

LTC Garrett Yee's Update from Iraq #5

A Short Visit to Babil

It is now the end of August and it is still HOT but this morning, the air is cool for a change. I get up and run around Lost Lake—the air was a cool 80 degrees, but it is early. I took my time and enjoyed the run—I also took my time because I was dead tired from the recent trip. I get into work and spend the day catching up. After getting back from dinner, I have another package waiting for me! This time, it is a package from home with a tape player and books on tape from my dad, beef jerky, and lots of snacks. About this time, my neighbor Champe says, “Another Package?!” Between the 5 boxes of books and supplies from Fort Leavenworth and the 4 packages from home and friends, I’m getting lots of stuff. It is a full first day back and I finish up and leave just before midnight.



The next morning, I wake up sore and fatigued. As I walked into work, the smell of dust was in the air. The highlight of today was meeting a friend, Major Frank Garcia, who is getting ready to head out of Iraq and go home to Fort Campbell, Kentucky with the 101st Air Assault Division. Of course, I have to show Frank the special technique of feeding the palace fish with bread from the DFAC. At dinner, I see my friend Skip and he tells us about his latest sting operation on Victory. Skip is an MP and the kind of clean-up has to do often times with contractors that come from around the world. It’s mostly small stuff, but every bit counts. It is a long day at work and I finally leave around 11:30 pm.

The next day, I sit in on the live update for our 3-star general. I have the option of listening on-line over a secure network or view in person. This time I decided to view it in person. Later in the evening, Champe and I attend a seminar on Ramadan since it will be coming up soon. Later that evening I get a call telling me that I need to get to the International Zone (IZ) in the morning to meet with the Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). So the next morning, I catch the 0700 convoy down to the IZ and get to the Baghdad PRT and meet with the staff. The meeting is short, compared to the other visits, and we stop by a few bazaar shops and buy a few gift items. At the end of the day, I catch the convoy back to Camp Victory. School just started so I call Maria to see how the day went.



With all the travel, time has moved along fairly fast. This is good. At lunch, I sit with

an Air Force Major from the country of Kazakhstan. This guy is TALL, and he looks very Asian. His name is Aman and he speaks Russian, Kazak, and English. Go figure. I have a hard time with English alone. I've been working on a handbook for PRTs and today, I get my first draft completed. There is plenty of work to do, but it feels good to make some headway. That night, Champ and I walk out to the roof to watch the night over Baghdad. It is quite a site with all the lights and "fireworks." I do some more work then head to the hooch around midnight.



Later in the week, I catch the convoy to the IZ and then head out to the NATO center. I meet a Major from Poland, who also works with the Iraqi Lessons Learned Center (ILLC). For the ILLC, there are two officers that work with about 14 Iraqi officers, one NATO officer (right now it is Poland), and one Army officer (that would be me). We meet the Iraqi Army staff and discuss an upcoming trip up north. We follow-up on some issues by visiting the MNSTC-I (pronounced "min-sticky") headquarters, which trains Iraqi Soldiers (I'm not even going to try explain all the letters!), then back to the US Embassy for lunch. After lunch, I stop into the medical clinic at the US Embassy and get yet another "free" dose of Anthrax, third in a series of six. Of course, this shot burns under the skin, causes a knot in the muscle for a few weeks, and is tender for a few days. My fourth dose will not be due until after I get off active duty, so I may not get it until such a time that I am deployed again. I catch the convoy back to Victory and then back to work for the evening. The next morning I get up feeling a bit drained. I think it is the Anthrax shot from the day before, but it will go away eventually, so will the knot under my skin.

The next day I meet Champe Miller at the convoy site. We convoy to the IZ and get a continental breakfast in the US Embassy, which is located in a building that used to be the presidential palace for the Saddam. LTC Andre Dragomrestsky came and picked us up to take us to the National Iraqi Assistance Center (NIAC). The NIAC is adjacent to the Red Zone (as opposed to the Green Zone), and has many local national Iraqis that come into the NIAC. There we get an overview of the operation from Andre. We meet a woman who is there to seek medical assistance for her baby boy, who looks about 10 months old. Very cute with big eyes but it is also very sad because the boy has congenital heart disease that may not be able to be treated. The woman quietly pleads for help. Andre tries to explain how the system worked, but I don't think he was successful in getting his message through to her. It's very sad.



