

■ WAR NOTES ■

Meeting a new friend over breakfast and pronouncing him dead in the evening. Treating a soldier who tried to stab his own arm. Sudip Bose, the US Army doctor who was on call in Iraq and treated Saddam Hussein, is about to chronicle his extraordinary 15-month experience. **Arun Venugopal** reports.

This much we know: Captain Sudip Bose, United States Army medic, treated Saddam Hussein, the erstwhile Butcher of Baghdad. Beyond that, the details are murky.

It's unclear how often they met. Or where. Or whether the former Iraqi dictator was suffering from chest pains or asthma or genocidal guilt-induced indigestion; whether he was clean-shaven or bearded or had reverted to his mustachioed form; and whether he has any big plans for his final battle, the mother of all trials.

We learn nothing. Bose is remarkably leak-proof.

"I'm only allowed to say I took care of him," he says, alluding to patient-doctor confidentiality and "the whole Hippocratic Oath thing."

"Gotta respect him like any other patient," he says. Pause. "It was interesting."

It should probably come as no surprise that the most visible Indian-American soldier in Iraq has been a doctor. During his

stint, Bose, surgeon for the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *US News & World Report*, the *Washington Times*, and CNN (twice, on Paula Zahn). Most prominent, though, was *The Accidental Soldier*, a 4,500-word profile on *salon.com* last summer that took note of his extraordinary intelligence and a tendency for mass casualties to follow him wherever he went.

Even if Dr Bose's days on the frontlines are over — he returned to Fort Hood, Texas, in February, after 15 months — his time in the spotlight is not.

The 30-year-old is likely to figure larger in the public consciousness after he leaves the army in July: his nearly completed memoir, *On Call in Iraq*, provides an in-depth account of the situation in Fallujah, Najaf and Baghdad. It is the physician-turned-soldier-turned-scribe's way of providing an alternative to the embedded reporter accounts that have dominated discussions of Iraq. But, should it be published, don't expect this to be a misty-eyed tribute to the US occupation of Iraq.

'...We have seen everything ever shown in a war movie. We have seen the hardest of men break down and cry. We have believed in the cause and at times questioned it,' Bose



On call in Iraq

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wrote February 8, in a message titled *Going Home!!!* 'We have been told the truth. And we have been lied to. We have watched and read about 'experts' and 'officials' sitting in their air-conditioned offices, ordering us to battle, boasting they 'know how hard it is.' They will never know.'

There was a time not too long ago when Sudip couldn't have known, and had no intention of knowing, war. He was just another 20-something *desi* guy en route to a career in medicine who happened to treat a few veterans as patients. Slowly, the idea of becoming an army physician intrigued him — its unpredictability and its rigor.

There was also the not-so-small matter of finances. The debt he and his family would be saddled with upon his graduation from Northwestern Medical School was daunting. In his second year of med school, he took the plunge and enlisted. At the beginning of 2004, he shipped out.

'So here I am in Kuwait in a secret camp with no lights, electricity or heat,' he writes in an e-mail January 9, 2004. 'It is pretty cold. Internet access is very sporadic here. It is kind of far with long lines and very very slow. We are limited in usage time so by the time I load up my Hotmail screen my time is more or less up! However, I will try to check e-mail as often as possible but may not be able to reply regularly. I will likely be here till January 30 after which time we will convoy by tank (although I hear they may fly me) into Baghdad. I do not have an address here (I do not have much of anything actually).'

His e-mails, to family and friends — including a couple who start a Web site, www.sudipbose.com — come at periodic intervals. Within a few months, he admits, the novelty of war is gone. He takes note of the 'endless tunnel of time,' and then proceeds to contradict himself.

'This morning I ate breakfast and saw a new friend of mine. We exchanged hellos. This evening I pronounced him dead and saw the contents of his breakfast in his ruptured intestines.'

At 3 am, April 21, 2004, Bose comes up with his 'humble solution' for the future of Iraq.

'Then it hit me! A brilliant idea!' he writes. These people are killing everyone!

They are even killing themselves now. If they continue to do this maybe all the

'bad guys' will take each other out and there will be none left. The other good Iraqis can live happily ever after and we can smoothly exit the country....'

A dark humor pervades his postings, a sort of armor, one imagines. One day, he recounts, he meets a patient with a shoulder injury. The soldier, it seems, had gone to sleep in his cot.

'His left arm fell asleep,' writes Bose. 'In the middle of the night his left arm lay across his chest, heavy without sensation. In a state of grogginess he awakens to feel 'a heavy arm' lying across his chest. Frantically he reaches for his knife to stab the arm which he mistakes to be someone else's limb. Perhaps the enemy's arm reaching for his weapon? Luckily there is no knife in proximity. He pulls his left arm violently with his right arm and nearly dislocates his own left shoulder! Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications. Tylenol. Rest, ice. Call me in the morning.'

On call on the war front means constantly being on the edge. For relaxation, he writes e-mails. He also lifts weights whenever possible.

Sometimes, he and the other soldiers watch movies — from the highly irrele-



vant *Anchorman* to the more topical *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Bose says, "It was interesting to see Michael Moore's movie" — a bootleg copy he managed to procure. "There were certain people who were fans, certain people who hated it. I think that more people there supported the mission than the media might portray. They wouldn't show the progress."

