

Southtown Article # 8 A Soldier's Story

The stories you hear are incredible. If it wasn't for the flesh and blood person standing in front of you recounting them in the first person, you would think they were written in Hollywood.

A sergeant who had spent a year in Baghdad was on his way home. He got stranded at our camp for a week waiting for his paperwork and for a space on a flight to open up. There was a nervous intensity about him. He wanted to talk but didn't want to be a bother to anyone.

I stood in front of the chapel introducing myself to him sensing something important was going to happen. As we spoke I noticed a slight tremor in his hands as well as his eyes which constantly scanned the environment looking for danger. I asked him my generic opening question, "What was your deployment like?" It was a lot like releasing a pin on a grenade.

Inside of a minute he was taking me on a verbal tour of a palace in Baghdad he had the duty to secure. Although soldiers had been through it for months he noticed something everyone else had missed. There was a tiny door in the back of the kitchen. He squeezed through it and found a narrow, unlit, hidden stairwell. He followed the stairs up, through another concealed passage. With only a small pen light he uncovered a hidden room. He immediately knew what it was, a torture chamber.

Words both in Arabic and English were scraped into the walls. Electric wires lay on the floor. A crude handmade chair lay on its side in a corner. There was also a cage for animals. Evidently, after being tortured, victims were tied to the chair and hungry animals were released from their cages to finish the job the torturers left undone.

He had his digital camera with him so he photographed the sight. As he spoke he took out the same badly damaged camera and reviewed haunting images with me.

The sergeant effortlessly shifted into another experience. He recounted how everyday except Sunday he woke up at 4:00 a.m. and took a shower so that he could get an early start on the days work. Sunday was his rest day. He slept in until 5:00 a.m. This one Sunday in particular, at 4:16 a.m. he heard an explosion. He ran outside to the shower trailer and saw that it was decimated. A rocket had landed just short of the trailer.

The explosion had launched hundreds of stones which riddled the trailer like a shot gun blast. He ran into the trailer and saw a soldier with a head wound. He wrapped his head in a towel and led the man out.

He ran back and saw another soldier lying on the ground with more severe wounds. Half of his face was gone. He shook as he told me how with his hands he tried to stuff the soldier's gray matter back into his head before he realized that some wounds defy treatment.

With a look of irony on his face, the sergeant said if it had been any other day except Sunday, he would have been that soldier.

We fixed him up with a semi private room for his remaining days. It was just a room with a few cots in it but it seemed to do the trick. Two nights later he said he slept more the previous night than in the past eight months. He slept soundly for seven hours instead of his usual 3 hours. The chaplain's and our assistants have informally adopted him. We genuinely liked him. He hangs out with us all day and we playfully exchanged banter. Last night he cooked for us and we played cards.

You can't make it right for anyone or undo the damage. But as chaplains, we can give these guys a sense of normalcy and family. I hope he can continue to sleep soundly.

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