

No. 5: Monotony, leave, and excitement as we start doing route clearance

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A proper answer

A lot of people asked me how it is being here when I was on leave. Here is a proper answer.

First, let me dispel a strange myth. What is Mosul like? Can I go into town? Are we able to leave the base? No. At least not in a meaningful way. Leaving the base means that you are in a convoy of at least three armored vehicles with at least 9 soldiers, wearing body armor, and armed with your personal weapon and several crew-served weapons for the vehicles (machine guns, etc.). Since June 30th, US forces can't go into Mosul without a Iraqi Police escort anyways. This is not like Full Metal Jacket or something, where hooker-criminals steal your camera while you sit at a café in downtown Saigon. There is no unofficial interaction with the civilian population. The US bases in Iraq are like little islands, and only a fraction of the inhabitants gets to leave regularly (the battle space owners and logistics guys who run convoys). But even when they leave, there are weapons, armor, distance.

No offense, but these questions, after having been here for a few months, struck me as bizarre, if that helps give you an insight into the mentality here. Maybe before the security agreement it was slightly different (in that the battle space owners had some more interaction with the locals, soldiers have never been allowed to just leave bases here and “go out into town”).

So, how is it being here? (*I wrote this originally right before I went on leave, I am a little bit more enthusiastic now, for the time being.*) When we first came here, we shared a building with an armor battalion that had been here for something like 11 months. Their apathy was striking. Offices were dirty, dusty, disorganized. People came late, left early, did most things with minimal effort. And here we were, all excited about being in a combat zone, worried, eager to get working, etc. After only 3 months here, I am starting to understand.

Boring is not the right word to describe the present mood building around here. To me it implies lack of work, but there is plenty of work here to do. But every day seems like groundhog day, a repetition of the past day, or week, or month. It is incredibly monotonous. I walk the same paths every day to the office, to lunch, to dinner, to the gym, back to my room. The food,

although different in appearance, seems all the same, and repeats on a weekly basis anyways. I read the same emails, send the same type of responses, and deal with similar issues every day. I go to the same meetings every week.

As far as I am aware, the English language does not have a verb that relates to monotony the way “bored” relates to “boredom”. After six years in Iraq and eight years in Afghanistan, that surprises me. All the people I have asked here feel the same way. After only 3 months here, most days now are a constant struggle against apathy and indifference. Things that seemed incredibly interesting the first few weeks, like reading interrogation reports, cell phone intercepts, reports on violent attacks, etc., all seem incredibly mundane now. A route clearance patrol found an IED with these or those characteristics. Another roadside bomb blew up and killed several Iraqi Army soldiers. Insurgents shot a storeowner in the head because he would not pay any more extortion money. Oh well.

Travel, Military-style

After three months at Marez, I already had a sense that Mosul is, as far as the U.S. military goes, pretty much a relatively primitive backwater. On my return trip from my two-leave, I was stuck in Balad for three days and my experience there drove that point home for good.¹ Compared to Marez, Balad is a resort.

It took me four and a half days to get from Mosul back to the U.S. The return trip took four and a half days as well, largely because I was stuck in Balad for three days, waiting for a flight to Mosul. It seems that the biggest reason for that delay is that Mosul is only infrequently serviced by flights, so I spent days waiting for one. And waiting in this context means being forced to sit at various fairly bare-bones terminals (i.e. warehouse) to wait for incessant roll calls. In typical Army fashion, you don't find out when your next flight is in any timely fashion—you sit and wait for various announcements and roll calls (meaning you can't leave and are forced to be bored), find out about your flight with minimal notice, and then it's a stressful hassle.

There are worse things than being stuck in Balad though. Here are some specific things that make Balad plusher than Marez:

¹ Balad, or formally Joint Base Balad (JBB) is a large military base north of Baghdad. I think that aside from Victory Base Complex (VBC; the chain of U.S. bases around Baghdad International Airport) in Baghdad, Balad is the largest U.S. base in Iraq.

(1) The roads are paved. Not only are the roads paved, but there are also paved side walks. Not only are there paved roads and paved sidewalks, but they even have damn neat little concrete pads for their T-walls (ubiquitous blast walls that surround almost all structures in both Balad and Marez). At Marez, after 6 years, the main road is gravel and dirt, and in Balad they have neat concrete pads for their T-walls.

(2) The main PX (or at least what I think is the main PX) sells birthday cakes. Birthday cakes. Really?

(3) There are power lines. No constant noise of generators.

(4) Some of the buildings have actual plumbing, i.e. running water and all that stuff.

(5) The main PX is maybe twice the size of the PX on Diamondback.

