



THE COMMUNITY PAGE

The Idaho Soldier: Defender of the Innocent, Champion of Liberty

The Idaho National Guard has a history of service in times of peace and in war. The Guard has been called up to provide disaster relief during fires, floods, and snow emergencies eight different times in just the last decade. In the current war on terror, Idaho has had a higher percentage of its Guard forces mobilized than any other state.



Idahoans owe a debt of gratitude to these stalwart citizen soldiers who stand between us and very real peril on many fronts. This gratitude is also owed to the families of our Guard troops who, themselves, sacrifice far beyond the understanding of those not involved.

In the spring of 2004, the Idaho 116th Brigade Combat Team was deployed for 18 months. Idaho Guardsmen were sent to several different bases in Northern Iraq. Places with now-familiar names such as Mosul, Kirkuk, Fallujah, and Baghdad interspersed with names straight from the Bible: Tigris and Euphrates Rivers,



Above: Half a world away, Idaho's citizen soldiers work to bring continued freedom to an oppressed people. Left: The 116th Cavalry Brigade's insignia shows a yellow snake set on a wavy royal blue band representing the Snake River Valley, where many of the Guardsmen reside. With yellow being the traditional color of cavalry brigades, the patch also includes a yellow sun against a scarlet background as a reminder of Idaho's beautiful sunsets.



The hazards of war are hard to avoid. The citizen soldiers of Idaho have paid the price of sacrifice, toil, and blood. Several members of the 116th were wounded in Iraq. Three paid the ultimate price.

Ninevah, and Babylon. One base was just yards away from the celebrated burial site of the Old Testament prophet Daniel. Another was in an area formerly used by Saddam Hussein as a torture camp—a tropical area with palm trees, where the smell of wood smoke was always in the air. Upon their arrival in late November 2004 it was surprisingly cool. That would change.

The Task

Settling into the routine of their mission, the Guardsmen began improving political stability and communications, including providing base security through elections. Because citizen soldiers are typically a little older than the regular Army, they are also experienced in a wide variety of skills and occupations, highly qualifying them for this type of mission.

Brigadier General Alan Gayhart, who oversaw the 116th Combat Team in Iraq, reported that Idaho soldiers were so effective in Iraq that the State Department used their mission as a model for other troops. He further noted that the 116th was assigned to an area where “water treatment, roads, electricity, sewage and trash collection were

in shambles” after the neglect of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. “No other brigade before or after the 116th was able to achieve the success of this brigade in the region.”

The horrors and constant stress of a war zone are real enough, but were made even worse by the unbearable heat: 130 degrees at its worst, coupled with the weight of the mandatory gear. The uniform, boots, helmet, machine gun, 700 rounds of ammo, 30 plus pounds of body armor, and a night vision monocular add up to 80 pounds.

One must ask why these citizen soldiers voluntarily do what they do. An Idaho mother, Tammy Pruett, who sent a husband and five sons to Iraq, told President George W. Bush, “I know that if something happens to one of the boys, they would leave this world doing what they believe, what they think is right for our country.”

Specialist Matt Salisbury especially appreciated being able to help Iraqi citizens vote. He describes one elderly man: “The pride radiating from his face was unmistakable. With one act, he recovered his dignity that had been stolen by a tyrant. How can I possibly describe the return of hope and dignity that I saw in these people’s

eyes? It is worth the sacrifice of leaving families, jobs and a safe life. I am proud to be a citizen soldier in the 116th Brigade Combat Team serving in Iraq. And I’m proud to stand on my watch.”

On the Home front

Only those who send loved ones away realize the terrible and unending stress of the families waiting at home: expecting bad news each day, never able to relax until their loved one is home again. Their sacrifice is monumental. Guardsmen freely state that their families at home are the real heroes. Family support groups have been an enormous strength to them, and the women who have directed those groups are greatly appreciated, both by the soldiers and by their families.

Many of Idaho’s citizen soldiers came home more complex than when they left, a result of the complexity of their deployment. As one Guardsman reported: “Our forces here work to quell any insurgents while helping to build public works. We must be a credible threat while simultaneously winning the support of the citizens. We load magazines full of 5.56mm ammunition in rucksacks next to teddy bears and lollipops.”



Idaho Guardsmen helped establish and protect a future that gives hope for the children of Iraq.

He further remembers having to switch quickly “from humanitarian to statesman to friend.”

This complexity contributes greatly to the difficult adjustment required upon demobilization. The demands of lives separated, threatened, and strained require time for healing. Temporarily distracted, a returning Guardsman may find himself driving down the middle of a busy Idaho residential street, unconsciously avoiding “bombs” on the sides of the road, or swerving to avoid a pothole that reminds him of dangers in a war zone. Mental pictures of torn and burned bodies come unbidden to mind. Adjustment takes time.

The Appreciation

Is this sacrifice really appreciated by the Iraqis? One interpreter for the 116th, in answer to this question, states that the Kurds care “more than you even know.” He further explained that “many Kurds continuously pray for our [soldiers’] safety, even to the point of asking Allah that if something was to happen, that it happen to them rather than to an American boy who had come so far over here to help them.”

This appreciation, shown traditionally by hands crossed over the

heart and head bowed, is returned by the great respect for the Iraqi people felt by our Guardsmen, as described by Chris Chesak:

“Our respect for them is probably only second to our great hope for them, hope that their own, self-determined government will succeed and that they will eventually be able to prosper. We hope that they will be able to control the destiny of their country and create a better place for their children. And we hope they will be able to sleep peacefully each night, go to a good job in the morning, and return home in the evening to a place that is safe, warm, and full of promise.”

The battle in Iraq is still raging. Though much of the 116th has been home now for a while, their personal transition from the brutality of war to a peaceful life back home in Idaho goes on. This Independence Day, may our hearts be filled with gratitude for their selfless service and devotion to duty.