

# Postcards from Iraq

## What I saw . . .

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Having spent the better part of the last three years deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, I felt as though I was fairly battle hardened.

Although not having been in a sustained firefight with a weapon in my hand, I have been with our troops when we have had enemy contact. I have seen the gruesome outcome of war, civilian and military casualties and the effects that war has on children.

I have always tried to put up a macho image to keep company with the very men and women that I entrust my life to. They are, in fact, putting their lives on the line for me. Young troops keeping me safe so that I can visit with the town folks and view our projects (renovating schools and hospitals, building fire stations and courthouses, installing water and sewer lines, repaving roads).

I do have a softer side that comes out every once in awhile. It's not something I can turn on and off, it just happens when my emotions get the best of me. Funerals and death are two of the things that I do not deal with well; however, I also cried at my best friend's wedding. How "manly" was that?

I travel the roads on Victory Base Complex in Baghdad as part of my job. I see convoys coming and going in every direction. Today was a special day. There were six armored troop carriers, fully loaded in a line coming on to the base. One sign that these were ground troops was that they had their duffle bags strapped to the sides of the carriers. I cannot even imagine where these guys had been or what they had gotten into. This is after all, a war zone.

I have to admit, I have a pretty comfortable job as far as that's concerned. I have a bed to sleep in every night and climate controlled working conditions. One of the biggest decisions I make each day, is which one of the six dining facilities I want to eat in. It was in one of those dining facilities that my perspective of our situation in Iraq changed.

While I was greedily stuffing myself with my favorite foods that day, I looked up. What I saw was a young soldier. He couldn't have been more than 20 years old. His uniform was covered with dirt as was his face. He must have attempted to splash some water on it because he had streaks of mud near his eyes — eyes that clearly showed signs of fatigue. He was alone, although not surprising as his buddies might have been out watching the weapons in the APC. Where had they been? What had they gotten into while they were there? Questions that only a few will ever know the answers to.

This young soldier was carrying his tray, looking for a spot to park a wary body. On his tray, the plate of food was piled six inches high. It appeared that he had some of everything they were serving that day. When he sat down and started to eat, he hunkered over his tray as if trying to protect it from invasion. I could tell by the way he was eating, that he had not had a decent meal in a few days. He was clearly exhausted and looked as if he might nod off at any time. I am not sure that the food was even hot by the time he ate it, but to him, it looked like pure heaven.

Most of us around here would not have even looked twice at such a site. I had probably seen it before and not even noticed. Today was different. Something about that soldier will stick with me for a long time. What I saw, was the epitome of the American soldier, giving his all until the point of having nothing left to give.

God Bless this soldier and God Bless America.

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