

Sunday, Feb. 15

CAMP NAVISTAR, on the Iraq-Kuwait border

No waitress, just weapons

Our first taste of being in a war zone hits us on the freeway as we pass a convoy on its way to Iraq with a soldier swinging a machine gun from the last vehicle. In front of him is an M-1 tank.

There's a camel being hauled in the back of a large-bed pickup, like you might see a dog in the States. The highway is desolate. There's only one gas station between our hotel and the camp. Here's this country sitting on several billion gallons of crude oil, and there are no gas stations!

Our group passes what's been dubbed the Highway of Death. It's the road where U.S. warplanes destroyed Iraqi troops heading home during the Gulf War in 1991 — the road on which they showed the charred body of an Iraqi soldier on the cover of *Time*. My gut feels knotted.

The Camp Navistar PX is tucked in a trailer complete with Operation Iraqi Freedom souvenirs. Postcards, backpacks, T-shirts. You gotta love America!

We do our show about 7 p.m. on a temporary mortar shell bunker, which resembles those concrete tubes you crawled through on the playground as a kid. Our audience is seated on trucks, picnic tables and benches. The camp is surrounded by 12-foot guard towers loaded down with sandbags as shields.

I want to do the best possible show for these people, who never get to really relax. But this ain't your typical comedy club. There's no waitress serving martinis to ease your mind.

While there are no strict rules limiting our acts, common sense dictates that we don't bust on the president or the purpose of the war. Iraqi culture, however, is fair game. And those jokes get the loudest laughs. How can you *not* make fun of Middle Eastern music?

The troops like comedy they can relate to, whether it's about Internet dating ("how desperate are you that you have to search the planet?") or name tags for pet gifts at Christmas ("who can't figure out that the giant chew toy is for the pit bull?").

About 550 men and women show up, most of them carrying machine guns with the clips removed, thank God. Still, you feel an added incentive to do well when the audience is armed.

Monday, Feb. 16

FOB (Forward Operating Base) GLORY and LSA (Life Support Area) DIAMONDBACK, Mosul

Mortars in the morning

We feel anxious as we board a C-130 transport plane bound for northern Iraq. There's a lot less joking around than on previous flights of the tour, and the soldiers seem solemn. We're issued flak jackets, helmets and sleeping bags, all shoved into one handy carry-on duffel that we'll lug ourselves.

Tom Irwin, the only comic on the tour who has served in the military, calls the C-130 the Dodge Coronet of aircraft. If you see one running, it's just by pure luck. The cabin noise is unbearable. Imagine sitting for three hours in your garage with the riding mower cranked up full blast with the door closed.

We land at the old Mosul International Airport. We're scheduled to do 22 shows in 12 days.

Army Capt. Chase Martin of Fort Hood, Texas, will accompany us through Iraq. He dishes out a security briefing, which as time goes on, becomes the punch line to a lot of situations. His speech goes something like, "It is my responsibility and the responsibility of Uncle Sam and the United States military that you will be safe and secure while in the country of Iraq."

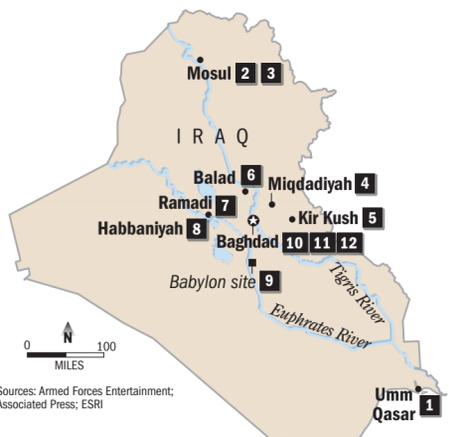
We also have our first MRE (Meal Ready-to-Eat), and I choose the cheese tortellini. Tom shows fellow comic Tony Daro and me how to heat the MREs. In the process, he cooks his fruit cocktail. "There's a reason I'm no longer in the military," he says.

Our "limos," meanwhile, are three armored Humvees loaded down with .50-caliber machine guns.

Having never been in a war, I feel my heart race when our convoy reaches the guard gate on the way out. "Lock and load!" barks the sergeant. Everything I've seen on TV and in the movies is now in my face.

Our FOB Glory show is on a small stage in front of the dining facility pasta bar. The sound system is poor and hollow sounding, but all 200 troops give their undivided attention. No spotlights, no greenroom, no hecklers and no two-drink minimum. (Alcohol is forbidden at U.S. bases in Iraq.)

Many of the soldiers come up to shake our hands and get autographs. To them, we are stars.