Since we were starting to run late, Andre dropped us off at the MNSTC-I headquarters where Champe had an office call with Lieutenant General (LTG) Martin Dempsey (three star general). LTG Dempsey and Champe were classmates and good friends from West Point and so this was his goodbye visit. Champe told me I was doing a good job with CALL and so LTG D gave me one of his coins and told me to show LTG Petraeus when I got back to Ft Leavenworth. So, I got a coin. After that, we had lunch at the DFAC there, then I met with someone at Camp Phoenix (where MINSTC-I is located) to discuss some business. After that, we took the bus back to the US Embassy where I picked up an SUV to drive out to the Cross Swords, and then the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. After that, we stopped by Camp Prosperity to pick up some items from the PX, then back to the US Embassy to drop off the keys to the



SUV. As I get back, I'm told I need to stay at the IZ to catch a flight out the next day. Good thing I brought my sleeping bag. So...off to the next trip.



I get up grab breakfast at the Embassy and head out to the helipad. I catch a Blackhawk Helicopter flight on my own to Al Hillah, which is located in the Babil Province. Babil is the historic site of the Tower of Babil and the ruins of Babylon. The place that I go to is the Regional Embassy Office (REO), which is a converted hotel (Hotel Babil) with offices and a few rooms for lodging. There will be four of us that share a room, but overall the accommodations are good. I spend the day meeting

with members of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Babil until the rest of the team arrives later that evening. That evening, a few of us sit on the third floor balcony and watch the night sky. Across the river, which is a feeder into the Euphrates, you can see the reflection of the date palm trees in the calm water. It is lit up by security lights and creates a real nice sight. I would use the term romantic, but hey, we are in the middle of a war zone. It really is quite a site.

Got up early to go to the gym and run my morning three miles before breakfast. The gym at the Babil REO is pretty good. Today I meet with the PRT engineer who shows me the water samples of filtered and unfiltered water. We have a good



discussion about projects in the region, then head up to the roof of the three story building overlooking the Shat El Hillah River, which used to be the Euphrates until Saddam dammed up the river and re-directed the Euphrates. This river now feeds into the Euphrates, but is the original trace to the Euphrates. From you roof top you can see Saddam's palace out in the distance and a closer mound where a second palace was in the works to be built for one of his sons. Saddam built somewhere between 17 and 19 palaces throughout Iraq—this one was in Babylon.



Across the river, where Babylon lies, is where the historic Tower of Babil was located and is also the place of the ancient Babylon Gardens and the Lion of Babylon. Babylon is the first place in recorded history where diplomacy took place, two thousand years ago. The converted hotel where we stay was said to be the nicest hotel in the city of Hillah and possibly the nicest hotel in the Babil Province. This used to be the site of weddings and celebrations. Now everyone goes to Baghdad. During the day I meet with the officers and the Non-commissioned officers to discuss their train-up prior to their deployment to Iraq.



Before dinner at about 1800, we play Ultimate Frisbee in a dirt lot—yes, it is hot out, and yes, I'm not sure this makes a lot of sense to me, but we play and it is an hour of continuous sweat! Our side wins and it is a great work out. It takes forever to cool down before we head to dinner, and then more work. I finally get a chance to talk with the PRT leader and find out that he is from Saratoga! Small world. Before going to bed, I head up to the third floor and watch out over the balcony at the great view overlooking the river. It was a

full, but good day in the ancient area of Babil.

Just as expected, woke up sore all over from the prior day's fun in the dirt. I'm not getting any younger. What was that song--As good as I once was? After breakfast, I finished packing my bags and received an information briefing from the PRT leadership. The day prior, we heard there was a flight stopping by the REO and that we might be able to get out early so we were placed on standby. As luck had it, we were able to get on one of the Blackhawk Helicopters and fly back to Baghdad. The first stop on the flight was Camp Victory, so I got off, hitched a ride to my hooch, and went through my normal routine of cleaning up and exchanging laundry. Good to be back.

Well that's it for now,
Cheers!
Garrett