

Her family matters should matter to fiancé. Tell Me About It, 3D



Punch lines ON THE FRONT LINE

West Palm Beach comedian Derek Richards takes his wit to war and discovers what troops in Iraq already know:
Laughter is a powerful weapon.



Photo by RICH DAVIS

'When they were off the clock, they were ready to laugh'
Derek Richards, in a 'Run for the Border' T-shirt, performs at Camp Arifjan on the Iraq-Kuwait border Feb. 28. Arifjan processes troops going into and out of Iraq. 'It was our first show outside of Iraq after 12 days,

and it was nice to be able to walk around without a flak jacket or helmet,' he recalls. 'I didn't see any difference in the troops as far as being more or less at ease. No matter what business they had to take care of in Iraq, when they were off the clock, they were ready to laugh.'



Photo by TOM IRWIN

'They're dying to sell souvenirs to Americans'
Derek Richards inspects a dinar — the local currency — bought from an Iraqi, who inspects Richards' \$50 bill. 'We went to this big local market near the ruins of Babylon,' Richards says. 'They're dying to sell souvenirs to Americans. They'll try to sell you something plastic and claim it's from the ancient ruins.'

Derek Richards, along with four other comedians, traveled to Iraq in February as part of a five-country Comics on Duty World Tour for Armed Forces Entertainment. He wore a flak jacket, heard his first mortar blast and learned that sand is best kept in an hourglass.

He also learned what it was like to be afraid — not just occasionally, but every day.

Richards spends most of his days on the road as a stand-up comic, appearing throughout the United States and abroad at comedy clubs and in corporate shows. His irreverent repertoire ranges from his mom's dog to NASCAR.

He first entertained troops three years ago on a USO tour in Alaska. Another USO tour, which included Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, followed in 2002.

"I've always had a great deal of respect for the military," says the former radio DJ who began performing in 1993. "But being a part of this trip made me realize how truly difficult their job is. I know in my heart I could never do what they do."

What he did do, however, was bring stateside humor to those who needed it most.

Last month at a comedy club in Rapid City, S.D., a woman whose son is stationed in Baghdad hugged Richards after his show. Perhaps, she said, her child had seen him perform.

'Mom and sis, I love you'



Spec. James Truitt of Palm Beach Gardens, who is stationed in Balad, and other local troops send messages back home to family and friends, **8D**

Richards, 38, remains in contact via e-mail with several troops, including some deployed out of West Palm Beach.

"I like to hear back from someone within a day or so because I know they're safe. You think, were they on the last convoy that got ambushed? Was it their friend who was taken hostage?"

After two weeks in Iraq, he can't watch the news without thinking about the soldiers he met.

"Once you add a human component," Richards says, "it changes everything."

—Loretta Grantham

INSIDE:
A journal from the war zone:
No hecklers — unless you count the mortar fire, 6D-8D

Waiting for medical test results can be the worst worrying of all

One of my most favorite things is waiting for lab tests for suspected:

- a) lung cancer
- b) liver cancer
- c) heart disease

I've undergone all three these past six weeks, and of the trio, I preferred the heart stress test for blocked arteries. No waiting. No agonizing. No time for morbid what-ifs. They put you on a hamster wheel and hold a cattle prod against your kidneys while you double-time against a grade steeper than the Mayan pyramid



Ron Wiggins

at Chichén Itzá.

The idea is to stress your heart short of a heart attack, and the test is discontinued the second you blow bloody foam.

Then the doctor, studying a cardiograph that monitors your exertions, says, "Uh, oh."

And off you go to surgery to have your arteries Roto-Rootered.

For the record, I've passed several treadmill stress tests and flunked only the last. I won't claim that going in for angioplasty is a treat, but the medics who accomplish this miracle on an assembly-line basis make the whole experience seem like your idea. Mind-altering drugs help. Typically, you're out of the hospital in 36 hours, feeling fine and amazed to have been a sickening disappointment to your insurance carrier.

I have managed to telescope an a la carte menu of medical concerns in a very short period.

Every four months, I see my dermatologist, because I have a face that sprouts basal cell carcinomas and squamous tumors like mushrooms in a bosky dell after spring rains. He attacks them with liquid nitrogen and scalpels and promises to get back to me about the biopsies.

"Squamous," he said a few weeks ago.

Squamous is bad if you let them go. Not as bad as melano-

ma, but bad enough. He cut a line from my eye through the sideburn and called me days later with good news, if we're talking about someone else's face.

"We have clean margins, but signs of peri-neural involvement. A skipper."

A skipper sounded friendly enough. It's not.

"Skipper cancer cells can leave the area along a nerve and cause trouble."

I didn't like the sound of that and was soon under the care of

See WIGGINS, 9D ▶