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Reporting from Iraq

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Reporting from Iraq

As a journalist covering the war, David Brown '96 caught a firsthand glimpse of U.S. military operations at work.

Story and Photos by David Brown '96

"Do not spill or allow liquids into your computer." — From "Tips for Handling your IBM ThinkPad system," IBM Corp., 2003

I was just about to climb down the rope ladder from the Coast Guard patrol boat into a small, inflatable motor boat when one of the Coasties handed me a water bottle roughly the size of my 1-year-old son.

It was hot out, and I didn't know how long I'd be going without water, so I took the bottle. It was looking like a difficult chore to pass all my gear down the ladder to the Coast Guard sailor bobbing along in the boat, and then get myself down there with any degree of ease.

Then I had what seemed like an inspired idea. I took the bottle and zipped it into an open compartment in the bag holding my laptop computer. It was secure. Problem solved.

We motored across the river to the cement pier, which was about 10 feet over our heads. After one sailor standing on the pier tied a rope to my bag and hauled it up the side of the wall, I heard a dull crack as it slammed against the cement.

Moments later, I was on the pier, finally on dry land, staring at my bag dripping water onto the pavement. I opened the computer and hit the on switch, only to find a blank screen staring back at me. I was now the proud owner of a very pricey IBM ThinkPad Paper Weight.

After months of anticipation, weeks of traveling, and days of wheeling and dealing with military types, I was finally in Iraq. And as a newspaper reporter covering the tail end of the war, I now had no way to file my stories.

* * *

I work for *Navy Times*, a newspaper published just outside Washington, D.C. It's privately owned, although many people assume our paper is run by the Navy. With a circulation of about 50,000, it's designed to be a community newspaper read by the sailors in the active fleet.

During the war, our goal was the same as all the other media outlets: to cover the war and tell individual stories. Thanks to a new Pentagon program, a total of 600 journalists — including two *Navy Times* reporters — were "embedded" with U.S. and British forces. Our reporters had been assigned to the Kitty Hawk and Constellation, which were among five Navy aircraft carriers deployed to the region.

While the *Navy Times* reporters and other embedded journalists gained unprecedented access to the troops for the first few weeks of the war, if they left their units, they lost their slots, so the scope of their stories was limited. That meant that much of our paper's reporting focused on activities aboard the carriers, while many other units worthy of attention went unnoticed.



In the port city of Umm Qasr, "we were able to find the last remaining portrait of Saddam," writes David Brown, who is pictured above standing in front of the huge mural. "Rumor had it that a British general was packing it up as a wartime souvenir."

People who watched the war on TV saw carrier jets bombing targets all over Iraq, and Tomahawk cruise missiles firing from destroyers, cruisers, and submarines. But sailors were also on the ground: Seabees rebuilt roads and put up tents, Seals secured airfields and oil rigs, and explosive ordnance disposal technicians blew up unexploded bombs that littered Iraq.

To cover these ground sailors, my editor decided to send me to Iraq about three weeks into the war. Unlike our other two reporters, I was told to fly to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf and be an “embarker” rather than an embedder. It meant taking short trips with small units to get a variety of perspectives.



Above, a Coast Guard port security boat examined Umm Qasr's port.

I had covered a part of the war in Afghanistan from the carrier *John C. Stennis* last February, but this assignment was more daunting. There's a certain comfort to being embedded — your job is to go where your unit goes. As an embarker, I was on my own when it came to getting from place to place and establishing contacts when I got there. The problem was that there were roughly 1,500 reporters sitting in Kuwait City hotel rooms whose editors had given them exactly the same assignment.

I decided to skip Kuwait City altogether and try to hook up with Navy units in Umm Qasr, an Iraqi port city at the northern tip of the Persian Gulf where the first humanitarian ships were arriving. I had hoped that the tide of the war would be on my side. I left home April 12, just a few days after Baghdad had fallen.

Reporters were either heading into Baghdad or going home, which I hoped would leave more opportunities open for me when I arrived.

I spent the first week aboard the large-deck amphibious assault ship *Bonhomme Richard*. The ship spent the war as an air carrier for Marine jets and helicopters, and launched Marines in landing craft out of the back of the ship toward Kuwait.

