

Rain never felt so good! Galva soldier welcomes relief from duty in Iraq's worst slum

By Dave Clarke of the Star Courier

Chris Doherty's "welcome home" cookout started off with a thunderstorm Tuesday evening but he didn't mind. It was the first rain he's seen, or felt, or heard in at least seven months.

Doherty, a first lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion, 5th Regiment from Galva, returned home Monday for a 15-day leave from his duty post at Camp War Eagle, on the edge of Baghdad's Sadr City, in hot, dry, and sandy Iraq.

He was met at the airport in St. Louis by his wife, Amanda, a DuQuoin native who is working on her master's in political science at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The couple met in college and were married last December before Chris shipped out from Ft. Hood, Texas, home of the 1st Cav. "The first thing we did was go to the mall," Amanda said. All of Chris' civilian clothes were still in storage at Ft. Hood and all he had with him was standard issue desert tan togs.

It was the first time we had met Chris in person. We first became acquainted with the first lieutenant and his father, Jim, last February, when they set up the Galva/Kewanee Armed Services Yahoo group on the Internet. In March and April, as the 1st Cavalry, which includes Galva's Battery F of the Illinois National Guard, Chris was our unofficial war correspondent. He was the first soldier we heard from as they were staging in Kuwait, and after they rolled into Iraq. The web site is now up to 250 members and provides a vital communication and information link for local military families.

"The thing I miss the most is the trees and the green," said Chris last night as he surveyed the backyard of the home of his parents, Jim and Pam Doherty, including what's left of a storm-damaged pine tree on which he and neighbor Ronnie Thompson used to string Christmas lights with a bucket truck. "But I don't miss the trains," Doherty shouted as an Amtrak Superliner passed by just then on the BN/SF tracks a few hundred feet from their yard drowning out the conversation.

Doherty is stationed in one of the poorest and most dangerous parts of Iraq -- Sadr City. More than 2.5 million people, mostly Shiite, are packed into a few square miles of squalor ignored for three decades by Saddam Hussein, who favored his own Sunni minority.

"Helicopters whip great sheets of sand into the air, coating anyone nearby. Gunfire and explosions from incoming mortar rounds rock the base, though less now than in previous months," according to a dispatch from Camp War Eagle filed by a reporter from The Dallas Morning News."

"We have to clean the sand out of our computer keyboards at least once a day," said Doherty.

He said U.S. efforts to improve the conditions in Sadr City have been sidetracked by recent attacks by radical Shiite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mehdi Army. "We've done \$40 million worth of improvements to the infrastructure, but 30 years of neglect

can't be corrected overnight. At first, the Iraqis welcomed us with flowers, now they can't understand why things aren't fixed," Doherty said.

Conditions in what is called "the slum of slums" are deplorable. According to a Chicago Tribune article filed a few weeks ago, "Mounds of garbage line every street. Raw sewage bubbling up from crumbling sewer pipes has turned many streets into impassable canals. Drinking water is contaminated; electricity is on for two hours, off for four."

It's also a dangerous place. Days after Doherty and his unit arrived they were pulled into what has been called one of the bloodiest battles since the fall of Baghdad -- "Bloody Sunday." A patrol in thin-skinned (no armor) Humvees was escorting an Iraqi garbage pickup detail on Sunday, April 4, when it came under heavy attack in the center of Sadr City. Doherty, an artillery officer, and the three-man crew of his Bradley Fire Support Vehicle, were among the first to go to the rescue, and came under attack themselves, reminiscent of Mogadishu and "Blackhawk Down." Doherty's Bradley sustained 19 bullet holes that day, but he made it through. Eight men didn't, and 50 were wounded. It was the beginning of a week-long Shiite uprising, the first inspired by al-Sadr in an effort to drive American troops from Iraq.

Jim Doherty gets agitated when he reads or hears news stories from soldiers in Iraq who claim it's not that bad over there. "They're usually in cushy, safe jobs 'behind the wire' (a Vietnam era term for inside the security perimeter) and can't see how dangerous it really is in some places."

After spending some time readjusting to American life and catching up with hometown friends and family, the 1997 Galva High School graduate and his bride are planning a honeymoon trip to Montreal.

"I want to go somewhere where the weather will be cool," said Doherty who has been experiencing daytime temperatures as high as 130 degrees in Baghdad.

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