

A YEAR IN IRAQ 2006

Photos and Writings by Michael Yon

Mike in the Mirror

I was in the Army some years ago and maintained close contact with many friends who made a career of military service. Naturally, I had an interest in what was happening in Iraq--I had friends in harm's way. But what spurred me to drop what I was doing, get on a plane and fly halfway around the world, to a war zone, was a growing sense that what I was seeing reported on television, as well as in newspapers and magazines, was inconsistent with the reality my friends were describing. I wanted to see the truth, first hand, for myself.



ALL PHOTOS IN THIS PHOTO ESSAY ARE
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Schools Out

There's something about Iraqi kids that can grab hold of the hardest heart and not let go. (At least the kids that soldiers have not made brats of by giving them candy -- which often upsets their moms.) "The Kids" was one of my first dispatches to describe the magnetic pull between soldiers and kids and in it I wrote: "Then, like squirrels in a park, the kids began to appear. They soon lined the muddy way. Iraqi kids are about the most polite I've seen anywhere in the world. But that doesn't mean they're shy--these kids are always very excited to see US soldiers. They just wave and wave and wave those little arms until they can barely hold them up. The moment a soldier casts a smile their way, the little faces erupt in smiles, some jump up and down as if on springs, until I think they will collapse in fatigue. But they never stop as long as the troops are in view."



The AK-Monkey-Pumpers Smack-Down

(excerpted from *Jungle Law*)

The Yarmuk traffic circle is fantastically dangerous. On the first mission I ran in Mosul, we lost two soldiers and an interpreter, all killed by a car bomb. Others were horribly burned, scarred for life. Many of our wounded and killed soldiers got it right here, or in the immediate vicinity. The ISF takes serious losses in this part of town. But it's not entirely one-sided--the Deuce Four has killed well over 150 terrorists in this neighborhood in the past 10 months. But almost none of those made the news, and those that did had a few key details missing.

Like the time when some ISF were driving and got blasted by an IED, causing numerous casualties and preventing them from recovering the vehicle. The terrorists came out and did their rifle-pumping-in-the-air thing, shooting AKs, dancing around like monkeys. Videos went 'round the world, making it appear the terrorists were running Mosul, which was pretty much what was being reported at the time.

But that wasn't the whole story. In the Yarmuk neighborhood, only terrorists openly carry AK-47s. The lawyers call this Hostile Intent. The soldiers call this Dead Man Walking.

Deuce Four is an overwhelmingly aggressive and effective unit, and they believe the best defense is a dead enemy. They are constantly thinking up innovative, unique, and effective ways to kill or capture the enemy; proactive not reactive. They planned an operation with snipers, making it appear that an ISF vehicle had been attacked, complete with explosives and flash-bang grenades to simulate the IED. The simulated casualty evacuation of sand dummies completed the ruse.

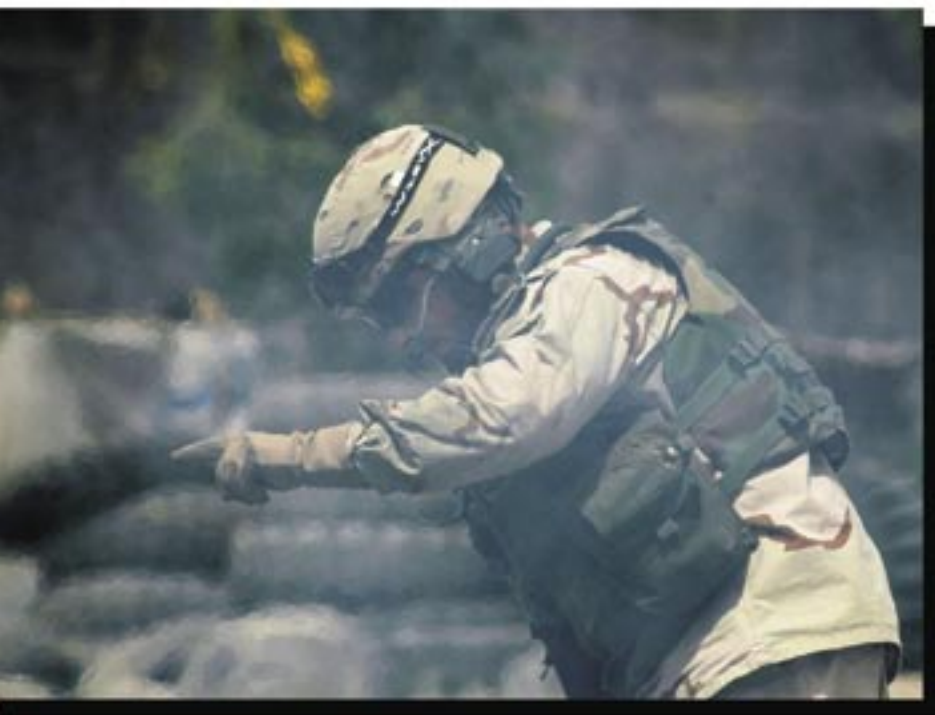
The Deuce Four soldiers left quickly with the "casualties," "abandoning" the burning truck in the traffic circle. The enemy took the bait. Terrorists came out and started with the AK-rifle-monkey-pump, shooting into the truck, their own video crews capturing the moment of glory. That's when the American snipers opened fire and killed everybody with a weapon. Until now, only insiders knew about the AK-monkey-pumpers smack-down.





