

Keen observation on patrol yields weapons cache

Story and photos

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Under a blazing sun, with temperatures soaring to 100 degrees and above, the paratroopers of 1st platoon, A Company, 1st Battalion 508th Infantry (Airborne) prepared to do what they've been doing for the last month here in Iraqi. They lined up on the street among rows of cinder block and adobe houses. The street, like all the streets in this small, nameless village, is strewn with filth. Garbage and pools of stale water do nothing but add a stench to the air under the punishing sun.

Still, the men say they are glad to be out of the back of the five-ton truck that brought them here. The miles and miles driven in a constant dust cloud are behind them for the time being, and now they can stretch their legs a bit.

A dog barks and a crowd is already forming, curious about the American presence here. Small children, normally the most outgoing, approach curiously, saying hello or asking, "what you name," in broken, memorized English.

And still, the sun beats down.

The soldiers are here to show the Iraqi people that Americans are in the neighborhood and to look for weapons. Not the weapons of mass destruction everyone seems to focus on, although they would surely be interested in those, but the rifles, pistols and rocket propelled grenades that are so prevalent in this country.

As the five-ton drives off the team moves slowly down the dirt road—kicking up balls of dust in their wake. Faces peek out from behind gates and through windows. A few people stand on the curb and offer a cautious wave, the paratroopers wave back and continue their patrol down the road.

The road ends in a "T" intersection, straight ahead is a field. "Go right, wait, no left," is the command, barked from the rear of the patrol as the team approaches the intersection.

It's here where Spc. Eric Briggs notices something—something odd in a land of oddities. A man, who moments before had walked into the field carrying something, is now walking out empty-handed.

Across the street to the man's left is Sgt. Jason Weaver. Weaver, upon hearing the news, tells the squad to take a knee and goes with Briggs to investigate.

It pays off. Folded inside a blanket are two loaded AK-47 rifles.

A blur of activity follows. The soldiers, in an attempt to apprehend the man who they suspected hid the rifles, quickly locate the house they believe he fled into. A seemingly vicious and mangy dog makes threatening moves as they rush the house. A confused, yet choreographed scene follows.

Among the wails of the distressed mother and the cries of the two small children, several of the soldiers enter the house to search for the man they saw and to look for more weapons.

Rifles at the ready, the men clear the building while the rest of the team tries, without much success, to calm the family outside.

It's all for naught though as neither can be found. He had either jumped the fence or blended into the crowd now gathering to watch the scene unfold.

The team regroups and they move out. This time their objective was a building with pictures of tanks and rifles painted on the sides, an abandoned Iraqi military facility.

"Today was somewhat typical of what we've been doing," said 2nd Lt. Brendan Fitzpatrick, platoon leader, who was resting in the shade with his platoon. They were covered head to toe in sweat and grime from the ever-present dust. "Normally, when we go to different villages people will tell us about a weapons cache, this is the first one we've found on our own."

Fitzpatrick runs through the list of weapons they've found in just the past week.

"Several caches of mortars, several different mortar tubes, 10 to 15 AK-47s and couple of assorted different weapons here and there."

"Every time we hit the ground we found weapons," said Platoon Sergeant, Sgt. 1st Sgt. Vincent Askew. "The squad leader just have a knack for it."

"We look at these kids, these American soldiers, who are just 18 and 19 years old and we don't think about what they are capable of," said Sgt. 1st Sgt. Vincent Askew. "We ask them to go into a room we know

has ordinance in it, or we ask them to rush somewhere where we know someone has a weapon and they do it. We don't give them enough credit for their guts and skill."

"It's kind of bad to say you're getting used to something like this, because you don't want to get complacent," said squad leader Staff Sgt. Natividad. "But at the same time you pretty much know where you have to be and what you have to do. This is what we're trained for and this is what we do. It's good to finally put your training to use."

Outside the compound, the convoy arrives, but this time there is a crowd, numbering around 100. The looks of distrust have seemingly disappeared, smiles line people faces and more than a few hands are shook. Though far from a 'festive' atmosphere, it's apparent that the presence of Americans here, at least, isn't something that spurs fear, resentment or anger.

"We see these people and we see they're living conditions. It could be a wealthy place," he continued. "I don't know what they've been through, but people come up to you and shake your hands, some people come up crying, it's really heartwarming to see that these people are finally going to get something. But it's up to them now."