



CHRISTOPHE VORLET For The Times

# The View From on the Ground

With American bloggers reporting on life in Iraq, the war is only a mouse click away

Other wars produced poetry and novels and memoirs. But the war in Iraq has brought a new kind of literature. In real time, on the Internet, officers and enlisted men and women are chronicling the war on weblogs — better known as blogs. Two weeks ago, one of the most popular war bloggers, a soldier stationed near the northern Iraqi city of Mosul who identified himself only as CBFTW, was disciplined by the Army for violating “operational security.” His gritty postings described both the terror and boredom of war. Last week, he removed them from his “My War” website. But the journals of many other military bloggers remain on the Web. Here are edited excerpts from the blogs of Americans serving with the U.S. military in Iraq.

## A ‘festering sore’

*Lt. Col. David G. Bellon was commissioned as an officer in the Marine Corps in 1990 after graduating from law school. He remained on active duty until 1998, then continued as a reserve officer while building a law practice in Oceanside. In January 2003, he went to Iraq to serve in the infantry during the invasion. He returned home in September of last year and was sent back to Iraq in February 2004. Bellon, who is serving in the volatile Sunni Triangle, has a wife and two children, ages 4 and 6. He hopes to be home by Christmas. His family maintains a website, [www.thegreenside.com](http://www.thegreenside.com), on which they post Bellon's letters to his father.*

Aug. 17, 2004  
My regiment has been involved in a fight outside of Fallouja for the past week.  
On August 9th, insurgents in the city kidnapped the two Iraqi National Guard battalion commanders within the city, subsequently killing at least one of them. It is another clear example of the savagery of the enemy here. The city is now without any coalition influence other than us. The local militia that was created as a solution to the April fighting has become a defensive army that is in collusion with the insurgents. The police are complicit with

the enemy and the city is literally run by terrorists.

The Iraqi National Guard battalion commander who was killed was Lt. Col. Sulaiman Hamad Ftikan. We knew him as Sulaiman. He was the closest thing to a true patriot and leader we have found who is actually from the local Fallouja area. He was kidnapped and murdered because he had finally gotten his battalion to stand up to the criminals and insurgents who have had their run of the city all these months.

Of course his murder was not merciful. He was tortured and beaten to death. He was so disfigured by the torture that his friends could not bear to look at his body.

The city has continued to be an epicenter of terror and instability. With everything that I know, I cannot fathom a resolution of this problem that does not include us being allowed to take the city down once and for all. Time and space does not allow me to recount the horrible tales of torture and murder that have taken place inside this town.

The Marines, meanwhile, continue their heroics. I could share with you accounts of severely wounded Sailors and Marines insisting that they can still hold a weapon and are still “in the fight” and other lesser wounded Marines refusing to be evacuated. There are Marines who exit friendly lines every day and commit acts of untold bravery that would inspire you as much as they humble me.

The difference between now and April is that the majority of Iraqis that we meet now ask us to enter the city. They are tired of the lawless hell that exists inside the city and are literally willing to have us rubble it to save it. I know it sounds strange but it is the reality here.

We also have an entire battalion of Iraqi Special Forces soldiers who have stepped forward. We have trained these guys and they are a different breed of cat altogether. They don't necessarily love us but they now have a bond with the Marines and operate jointly with them everyday. They shake their head at the hesitancy to resolve Fallouja and are willing to fight inside the city. It will be a very tough fight but in the end I just don't see how we can move forward as a coalition, or Iraq as a fledgling

country, while this festering sore remains open.

## ‘Getting settled in’

*Beth is a 28-year-old lab Navy lab technician with a husband and a 1-year-old son named Cody back home. She arrived in Iraq late last month. Her blog, “A Labrat's Journey,” is at [www.desertdiet.blogspot.com](http://www.desertdiet.blogspot.com).*

August 30, 2004  
Pretty good day

It was pretty calm yesterday and not too bad today. We are getting settled in and wondering when the others are coming. The group we are replacing can't wait to leave. For a short period of time, until the turnover, we have to double up in our rooms. The sunrise and sunsets are very pretty from here. That is about the only beautiful thing, though. The laundry is taking about five days to come back instead of overnight due to some people up and quitting. Last night they had lobster and steak for dinner. Everyone was so happy. Not quite my cup of tea, though. I ate a PowerBar. I am still leery of the food here but hopefully that changes — or I get lots of food in the mail. We have microwaves and can openers. I need a bowl with a lid. Got the webcam thing figured out and got to see Cody last night — made me cry for hours. He has already grown to be such a big boy, his hair is longer and he has gained weight.