Khanakan Girls in Class

The longer I stayed, the more I understood. Americans must see these things in order to understand what is happening here and come to a more informed judgment of whether this struggle is “worth” the cost, in money and lives. No one can make that determination without a balanced set of facts. But I didn’t do this work to espouse a point of view, or rally people to the right or left. Some people might find that statement disingenuous. I’ve been criticized for using terms like “terrorist” and “enemy” in my dispatches. On Monday, people criticize me for statements that seem to support the President. On Tuesday, people criticize me for statements that seem to attack the President. Frankly, I am so politically tone-deaf that I usually have no clue whether my work supports or attacks politicians until readers tell me. Most critics are a safe distance from the battleground. Up close, it’s more than a matter of taking sides. There’s no value in using imprecise language in a futile attempt to appear objective. To me, one look in the face of any of the children tips the scales one way.



SGM in the Heat

Getting these dispatches right is challenging. Iraq multiplies the challenge. The chaos of combat has already claimed two pairs of eye-glasses, a video camera, and two digital still cameras; the environment is merciless, with 117 degree days beating down over land and people. The professionalism of soldiers like CSM Prosser, here depicted leaning over the open hatch of that burning Stryker, was a prime motivation for me to persevere and make sure the story of Deuce Four was told.



Combat 2n9

In *Jungle Law*, I wrote: “In the Yarmuk neighborhood, only terrorists openly carry AK-47s. The lawyers call this Hostile Intent. The soldiers call this Dead Man Walking. ... Deuce Four is an overwhelmingly aggressive and effective unit, and they believe the best defense is a dead enemy. They are constantly thinking up innovative, unique, and effective ways to kill or capture the enemy; proactive not reactive.” Combat is just one form of confrontation. I chose another way. By getting close enough to the truth, for long enough to describe it, I confront the distortions in how this struggle is portrayed. I do it because we need to see this clearly: what happens in and to Iraq and to the greater war on terror is a defining moment for our nation, and the world.



Deuce Four Rescue

ABOVE

I saw American and Coalition soldiers putting everything on the line to accomplish their mission. On my first mission with the Deuce Four in Mosul, in late April 2005, one of their Stryker vehicles was hit with an SVBIED and several soldiers were trapped inside the burning vehicle. I wrote about this incident in a dispatch called “Battle for Mosul.” When I saw this unit in action that day, I requested from the commander to embed with Deuce Four for the duration of their deployment.

Kurilla Shot Shooting Back

In “Gates of Fire” I wrote about the day LTC Kurilla was shot in front of me, as he led a small group of us in pursuit of insurgents. “Kurilla was running when he was shot, but he didn’t seem to miss a stride; he did a crazy judo roll and came up shooting. ... With his leg mangled, Kurilla pointed and fired his rifle into the doorway, yelling instructions to the soldiers about how to get in there.”





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CSM Prosser in alley

This photo of CSM Prosser was made in the Mosul alley the day LTC Kurilla was shot three times by a terrorist. In "Gates of Fire" I wrote this about Prosser's actions in combat: "Prosser ran around the corner, passed the two young soldiers who were crouched low, then by me and right to the shop, where he started firing at men inside. ... Then Prosser's M4 went "black" (no more bullets). A shooter inside was also having problems with his pistol, but there was no time to reload. Prosser threw down his empty M4, ran into the shop and tackled the man." Got him.



