

TRIBUNE SPECIAL REPORT

The war up close with the 3rd Platoon, Bonecrusher Troop

The Tribune is following a platoon in Baghdad to witness the complexities of the war. For these GIs, trying to secure their slice of this disintegrating nation is chaotic, confusing and deadly work.

By **Aamer Madhani** and **Dahleen Glanton**, ChicagoTribune correspondents - Sept 9, 2007

BAGHDAD

The crack of gunfire erupted from the other side of the wall. Josh Nelson and Mike Lyons, two privates barely a year out of basic training, tensed.

On one of their first patrols since arriving in Iraq, the two stood guard in a dusty school courtyard during a frantic hunt for whoever had just fired a rocket-propelled grenade. The schoolhouse gate crashed open. The two raised their weapons. In the sweltering June heat, Nelson could feel his heart pounding. In walked an Iraqi army officer. He laughed nervously at the sight of Lyons and Nelson. The gunfire? Just the Iraqi shooing away a curious boy loitering near the gate.

"I was this close to blowing that guy away," Nelson said.

With that, the two young grunts from the 3rd Platoon of Bonecrusher Troop had their introduction to the fog of Iraq. While politicians in Washington debate whether the U.S. military "surge" is working, American soldiers here in Baghdad have their own, narrower focus. Their days and nights are spent identifying friend from foe, struggling to bring a semblance of security to their corner of Iraq and trying to stay alive.

This summer, the platoon's 18 men joined the front lines of the Bush administration's 28,000-troop buildup, billed as the U.S. military's last chance to stabilize Iraq and spare it from even greater carnage. In the coming days, Gen. David Petraeus and the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, will deliver a report expected to outline why they think this strategy is succeeding. Two embedded reporting assignments with Bonecrusher Troop and its 3rd Platoon yield a different sort of assessment.

Weeks of on-the-ground observation show how a commanding officer relies on pop sociology, not Patton, in his earnest attempt to understand the intractable mess that is Iraq; how young soldiers grapple with the conflicting roles of diplomat and warrior; and how those soldiers must fend off their own doubts and fears to protect Iraq. As one young private wondered aloud: "What if these are my last days? What is it for?"

Such are the private questions obscured by the big ones soon to be addressed in the halls of Congress .

Here is a soldier's-eye view of how the strategy devised by Petraeus, who crafted the military's counterinsurgency plan, sometimes gets lost in translation when applied to the streets of Baghdad.

Finding the tipping point

The day before the soldiers of Bonecrusher Troop left for their first patrols, Capt. Jim Marckwardt, the troop commander, gathered them for a pep talk behind their barracks. With an almost frenetic energy, Marckwardt paced the gravel, telling his soldiers the road ahead wouldn't be easy, but if they stayed focused they could leave behind a 4-by-2-kilometer section of Baghdad ready to flourish. He patted backs, thanking the soldiers for their commitment. At a time of growing skepticism over U.S. war policy, even inside the Pentagon, Marckwardt

remained optimistic. At the urging of a superior, he read Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point" in the months before coming to Iraq. For Marckwardt, the book was a revelation, a blueprint for securing his little piece of a battered land. He assigned the book to his unit's junior officers as pre deployment reading. The one-time best seller extolled the "broken windows" strategy used by New York City in the 1990s, when violent crime dramatically decreased after authorities addressed minor crime problems to prevent them from leading to more serious ones. Similarly, Marckwardt figured that making small improvements--say, cleaning up trash heaps that insurgents use to hide roadside bombs--could have a cascading effect on improving life in Baghdad.

"The Tipping Point" also argued that a small group of people, if they're the right people, can reshape a society by spreading ideas, products and behaviors like a virus. Marckwardt believes that if U.S. troops can sufficiently improve security in Iraq to win some influential friends among the locals, the country will reach a tipping point where an irreversible momentum of progress takes hold. Employing a bit of Gladwell's terminology, he explained: "What we need to do is find the connectors and mavens in our sector. Once we find those right people, we will be successful." It took exactly one trip "outside the wire" for his unit to discover that finding allies in a divided Iraq can be difficult, and persuading them to work with you even harder.

