

In March, VFW's communications director spent time with the 3rd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, in Iraq. Here's a brief report on one patrol.

By Jerry Newberry

'Screaming Eagles' Soldier On in Iraq

A Battery, 3rd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment made the transition from "cannon cockers" to grunts before deploying to Iraq, making it ready to hit the road running.

It patrols jointly with Iraqi Army (IA) forces. That's how things are done now. It's no longer left entirely up to American units. The 101st has been training the IA, 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.

Intelligence indicated 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 out the rumor, and see if insurgents were still around. Then they were to hold and question suspects and collect any additional intelligence regarding insurgent activity.

The patrol commander was Staff Sgt. Charles Brantlee. His team included Pfc. Albert Shy of Hannibal, Mo.; the team medic, Pfc. Frank "Papa Doc" Zuniga, Daytona, Fla.; and the top-side gunner, Sgt. Eduardo Campos, Chico, Calif. The IA translator was nicknamed "Jose."

Heading north along the "Tampa Highway," the patrol skirted Tikrit. Just east of Al Hambra is a deserted military complex where a number of structures still stand relatively intact. There is a lot of transient activity there, 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 it as a base for construction

and disbursement of the materials.

En route, the IA team leader, Lt. Abdillah of 1st Bn., 1st Bde., 4th Iraqi Army Division, radioed 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 renegades in ski masks who were shaking them down and attempting to extort cash.

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." Despite this show of hostility, odds are that Iraqi troops weren't involved.

One of the men on patrol that day was Sgt. Mike Kaufman, assistant non-commissioned officer-in-charge of the battalion personnel section, who made his first trip outside of the wire.

When the patrol ended, Kaufman said, "I finally felt like I was part of the effort. I had taken the same chance as the rest of the group does everyday. I feel like a soldier."

GIs are teaching Iraqis to be effective against Al Qaeda and insurgents, to be guardians of their own people, and to serve the needs and concerns of those they protect. That's why civil affairs personnel work beyond belief. They want to see the people of Iraq finally become free of the fear and terror that has shackled them for so many years.

And that's why Brantlee and his team, as well as the entire 3/320th, are as much peacemakers as they are warriors. Their vital mission will succeed if given sufficient time. ❄

Voices from the 3rd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division

Sgt. 1st Class Cheryl Newels, New York, N.Y.

"Our efforts will pay off eventually."

Sgt. 1st Class Maurice Goodwin, Denver, Colo.

"This is a good mission that needs to be done—the people of Iraq have been deprived and abused, and they deserve better."

Sgt. Rick Rohrig, Cincinnati, Ohio

"This is an outstanding mission and we're proud to be here. I only wish the media would stop telling only half the story."

Staff Sgt. Amara Fofana, New York, N.Y.

"I'm glad someone wants to report the good we're doing here."

Pfc. Jessica Hans, San Diego, Calif.

"The hours are long, but everything we're doing—helping the civilians and making great strides with the Iraqi Army—makes it worth it."

Capt. John Montgomery, Independence, Ky.

"The lack of national unity we see on the news contradicts the grassroots support that we actually see."

1st Lt. Matt Kotowski, Campbell, Calif.

"The real story of the successes we're having needs to be told. I'm glad the VFW is here doing that."

1st Lt. Kevin Tanquary, Sheridan, Wyo.

"Our troops are outstanding and they are doing outstanding things. People need to know that."

Pfc. Albert Shy, Hannibal, Mo.

"I'm proud to be here and proud of what we're doing. It's good to know the VFW is doing what it can to report the real story."

Sgt. Eduardo Campos, Chico, Calif.

"We are doing good things that people just don't hear about—and that's too bad."

Pfc. Leonardo Gonzales, Reno, Nev.

"We are doing important things here—helping the Iraqi people and training the Iraqi Army."