Farah

There is a difference between Coalition soldiers and ISF and the terrorists and criminals they confront. Whether you call them "insurgents" or "resistance fighters" or "terrorists," any man who wakes up in the morning plotting how to drive explosives-laden cars into crowds of children must be confronted. This image of Major Mark Bieger cradling and comforting an Iraqi girl named Farah who had been critically wounded when a terrorist aimed his car bomb deliberately through a group of children is the truest depiction of our combat soldiers in Iraq, and of the horrors inflicted upon the world by the evil men our soldiers confront. Farah died that day. An Army intelligence officer said that after this photo of Major Bieger holding Farah was broadcast around Iraq and the world, it led to a flood of intelligence that was used to capture and kill terrorists.



Golden Bird

What I saw during those ten months in Iraq changed how I thought about this war. The “truth” of this experience is too complex to capture in a body count or a thirty-second sound byte. It’s chaotic, dynamic and evolving. It’s unwieldy, wasteful and we have made mistakes. It’s a struggle of epic proportions that ultimately relies on the strength of a people about whom most Americans seem to know very little. The intense heat and desert dust may wreak havoc with equipment and vehicles, but they also make for incredible sunsets and amazing images. I shot this photograph in early February 2005, as it ferried Maj. General Batiste away from a memorial service for 5 soldiers of the 1st ID who’d been killed in a vehicle roll-over. In places like Iraq, you learn to savor beauty whenever fortune favors you with it.

A Sixth Sense

(excerpted from *Gates of Fire*)

[note: This excerpt begins in the hospital where LTC Kurilla is recovering after having been shot three times in a fire-fight with an insurgent in a Mosul back alley. While he was in surgery, soldiers learned the “insurgent” was a known terrorist who’d been captured months ago by Deuce Four only to be released from prison earlier that day.]

It was near 10 PM when the airplane that would start their journey back to America landed outside, its engines rumbling the hospital floor. The terrorist who shot Kurilla, and who was now a eunuch in a nearby bed, might well have been the same terrorist who, after being released, shot Lama and Thompson and others. Kurilla could see Khalid Jasim Nohe, but made no comment.

As Captain McGrew and I drove through the dusty darkness back to the Deuce Four, the Commander and SGT Lama, along with other wounded and dead soldiers from around Iraq, began their journey home.



The next day, Iraqi Army and Police commanders were in a fury that LTC Kurilla had been shot. Some blamed his men, while others blamed the terrorists, although blame alone could not compete with disbelief. Kurilla had gone on missions every single day for almost a year. Talking with people downtown. Interfacing with shop owners. Conferencing with doctors. Drinking tea with Iraqi citizens in their homes. Meeting proud mothers with new babies. It’s important to interact and take the pulse of a city in a war where there is no “behind the lines,” no safe areas. It’s even dangerous on the bases here.

In order for leaders of Kurilla’s rank to know the pulse of the Iraqi people, they must make direct contact. There’s a risk in that. But it’s men like Kurilla who can make this work. Even and especially in places like Mosul, where it takes a special penchant for fighting. A passion for the cause of freedom. A true and abiding understanding of both its value and its costs. An unwavering conviction that, in the end, we will win.

Make no mistake about Kurilla - he’s a warrior, always at the front of the charge. But it’s that battle-hardened bravery that makes him the kind of leader that Americans admire and Iraqis respect. Like the soldiers of Deuce Four, Iraqis have seen too much war to believe in fairy tales. They know true warriors bleed.

Iraqi Army and Police officers see many Americans as too soft, especially when it comes to dealing with terrorists. The Iraqis who seethe over the shooting of Kurilla know that the cunning fury of Jihadists is congenite. Three months of air-conditioned reflection will not transform terrorists into citizens.

Over lunch with Chaplain Wilson and our two battalion surgeons, Major Brown and Captain Warr, there was much discussion about the “ethics” of war, and contention about why we afford top-notch medical treatment to terrorists. The treatment terrorists get here is better and more expensive than what many Americans or Europeans can get.

“That’s the difference between the terrorists and us,” Chaplain Wilson kept saying. “Don’t you understand? That’s the difference.”

