will go to sleep tonight also thinking about Indiana tomatoes and the soldiers I met today who want a taste of home.

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Tuesday, August 15th -- Posted by: Eric Miller, Photojournalist

Well, after a good 16+ hour trip and several airline meals to our credit, Karen and I have finally touched down in Kuwait City. Each leg of the journey was pleasant enough, and considering the heightened security at Heathrow airport I was very impressed at the time it took us to move through the gate checks and screenings.

As we sat in the London terminal waiting to board our third and final plane, I was, for the first time, vividly aware of the fact that I am truly sailing headfirst into the unknown. And more than anything, this feeling makes me excited and proud. Both for what I will experience, and from the opportunity I have to show YOU something new. I have never been to this part of the world before. I have never been in a situation where, as an American, I am the minority to a majority powerful, proud, and fiercely volatile. I am acutely aware that we are headed into a war zone, but I feel that it is my duty to report and photograph first hand what is happening. I think this as a strap myself into seat 19F aboard Kuwaiti Airways. Taxiing down the runway, I make eye contact with a little girl and her mother both shrouded in black, and my smile was met with two equally genuine grins. This is going to be a remarkable trip.

My first opportunity to gather video came today (Wednesday) as myself, Karen, and the congressional delegation we are traveling with went the Camp Arifjan, which is about 45 minutes outside Kuwait City. Security was very tight, but we were able to eat with the troops, visit a few of their facilities -- hospital, dentist, offices -- and I was able to find a few soldiers from Indiana. It was great to get to talk to those guys and even though I truly sense that everyone's spirits are up, they are aching for anything Hoosier. Our conversations centered on the recent Brickyard 400, and the State Fair which one soldier from Bloomington is very sad to be missing. (An elephant ear does sound pretty good, huh.)

That's all for now but I will update very soon as we move across the Middle East. Please keep our

troops in your prayers, as well as the knowledge that peace is within our grasp.



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