## Operation Chemlight

*Paul Rieckhoff enlisted in the Army Reserves upon graduating from Amherst College in 1998. After completing an officer's training course in 2002, he volunteered for active duty. He was sent to Iraq in 2003 and was based in Baghdad for 10 months conducting combat operations. All 38 members of Rieckhoff's platoon returned home safely. Now off active duty, the former first lieutenant has started Operation Truth, a “nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that seeks to educate the American public about the truth of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from the perspective of the”*

[See Blogs, Page M6]

## DEFENSE

# Five Big American Blunders in Terror War

By WILLIAM M. ARKIN

**S**OUTH POMFRET, Vt. — Almost three years ago, soon after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, I began to write a twice-a-month column for the Opinion section on military affairs and the war on terrorism. This is the last in that series of columns and — with terrorism continuing to haunt the nation's thoughts, as well as the presidential campaign — it may be worth looking back at what we have learned. Think of it as looking back in order to look forward more clearly.

Failing to learn from the past may not always condemn us to repeat it, as George Santayana famously suggested, but it does mean our journey forward will be rougher. With that in mind, here are five lessons for the struggle ahead, based on the experience of the last three years.

**First: Beware the Next Big Thing.**  
On the military side of the war on terrorism, the Next Big Thing has been U.S. Special Forces. President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld jumped to embrace special operations in the Afghanistan war and expected them to play a substantial role in rooting out Iraqi die-hards. At first, the ninja warriors did seem to personify 21st century military transformation. And the shadowy, no-rules ethic of special ops nicely paralleled the president's “bring 'em to justice” thinking.

But the special operations strategy is essentially a SWAT team approach: Highly trained operators swoop down on the enemy and clean house. It works well for the police, because the bad guys are usually holed up somewhere. You can't surround a whole city or country, though. By the time we kick in the doors, the bad guys have often scattered. Or they were never at that particular address to begin with; witness the still-futile search for Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar.

**Second: What you don't know can be bad, but what you think you know can be worse.**

Administration officials have tied them- [See Arkin, Page M2]

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# The Iraq War Is Brought Home on Blogs

[Blogs, from Page M1]

*soldiers who have experienced them firsthand." The following posting from Rieckhoff is one of many on his group's website, www.optruth.com.*

April 2003:

I sit down to take yet another irregular dump on our rickety, unstable, fly-infested "throne." A nice moment precariously situating my bum on the remnants of a folding chair. I become aware that our building has just reached minute 120 of our two hours of allotted electricity. Chunk! Darkness. The generator is down today — again — so there is no hope of waiting this one out. There is a lovely little waste basket of overflowing, used toilet paper and baby-wipes next to my size 11½ desert combat boots.

Sadly, I have prepared for this — knowing the grid rotation, we are not due power for another six sweltering hours. Therefore, most of us — the shrewd ones — always carry a flashlight in our cargo pockets. I have of course run out of batteries. But I have a back-up plan. The really cunning enemies of discomfort and inconvenience — like yours truly — also store a chemical light in those deep American-made-by-the-lowest-bidder pockets. Yes, one of those favorite little friends of soldiers and ravers worldwide — the orange chemlight!

I crack that sucker satisfyingly as the guy getting a haircut in the next room rants and someone elsewhere in the building stubs yet another toe on a weapon, or a helmet, or a private. I am sitting on a hollowed-out folding chair by orange artificial light hoping a super-sized rat doesn't decide to improve Iraqi-American relations at this precise moment in time. And I am strangely happy about it. They don't pay us enough for this I am sure.

We deserve a parade for having to endure this alone.

## Speak, pause, response

*Sean Pearce enlisted in the Army in 1998. He served six years in the Signal Corps as a satellite technician, with tours in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and at Camp Victory, the main U.S. military complex near Baghdad airport. He returned to the U.S. in September 2003. He now lives in Virginia, where he works in communications and plans to complete his college education. He has now married the girlfriend he writes about in this excerpt. His Iraq blog is at [www.turnintables.blogspot.com](http://www.turnintables.blogspot.com).*

August 5, 2003.

