

Southtown Article #16 Baghdad

Camp Victory is the main Army base in Baghdad. It is massive, miles and miles of real estate. It is actually a number of smaller camps which are connected together. The main store or PX (post exchange) is the reason soldiers look forward to going there. The PX is huge, something akin to a mini Kmart. It is the envy of soldiers everywhere in Iraq. The PX at my camp is tiny by comparison.

I went there last week to attend a Chaplain's conference on the role of chaplains in detainment facilities. Since I work at Camp Bucca, the largest prison for insurgents in Iraq, it was particularly pertinent. The conference was great but I was really looking forward to going to the PX and getting all the stuff I needed but couldn't find at Bucca.

I made two trips to the PX the morning of my first day at Victory. I forgot to pick up a special electrical adaptor so I was planning yet another excursion later that day after the conference ended.

Chaplains, like most priests and ministers like to talk a lot. This meant our conference ran long. I squirmed and fidgeted in my seat examining my watch. It served as a constant reminder of the injustice of being trapped by long winded men of the cloth. By now, I could be at the PX, I thought over and over. Just then a large explosion rocked the camp.

By the end of the talk word had filtered back that there was a mortar attack which struck the PX. One soldier was killed, twenty-two were wounded. If it wasn't for the loquacious excess of some chaplains, I would have been there during the attack.

The next day we gathered in the small chapel. Word had it that before the coalition force captured Baghdad, it was a brothel. During a presentation, a thunderous boom shook the building. Although we didn't know it at the time it was a suicide car bomb which exploded at the front gate of Camp Victory. Later reports concluded that 8 people were moderately wounded but only the driver was killed.

The following day another mortar attack was launched. This time it hit the gym. There were injuries but no fatalities. Conventional wisdom has it that the insurgents simply fire mortars and rockets but have little control over where they land. Given the huge land mass of Camp Victory and the fact that insurgents hit two high value targets successively, I'm not convinced by that piece of conventional wisdom any longer.

What strikes me about all three incidents are the reactions of the soldiers, Marines and Airmen. Once they were certain there would be no more incoming fire, they went back to their business as if nothing happened. It was hardly even mentioned. It's not a good sign when life and death events no longer gather much notice. I guess in the military, we get immune to the constant violence. It makes me wonder if people back home are getting immune to the reality of the war in Iraq.