

Major news service: Commander in Iraq sent radio updates to area listeners

By HUEY FREEMAN -- H&R Staff Writer

MAHOMET - "This is Major Mike, with an update from Baghdad."

This was a familiar greeting to thousands of radio listeners in recent months, signaling the beginning of another story about the trials and triumphs of a group of men from Illinois serving in Iraq.

During his yearlong tour of duty in Iraq, which ended in March, Maj. Mike Kessel of the National Guard sent home reports on his unit's battles and accomplishments, which were broadcast to listeners throughout the state by WBGL, a Christian radio station based in Champaign.

Kessel said his messages were intended to let people know Americans are doing many positive things in Iraq.

"Our unit built one school and refurbished six," said Kessel, 38, a native of Chester who works as an investment representative in Champaign. "We delivered hundreds and hundreds of pounds of school supplies to the kids."

Kessel, a cheerful, easygoing man who lives in Mahomet with his wife, Alicia, served as commander of Battery F, 202nd Air Defense Artillery, based in Galva. The 120-soldier unit, which served with the Army's 1st Cavalry Division, received about 25 Purple Hearts during its year in Iraq.

"We brought everybody back alive, by the grace of God," Kessel said.

Three weeks after the unit arrived in Iraq, it was attacked by two groups of insurgents trying to infiltrate the Baghdad International Airport. The battle began on the day the 1st Cavalry took charge of the area and lasted from April 7 to 11.

The Army later cited Kessel's unit as the "Hero of the 1st Cavalry Division," for its actions during the battle, which resulted in the wounding of four of the battery's soldiers.

"We stood our ground and just kept fighting and going after them. Time after time, we kept hunting them down. It became obvious to them that there were easier places to go."

During its tour, the unit's duties included patrolling the deadly road between the international airport and Baghdad's Green Zone, which contains the U.S. Embassy.

Kessel said the low point of his tour was when one of the battery's soldiers, Pfc. Dustin Hill, 22, of Wyanet, was seriously injured by a car bomb. He lost both hands, an eye and an ear and received burns over one-third of his body.

"It didn't look like he was going to make it," Kessel said.

Hill is in Brooke Army Medical Center in Texas, where Kessel recently visited him.

"He is in very good spirits," Kessel said. "He has just a great attitude. He said, 'If I had to do it all over again, I'd do it.' "

During the unit's final three months in Iraq, Battery F was in charge of security for Tarmiyah, a city of 10,000 people, in the Sunni Triangle, 20 miles north of Baghdad.

When Kessel first came to Tarmiyah, he met with the area's sheiks, or tribal leaders. They said the residents felt threatened because soldiers from the previous unit pointed their weapons at them all the time.

"It was understandable that the unit that fought its way into town was not on good terms with the people," Kessel explained. "We were the first relief unit after the initial invasion."

Kessel told the community leaders he understood their concern. He ordered his soldiers to point their rifles downward.

The sheikhs had another complaint: You guys always look mean.

"So I was smiling and waving," Kessel said. "I smiled and waved and shook hands. I asked them what they needed. They didn't have fresh drinking water. We worked to bring fresh drinking water."

Despite his best efforts, not everybody in Tarmiyah, known as the hometown of Saddam's secret police, was welcoming Americans.

On Christmas Eve, Kessel was riding in his armored Humvee, with a tank in front and one behind, on the road from Tarmiyah back to the unit's base at Camp Taji.

Kessel saw a donkey with a cart on the side of the road. He did not know there was a bomb hidden in the cart.

When the bomb exploded, it lifted Kessel's Humvee into the air. When it returned to the ground, it skidded out of control on four blown tires at about 50 mph.

"Instantly, the truck was filled with dirt and smoke," Kessel recalled. "I heard my gunner and a passenger moaning."

The gunner and the passenger, a civilian police consultant, were seriously injured. Kessel later found several steel shrapnel fragments in his pack and sleeping bag, which lay just behind his seat.

"After the Christmas Eve incident, my body was sore," Kessel said. "When I got back to the Iraqi police station, I met with the police chief.

"I told him: I have to do a lot of prayer and soul searching. Someone in this town tried to kill me. You wounded two of my people. My tendency is to knock down doors and shoot people. I'm not going to do that. God is helping me not to do that."

Kessel said the high point of his tour was the Iraqi election day, Jan. 30.

"We provided security for the outer cordon for Baghdad," Kessel said, adding the battery set up checkpoints to enforce a ban on driving.

"Eight million people stood in line to vote," he said. "One of my soldiers said, 'Today makes it all worth it.' "

Jeff Scott, WBGL program director, said Kessel brought many wonderful insights on the war to the radio audience.

"We got to see the war from a front-line view," Scott said.

Kessel devoted many messages to American efforts to provide essential services, such as clinics, electrical

power stations and water plants.

Scott said WBGL listeners responded by e-mailing about 300 messages to Major Mike and his soldiers. Many of them expressed thankfulness for their service, as well as promises to pray for them.

The soldiers received many phone cards, as well as tons of boxes of homemade cookies.

"We were getting cookies from all over the state," Kessel said. "We had so many, we gave some to other soldiers."

Kessel believes the success of his unit was partly due to the prayers.

"It was phenomenal," he said. "We probably had about 50 roadside bombs detonate on us. We also found about 150 more before they detonated. There were about 40 to 50 attacks with RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), rockets and mortars. Every day, it was evident that God was protecting us. Things would happen, and we'd nearly always walk away from it."

Kessel said he survived being shot at, attacked with rocket-propelled grenades, improvised explosive devices and a car bomb.

"And I have no injuries," he said. "It was just amazing."

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