During my stay, the *Bonhomme Richard* was launching Marine Corps air patrols a few miles south of Kuwait. Being so near shore, the ship was placed on high alert because of the remaining missile threat, as well as the potential small-boat threat from Al-Qaeda terrorists. So as soon as I stepped off the helicopter, I was greeted by a Navy chief holding what looked like an olive-green purse. “Welcome aboard. Here's your gas mask,” he said with a smile. I had heard the horror stories of reporters scrambling around in a panic the first time the gas alarms went off, so I was prepared. I did all my interviews with my “purse” hanging to my side. That sucker was never leaving my sight.

* * *

I spent the next six days writing stories and taking photos to show what the ship was doing and how the sailors and Marines on board had adjusted their operations for the war. About midway through my stay, all the television networks announced that three of the four carrier battle groups in the Persian Gulf were leaving. The at-sea story was dwindling — with one carrier battle group left in the Gulf, there were fewer ships to ride, hence fewer stories to write. It was time for me to try to get ashore.

I had heard that the Coast Guard was up near Umm Qasr, so after catching a ride with a Navy helicopter back to Bahrain, I contacted the Coast Guard and they agreed to fly me out in a couple of days to one of their cutters in the northern tip of the Persian Gulf. The general plan was to find as many Navy and Coast Guard units as I could, try to get ashore for a few hours to check out the port in Iraq, and then get back.

Along with a reporter and photographer from another newspaper, I flew for almost three hours up the length of the Gulf to meet the Coast Guard cutter Boutwell. Because the helicopter was too big to land on the ship, the plan was to lower us by a hoist onto the flight deck. But lightning had been spotted in the area, which would have fried us if we had tried to drop onto the ship. So we turned back to Bahrain.

Back in my hotel in Bahrain, after a badly needed shower and an unholy spate of cursing, I received a call from a public affairs officer at the coalition press information center in Bahrain. She told me that a 110-foot Coast Guard patrol boat was leaving in two hours, and to get my rear end down to the pier if I wanted to get up the Northern Gulf. The boat would bring us north to a 225-foot long buoy tender called the *Walnut*, which was tied to the pier at Umm Qasr.

The *Walnut* had been busy, and I figured she'd have a good story to tell. Buoy tenders pull up, drop, and repair buoys. The Iraqis had allowed their system of buoys in the Khawr Abd Allah Waterway that leads to Umm Qasr to go haywire. Many had rusted out or floated into the middle of the channel, so the people driving the humanitarian aid ships to Umm Qasr had to wing it. Hence, the *Walnut* had been given the non-sexy but vital task of placing about 35 buoys up and down the waterway.

It was on the trip from the Coast Guard patrol boat to the *Walnut* that I accidentally drowned my ThinkPad. Thankfully, the *Walnut* had computers aboard for use by the sailors. If I wrote my stories out longhand, I could type them into the machines and e-mail them to my editor back in Washington. A pain, but also a solution.

Using the *Walnut* as an office and hotel, I spent the next few days covering the troops in Umm Qasr, which was the first city to be taken by coalition forces. As the only working port for Iraq, Umm Qasr was by default the only place where shipments of desperately needed food and water could come into the country by sea.

At the port itself stood a makeshift tent city built by Navy and Coast Guard sailors to house the hundreds of troops stationed there. This was the largest deployment of Coast Guard units since Vietnam, and they, along with the Navy port security folks, were eager to tell their stories. Proud of their accomplishments and very anxious to go home, they were also eager to hear news from the States and pumped us for information.

Knowing it wasn't safe to go into the city without military escort, we asked sailors inside the tent city if they knew of anyone who'd be willing to accompany us. It took several hours, but in the end we had mustered a truck and a Humvee, along with several armed guards who were only too happy to help us. It was a win-win: they protected us out in town, we got them out of mind-numbing guard duty at the port.

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As soon as we passed through the port gates that led out to the town of Umm Qasr, Iraqi children swarmed the cars, motioning with their hands that they wanted water. One child carried an anti-tank missile launcher — essentially a big, hollow tube — that he had found abandoned in the field and presented it to a sailor in our group. The sailor took it, and tossed the child some candy. The military was forbidden from rewarding such behavior with food or water, since that would send scores of other children back out to the fields looking for more unexploded ordnance.

