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Every Time The Wind Blows, Part 1**'This Is The Wild, Wild West'**

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

AL-QAIM, western Iraq - "This is the wild wild west," says Captain Chris Alfeiri, holding a fly swatter while relaxing in between missions. A 30-year-old native of Boston, Alfeiri is one of about 1,000 soldiers from the 1st Squadron of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), based in Fort Carson of Colorado Springs, Colorado, and currently stationed in al-Qaim, at the western edge of Anbar province, bordering on Syria.

It is a dusty, arid and lawless region, with large towns by the Euphrates River, which snakes into Iraq from Syria. Americans are attacked on a daily basis by a recalcitrant community that used to shoot at the Iraqi army as well, and every night they can hear mysterious fire fights occurring inside the towns as tribes, gangs and smugglers battle over turf.

The 3rd ACR has converted an abandoned train station into home and called it Tiger Forward Operating Base. There is a cafeteria, or chow hall with a Pueblo motif painted on its walls, serving three different hot meals a day, from bacon and pancakes to pasta and Asian-flavored chicken with vegetables. There are TOCs, or tactical operation centers, pronounced "tok". There are barracks, where soldiers have small gyms, watch satellite TV and compete in board games like Risk, seeking world domination, or football video games on Sony Play Station. There is a detainment center for prisoners, and even a recreation center with wireless Internet and "morale phones" to call home.

Alfeiri's diminutive chin, small eyes, soft cheeks and shaved head give him a friendly baby-faced look incongruous with his role as a combat officer who served in Bosnia for a year, an experience that helped prepare him for dealing with conflict in an alien culture, as does his marriage to a former fellow journalism student from Honduras, whose family he often visits in their country. His men operate every day from the western-most base in Iraq. His 130 soldiers, known as Bandit troop, conduct border surveillance operations, raids, checkpoints and help reconstruct the towns in the region.

Every night his men roll out of Tiger X Ray, the call sign for their base, and a convoy of tanks and Humvees proceeds to the border, driving off the hardball, as they call the road, in order to avoid improvised explosive devices, IEDs. They stop at a test fire range, and make sure their heavy weapons work, the radio announces that their call sign, White 1, is at Red Con One (or Readiness Condition One, meaning everything works) and they head into the black moonscape.

On a hill a kilometer from the border they observe the berm for movement, using night and thermal vision capabilities that allow them to see clearly thousands of meters ahead, and supported by Kiowa helicopters code named Nomad, who observe from above. "We have nightly contact," Alfeiri says. "There are cross-border attempts both ways." Alfeiri's men fire warning shots at the infiltrators, who are usually smugglers of sheep, gasoline, fertilizer and produce. "We're not seeing guys with truckloads of AK-47s,"

he says, "most weapons they carry are for their own protection." The trespassers usually run back into Syria after the warning shots are fired. Before the mission, one of Alfeiri's officers instructs his men that if they do have to "drop somebody" they should get a picture of him so that he can be identified.

The men of the 3rd ACR police a porous Syrian border 195 kilometers wide. They studied historical patterns and compiled intelligence to establish Named Areas of Interest, or locations where people are known to cross borders. During the day, Captain Justin Brown and his Apache troop help secure the checkpoint. After spending 24 hours a day there for two months, they reconstituted the Iraqi customs facilities and now provide security to the checkpoint, where they have absorbed 130 attacks since taking it over on June 7.

Alfeiri often accompanies his men out on missions. His First Sergeant, Clinton Reiss from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, resents the logistical-support role his high unenlisted rank bestowed on him and seizes every opportunity to go out with his men as well. Reiss's hawk-like face is reddened by the sun and at 37 he still has the thickly muscled body from his days as a high-school running back. His wife waits for him at Fort Carson, along with their 13-year-old daughter, who is angered by teachers who say that the war is over. It is not over for her daddy, who plans on becoming a social-studies teacher himself when he retires from the army.

Early in the morning, Bandit troop takes three "uparmored" Humvees, meaning Humvees with armored exteriors, and two Bradley armored personnel carriers that can hold up to five very cramped "dismounts", and head out to search three houses for a supporter of attacks against US troops and a man injured recently while conducting an attack.

