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User Menu

- Home Page
 - «Mirror of the World»
 - Support the Site
 - Contacts
 - Iraq-War board rules

- Articles
 - Iraq News
 - Around the World
 - Historical analysis & facts

- facts
 - Current analysis
 - Economics
 - Hot News
 - Rankings

- Forums

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RSS RSS feed for articles and news

Weather

Baghdad	
	FR, 29/12 +7...+9 °C NW, 6 m/s
Basrah	
	FR, 29/12 +11...+13 °C NW, 9 m/s

Calendar-Filter

< Dec >		< 2006 >				
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						
Today						

Snipers stalk Marine supply route in western Iraq

By: Tony Perry on: 28.12.2006 [08:32] (534 reads)



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THE CONFLICT IN IRAQ: HUSSEIN'S MESSAGE; AL ANBAR SNIPERS
Snipers stalk Marine supply route in western Iraq

By Tony Perry, Times Staff Writer
December 28, 2006

along msr mobile, outside fallouja, iraq — The battle for this desolate stretch of road east of Fallouja is relentless: Twenty-four hours a day, Marines lumber up and down the six-lane freeway in 23-ton amphibious assault vehicles, looking for bombs and dodging snipers.

The shadowy gunmen are a constant menace on MSR Mobile — short for Main Supply Route Mobile, so dubbed because it serves as a main link between several U.S. bases here in Al Anbar province. In the last two weeks, two Marines with Company B of the 2nd Assault Amphibian Battalion from Camp Lejeune, N.C., have fallen to snipers' bullets: Lance Cpl. Luke Yepsen, 20, of Brazos, Texas, and Cpl. Joshua Pickard, 20, of Merced, Calif.

Marines suspect the same sniper killed Yepsen and Pickard.

"I hope he shows up today — I'd like to blast his ass," Sgt. Clayton Chism, 26, of Prentiss, Miss., said at the beginning of a patrol involving 14 Marines and three vehicles from the battalion's Team Gator.

The mission on the road linking Fallouja to Baghdad could be seen as a microcosm of the Marine mission in Al Anbar: nothing likely to be made into a Hollywood war movie, just a "persistent presence" to wear down the insurgency.

But there are moments of adrenalin-pumping drama. On this day, the Marines shot an Iraqi spotted planting a roadside bomb. When Lance Cpl. William Shaw was lifting the wounded Iraqi into a vehicle to be taken to a field hospital, the Marine was shot in the back by a sniper.

The round struck the back plate in the flak vest worn by the 22-year-old from Fort Bend, Texas. A few inches lower, and Shaw might have been killed or his spine severed.

The explosive ordnance detail was called to examine the bomb. It was fake.

Fake bombs are a recent wrinkle in the insurgents' game plan. The strategy, apparently, is to fire at Marines who arrive to neutralize the devices.

Navy trauma doctors who have treated wounded Marines say the snipers have also learned how to find vulnerable spots not covered by protective plates.

"We're not bionic men," said Gunnery Sgt. Justin Smith, 32, of Boston.

Several sniper shootings have taken place nearby. Marines suspect that insurgents use low-slung buildings parallel to the freeway as a staging ground and a place to make bombs.

The Marines raided the buildings recently and detained dozens of Iraqis. Some Marines had hoped to get permission to demolish the buildings, but that was denied by upper authority.

"It's like being in the U.S. and having a public park being used by drug dealers," said Capt. Eric Dominijanni, 34, of New York, commander of B Company. "Not everybody there is a drug dealer, and you can't destroy the park."

Chism's three-vehicle convoy arrived to provide additional security for the Marines. Inside one vehicle, nicknamed "Event Horizon," after a sci-fi movie, three Marines waited to respond if the searchers were attacked.

Protecting MSR Mobile is sometimes boring.

For four hours, they waited. "It was a good day: not much action," said Cpl. Dennis Bryant, 21, of Kodiak, Alaska. "Everybody came back OK."

Navy corpsman Raymond Casas, 35, of Victoria, Texas, was hit by a sniper round in the upper chest while on a mission just off the freeway. The bullet hit his M-16 and then the fabric of his protective vest, leaving Casas with a deep gouge in his Grim Reaper tattoo.

Casas said he felt a sharp sting in his chest and immediately went on the radio to report he'd been hit. "I was more mad than hurt," he said. He knows that if the bullet hadn't been deflected by his M-16, he'd be dead. "I was lucky, I guess."

Although the sniper thought to have killed Yepsen and Pickard is still at large, the Marines here have killed and captured numerous snipers and bombers.

"We take one off, there seems to be another to take his place," Smith said.

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they take one off,
by verve on 28.12.2006 [15:40]

another takes his place. Sounds more like Iraqi Army regulars than snipers. All soldiers, especially well trained grunts, are taught to shoot straight.

Page: 1/1

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