(6) There is a big MWR facility the same size as the PX. It includes, among other things, a game room with half a dozen large flat-screen TVs with Xbox or Playstation, as well as a dozen high-end computers specifically set aside for video games (I gather each computer has about a dozen or more games installed on it).

(7) Free internet for those who actually live here. At least so I hear.

(8) Not only one, but two Olympic-size swimming pools, one indoor, one outdoor.

(9) The best: a golf driving range. Are you kidding me?

Now I should say that many of the infantry guys live in remote outposts that are much worse than Marez, and I really don't have much to complain about. The food is decent (even if the menu is identical each week, which gets old fast), there is internet, and running water for showers. But still, given what I have seen at Balad and heard about various other bases in Iraq, I would estimate that more than two-thirds of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq have a standard of living higher than ours.

Mosul

And related to that, I now realize how much of a backwater Mosul and Ninewa province really are in Iraq. It's like this place is the wild west of Iraq—lawless and remote. Mosul is a shit hole even by Iraqi standards. Our interpreters avoid it like the plague. While there might be more violence in Baghdad, I would venture to guess that per capita, the violence in Mosul is higher. And at least in Baghdad the Iraqi Army and Police try. In Mosul, half of them are corrupt and part of the problem. Or just outright insurgents themselves. Ninewa province has more roadside bombs now than any other place in Iraq, including Baghdad.

The US bases up here are correspondingly remote (one would think the opposite since this is where all the insurgents are...). Flights up here from central Iraq and Kuwait are rare, infrastructure is satisfactory but not “plush” like in the bigger bases further south. Maybe it is a telling sign that there are no Air Force people up here (the Air Force tends to expect a higher standard of living for its personnel). Oh well, overall it is not bad though, and certainly better than a few years ago when the insurgency was much bigger and half the people still lived in tents. A pool would be nice though. You would think that as engineers, we could build one for ourselves. Spring break Iraq just isn't complete without it.

Changes

There have been some interesting changes during the three and a half weeks I was gone for leave. Overall, they have made my job significantly more interesting, because I am now able to do intelligence in a way that is closer to what I learned when I was in intelligence school.

When I left, it was still dry and hot. I got back right during a weeklong period of rain, and unlike Florida, this is cold and miserable rain. Given the absence of paved roads or sidewalks in this place, everything temporarily turned into mud. Now it gets close to freezing at night, but on the bright side, there are bright green patches of grass sprouting up in random places. It is quite a welcome change though.

There have also been some drastic organizational changes both in my battalion and with the division in general. So far, MND-N (Multinational Division North, not sure why it is still called multinational, but anyways, this is basically a geographic area corresponding to Iraq from Baghdad on north) has been run by the 25th Infantry Division, which now is being replaced by 3rd Infantry Division (out of Fort Stewart, Georgia). The new guys have been somewhat unusual, trying to change things that have been in place since we have been here and zealous to enforce rules no one has followed. Gone are the days I had my little container suite to myself. We now also have to wear ballistic glasses and reflective belts when walking around at night. A couple of other small rules like that are now enforced. I do not know whether these changes are a function of the fact that they just showed up and are excited and everything, or whether this is a cultural phenomenon unique to 3rd ID.

Along with the change in divisions, the local battle space owner (the combat arms unit that “owns” Ninewa province), 3-1 CAV (3rd Cavalry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division) is being replaced by 2-3 HBCT (2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division). The corresponding battalions are being replaced by other units as well. I don't have much of an occasion to deal

with those brigades, except to request ISR coverage (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, e.g. unmanned drones and stuff like that). As an engineer battalion, we are low in the pecking order for ISR and most of my requests are typically denied. Hopefully 2-3 will be somewhat more forthcoming, but I can't tell yet. The practical effects this is having on us are that Marez is more crowded for now since there are two brigades here at the same time, and that all my contacts with the various elements in brigade and the battle space owner battalions I occasionally deal with are changing.

Looking down at my own battalion, there have been two significant changes. While I was gone for leave, one of my two actual intelligence analysts was gone for leave as well, leaving the remainder of my intelligence section overworked. As a result they managed to convince the powers to be to establish intel teams in the companies (something new in the Army typically called a COIST—company intelligence support team). Given that we are not combat arms, these “teams” largely consist of one or two people that provide convoy-specific intelligence packets. Now that both I and the other analyst are back, this has freed up enough time for us to focus on something else that came about as a result of the other significant organizational change.

The day before I left for leave, we took control of a route clearance company. They drive up and down roads to try to find IEDs. They actually hit an IED 10 minutes after we formally took control over them (staying up until four in the morning as result, the day I am supposed to fly out of here, is fun). But providing intelligence support to them is much more exciting than the stuff we have been doing so far.