Umm Qasr was a dusty expanse of brick walls and low buildings. It was desolate and war-ravaged. There was no power, no water, no places to buy anything. But it soon became clear that most of the town had been



Brown photographed the bombed-out remains of an Iraqi gun ship. "The river is littered with shipwrecks from previous wars," he writes. U.S. sailors boarded them, "looking for evidence that Iraqis are hiding out, either monitoring coalition ship movements or using the ships as staging areas for small-boat attacks."

neglected for years before this war began. Above this desolation hovered the smiling face of Saddam Hussein on murals that were, by now, mostly defaced by the hungry, frustrated Iraqis who lived there, and later taken away by coalition troops.

We passed by water tank trucks, which were swarmed by Iraqis who carried the water away in jugs or wheel barrows. Every Iraqi we passed, from little girls to old men, smiled and waved to us.

We made our way to one of the dilapidated schools that was being rebuilt by the Navy. As soon as we showed up, Iraqi boys and girls, and a few young men, all began hovering around us. Several just wanted to shake my hand. They often gave me the thumbs-up, saying, “Bush good, Bush good.”

While I interviewed the sailors working there, a group of kids started checking out my digital camera. One at a time, I took their pictures and showed them their image on the viewfinder. It was a hit with the kids, and more lined up to have their picture taken. When one of the boys asked if he could take my picture, I thought better of it. The sailors had already told me that lumber, tools and other equipment had a habit of “walking off” at the end of the day.



Brown visited an Iraqi school that was being renovated by Navy Seabees. His digital camera drew the attention of several children who asked him to take their picture.

The next day, I revisited the site. Two of the Iraqi children kept showing me their colorful but worthless Saddam dinars, Iraq’s official currency, and I caught on that they wanted to sell them to me as souvenirs. I knew I could get them for free back in Bahrain if I looked hard enough, but seeing how poor they lived made me want to give each child an American dollar in exchange for their dinars.

I tried to hand the bills to them without anyone else noticing, but other kids saw the exchange and raced over my way. I had a mini-mob on my hands, until some of the Iraqi parents came over and ushered the children away. What I really wanted to do was give them water, but I knew that would create a riot.

There was plenty to do in Umm Qasr. When I wasn’t exploring the town, I hung out at the tent city, where many Navy and Coast Guard stories were waiting. I spent the bulk of my time talking to the men and

women there, and zipping up and down the waterway leading to the port in Navy and Coast Guard security boats. Iraqi wooden fishing dhows had poured back into the river now that the shooting had subsided. The Navy was diligently watching these boats for any signs of terrorism, spying, or smuggling. Although the war was winding down, the potential for danger was still present.

After a week in Umm Qasr, I decided that I had told as many stories as I could there and that it was time to head back to Bahrain. Since I didn’t want to rely on helicopters anymore, I knew my best bet for getting out of Iraq was the same way I got in: by Coast Guard patrol boat. But there was another hitch. After we had cruised back out to the northern Persian Gulf, we were told we needed to transfer to another patrol boat that would take us the rest of the way to Bahrain.

By the time the second ship had come in range for this rendezvous, it was past midnight, and a sandstorm had blown in. Because the two patrol boats can’t join up in open water, a smaller boat was unloaded to take us over to the second boat. As I stood on the deck of the patrol boat, with no land in sight and sand whipping through the night air, I looked down at the small, inflatable boat bouncing violently alongside us.

I gave one of the Coasties a you-don’t-expect-me-to-get-on-that-thing-do-you look. The look he gave me showed his response: You’re damn right you’re getting on.

The ride to the other patrol boat took about 10 minutes. It felt longer. I kept my head down to block my eyes from the gale of sand, feeling exhilarated, but wanting it to be over.

By the time I climbed aboard, I finally started to relax. My two-and-a-half week trip was about to end. Within 30 hours I would be back in Bahrain, and in another three days I would be back home in Maryland, in the land where showers are plentiful, beds are huge, and laptops can be fixed.