Tonight I got to talk to my girlfriend via visual teleconferencing. It went really well. I waited around until the middle of the night, and then I was escorted into the area where all the magic happens, past giant wall-

sized television screens with maps and diagrams, past rows and rows of desks with computers and soldiers working around the clock on the war effort, and into the conference room, which was exactly that. I'm so used to seeing rooms and quarters converted into conference rooms. They are set up in kitchens or garages or boiler rooms. But this one was an honest-to-god conference room that I'm sure was used by Saddam and all of his buddies. Now it belongs to us, because we took it.

As I stroll in, the family of the sergeant who went before me is still on the giant screen. I see his wife trying desperately to keep her composure and get her three kids out of the room where they were filmed in an orderly fashion. Then, in the corner of the screen coming through the doorway is a very distorted shape that the camera is trying to focus on. It walks like my girlfriend. It's the same size as my girlfriend. And it is my girlfriend. She giggles, and I wave and smile.

I have to press a foot switch every time I want to speak so that the microphone turns off. Otherwise the delay will cause a killer echo. There is at least a 15-second delay that makes normal conversation useless. Speak. Pause. Pause. Pause. Pause. Response. But she is there and she can hear me and I can see her.

She's wearing the Curious George shirt I bought her on the Universal City Walk in L.A. It fits her perfectly, and her hair is beautiful. She's had three hair cuts since I left, but luckily she sends me pictures, so I stay up to date with the girlfriend fashions.

We have this silly thing that we do. It started one night when we were at a rave in L.A. To the beat, I say "girlfriend" while I nod my head. Then I say "run in place," which I do to the beat. It's a sign of my affection. So there I am, in Baghdad, Iraq, running in place in Saddam's conference room so that my girlfriend can watch me on the other side of the Earth.

I showed her my muscles, my big ol' arms that are twice the size as when I left. She was impressed — or she at least faked it for me. She's a good woman.

I left hating this place more than ever, but also feeling a bit more relaxed. I made it to my cot, and I sweated off into sleep. This is almost over.

## The brave, the spider-men

*Sean Dustman is a Navy medical corpsman who served for seven years during the 1990s, then reenlisted after Sept. 11 because he "realized my talents were going to waste, and I wanted to make a difference." He arrived in Iraq in March and returned home late last month. His blog can be found at [www.docinthebox.blogspot.com](http://www.docinthebox.blogspot.com)*

June 19, 2004

It's surprising how much wildlife we've run into. Every night we find a bigger camel spider, and the Marines gather around and say "Wow, that's the biggest one I've ever seen," which leads to other sorts of fights. They'll catch scorpions and other bugs and toss them in. They tossed a mouse in once and you could hear the cheering from hundreds of yards away. Marines are just big kids. Take them to a body of water, and they'll be happy skipping stones for hours; give them a magnifying glass, they'll find an ant hole. If they invade your country, expect silly stuff to be written on all the walls. We've run into snakes both venomous and non. I'm glad I was the only one that spotted the non-venomous one. I took its picture and let it go on it's way. I'm not much into killing things. Things I've found out? Scorpions do glow under black light. Camel spiders have ten legs and two eyes and are not even related to true spiders. And don't ever use a k-bar knife alone to kill a venomous snake.

## 'To do right by Allah'

*Nicholas J. Cademartori is a 22-year-old infantryman with the Army's 1st Infantry Division. After four years in the National Guard, he asked to be released from his Guard contract so he could join the regular Army. He has been in Iraq since March. His blog can be found at [www.thequestingcat.com](http://www.thequestingcat.com).*

May 7 and May 24, 2004

One thing I always notice about old war movies is that soldiers always attach a slang word to their enemy that has some negative connotations. In WWI and II, it was Kraut. Vietnam, it was the gooks. Out here, it is "Hadji," like in the old Jonny Quest cartoons. All people out here are Hadji. No malice to it; it is just what we call them.

The other day, a sergeant and I were told to take our truck and go and pull security. This is generally a very dull job (thank god). So we went out and were just sitting peacefully when we saw a middle aged Iraqi farmer in his field waving to us. Curious, I went to investigate while my buddy covered me with the 50 cal.

When I reached his field it became obvious that the man did not speak English. He was tall and thin, and smiled continuously. He had a small plot of land with a little shack off in the corner of the fields, and a slow shallow stream ran down the middle for irrigation. You could tell that this was this man's life, his entire livelihood.