"With the intel we've been getting, its probably a house full of nuns," complains the acerbic Reiss. After a few minutes of banter the ride out into the rising sun is silent. The smell of dust enters the vehicles as they rumble noisily through the desert. Alfeiri keeps the communication receiver by his ear at all times. Metal clacks against metal as weapons are loaded. Sergeant Tim Carr, the linguist for 3rd ACR Military Intelligence section, accompanies Bandit this morning. The 37-year-old native of Michigan studied Arabic for four months at the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, California, prior to departing for Iraq and received two weeks of supplemental Iraqi dialect classes as well.

The Stack Team, as the soldiers who conduct the house searches are called, knock on the gate and ask the residents if they can conduct a search. They find an emaciated young man whose entire torso is covered with burns, and a bullet wound scars his calf. Sergeant Carr demands to know how he was injured, and the young man replies, "It was a cooking accident." Carr questions the family in staccato, searching for contradictions in their statements. The soldiers are skeptical that such massive wounds could have occurred in the kitchen. One soldier jokes, "This ain't the south, they're not deep-frying chicken here!" They take the burned man and the owner of the home in for further questioning.

The troop then knocks on the door of the neighboring house and a surprised couple protest that they have nothing. The wife studied English in college and is eager to practice it with the soldiers. "Welcome, welcome!" she smiles at the soldiers who gently search the house for weapons other than the legal AK-47. When none are found, they thank the family and move on. The smiling young wife is disappointed by their hurried departure.

The ride back is silent until Reiss asks Alfeiri, "Did you hear Gregory Hines died?" Alfeiri says, "Yeah, I still couldn't believe it." The jocular Reiss brings up the wife of the arrested homeowner. "That woman was hard," he says. "She didn't have an expression on her face. If it was my mother she would have been hysterical." The vehicle is silent for a while and then he asks, "Did you catch that comedian talking about

the Iraqi uniform and why was it green if they were in the desert?" After another period of silence Reiss says, "I still can't get over that IED we found last night." The mechanism was more sophisticated than past ones. Composed of two artillery rounds and a car battery, it was designed to explode when a vehicle drove over two pieces of metal that would come into contact and complete the circuit, triggering the detonation. Only luck had spared his men from the device, planted brazenly two kilometers from their base.

Led by Squadron Commander Lieutenant-Colonel Greg Reilly, known as the SCO (pronounced "sko"), the men of the 3rd ACR police the border, pursue anti-coalition paramilitaries and provide humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of people.

The SCO, whose call sign is Tiger 6, is a tall 41-year-old Californian, his provenance made obvious by his gentle, wispy voice and his waving limbs. "He's a little kooky," according to one non-commissioned officer, reacting to Reilly's intense personality and uncommon sensitivity. Seated at his desk with drawers full of junk food and the two sabers emblematic of his regiment on the wall behind him, Reilly is relaxed, reclining and throwing his long legs over the desk.

Rimless glasses combine the gaze of an intellectual with the strong taught jaw and Ranger badge of a warrior. On the bulletin board listing his schedule of operations are pictures of his wife and two children, both in college.

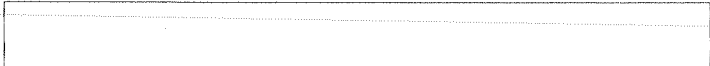
"We don't have a reference point for problem-solving in Iraq," he explains. "You can't say this is the same as Bosnia, Kosovo or Afghanistan. You need an understanding of the situation on the ground to see what you need to do. Each area has its own distinct terrain and the terrain in this environment is the people. It's not a one-size-fits-all thing. It takes a tremendous amount of thought. It consumes me."

Reilly, a veteran of the first Gulf War in 1991, and also served in Bosnia, Kosovo and Germany, is philosophical. "The problem is," he believes, "we're here and we brought an idea with us. The idea is, in order for this place to progress it has to move forward in a way that it governs itself so that basic human rights and respect for one another are established. So we have to establish stability and security."