When they're not relaxing, the soldiers are sweating. The temperature goes well above 120 Fahrenheit, regularly — much higher when they're out with their 40 pounds of gear. At night spiders and scorpions emerge, and bite soldiers.

Then there are the battles. Sometimes, it is a covert operation in the middle of the night, when the rest of his unit approach a home known to house insurgents, while he waits behind, in his vehicle, M16 pointed out the window.

Gunfire erupts and soon he finds himself treating the wounded — only those who stand a chance of living. Sometimes, these are Americans, or friendly Iraqis. And at other times, it is 'the enemy who spits, swears, and glares at you as you attempt to listen to his lungs. He recently killed two fellow soldiers. He would have killed us too if we had driven over his explosive device. He hates me.'

His unit is constantly on the search for Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose forces

are wreaking havoc with the US military's plans. A battle takes place, appropriately enough, in a cemetery.

"Our unit was the only unit with a doctor," recalls Bose. "We were on the periphery of the cemetery. If somebody got hit there, they came straight back. You could hear the battle going on, and the gunfire. It's a whole different environment. You kind of get used to that noise around you — helicopters flying around you randomly, mortars flying into your area — it's an array of things. You're going down the street in a humvee and there are people firing down on you. It's not like in the old days when there's an open field and one team's on one side and another team's on another side. It's like you're in a city and there's road bombs here, road bombs there, people on the streets throwing rocks at you."

Bose is getting ready to re-enter civilian life. This summer, he has to move back to Chicago, where his father, an engineer, lives with his mother, who works in a bank. There, he'll be a regular physician in a regular hospital.

Two months after returning, he's still enjoying the luxuries of modern America, like warm showers, and the Nacho Supreme at Taco Bell.

Generally, he says, he's doing all right, save for being startled by a loud clap of thunder.

There are also the occasional "little frustrations" at encountering a society whose priorities seem a bit misplaced.

"Being in a traffic jam, honking your horn — things that are frustrating here after coming back from an experience like that — it's just dumb," he says.

"If your shower or faucet breaks, you might think twice before cursing at the faucet. I think that's what I came back with: what's most important in my life, and what things are not worth stressing over."

Who is Sudip Bose? That's a question more than a few journalists have asked. And if you're not quite satisfied with their answers, you can turn to the man himself. Between all the articles and the thousands of words he has written for public consumption — and the many more to come — there's no shortage of information about this one soldier.

Unlike other ringside commentators, you don't get the impression he is in it for cheap thrills. But the abundance of text doesn't change a simple fact: that this man has been some place you haven't, and that you hope you'll never be.

The more you hear, the more you begin to suspect you aren't hearing. But it's not the same as an official confidentiality, the kind that is demanded when speaking of military coordinates or famous patients. With this silence, it's as if you are being taken places where words don't go. ■

'Saliva, swear words and gunfire'

March 2, 2004: "What a day today! So I awoke at zero-early A.M. in typical Army fashion. In a semi-comatose state I managed to down some breakfast (not very tasty)... feeling a little under the weather. Around 10 AM there was a bombing/Rocket-propelled grenade (who knows???) at a mosque in the Khadimiya area of Baghdad about 1/2 mile from where I spent the night. Absolute chaos! Our unit (1-5 Cav of 1st Cavalry Division) rolled out to the site. I was in an armored humvee vehicle. The streets were packed with thousands and thousands of people celebrating the holiday of Ashovara. This is a holiday in honor of Imam Hussein the grandson of Prophet Muhammed. The Shiite Muslims feel he died in vain so they mark this holiday by slaying themselves (cutting etc...) as a means of sacrifice. From our perspective this means more suicide bombings...."

As we rushed to the site of the bombing the crowds began hurling rocks at us. I was in a humvee with an M16 rifle pointed out the window. The women in burqas spit at our vehicles. Hoards pounded on the windows. There was only glass (windows halfway rolled down so I could have my machine gun out the window) between myself and thousands of angry mobs... somehow they were under the impression that the bombing was the Americans' fault?!?!?! Angry. Angry.

Security was posted (somewhat) and I exited the vehicle to

treat patients (hundreds of patients some severely injured and some mildly). I was the sole doctor with a physician assistant and a few medics. Rocks bounced off my kevlar helmet. I don't know where the heck all these rocks came from.. it was as if they brought a dump truck filled with stones!!!!?? I didn't think there were that many rocks in the whole city! AK47 gunfire was heard in the background. Save lives??? I couldn't even save my own if my life counted on it!!!! It was absolutely terrifying...

So several rock bruises and a slight limp later I write to all of you... extremely thankful that these bruises were my only injuries (although it was painful)... Sticks and stones can break your bones!!! (Saliva, Arabic swear words, and gunfire overhead is not too pleasant either!)

We turned around and sought shelter behind the walls of the compound before I really had a chance to treat any patients. Six foot high flames were set around us and people attempted to climb the walls and were warded off with our weapons... Needless to say, I really earned my Combat Medical Badge today for providing care in the direct line of fire... My life would have been just fine without it but hey...

I hope this goes down as my most terrifying day in Baghdad and these go down as my only injuries. I will consider myself extremely lucky." ■

Extracted from Sudip Bose's diary with the author's permission