The diplomat's daughter

No one seemed to know exactly what had happened to the farmers. For years they had tended lush patches of dates, tomatoes and okra in one of Baghdad's many urban farm plots. The 3rd Platoon's patrols, which began shortly after the unit arrived in Iraq's capital in June, covered the farmers' neighborhood of Sulaikh, once an upwardly mobile area filled with the grand homes and meticulously tended gardens of former Saddam Hussein-era bureaucrats. Today the same government employees hunker down behind gates adorned with the old Baath Party crest.

In one of the platoon's first trips outside base camp, the soldiers found markets tagged with pro-Shiite militia graffiti and storefronts displaying posters of anti-American Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr. The 3rd Platoon's leaders, 2nd Lt. Kyle Graham and Sgt. 1st Class Chhay Mao, talked to some of the remaining Sunni residents. Through Graham's interpreter, they said many Sunni families fled in fear of the Shiite-dominated security forces. The Shiite residents offered a very different story: The Sunni farmers hadn't fled at all, they just hadn't been around lately. Drenched in sweat, Graham, 23, and Mao, at 33 a grizzled veteran on his third Iraq deployment, were no closer to the truth after two hours of interviews. Still, a few of the neighborhood's residents warmed to them. One older Sunni couple quietly confided that members of a major Shiite militia, Sadr's Mahdi Army, had abducted a young relative. Others complained that Iraqi security forces indiscriminately arrested Sunni men.

Graham, who is on his first deployment, eventually made his way to the well-kept yard of the last house on the block. A middle-age mother named Zainab greeted him in near-fluent English. She then launched into a litany of all that has gone wrong since the U.S. military invaded Iraq. The Pentagon's "surge," she said, had only made matters worse. "There was never problems, there never were bombs here until your security plan," Zainab said. "Shiites and Sunnis lived together with no problems until you people came. What have the Americans done for this country? Tell me what have you done?" Graham, a West Point graduate moved by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to enroll in the academy, tried to reply. But Zainab would not let her monologue be broken.

The daughter of an Iraqi diplomat during Hussein's regime, she blamed the Americans for

the lack of electricity and accused the U.S. military of empowering a Shiite-dominated government intent on isolating Sunnis. She also said she is afraid to let her 18-year-old son leave the house. As a young Sunni man, he would be a prime target for the Shiite militants who terrorize the area.

Graham listened patiently. Overhearing her complaints, a young Iraqi soldier walked into the yard. He barked at the woman that it was she and her Sunni brethren who were the problem. He called her an Al Qaeda sympathizer, implying that, as a Sunni, she at the very least must condone terrorist acts against Iraqi security forces. Shaken by the taunt, Zainab fell silent. Graham asked the woman if they could continue their conversation inside her house. Once there, Zainab told him the Iraqi soldiers now would certainly harass her. The lieutenant made a promise. "I will keep an eye on you and your family," Graham said. "We will make sure that you stay safe." But she wasn't soothed. She told him the U.S. military has long been making promises it couldn't keep.

Trust in short supply

The 3rd Platoon, an element of the Army's 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, is a tank unit. "Death before dismount" is its mantra. But at this juncture in Iraq, the Pentagon has little need for tanks, so the platoon travels by Humvee. Clad nearly head-to-toe in armor, the platoon regularly dismounts to interact with the Iraqis of Sulaikh. This is what commanders mean when they say the battle for Iraq's most volatile neighborhoods is going to be won by foot soldiers performing double duty: police detectives looking for the enemy and social workers serving citizens ravaged by the country's chaos and violence. The platoon's troops received minimal training for either mission.

Mao and Graham began one patrol with the hope of meeting as many locals on the streets as possible. But few people were out in the 110-degree heat, so the soldiers decided to knock on doors and introduce themselves to anyone who would talk to them. The first person who answered was a man with a salt-and-pepper mustache trailed by a little girl who seemed perfectly at ease with seeing a platoon of American soldiers outside her front door. A Sunni, the man had earned a good living running a real estate agency in a predominantly Shiite neighborhood across the city. But he stopped going to work last year after militiamen killed his business partner near their office.

Ushering Mao and Graham into his home, the man sent his daughter off to another part of the house to retrieve a photo album from his wife. He insisted the soldiers look at his pictures from a vacation he'd taken a few years earlier, snapshots from Boston and Las Vegas. The man, like many of his neighbors, complained that a nearby passport office was controlled by rogue Iraqi security forces who refused to allow travel documents to be issued to Sunnis. Other residents said they had to leave the neighborhood for fuel because Shiite militias and corrupt police ran the nearby gas station.

