

Baghdad: Let's Talk Positive!

July 11, 2004

Just wanted to say hi again. I hope everyone had a good 4th of July weekend. Usually I celebrate Independence Day by seeing fireworks. This year the "fireworks" were a little different. Very explosive nonetheless!

Thank you for your emails. I realize I have been delinquent on many replies. Whenever a soldier dies here all communication is cut off until the family is notified. Although there has been progress with internet cafe here I find at times it is several days before I can make it there and when I do the computers often do not work or are very slow. Kind of like the state of this country...in the process of rebuilding but not quite there yet. Nonetheless, thank you for your emails and support. It is so much appreciated!

The Iraq situation is often portrayed negatively. Soldiers dying. 12-15 month deployments often without mid-tour leave (as in my case). Unbearable climate. Many locals taking what we are trying to give them with one hand and attempting to kill us with the other. The media and recent movies have pointed out the explosions, death, and darkness. There is definitely truth in that. But even through the harshest of combat environments some positives do pop up here and there. I thought I'd change the tone of this email and try to point out some of the positives, both on a larger level and for myself. It is the things below that help me through these times.

The Larger Glass is Half Full:

Optimism: Iraq is "free". The local Iraqis can hopefully shed the cloak of dependency and assume taking more matters in their own hands.

Optimism: Bad Aim. People firing mortars have terrible aim. Worse than a doctor with an M16 machine gun! Their misfires make for fewer casualties (and interesting stories!).

Optimism: Rebuilding of a nation. Millions of dollars have been put into repairing sewer systems, taking trash off the streets, and renovating buildings. We live by a circular road which troops had termed "stinky circle". It is now a little less stinky. Even our area of Baghdad is more livable. My building is no longer severely rat infested. Painted, shattered windows repaired (until they are shattered again). Plumbing fixed. Fewer power outages. For a while there the electric wires were crossed with showers so we were getting shocked when touching the faucet!

Optimism: Rebuilding of local hospitals and clinics.

Optimism: More children immunized.

Optimism: School textbooks don't mention Saddam Hussein for the first time in 30 years.

Optimism: Interacting with local physicians. "Emergency Medicine" is not a specialty here yet. MUCH needed.

Optimism: Reaching out to the youth who will hopefully one day like Americans. More smiles, waves, handshakes. Hopefully they will enjoy the life I one day hope to return to once deployment ends.

Optimism: Caring for 2 children with a life threatening blood disease and trying to arrange for their care in the United States.

The Smaller Glass is Half Full:

Optimism: I am still physically and mentally and emotionally healthy. I wish we could all say the same. If I make it home without any injuries and am sane I cannot complain.

Optimism: Knowing this hell is only temporary.

Optimism: Recognizing happiness does not come from material goods or money.

Optimism: An uneventful day.

Optimism: Watching DVD movies on those uneventful days. Saw "Fahrenheit 9/11" 2 days after it came out in the States! Interesting (and much more relaxing) seeing the raids in Iraq on a computer screen rather than in life. The copies are bootlegged versions taken by someone in the local theaters with a camcorder. You can hear popcorn crunching, people whispering, and often see people walk in front of the screen! It's like being in a theater!

Optimism: A shower, laundry, and fresh change of clothes. This does not occur for us every day. Most of us only brought three uniforms for the whole year.

Optimism: Powder-for those other days. (I have more than enough and don't need any more-thanks).

Optimism: Getting sleep.

Optimism: Not getting crazy war dreams during that sleep.

Optimism: Life. Saving a life.

Optimism: Killing a nasty bug in my room.

Optimism: Trying the local food.

Optimism: No diarrhea after the local food (a.k.a. Saddam's revenge).

Optimism: Having V.I.P as a patient. (A very famous bearded man now on trial). Now that he is on trial I am allowed to share that I helped take care of him. It was fascinating sitting in the same room over six hours with this man. Cannot say where I cared for him. Cannot say for what. Patient confidentiality.

Optimism: Working out. Now I understand why prisoners lift weights! Much of my free time has been spent doing this.

Optimism: Unbelievable trauma experience.

Optimism: Having my friends reassure me I am not "lanky" and "dorky." Thanks guys! You're the best! This is how a recent front-page article chose to describe me. Although, around 6'5" infantry guys I probably do come off that way! For the record, I did not join the military for purely financial reasons and it was not an "accident." Nor is Baghdad a "utopia." Definitely an interesting read...

Optimism: Writing a book and hoping to publish (looking for willing publisher).

Optimism: Getting to appreciate why I really went into medicine.

Optimism: Air conditioning-when it works-to bring the temperature down from 120 degrees to a nice "cool" 90 degrees.

Optimism: Earning several military coins as awards. "I went to Baghdad and all I got was this lousy t-shirt!"

Optimism: Learning Arabic (well not really but I know some words). "Alem" means pain. This is the word I most commonly encounter.

Optimism: Care packages.

Optimism: Letters.

Optimism: Emails.

Optimism: Support from family and friends have been unbelievable. Even from those I have not spoken to in years or have not even met! Childhood, High School, Undergraduate, Med School, Residency, and Work friends! Like a reunion (kind of). Thank you guys!

Optimism: Support for my mom, dad, and sister in the States (in many senses this is much harder for them than for me). Thank you again.

Optimism: Receiving a "thank you".

Optimism: Recognizing life is short and even one year can change the course of life forever.

Optimism: Receiving emails from animal activists questioning why I dislike rats and spoke badly of them on my last email. Made me chuckle. I do not dislike rats. They have their home and I have mine. We just need our space!

Optimism: Realizing "it's already been a week." Although it seems to be going a lot faster for the people who email me and say "Six months already? Wow that was fast!" Uh huh...

Optimism: Porcelain toilets - hard to come by.

Yes this is miserable. But at times good can come out of even the worst of situations. The glass is half full not half empty. 6 months down. I will be a happy man when I get to go home! And that is something definitely positive I hold on to!

Take care!

Sudip

"It Could be Worse"