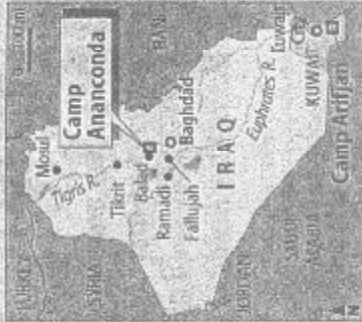


Truck drivers recount the road to Baghdad

These soldiers travel into an area where what looks like just a piece of trash may be a roadside bomb.



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CAMP ARIFJAN, KUWAIT — The drive from Camp Arifjan to Baghdad is long, hot and stressful. It can take days or even weeks to get there and back, depending on how much fighting is going on or how many attacks there are along the route.

Fort Eustis soldiers inside the biggest trucks — 48-wheeled vehicles designed to carry tanks — can top 140 degrees.

There is always the danger of roadside bombs or small-arms fire.

Yet Sgt. Jason Jackson and Sgt. Charles Rupert, truck drivers with the 2123rd Transportation Company, a National Guard unit from Kentucky, say the trip isn't as bad as people make it out to be. They've been making the trip since January.

"Sure, they are firing small arms at us," Jackson said as he slipped from a tall cup of soda in the Arifjan dining facility.

He was on a two-day break between runs. He used the time to e-mail his high school sweetheart waiting for him back home and to relish the chance to wear shorts and a T-shirt instead of the desert uniform, bulletproof vest and Kevlar helmet he wears on the road.

mer and are already familiar with the trip to Iraq.

Bottom line, Jackson said, everyone from truck drivers to commanders are scared their first few times in and out of the country. But soon you realize that you have a job to do and being too focused on your fear can be dangerous. It can be just as dangerous to forget your fear, to get too relaxed.

"When we first started our runs, it was pretty quiet," Jackson said.

The drivers leave Arifjan and stop at Camp Navistar, the border crossing area into Iraq.

"From there to the Baghdad International Airport is basically nothing," Rupert said.

"One of the first things you'll notice are all the children that are waiting for you right across the border," Jackson said. "It's a bunch of kids begging for food or trying to sell you stuff."

In the beginning, Jackson said, some drivers threw MREs to the kids.

"In the beginning you are soft-hearted for them," he said. "Now our mind-set has changed because we have to assume everything is a threat."

Southern Iraq is barren, Jackson said.

"There's not a lot of dunes like you would think of being in a desert," Rupert said. "It's flat, open land."

Land that gets real dusty, real quick.

"There is this one area that we drive through that we call 'the

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SGT. JASON JACKSON,
a truck driver with the 2123rd Transportation Company

dust bowl," Rupert said. "That's just what it is. It's so dusty that sometimes you have to strain to see."

The only scenery is dry vegetation and simple, mud-brick homes.

"Some of those homes are really neat to look at," Jackson said. "It's like getting to do the ultimate study in other cultures for a liberal arts degree."

Jackson is a college student, called out of class to duty. He's studying to be a teacher.

"Before you even get to the city (Baghdad) you can smell the trash burning," Rupert said.

Litter is everywhere. The danger is somewhere.

"So many people are hiding roadside bombs in that trash that it's often hard to tell what's trash and what isn't," Jackson said.

Things started heating up on the roads in April, especially around Baghdad, Jackson said. More than 100 Americans died in Iraq that month.

One — a first lieutenant commanding a convoy — was serving

with Jackson and Rupert. "He was shot during a pretty intense firefight," said Jackson, who was not along on that mission.

"The bullet went through this Humvee door and into his legs. It hit a main artery and he bled to death."

The lieutenant's wife was pregnant at the time, Jackson said. She just recently gave birth. Rupert was there when the lieutenant died.

"We ran into an ambush," he said. "They were waiting for us." After that attack, Jackson said, everyone in his company started taking things more seriously.

"Not that we weren't before," he said. "But even more so because it hit so close to home." They put improvised armor on their trucks.

"We call it 'hillbilly armor' because all we did was cut out thick steel and put it on our doors," Jackson said. "We have a really good welder who worked really hard on that to give us the extra protection."

Jackson said he and the other drivers feel safer now.

"We weren't so worried about getting shot," he said. "What we are worried most about is (roadside bombs). We needed the armor to help absorb the impact."

Nothing changes on the drive back, Jackson said, except maybe you're hauling tanks and tank crews to ship home.

"We like it when we travel with tanks," Rupert said. "We feel more secure."



Covering the story

Daily Press staff writer Stephanie Heinz and photographer Dave Bowman are traveling with the Fort Eustis-based 7th Transportation Group. For more photos and journal entries, go to dailypress.com/eustis

Iraq developments

■ A U.S. jet fired missiles Friday in the Sunni insurgent stronghold of Fallujah, the fourth day of attacks targeting the city where U.S. and Iraqi troops have no control, officials said.

■ In Najaf, about 1,000 protesters marched through the old quarter Friday to demand that Muqtada al-Sadr and his aides leave the city, which has been ravaged by fighting.

■ A group calling itself "Supporters of al-Zawahir" posted a Web statement Friday claiming to have kidnapped two Italians.

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