

## Southtown Article # 20 Hearts and Minds

The other day we went on a humanitarian mission to benefit three schools in the port city of Umm Qsar. We delivered about 50 boxes of schools supplies and a few thousand “Beanie Babies.” This is known as trying to win the “Hearts and Minds” of the Iraqi people. The purpose is two-fold. We do what we can to address the paralyzing poverty. But on a more “selfish” note, we hope that they will be less inclined to become involved in the insurgency if they experience our concern for them. If doing this now saves the life of a soldier months from now, it will be entirely worth while.

It isn't a perfect situation. The soldiers, myself included, become jaded, knowing that goods will be stolen and we will be mocked and thought to be weak because of our outreach. The Iraqis become cynical that here we are giving out school supplies while we direct military operations in their country. There are no easy answers or foolproof methods. Maybe something good comes from this, maybe not. But in a war situation with no clear solutions you do what you can and hope that you can make a positive impact down the road.

Collecting supplies to be donated is not difficult. There are thousands of generous Americans that regularly ship goods for us to distribute. Finding needy children isn't difficult either. Crushing poverty surrounds us in every direction. The most difficult problem in these types of missions is being able to secure the area. No one wants to get shot or blown up while trying to reach out to the locals.

We met up with the British (who control this sector) at their base and headed out in convoy to the impoverished city. Looking out the bomb proof windows of the HUMVEE, I saw a city that looked like it was ravaged by a hurricane. Debris, garbage and cinder block were strewn about the entire landscape. Most houses didn't appear to have any roofs. Windows were broken, walls had collapsed. My mind kept insisting that no one really lived in these dilapidated structures.

We pulled up to the center of the city. Immediately the soldiers and Marines spilled out and established a perimeter, weapons loaded and ready. A few of us met with city council members and exchanged pleasantries. We assured them it was our hope that these supplies would benefit the children. They assured us the goods were both needed and greatly appreciated.

The three head mistresses from the schools arrived late. Each was wearing a head to toe, black burqa. At first I thought they were Catholic nuns in a black habit. When I could only see the slit opening for their eyes, I foolishly caught my mistake.

Since school was out for the summer, the goods were to be stored in the city council building. We formed a human chain and quickly offloaded the boxes.

The children were drawn in by their curiosity. A single adult female stood several hundred yards away watching suspiciously from a doorway. After the security team

determined none of the kids were carrying weapons or explosives, they let them pass. I could see in their eyes they were hoping to get some of the goodies immediately. The British, who ran the operation insisted that since not all of the children in the area were present, none would be given anything this day. It struck me as an overly firm sense of fairness governing that judgment.

As we began to say our goodbyes, the vehicles were started, all but the five ton truck. They couldn't get it going. It was somewhat embarrassing. Here we were, the mighty U.S. Army on a simple mission and we couldn't even start our truck.

The security team started getting nervous. It is never good to stay put too long at any one place. They scanned the surroundings with intense vigilance.

By now the kids lost all of their inhibitions. They came out of nowhere and surrounded us. They didn't speak English. We didn't speak Arabic. About half of them had no shoes. I was pretty certain they were wearing everything they owned.

I was thinking to myself, "What in the world do we do now?" How do we communicate with these kids? It is going to be awfully awkward if we just stand around trying to ignore them.

A braver one inched closer and eventually poked me with his finger. I looked down and saw his fearful eyes. I smiled and made a goofy facial expression. That broke the ice and they mobbed us from that point on. I got down on one knee to their height and showed them how to "give five." They caught on quickly and soon we were exchanging high fives with no shortage of giggles.

Even though we were wearing our body armor and bullet proof helmets, armed to the teeth with weapons galore, we must not have appeared menacing anymore. In truth, we became like big kids playing with little brothers and sisters.

I pointed to myself and said my name. After a couple of minutes they realized I was introducing myself. Their names flooded out, too many for me to remember. We pointed to objects and pronounced their names in our native language. Soon we were teaching each other. The kids laughed in unison as I butchered the pronunciation of their words. Smiles were fixed to our faces.

They were fascinated by the protective gear that we wore. They took turns punching me in the body armor, only to withdraw their hands shaking them and howling in laughter. The youngest one, a boy of maybe four or five, decided to do something different. He ran up to me and gave me a head butt. He reeled backwards as his head bounced off my Kevlar helmet. His companions laughed with delight at his antics and soon the humor outweighed the sting and he joined in the fun.

By this time someone managed to start the five ton and it was time to leave. The kids stood around and watched us depart. They didn't get any goods from us that day. That

will have to wait until the beginning of school. But they did meet some real American and British soldiers and Marines. I can't help but think it won't be as easy for them to think of us as the enemy in future years as they grow up.

For my part, I was disarmed by their childlike innocence and goodness. I work in a detention facility with about 6,500 insurgents. Many of them would kill me in a heartbeat. I know now I was growing callused to plight of the average Iraqi. Working with detained insurgents skewed my perception.

Indeed this trip was successful in winning over hearts and minds. I suspect the children will think of us differently. I know my heart and mind has been changed.

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