Before we had route clearance, most of my intelligence work was defensive in nature—provide our units and convoys with information that will help them not get blown up or shot at. A large portion of that comes from simply looking at the details of past incidents in a given area, and keeping track of current enemy tactics. It's not that interesting. Fortunately we have now unloaded a lot of that on the COISTs, we just help provide resources, information, and a bigger picture, they do the actual work. Now that we have route clearance, I am much more involved with counter-IED stuff, and the way one goes about that is (1) more interesting, and (2) closer to what I learned to do in school.

In intelligence school, when it comes to intelligence in support of non-conventional wars (yes, we did spend a few weeks learning quasi-Soviet doctrine, organization, and tactics), I was basically taught how to do two things. I should also mention that they teach you to be an intelligence officer in a combat arms unit, and I am not. The first was IPB (intelligence preparation of the battlefield, blah blah, basically

intelligence support to mission planning) for counterinsurgency. I really don't do much of that here because we simply do not have the time or inclination to develop elaborate, written plans for our operations. I don't think I have written an actual intelligence annex to an operations order since the first month we got here, although with the elections and joint Iraqi Army and Peshmerga checkpoints looming, I may soon have to.

The second thing we learned was how to do day-to-day intelligence in a counterinsurgency, for a combat arms unit. A stylized version of this process looks something like this: receive various intelligence reports, distill the information to (a) find patterns in enemy attacks, and (b) track insurgent networks and patterns in the behavior of specific insurgents, and then use that information to focus surveillance, advise on operations, and develop target packets for specific insurgents so that someone can go capture or kill them. As a support unit, I don't do any of the stuff involving humans, i.e. we don't do what the Army calls targeting.

To some extent, we have already been doing the first two of those pieces already, i.e. sift through the myriad of intelligence reports and try to find trends in enemy attacks. The exciting thing now that we do route clearance is that I can focus much more on IEDs specifically, in a fairly small geographic area, and most importantly, I now have a much better justification for requesting various forms of surveillance to ideally catch IED emplacers in the act. That to me is much more exciting than reassuring people when they should not drive down a road so they minimize their chances of being blown up. Now when I think that there will be an IED in a certain location at a certain time, I can throw ISR and route clearance patrols at the problem (I control the ISR, I have to convince the operations people in my battalion to throw a patrol at it).

Thanksgiving

The holiday kind of crept up on me, I forgot about it almost entirely until the day before. Since I have returned from leave, I have thrown myself at counter-IED work at the expense of most of my other responsibilities. The reason is that over the past few weeks, the level of IED attacks on US forces in southern Ninewa province has increased dramatically, and there are now more IEDs in that area than anywhere else in Iraq, including Baghdad. Our route clearance convoys now are hit almost every other day. My main joy for Thanksgiving is related to this work.

The night before Thanksgiving, I stayed up working until 1am, partly because of an IED-related incident involving a route clearance convoy, but more importantly because I was fairly confident that there would be another IED attack in a certain area at a certain time that night. After dealing with the first IED-related incident, I stayed in our TOC (tactical

operations center) for a while longer, and watched as the officer on duty diverted one of our non-route clearance convoys (=vehicles that are not as heavily armored and less vigilance) heading for the area that I thought the IED attack was going to take place tonight. It was kind of a stroke of luck that I still happened to be there to catch this. Later on, after I left, the route clearance convoy did make its way into the area and found an IED in the middle of the 3 or so kilometer stretch of road I had told people it would be in.

So I'm pretty excited right now. Not only were we able to predict the location and time of an IED attack almost a week in advance, but this is the first time since we have been here that I can say with confidence that my work potentially helped save some lives. We are finally ahead of the insurgents emplacing IEDs, at least some of them. Hopefully this little incident will build my section's credibility so that the next time we come up with a prediction like this, people listen to us and the battle space owners provide us with a little bit better support (like catching triggermen that we identify...). And oh, there was a general officer riding on the convoy as a VIP, so maybe we'll start getting some more surveillance support.

Thanksgiving itself...woke up very late and feeling sick, went to work for a bit, then to the dining facility to eat quickly and then serve food (Army tradition...on holidays the officers serve food for the enlisted). The last bit was probably a bad idea considering how sick I feel now, but it was fun. The food was good, the dining facility staff went all out. After that, attempted to work for a bit more, but then caved in to my cold or whatever it is and just relaxing for the rest of the day now. The first day off (kind of sort of) since I have been back from leave. A lot more counter-IED work is looming this weekend.