

Topic: “My War in Iraq”

Abstract: In January 2006 just nine months after high school, I went to Marine Corps Boot Camp for 3 months. Less than a year later, I found myself in an unfamiliar country in a war zone. It was extremely hot there and our living conditions were poor. Despite all the bad things about being in a war zone, it was interesting meeting new people of different cultures. My time in service was hard, trying, stressful, and at times frightening; but I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Keywords: USMC, World Trade Center, Iraq, War, Combat Zone, Different Culture, Pride, Service

Just nine months after high school graduation, I decided to join the Marine Corps. I, like many others I served with, was still upset about the attacks on the World Trade Center and wanted to do my part to serve my country. The blatant disregard for human life shown by the terrorists that committed that heinous act deeply upset and enraged me. As a kid, friends and I played “Army”, just as most young boys do at some point. I had no idea that one day I would actually be involved in a real war. Boot camp was from January 2006 to March 2006. Shortly after my graduation from boot camp, infantry school began. In June of 2006 I graduated from the Marine Corps School of Infantry. Just eight months later I found myself alongside a thousand other Marines from my unit, 1st Battalion 3rd Marines, on an airplane headed for Iraq.

Our first stop out of the country was Germany. Even though we were only there enough time to allow our flight crew to switch and refuel our plane, it was still interesting to be there. Even from the airport terminal we could see the buildings, roads, and even road signs were much different than we were used to in the U.S. They even sold pre-mixed Jack Daniels and Coca Cola in cans, we of course took pictures. After a couple of hours we were loaded back onto the plane and headed to our next destination, our first taste of the desert, Kuwait.

Kuwait was not at all what I had expected. I thought it was going to be a little run down country in the middle of nowhere. Then again all I had to go off of was things I saw in the movies. It had large buildings and highways, just like we do. A lot of people even drove American made cars. It was unbelievably hot there too. We didn't do much in Kuwait. We took buses from the Kuwait International Airport to the main base. The base was huge. Most of our time here was spent talking to family members on the phone or internet, eating, sleeping, and doing paper work for our upcoming trip into Iraq. Our time in Kuwait ended about five days after it had begun. This time when we loaded up on airplanes, they weren't commercial airliners. We boarded Air Force C17's wearing our combat loads that consisted of Kevlar vests, ballistic ¼ inch thick steel-ceramic coated plates, and Kevlar helmets. It was starting to get real.

Like many others, I had never been out of the country before, let alone to a combat zone. We touched down at Al Assad Air Force Base, Iraq in the middle of the night and were moved to temporary living conditions to wait for our move out to our Area of Operations or AO. From what I saw in the morning when we got up, Iraq was exactly how I pictured it, a vast desert wasteland filled with nothing but sand, dirt, and the occasional camel. My unit spent eleven days at Camp Al Assad and were "heload" (pronounced hee-low-ed) into our respective AO's. Heload is a term we used for being on helicopters, we also called them birds.

Charlie company 1st Battalion 3rd Marines, or just 1/3 Charlie, was to operate out of two cities. The first city was where the majority of our company would spend their deployment. It was an old, very old, "college" that consisted of mud huts in the middle of the city of Haqlinyah. It was a very rural place with a lot of farm lands and open desert and was right on the shores of the Euphrates River. The other city we were in charge of was called Bani Dhar. We quickly dubbed it Bani D, since our Arabic pronunciation was so poor. Bani D was even more rural than

Haqlinyah. Fourth Platoon, one of the platoons out of the four in our company, was to stay in a mud walled, dirt floored house with no electricity or running water in Bani D for half of the deployment and be relieved by another platoon. Luckily, sort of, for me it was my platoon that would relieve 4th Platoon.

At first it didn't seem very scary at all to be in a combat zone. The first few days in our AO were pretty quiet. While 4th Platoon patrolled Bani D, my platoon was up first for guard force on the main base in Haqlinyah. This meant we stood in bullet proof boxes for 8 to 12 hours a day to protect the perimeter of the base. It was interesting at first to be on post as we called it, and watch the locals go about their business in their everyday lives. They live much differently than we do. They have less, eat less, and work very hard for not a lot of pay. My interest in standing post ended quickly after a small terrorist cell decided to start launching 60mm mortars at our base. They landed just 50m away from our posts. The sound was deafening and shook our entire compound. Good thing our roofs were made of plywood and sandbags right? It is almost impossible to describe to someone who has never heard a mortar round exploding what it's like. It has a very distinct "ka-rump" sound, not a BOOM, like in the movies; that's more what grenades and pipe bombs sound like.

After 3 weeks on guard force, posts were re-named loony bins, insinuating that one would go crazy standing in them. In 130 to 140 degree weather wearing anywhere from 80 to 110lbs of gear, that wasn't far from the truth. All I wanted to do at this point was do my real job as an infantryman. I wanted to go on patrols. Patrols were fun, exciting, dangerous, scary, nerve racking, and interesting all at the same time. We walked around the city in squads of 10 or more Marines at a time and usually one Navy Corpsman (our medics) and sometimes an interpreter. Well on April 15, 2007, I got my wish.

My platoon was finally rotated into the patrol schedule. My squad's first patrol was on April 15, 2007 at about 1600 hours, or 4 o'clock. We were to patrol a sector of the city known for having terrorists and a street call I.E.D ally. I.E.D stands for improvised explosive device. It was quite ironic actually because my first patrol, the time when I was most likely to be killed, was on my 20th birthday. Happy Birthday to me.

After 3 months of patrolling, standing post and working checkpoints at the cities outskirts, my platoon relieved 4th platoon in Bani D, that's when the real work began. My platoon consisted of 28 Marines. The 28 of us lived in that run down, dirt floored house I described earlier (now with electricity, sort of) for 3 ½ months and were in charge of running 4 patrols a day, standing four posts including a radio watch (in charge of sending and receiving radio transmissions from the squad on patrol and the main base) and controlling an entry point to the city, a bridge. Needless to say, we were short staffed. We got on average about 3-4 hours of sleep every other day. Some weeks we went 2 or 3 days with no sleep at all. The highest recorded temperature while we were there was about 146 degrees Fahrenheit. Add 105lbs of gear to that and then walk around a hot, dry, and hostile city for 6 to 8 hours and then immediately go take your place at one of the loony bins after patrol and that was a typical day for us.

We lived like that until October 2007, when we finally slowly began to change over with the next unit to work that AO. At the end of our time in Bani D most of us looked like survivors of some horrible famine. I stand about 5'9 and weighed 155lbs going into that deployment. After being in a constant state of stress and in weather that made it too hot to eat or drink, and walking about 15 to 20 miles a day, I lost 25lbs and looked like a skeleton with skin. Then again so did most of my platoon and the Marines from 4th Platoon who were at Bani D before us.

At the end of the deployment I had been shot at, had mortars launched at me, a pipe bomb thrown at me and had to deal with men who would kill their own family members if they felt it was in the best interest of the cause. The war changed me, but not in a bad way. I just look at things much differently now. I have a greater appreciation for the things I have. I even have a greater appreciation for every day that I wake up, not all my friends have that anymore. I also have grown to appreciate other people's cultures as well. While we were fighting Muslim extremists, real Muslims were quite pleasant people to be around and we met a lot of wonderful people, I even stay in contact with a guy I met over there.

Despite the bad parts of the military and being in a war, I wouldn't trade my time in the Marines for anything. I met lifelong friends and even brothers closer to me than some of my own family. I know that I am a better man for it and I am proud to say that I served my country and was a part of U.S History.