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Every Time The Wind Blows, Part 2

Why We Are Here

By Nir Rosen, with the US 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq

AL-QAIM, western Iraq - Lieutenant-Colonel Gregg Reilly, the SCO, or squadron commander, of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's Tiger Base in western Iraq, is relaxed and comfortable answering tough questions, but he gets visibly tense for the first time when asked why the US is in Iraq.

He removes his legs from the desk and, placing an elbow on the table, he leans his forehead in his palm, pondering intensely on the best way to articulate his position without crossing the line. He speaks deliberately, "We're here for the right reasons. In order to enable this region of the world to progress. And America has always had to be there to stand up for the basic human rights of people. We believe that people should be able to govern themselves and that human rights are important to the long term support of progress in the region. This idea is embedded in the progress of humanity."

He avoids the political debates about how the US ended up occupying Iraq. That is not in his purview. "The reputation of the United States is on the line," he says. "We're here," he repeats emphatically, "We're here. And we're here for the right reasons. There is nobody else who had the will or the ability to do this."

Reilly's men are clear about their missions, even if they state purposes, like his, that are often not the official ones cited prior to the war. Specialist Ray Winters, originally from California, is here "to help the people of Iraq, that's the overall reason. I'm not worried about what's going on back home outside my family. My family is proud of me and I'm proud of myself. We're fighting terrorists and guerrilla warfare. These are bad people and we've got to get rid of them so the people of Iraq can move on."

Captain Chris Alfeiri, of the 1st Squadron of the 3rd ACR, says his men believe they are active in the fight against terrorists, though he admits, "This is not directly connected to 9/11."

Immediately after the September 11, 2001, attacks, the 1st Squadron was sent to Egypt for exercises called Operation Bright Star. "We were expecting and hoping to go to Afghanistan," Alfeiri says, "and we were frustrated we didn't have a role there. We don't want to leave Iraq until the job is done." First Sergeant Clinton Reiss, a veteran of the first Gulf War in 1991, says, "The more we're attacked the longer we're going to be here. We get these people on their feet, we go home. That's the way I look at it."

Similar sentiments can be heard from a young enlisted soldier relating his experiences to his wife on the morale phone. "If they would be peaceful and be nice we would be out of here in no time," he tells her. "We're trying to help them. They don't understand and they're trying to prolong our stay by butting heads with us."

Known as the "anti-morale phone" by soldiers because it is often impossible to find a connection, this phone and the Internet access they have are their life line, allowing them to tell family members they love

them, to ask for supplies, to arrange their finances, and from time to time to argue with girlfriends and wives, to the increased interest of all those within listening range. They do not discuss politics over the phone.

Captain Bill Ray, a 30-year-old intelligence officer from a small town called Ordway, near Pueblo, Colorado, asserts that the war in Iraq was a "continuation of the war on terrorism. Even though we haven't been able to put our hands on WMD [weapons of mass destruction] I believe it was here and a lot went to Syria. We needed to come here before Saddam [Hussein] started letting those weapons out of this country. And there were training camps for international terrorist organizations in Iraq. We came here for just reasons and there were a lot of people here who were in bad shape." He adds that unlike most men on the base, "I'm not married, so being here this long doesn't bother me."

Captain Justin Brown, the commander of Apache Troop, states his mission in Iraq in clipped military simplicity, "To get the area safe in order to provide a secure environment to bring international organizations in and provide normalcy."

Staff Sergeant Michael Adair, a 30-year-old non-commissioned officer under Brown's command from Junction City, Kansas, believes that "we're here to liberate the people of Iraq, to help restore a government, more at the local level for us, to restore infrastructure and to stop illegal trafficking and border crossing."

His colleague from Apache Troop and first Gulf War veteran Staff Sergeant Christopher Joseph, 31, from Moya, North Carolina, agrees, adding that "the only concern that soldiers here have is the same thing the government is finding out, and that is it's going to take longer than we thought. We're disappointed that we haven't found any weapons of mass destruction yet, but that keeps us motivated to search for them."

Adair adds, "I'm not after WMDs. I think when they realized we were coming in they got rid of it. I definitely think al-Qaeda is alive and well in Iraq. Our soldiers don't have a clouded vision of why they're here." They agree that keeping track of the debates back home about the US occupation was difficult. "We're behind the times-news-wise," says Joseph, "we're focused on the here and now."

