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Iraq through one man's lens



Students at a girls' school in the Al Wahda neighborhood of Mosul, Iraq, reach for colorful pens and other school supplies delivered by Fort Lewis Stryker soldiers on Oct. 9, 2006. (Tony Overman/The Olympian)

Tony Overman '85 carries images from Iraq in his heart and head as well as his camera: Soldiers handing out soccer balls and school supplies to Iraqi children. Sunlight glistening off bright red and yellow spices. A soldier inspecting debris from a suicide bombing.

An award-winning photojournalist with *The Olympian* newspaper in Olympia, Wash., Overman spent six weeks last fall embedded with the Third Stryker Brigade deployed from Fort Lewis, Wash., spending most of his time in Baghdad and Mosul.

In Iraq, the risk of violence is ever present. Overman raced down dark, narrow alleys chasing insurgents and caught naps alongside soldiers on a Baghdad street, using his helmet for a pillow. But there are also hours, days, weeks and months of routine and boredom, Overman said.

Although he and the squad were shot at on their first mission, their first day, Overman never saw his companions fire a gun the entire time he was there.

"We heard every day about firefights in the area, but they weren't near us," he said.

The Stryker Brigade's goal is to train Iraqis to take over police functions, he said.

"In Mosul, they are making huge strides and the police and army almost run the city by themselves," Overman said. "That was not the case in Baghdad. But, from a soldier's standpoint, they are helping people, helping get schools open and getting electricity up and running."

Overman went wherever the troops went, chasing after insurgents, patrolling the streets and visiting schools. He saw soldiers touch the lives of children and Iraqi citizens by passing out soccer balls and candy. In turn, they often got hugs and a chance to play with



Lightning Platoon scout Sgt. Justin Sanford, 27, of Olympia, Wash., watches the stairwell as Spc. Richard Oxford, 28, of Red Bluff, Calif., searches locked rooms for attempted kidnappers suspected of hiding in the house in Mosul, Iraq, on Oct. 28, 2006. (Tony Overman/The Olympian)



Staff Sgt. Meksavanh Saphakdy, 26, of Tacoma, Wash., inspects debris in the streets of Mosul, Iraq, following a suicide truck bombing that killed 10 Iraqi civilians and one Iraqi policeman on Oct. 19, 2006. Saphakdy is a member of the HHC Close Target Reconnaissance Lightning Platoon from Fort Lewis, Wash. (Tony Overman/The Olympian)



Fort Lewis Stryker soldier Spc. Brian Arias, 20, of Riverside, Calif., waits in the pre-dawn darkness for an early morning sweep of the Hurriyah neighborhood in Baghdad. (Tony Overman/The Olympian)



Spc. Jason Berg, 22, of Buffalo, N.Y., has his arms full lifting two Iraqi boys during a goodwill mission into Mosul, Iraq, by the Lightning Platoon Stryker soldiers from Fort Lewis, Wash., on Oct. 25, 2006. The soldiers were giving away soccer balls and candy that had been donated from organizations back in the United States. (Tony Overman/The Olympian)

local children who are caught up in the chaos of war.

“The army told us that the future of Iraq rests with the children who did not live under Saddam,” Overman said of his stint in October. “They are trying to get the kids to trust the army, the police, to trust authority and recognize that they are here to help and not hurt. They look for any chance they can to build that trust.”

The soldiers are amazing, Overman said, and many are kids themselves. He turned 44 during his assignment and was considered an “old man” in a unit where the average age was 22. Many were 19 or 20 and in their second or third deployment.

“It’s hard for people to understand what life is like there,” Overman said. “Weekends mean nothing. Days mean nothing. Birthdays and holidays mean nothing. You get up, do your mission, you go back and go to bed. And you miss home. I was there six weeks and couldn’t wait to get home.”

When the war started, there were 600 embedded journalists. At one point when Overman was there, with 160,000 troops, only 11 journalists were embedded with U.S. forces.

“If you only cover the people you are with, the odds of battles happening with your troops are slim,” he

said. “Having only 11 journalists with the soldiers really reduces the coverage of the war. That’s why it’s important to have more journalists there.”

He clearly remembers the image he didn’t photograph: of a bright shaft of sun lighting up a man with a long white beard, sitting at a table covered with bright red and yellow spices. He got only a glimpse before racing by on the heels of an insurgent.

“I would have loved to spend hours or days shooting things I saw as we drove by at 30 miles an hour, things I never had a chance to photograph or see again,” Overman said. “I wish I could have talked to the Iraqi people about what it was like before the war.”

He wavers when asked whether he would go back again but he does miss the soldiers and worries about those men young enough to be his own children.

“People are facing some really difficult situations there, not just the Iraqis, but also our soldiers,” he said. “I get emails from them and I worry about them. It meant a lot to them that we were there covering them. That war is still going on, and we need to send more people to cover it.”

– Mardi Mileham