Reilly is convinced that "most of the people here understand why we came and are happy the regime fell. But when the regime fell, so did their system for supporting themselves. The regime controlled everything. There is a vacuum. The challenge we face is that people here expect to see their lives improve. America is here, America is the greatest industrial power, so their lives should improve. They need to have confidence in the future, they need opportunity. But it's very slow and they don't see it happening. Until they see it and identify with it, there will continue to be tension and dissent," which is how Reilly refers to grenades being launched at him.

For Reilly, who majored in economics at Sacramento State, the panacea is employment. His priority is getting the regional super phosphate plant at Ubeidi running at full capacity, employing all its 3,300 workers, as well as the miners in the nearby town of Akashat and the truckers who would transport the phosphate, which was once exported to 27 countries. Reilly's civil-affairs section created an unemployment office staffed by Iraqis, and so far 2,600 applications have been filled providing information about the individuals' skills and family size. Reilly has helped set up a sanitation system, a police force and a customs organization. He has built water-treatment plants and hospital wings. His next goal is the creation of a 200-man civil defense corps and an 800-man border force staffed by local Iraqis.

In the 1991 Gulf War the phosphate plant, which emerges from the desert with immense convoluted metal tubes like a city out of *Mad Max*, was hit by a US bomb and 15 civil defense firemen were killed. Sanctions imposed on Iraq meant that the plant could no longer export all over the region as it once did and



had to export phosphate illegally to the United Arab Emirates by using a false name.

Iraqis called the sanctions regime "the siege", and the dilapidated condition of al-Qaim's phosphate plant as well as the entire country's infrastructure were a result of the asphyxiating blockade on many industrial goods that a United Nations report described as reducing Iraq "to the pre-industrial era". Gasoline in the towns is four times as expensive today as it was before the war, and locals use gas imported from Saudi Arabia, an added humiliation for a former gas-exporting country. The plant depends on power provided by the Haditha Dam. Looters destroyed three of the dam's five turbines and stole much of the power-line grid going to the plant, so it cannot get enough energy to run.

Reilly acknowledges the paradox of his responsibilities. "The tactical activities I conduct to bring security, tactical checkpoints [TCPs, as road checkpoints are known], raids and patrols, often have a destabilizing effect. No culture likes to have an army in their neighborhood. If the Chinese occupied the US we would react the same way, we would hate them too, so the more people you arrest over time can have a destabilizing effect, because if you're not arresting the right people it can cause dissent.

"I have to be very careful because what I do can have the opposite reaction from the intention. When we go search houses we're very polite. Most of these people have never seen an American. Now we're in their house! We knock on their door, tell them why we're there. They ask us in. We don't ransack the house, we don't touch the women. So that when we leave the house they know why we were there and we thank them for their support. They wouldn't appreciate it if we treated them like criminals.

"Then there are the people that are shooting at us with routine frequency. Identifying who they are is a challenge. It's a very small portion of the population. Holding the entire population responsible only causes more violence, so I have to surgically determine who they are and that takes time. But because of the way we've been doing business here, more and more people are providing us with information. When an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] goes off in an area, it scares the hell out of them. Their kids are crying, their mothers are scared. So they're glad we're doing this." Leaflets Reilly's psychological operations unit leaves on the road depict tanks and helicopters and state, "We're watching you."

The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment: "Brave Rifles"

Headquarters: Fort Carson, Colorado.

History: The 3rd Cavalry's history dates back to the Indian wars of the 1800s, and the regiment has fought in nearly every war since then. Two famous names associated with the regiment are Christopher "Kit" Carson and civilian scout William F "Buffalo Bill" Cody. The 3rd ACR was part of the 24th Infantry Division's drive to the Euphrates in "Desert Storm" of 1991.

Current status: The 3rd Cavalry is the US Army's only active heavy armored cavalry regiment (out of what used to be four active and four reserve ACRs during the Cold War). It is a neat package of all the army's heavy systems, with tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Paladin howitzers, AH-64 Apaches, and other equipment. 3rd ACR is intended to be deployed on short notice, with equipment pre-positioned in Middle Eastern and Central European regions. (Source: ranger95.crosswinds.net)