"When you came to my door today, and I saw it was American forces, I was glad to see you," he said. "When the Iraqi army comes ... I would never open the door. They are my own people, but I don't trust them."

Even when the platoon met friendly Iraqis, it remained unclear what the Americans could do to help them.

On another patrol, an elderly man approached Staff Sgt. Stephen Yacapin. In pidgin English, he told Yacapin he was excited by the American presence in his neighborhood. He went on to describe how terrible the Iraqi security forces were, filled with incompetent or corrupt

police and soldiers. Yacapin said little to the man, but the conversation unsettled the veteran of two tours in Iraq. "I wanted to tell him it's their country, and we have to give it to them. So they're going to have to start trusting their own people," Yacapin said. "I don't want to be here forever."

What if I die here?

Pfc. Mike Lyons got his first tattoo in March, more than two months before the 3rd Platoon left for Iraq. It's a bar code on his wrist. "So I will never forget my time in the armed forces," he explained. "They got bar codes on all the products you buy and whatnot, but the Army has bar codes on us because the Army's got us." Lyons' father, Sgt. Mike Lyons Sr., retired in December after 27 years in the military, his last hitch running a forward operating base in Iraq. While home on leave, he had tried to talk his son into getting a college degree before enlisting. But his son signed up anyway.

Sitting back at Camp Taji before going out on patrol, the younger Lyons wondered what more the U.S. military could accomplish in Iraq. "There are no weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein didn't attack the twin towers," he said. "You get here and you think, 'What if I die here? What if these are my last days? What is it for?'"

Grunts didn't ask those questions when Lyons' platoon sergeant first arrived in Iraq more than four years ago. Chhay Mao, who fled the killing fields of Cambodia as a child, was among the first American soldiers who stormed across the desert to Baghdad, toppling Hussein. Nor were the troops asking such questions when Mao returned to Iraq in 2005. Back then the mission seemed equally clear: to create a stable enough environment to allow Iraqis to hold their first national election in the post-Hussein era. But on this latest deployment, Mao said the goals of the mission eluded the "average Joe" (as in G.I. Joe), and progress proved harder to gauge. The uncertainty left some soldiers on edge.

Lyons, one of the platoon members seeing Iraq for the first time, got irritated by the Iraqi children who begged the Americans for candy and money. His mother said Lyons told her he feared playing with the children, worrying that if he let his guard down even for a moment the enemy would find a way to kill him. On one of his many phone calls home, she could hear the trouble in his voice. Marie Lyons said she tried to reassure her son. "You're going to be safe, and the Lord will be with you," she told him. "Do you really believe that, Mom?" Lyons asked.

Never particularly religious, Lyons has become interested in the Bible since getting to Iraq. Living in the region where Abraham was born, he said he figured now was a good time to read as much of the Scriptures as he could. Often, he takes a camouflage -covered Bible with him on patrol. As the summer wore on, Lyons arranged to swap home leave with another soldier so he could travel back to Kentucky. But the other man had a change of heart, according to Marie Lyons. He told her son he didn't want to mess with "God's plan."

Perhaps it was more than a hunch. The Army had its own plan for Bonecrusher Troop. In a controversial effort to isolate Al Qaeda fighters and Sunni insurgents, the U.S. military last spring surrounded one of the districts neighboring Sulaikh with miles of concrete barriers rising higher than the surrounding houses. Residents must enter and exit the area, known as Adhamiyah, through guarded checkpoints. Even with the wall, Adhamiyah remains among the most volatile areas in all of Iraq. U.S. troops operating there face near-daily attacks from roadside bombs, grenades and sniper fire. In 11 months of patrolling the area, an Army battalion suffered so many fatalities and serious injuries--more than 50 of its roughly 500 soldiers--that commanders sent in Bonecrusher Troop to relieve that unit. After just a few weeks of patrolling

the relative quiet of Sulaikh, the 3rd Platoon was going over the wall.

Aamer Madhani reported from Iraq; Dahleen Glanton reported from Elizabethtown, Ky.

amadhani@tribune.com dglanton@tribune.com Copyright © 2007, Chicago Tribune
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