

GO FOR BROKE

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You will face many defeats in your life, but never let yourself be defeated. (Maya Angelou)

The patrol briefing was to the point. We would be conducting a routine route clearance to deter the emplacement of improvised explosive devices along major supply routes around Logistical Support Area Anaconda as well as conduct counter-cache operations to deny the enemy access to weapons and ammunition. The soldiers from the 2nd Platoon, Company B, 100th Battalion, 442nd Infantry have been performing these types of missions on a daily basis for about five months now. Company B is comprised mostly of infantrymen from American Samoa and has been supplemented by both volunteers and cross-leveled soldiers from all across the United States. Our patrol was lead by Staff Sgt. Uluao Leituli from American Samoa.

The 29th Brigade Combat Team, which includes the 100 Bn, 442nd Inf., arrived in theater in late January. Shortly after arrival, the change in season from winter to spring happened almost overnight. The Iraqi winter was wet, cold and muddy. The skies were overcast and rain visited in occasional deluges. Poor drainage and the oversaturated soil led to ponds of placid brown water that dominated nearly every open area on the base. The ponds became mock reflecting pools mirroring images of the mundane: porta-potties, trailers and metal shipping connexes. Thick gooey mud was everywhere, adhering itself to everything it contacted. Vehicle tires became giant mud doughnuts covered with gravel “sprinkles,” while Army boots became awkward cement clodhoppers after a stroll through the stuff. Then one day the rain stopped, the sky cleared, and the puddle ridden fields became dry, dusty bowls in a matter of days, signaling the onset of spring.

The warm spring soon became an oppressively hot summer and the thirsty soil often takes flight in the form of dust hazes and dust storms. Visibility drops to about the length of a football field at times and the fine, tan colored powder gets into everything. On hot days, a gust

of wind brings no cooling relief. The heated breeze reminds me of opening an oven to see if the Thanksgiving turkey is done; the blast of heat elicits a cringe rather than a sigh of relief. There have been days in which the temperature has risen above 121 F. Peak summer temperatures here will rise to 130 F, sometimes higher.

We left at noon, at the start of the hottest time of the day. An anemic AC unit in our humvee pumped arid, semi-cool air over us as we baked in the box-like interior of the steel humvee.

Our patrol passed along the raised dirt roads which meander through the fields of the rural agricultural communities that surround LSA Anaconda. Irrigation canals, filled with tall weeds and fecund green water, line many of the roads. Little girls heard flocks of sheep, goats and sometimes a few scrawny cattle, while women of various ages labor under the desert sun using long handled shovels to turn the bleached soil. Most of the older women are draped from the neck down in a black, loose fitting outer garment called “abayah”, the modest nun-like covering that Arab women wear. The younger women wear conservative printed coverings of the same design. The heads of both young and old women are swathed in “hejab,” the linen wrapping that allows only their faces to be seen. Their clothing appears as confining and stifling as it is proper and traditional. They seem impervious to the oppressive heat. The resigned, even pace of their work is contrasted by their vibrant young children who play near them in the fields. The women work as their parents have, as well as their parents before them for generations. Though they work hard and perform important roles, in general, women occupy a low rung on the Iraqi social ladder. They pay no attention as our patrol rumbles past. Conservative Muslim tradition doesn’t allow them to look at or speak with males outside of their families.

We passed homes either spread out across the countryside or clustered in small villages; most of the homes are humble dwellings made of cement or mud brick. The mud bricks are mixed with straw for strength, giving them a “hairy” appearance. The bricks weather over time, melting into each other until they eventually form solid hairy walls of earth.

Iraqi architecture favors square block-like homes with covered lanais; they often use their flat roofs as decks. The mud brick structures feature roofs thatched with tree branches and sticks that are packed with mud (which after drying, aids in waterproofing and heat absorption). All of the homes are the same color of the light tan desert soil they stand in. Modern satellite dishes adorn the roofs of a few of the homes in the Villages of Yethrib, Albu Hassan and Albu Hishma. As we passed through, the men regarded us with friendly to neutral expressions, while the modesty of the younger women was protected by



Visibility limited to 100 yards. Photo by SSGT Ernesto M. Gutierrez.



On patrol. Photo courtesy of the United States Army.



On patrol. Photo courtesy of the United States Army.



Friendly Iraqi children.



Arabian fire red sunset. Photo courtesy of the United States Army.

exasperated mothers who quickly shoved them indoors. Litter lines the pot-holed streets. We continued on through thick clouds of fine dust kicked up by the humvees in our patrol.

Some of the children dealt with the heat of the day by splashing about naked in the canals; occasional huddles of women scrub clothing piled in wicker baskets along the shores. Many of the children flash the Hawaiian “shaka” sign that the 100th Battalion 442nd Inf. soldiers have taught them.

The day settled into late afternoon and the sun cast the golden glow of a French Impressionist’s painting upon the fields and laborers. The shadows lengthened and the outline of our hulking armored humvees shimmered across the timeless scene as we passed by. For a brief moment, the old and the new, the traditional and the modern were intermingled as our shadows crossed each other. Iraq is a land of many paradoxes.

We dismounted in the village of Abu Hishma and patrolled the village’s main street. The children were friendly and full of smiles. They’ve become accustomed to the generosity of the soldiers and follow them wherever they go. Some of the children were unkempt, with matted, tangled hair. Many were barefoot and shouted, “Mista, you give me!” as they held out empty hands to the soldiers.

According to Sgt. John McElroy, the 2nd platoon has been hit twice by IEDs in the past few days. One was a big one so it was really loud when it went off,” said McElroy. None of the infantrymen were injured in the attack. According to Sgt. McElroy, many of the 100th Battalion 442nd Inf. patrols have experienced IED attacks since taking over this area of operations near Balad, in the heart of the “Sunni-Triangle.”

The fiery Arabian sunset was accentuated by the absence of electrical lights in the area. As evening approached, the sun’s passing was marked by the Bakr Village Imam (Muslim priest), who summoned the faithful to the “Salat-El-Meghrib” or “sunset prayer.” The imam’s voice reverberated across the quiet countryside like a surreal blanket, projected from a loud speaker in the mosque’s minaret.

Evening brought out the bats. They flitted about haphazardly like dark leaves buffeted by an unfelt wind that doesn’t allow them to fall; they swirled to the backdrop of a hazy purplish sky and a rising full moon. The peacefulness of the evening belies the danger outside LSA Anaconda’s barbed wire. To date, 36 soldiers from the 100th Battalion 442nd Inf. have been wounded in action. A total of 49 soldiers from the 29th BCT have been wounded in combat, two have been killed in action. The 29th BCT is about halfway through its year long combat tour in Iraq.

Of interest:

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) was organized on March 23, 1943, in response to the War Department’s call for volunteers to form an all Japanese American army combat unit. Over 12,000 Japanese Americans in internment camps volunteered for World War II. With its battle cry, “Go For Broke!” the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, along with the 100th Infantry Battalion (separate), earned the honor and distinction of being the most decorated unit of its size and length of service in battle in U.S. military history.