Soldiers get most of their news watching Armed Forces Network television or reading Stars and Stripes newspaper. Both are sanctioned by the military. Reilly believes his men are as informed as the general US public, adding that "it's very representative of the population back home. On your city block back home, how many people are interested in the issues? It has to do with interest, not rank. They spend most of their time focused on the day-to-day, either recovering from an operation, preparing for an operation or doing an operation."

Joseph adds that the copies of Stars and Stripes they do get are usually about two weeks old and are only from one or two days of the week. Despite that, and even though his troop of 100 men only get six copies, he says, "It gets passed around like porno." Adair agrees. "What news we get they devour," he says of his men.

But they are not well informed about the growing recriminations over possible administration deception by the administration of President George W Bush and subterfuge regarding the evidence provided to justify the war. They do not have time to follow these debates, and the official military sources do not delve into such matters. "I have to believe, and hope, that our leaders sent us here for the right reasons," says Reiss, and leaves it at that.

Of course not all the men are thrilled to be in Iraq. Enlisted men say their officers have to be positive, because dissent can ruin a career. When asked how long he has been in Iraq, one enlisted 21-year-old

snaps, "Way too long." He explains that "when we first got here it felt like we were doing something good, now it feels like a waste. We were making progress for a while and now things are slower. When we first got here we were getting Ba'ath Party members left and right. We've been away from our families a long time."

Another 21-year-old says, "If we find weapons of mass destruction it was worth it, but if we don't and we're just here because Bush wanted to finish what his daddy started, then a lot of boys died for nothing, and that's fucked up."

A very senior officer expresses his hopes that retired General Wesley Clark, a Democrat, will become the next president, believing that the positive ramifications would extend to the army as well. A chief warrant officer wonders aloud whether it was a mistake to isolate the international community and attempt the daunting challenge of reconstructing Iraq alone.

It is common to hear the men state that they are just a conventional force, untrained for "these kinds of operations". Fortunately for the regiment, many of its soldiers have experience from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo setting up tactical checkpoints, dealing with foreign cultures and navigating complex ethnic, tribal and religious rivalries. Sergeant Joseph explains, "This isn't from a textbook. It's all battlefield training. Tank commanders aren't trained for kicking down doors. We're adapting as we go."

According to Alfeiri, "All my soldiers are between 18 and 23. The hardest thing for them is to transition from combat to stability operations, using deadly force in the morning and in the same day fixing the air conditioners in a hospital." Alfeiri wonders how he and his men will adjust to the life back home they all long to return to. "We're in an environment where there is no law," he says, "nobody can stop us." He believes the transition to regular life in the United States will be difficult, comparing it to the experiences faced by veterans of Vietnam.

Sergeant Scott Blow, a 27-year-old from Denver, is confounded by the same problems all the men of the 3rd ACR face. "Nobody knows who the enemy is here until they shoot at you. Any time you kick down a door you don't know what to expect." For a conventional force accustomed to expect to fight an obvious enemy, the challenges are not merely intellectual.

On June 7, Bandit Troop's Sergeant Michael Dooley was standing at a checkpoint when a car approached containing three men. Two of them called out that their friend was injured and needed attention. When Dooley approached the vehicle to assist, he was shot in the face and killed immediately. The car sped off, but soldiers shot at it and later found it abandoned containing rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), hand grenades, flares and C4 explosive.

The men on Tiger Base are curious what the Iraqis think of them, and baffled by the hostility the daily attacks make so obvious. "They hate us," soldiers often say of their new neighbors in Iraq. Sergeant Reginald Abram, 24, from San Diego, exclaims, "These people are pretty persistent. If they killed three of my buddies for shooting at them I'd be like, damn, maybe it's time to find a new hobby. But it's not difficult to understand why somebody might pick up an AK-47 against us. Maybe we killed his father in the first Gulf War, maybe in this Gulf War, maybe he's just a dick."

Alfeiri also expresses sympathy. "I wonder how I would feel if someone was breaking down my door," he says, "or if it was my grandfather who didn't understand instructions at a checkpoint and panicked and was shot by the foreign force."