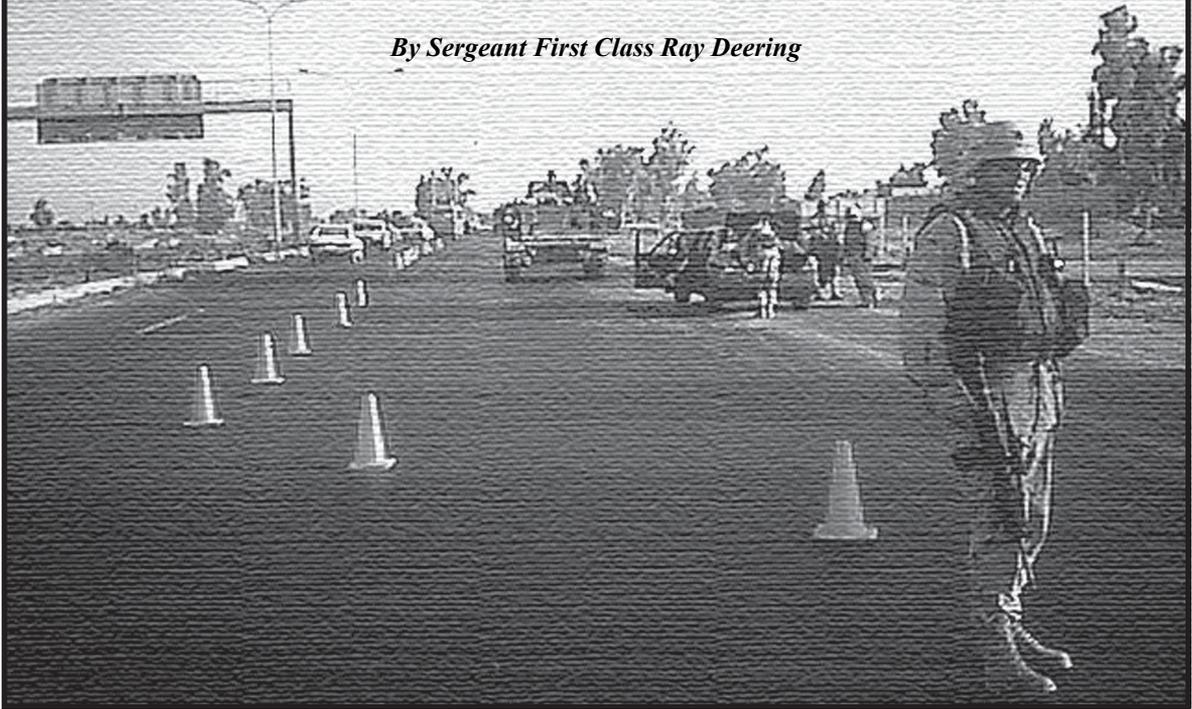


A Day of My Life in Baghdad

By Sergeant First Class Ray Deering



You can smell the decaying banana skins underfoot as they mingle with the fuel and exhaust fumes. Iraqi men and boys, some no more than 10 years old, shout “mister, mister, one dollar” as they shove bundles of bananas and soda cans toward you. Yet another crossing of the Al Muthana Bridge that we helped replace on the Tigris River to improve the flow of traffic into Baghdad. There must be seventy or eighty cars jockeying for a position at the front of the traffic. Normally, there would be two lanes, but somehow it has grown to four and must merge into one to cross the bridge. Horns blow and hands wave as people shout at each other, most assuredly not words of greeting or well wishes.

Another patrol, searching the streets for improvised explosive devices (IEDs), comes to a close. But first we have to make it back to our base camp, and lately the last mile has become even more dangerous, once with an attack on one of our own—our commander. As we make the last turn onto our island sanctuary, we all lighten the mood with sarcastic comments, and the same one or two guys provide our comic relief.