Comics on Duty World Tour in Iraq

No.	Date	U.S. military camp/base
1.	Feb. 15	Camp Navistar
2.	Feb. 16	FOB Glory, LSA Diamondback
3.	Feb. 17	Camp Freedom
4.	Feb. 18	FOB Normandy
5.	Feb. 19	FOB Caldwell
6.	Feb. 20	LSA Anaconda
7.	Feb. 21	FOB Junction City, FOB Champion Main
8.	Feb. 22	Guardian City, FOB Ridgway
9.	Feb. 23	Camp Babylon
10.	Feb. 24	Baghdad International Airport
11.	Feb. 25	Camp Falcon, Camp War Eagle, Camp Slayer
12.	Feb. 26	Camp Victory

TIM BRITTON/Staff Artist

Punch lines

ON THE FRONT LINE



West Palm Beach comedian **Derek Richards** kept a journal during his 12-day tour in Iraq.



Photo by RICH DAVIS

'The mortar crew said, "You guys want to try?"'

Comedians Tony Daro of New York (from left), Tom Irwin of Los Angeles and Derek Richards amuse soldiers at FOB Normandy in Miqdadiyah. "We were taking a tour of the base, and the mortar crew said, "You guys want to try? Here, we'll show you how this works." This is a practice mortar, of course, not a live one. They were cracking up."

We sign about 100 autograph cards — a sheet with the five comedians' photos — before each show. At first it feels strange thinking, "Who would want my autograph?" But the troops snatch them up.

That night, we try to check our e-mail at the base Internet center, but we're locked down almost immediately. Five comics and about a half dozen soldiers are holed up. No one will give us details, but we later learn that a soldier was seriously injured by a homemade bomb outside the base.

We're awoken at about 4 a.m. by two loud booms — mortar rounds being fired on our camp. I zip my sleeping bag up over my head. If the bombs can't see me, I can't get hit.

I keep thinking, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Tuesday, Feb. 17

CAMP FREEDOM, Mosul

A palatial stage — literally

Camp Freedom is at one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces. We do our show in the dining room of one of his guest houses. This is all too weird.

During dinner, we're told that the soldier in Mosul who was hurt last night by the homemade bomb has died. The table goes quiet. The topic shifts quickly. Or at least discussion about it does. Soldiers can't — and don't — dwell on death in a war zone.

The base falls under a mortar attack during our second show. It's just like the boom from last night, only closer. Eighty of the 100 soldiers in the crowd bolt for the door, but comedian Warren B. Hall continues his act like the band on the Titanic. Turns out the shell went off about a half mile away. No one was hurt.

I'm incredulous over Hussein's palace. It's like a bunch of enormous Palm Beach mansions put together. Marble and amazing woodwork are everywhere. It's said that he only visited this palace twice, although the staff was required to prepare dinner every night in case he stopped by.

The place was looted by the Kurds after the coalition forces struck, so much of the furniture and fixtures are gone. Shards of gold-plated metal hang from the ceiling where chandeliers once were. You can see a hole the size of a UPS truck on the fourth floor where a cruise missile hit.

We crack about it being a remodeling project gone bad.

Wednesday, Feb. 18

FOB (Forward Operating Base) NORMANDY, Miqdadiyah

'The first entertainment we've had'

We're up at 4:45 a.m. for a 5 a.m. departure on a Blackhawk. We'll return to LSA (Life Support Area)



Photo by DEREK RICHARDS

'There are no chartered jets'

Comedian Warren B. Hall of Green Bay, Wis., travels with the Comics on Duty group in an armored Humvee Feb 16 in Mosul. "We're headed to our first show in Iraq," Derek Richards says. "Our transportation is the same as the soldiers' — Humvees, Blackhawks, Strykers, the back of troop transports. There are no chartered jets because we're performers."

Diamondback to pick up our stuff, then head to Normandy. The takeoff feels like you're wobbling on a beach ball, then it smooths out as the helicopter lurches forward, gliding over the treetops.

Our second Blackhawk trip — to Normandy — is very low and very fast to avoid enemy detection. At times, we're no more than 50 feet off the ground and zipping over electrical wires. People come out of their homes and wave to us. It feels like a ride at Universal. The only people that aren't big fans of the Blackhawks are Iraqi sheep herders. Every time we cruise over one of their farms, the flock scatters.

The pilots didn't get a chance to see our show, so they ask if we would do some of our acts on a separate radio channel. Tony and I are outfitted with headsets and microphones. We love seeing the pilots howling midflight, although it's strange because we can't hear them laugh.

At Normandy, we're all crammed into one room of a base chapel, six guys with cots on top of each other with comedian Jennifer Rawlings squeezing into what appears to be a walk-in closet.

There are no amenities for the troops here like at other camps. "You guys are the first entertainment we've had," one soldier says. "The press doesn't even want to come here."

Everyone seems so grateful. "We've been waiting for this," we kept hearing.

A standing-room-only crowd comes to the show in a makeshift dining facility. Afterwards, we're given certificates welcoming us as brothers (and one sister). Later, Tony, Tom, tour producer Rich Davis and I smoke cigars and drink non-alcoholic beer with some of the guys.

I don't smoke cigars, but you can tell that these kids, most of them between 18 and 25, just want to talk and hang out with someone other than their own people.

The No. 1 topic isn't sports or women. It's about where everyone's from back home.