He held a tomato out to me, it was not entirely ripe, and a little misshapen, but it appeared entirely edible. I took it, since it is rude here to refuse food. He seemed ecstatic

about this, and hurriedly began rooting through his fields for ripe tomatoes.

Hadji vendors love to give you the product first, let you take a few bites, then give you the price. I took out all the money I had — one quarter — and offered it to him in exchange for five or six tomatoes, anything not to seem rude. He pushed aside my meager offering and offered me an eggplant.

Once I realized he didn't want money, I was very curious what he was doing. I mean, was this some kind of tribute he would pay to Iraqi soldiers under Saddam? Was he trying to bribe me to do something for him? He signed that he wanted me to try the tomato, and pointed to the brook and made washing gestures. I washed myself a little and the tomato, then gave it a shot, eating it like it was an apple. It was delicious.

By this point he had collected up quite a batch of tomatoes and an eggplant in his robe, and he wanted to take them over to my truck for my buddy. I asked if he was sure he didn't want any money. He shook his head and pointed up. "For Allah?" I said, and he nodded and said "Allah." He was doing it to be a good man. To do right by Allah. By this simple act, he touched me deeply. He gave me faith in the people of Iraq. He let me know that what we have done here is appreciated, and that these people and I are not so far apart.

I will never believe that my enemy is unredeemable. I will never believe that all Iraqis are the enemy. But I can have no faith in man untested, and truth be told, I have never gotten a truly unselfish vibe from anyone in this country no matter where I've been. They want desperately to take advantage of soldiers' paychecks. But this man living in a shack off the main road has become the first Iraqi I have met since coming here who didn't. And I hope to God that we don't let him down.

## Daddy & son

*Army Pfc. Brian McGovern ([www.brian.mcgovernville.com](http://www.brian.mcgovernville.com)) has been serving as a paralegal near Baghdad since June. His first child, Vincent, was born July 9. McGovern will see him for the first time this week, when he starts a 15-day leave.*

July 27, 2004

I heard "Cat's in the Cradle" this afternoon, the song by Harry Chapin. It's that song that talks about how a guy had a kid and put off spending time with him. Eventually, the kid grows up to be just like him, never finding the time to hang out and have a good time as father and son.

One of the things that we had planned to do was, every Saturday I would let my wife sleep in and wheel the baby in the stroller up to the cof-

fee shop and have some daddy & son bonding time. It's kinda sappy, but it tore me up to hear that song today, because I'm thinking, "But I would spend time with my son if I could! I promise!" I was raised by some great parents. My dad had (still has, in fact) a job where he'd have to go out of town quite a bit, but never for more than a few days. My favorite childhood memories were of Saturdays, when my dad and I would go do stuff.

I want to be the kind of father that my dad has been to me. There are so many guys who get women pregnant and just take off. And here I am, wanting nothing more than to be there, and can't.

## Code normal

*Koka Sexton, who was a team leader in the 341st Military Police Company from San Jose, enlisted in the Army Reserves because he believes "that everyone should do something to support their country." He got his call to go to Iraq on Feb. 14, 2003, and "by June 1 was in the desert realizing that the Army Reserves was more than one weekend a month." He posted the following to his blog, "A Walk Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," ([www.kokasexton.com](http://www.kokasexton.com)) after arriving back home earlier this summer.*

August 1, 2004

Getting back to feeling normal is harder than it sounds. What is normal? I can barely remember what my life was like before I left for Iraq. I have memories of loved ones and friends that carried me through the hard times overseas but other than that, most of pre-war life is a blur. I find myself walking through the city waiting for the next gun shot or explosion. Driving a car is still an adventure. For no reason whatsoever I have moments where I feel like a coiled spring ready to snap. Tension building up in every muscle preparing for the chance to explode on what stands in my way. Neurotic? Maybe.

I miss my rifle and the security that it gave me when I was walking through unknown areas. I knew in Iraq that my life was in my hands. As long as I was prepared for the attack, I had a chance to get them before they got me. I'm always thinking about the "what if" now, because in Iraq preparing for the "what if" made me better able to deal with the next roadside bomb or rocket being fired in my direction. Being prepared could make the difference between life and death. Not that I have the same concerns now that I am home, but my mind races with other concerns of safety.

One day at a time, I keep telling myself. Then I laugh. Maybe I should make a personal threat indicator that I carry in my pocket and update it as I feel necessary. Today, I feel Orange.