

## **Soldiers sweep up the filth in Al Huwija**

Raid turns up Ba'ath Party book

Story and photos by

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With lights out and night vision goggles on a convoy of over a 1,000 soldiers slipped into Al Huwija, Iraq Dec. 2. The weather was lending a helping hand this morning with a very heavy fog settling in for the two-hour drive down concealing the massive convoy.

The temperature this morning dipped down into the low 30's, which further helped keep locals off the streets until the soldiers were in position.

By the time the sun showed it's face in Al Huwija the whole city was surrounded by soldiers, tactical checkpoints were setup and soldiers were already searching houses.

Paratroopers of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (Airborne), 508<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (Airborne), 503<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment conducted house to house searches while soldiers of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division surrounded the city with Bradley Fighting Vehicles, M1 Abram tanks, 113 Armored Personnel Carriers.

The soldiers were searching for persons of interest, weapons, and improvised explosive device making material. Al Huwija has been a hotbed for enemy activity since the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade and 4<sup>th</sup> ID arrived in the region. In recent months a string of IED's, rocket propelled grenade attacks on the road leading from Kirkuk to Al Huwija has sent numerous soldiers on a one-way ticket out of Iraq.

Even though in recent months all three battalions have had soldiers wounded or killed by residents of Al Huwija and its surrounding areas, soldiers are still professional and respectful to residents.

Paratroopers of Chosen Company, 2-503<sup>rd</sup>, even went as far as to wipe the mud off their boots and inform residents what they were searching for and why before entering homes.

"Were not here to kick innocent peoples doors down and scare them to death," said Sgt. William Higginbotham III, a squad leader in Chosen Company. "Were not going to let down on security, but if your respectful to residents they'll respect you."

Higginbotham's theory paid off in the first house he searched. Before searching the house he had his interpreter explain to the man of the house that all Higginbotham wanted were his weapons. He wasn't here to tare apart his house or steal his belongings.

The homeowner along with his wife and kid led Higginbotham and few members of his squad into a back room where he pulled out a brand new AK-47 that was hidden under some floorboards underneath the bed. Before leaving the house the resident thanked Higginbotham for wiping the mud of his boots before entering the house and for waiting for his wife to finish up in the bathroom.

"We didn't want to disturb the man's wife, so we waited until she was done in the bathroom before we searched the house," Higginbotham said.

Higginbotham's squad continued their search for weapons with a few more residents turning over weapons without a search.

Half way through their search Higginbotham's squad got very nice surprise in abandoned lot.

"I saw a fresh pile of dirt and I thought it looked suspicious," said Sergeant 1<sup>st</sup> Class Danny G. Boivin, a platoon leader in Chosen Company.

Boivin moved the dirt around with his foot and found a buried bag. Along with Higginbotham, Boivin dumped the bag's contents onto the ground and out came a brand new AK-47.

"When we found the AK we got a call over the radio that 508<sup>th</sup> found eight rocket propelled grenade launchers buried in someone's front yard," said Boivin. "So I had the squad (Higginbotham's squad) continue searching the lot."

A few yards away from where the AK-47 was buried a stack of old tires revealed a large bag of AK-47 and MP-5 magazines loaded with new ammo.

"After finding the bag of ammo we removed all the tires and found another bag," said Higginbotham.

Inside that bag was a DVD box with 2.5 million new Iraqi Dinars inside- about year and half's salary in Iraq (\$1250 U.S. dollars).

Boivin called Capt. Arie Richards, Chosen Company's commander, on the radio and informed him what they had found. At the same time a man who lived next door to the vacant lot claimed the money was his, but the AK-47 wasn't.

Richards arrived on the scene and told the translator to tell the man he knew he was lying and if he didn't start telling the truth he was going to jail. The man admitted he buried the weapon, magazines and the money when he saw American troops because he was afraid they'd steal his money.

"Were not here to take your money," said Richards. "But we can't let you keep the AK-47 and ammo."

The money was returned to the surprised man, but the weapon and ammo was confiscated.

Higginbotham's squad stopped searching for a few minutes to enjoy a Jimmy Dean. After eating Higginbotham got the call that his squad was to pull security for a speaker team who's mission was to patrol through Al Huwija broadcasting a message explaining why Coalition forces were searching homes.

"We drove around trying to get the enemy to shoot at us," said Pfc. Noorani Aleem, a Mark 19 gunner in Chosen Company. "If someone would have shot at us we would of opened up like it was the Fourth of July."

No one shot at the speaker team. Residents came outside and stood in the muddy streets cheering on the paratroopers and giving them the thumbs up.

After Chosen's Company's area was searched and cleared they waited for the rest of the battalion and then started the long convoy back to Kirkuk in the rain.

"The mission ended up being a complete success," said 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. Michael Stribiling, First Sergeant of Alpha Company, 1-508<sup>th</sup>. "My company alone nabbed one person of interest (a local Ba'ath Party Official). We also had a guy walk up to us at a TCP and give us a book listing over 200 Ba'ath Party Officials. That was a massive find and I'm pretty sure it made Colonel's day (Col. William Mayville, Commander of 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade)."