We clear our weapons and head back to our rooms, where we download our equipment and grab a cold bottle of water. Junior leaders verify that all equipment is serviceable and stored neatly, while we think about the time our next mission begins and what we will do to relax for an hour before we go back to work. The married guys head for the cyber café, hoping for an e-mail from their loved ones or, more importantly, that they will catch that loved one online in a chat room. Some

make their way to the telephones to call home. Even more seek some solitude while they become consumed with PlayStation or GameBoy. This is their break from the reality of being away from the family, friends, comforts, and freedoms that they have all sacrificed to help bring freedom to the Iraqi people.



Soldiers guard a power plant in northern Baghdad.

I head to the operations center to check in with the commander and first sergeant. They didn't go along on this patrol, but they are just making their way through the doors as they return from checking on a school. We discuss the heat and how it's nice that the intense climate we suffered through during the past few months has passed. There is a lighthearted atmosphere as everyone is silently thankful that we have gone out into the sector and safely returned one more time. We discuss future missions, plan the rest of the day, and bring up the truly important question: What time is mail being picked up?

There is a bond here that no one can ever explain and that is never talked about. It overcomes the differences between rank, background, experience, and personal opinion of one another's personality. It is the appreciation for the guy beside you and what he contributes and brings to the table during this time of hardship—our generation's War on Terrorism. We complain about who may or may not be doing what, whose turn it is to perform a mission or task, why more effort has apparently been put into a plan for sporting activities than was put into the plan for an upcoming mission involving multiple units. But it is done in our own group—our leadership team.

When we are together as this leadership team, we feel that we can handle any problem that comes our way, because we are in harmony when it comes to the mission. Yet we agree to disagree among ourselves, debate issues back and forth, and jibe and harass one another constantly. It is our way of relieving the pressure of the situation, to ensure that we stay focused in front of our men. It is our way of getting our secret fears out into the open, but without losing face or displaying weakness. We use each other for that, so we can lead our men with the effort and professionalism they deserve.

I wonder if the soldiers know we do it, but does it really matter if they know that or not? They look at us as we step in front of them and present a plan for a mission as if this is going to be the one mission that will break the back of the resistance in Iraq and lead the way to our returning home. We have to try to convince them that it is the best plan that has ever been conjured up in a military mind, though we constantly search our own minds and our past experiences for the things we may have forgotten, the things we have to inject to ensure that our soldiers stay motivated, stay professional, and stay alive. None of us can afford to miss doing something that we should have known to do. These men deserve our best, and so do their loved ones.

So we finish our discussions, throw away our empty water bottles, and head back to our small units, our platoons, and our men. We put that brave face back on, because for their sake we can't afford to have a bad day. We close our minds to our families for a few more hours as we go about the business of briefing tomorrow's mission, ensuring that the guard roster is straight. We deal with the concerns that a troop might have about his wife and what she may be doing with their bank account, and we talk to the guy whose wife is due to deliver



Soldiers clear routes to prevent IED attacks.

their first child next month and when he'll get to go home to see his newborn.

We ensure that our equipment is ready, our weapons are clean, and our plan is foolproof—at least in our eyes. Then we take a few minutes for ourselves, go for a run, lift a few weights, or see if we can borrow a movie that we haven't already seen half a dozen times. But we know that soon we can lie down, and with that comes our own private thoughts about our loved ones, our kids, and our parents. And we know that when the morning comes, it's one day closer to getting back to them and one more trip back across our bridge, one more whiff of those banana skins, one more cry of "mister, mister, one dollar." In the back of our minds, we realize that we have experienced the greatest honor a soldier can ever have—leading troops in combat on a day with no casualties. 

Sergeant First Class Deering deployed to Baghdad, Iraq, with Bravo Company, 16th Engineer Battalion, "Ready First Combat Team," 1st Armored Division, on 9 May 2003. He led a combat engineer platoon as a platoon sergeant until 17 November 2003, when he returned to the United States after 6½ years in Europe, including a tour in Kosovo as platoon sergeant. His previous assignments include the Combat Maneuver Training Center, 5th Engineer Battalion, and 12th Engineer Battalion during Operation Desert Storm.