

Thursday, Feb. 19

FOB CALDWELL, Kir Kush

Shell shock in the shower

We convoy to FOB Caldwell, about 6 miles from the Iran border, for two shows. Even though we're only a 45-minute ride from Normandy, this camp is considered to be in much safer territory. This base, like many current coalition force bases, used to be an Iraqi installation. The accommodations are relatively new and clean, a dramatic switch from last night.

The only problem we run into is that the Iraqis who built the place we're staying in, which resembles a small-town elementary school, didn't ground the wiring properly.

We don't discover this until we take a shower and are jolted when we grab the metal valves. From then on, I use my shower shoes to beat the valves open and closed.

Friday, Feb. 20

LSA ANACONDA, Balad

Flying over the Sunni Triangle

We have two packed shows in the MWR (Morale Welfare and Recreation) tent. That night after the second show, the base has a dance party. Everyone stacks machine guns in the corner like women do with their purses at a nightclub. One guy sits in a chair with a dejected look and mutters, "My turn for gun watch."

Leaving Anaconda is a mess. Five minutes into my act, we're told that the choppers have arrived to get us. Someone obviously got the times mixed up. We do a short meet-and-greet and dash to the airfield, only to learn that the choppers have left. I now understand what the military means by "hurry up and wait."

Looks like we're going to stay at Anaconda for the night. We arrive at our quarters, which are basically dorm rooms with bunk beds. No sooner do we take our shoes off than we find out that we need to head to the airfield to climb aboard a Chinook helicopter —

now!

These copters are the ones where the gunner sits in the back with the door open. If you think the desert is cold at night on the ground, put yourself in the air with wind howling through the cabin. All lights are off. There's just a dim glow coming from the cockpit. We're flying over the Sunni Triangle, a pro-Hussein area, so we must remain inconspicuous.

An hour later we land at FOB Ridgway. We unload from the Chinook, head up the runway about 100 yards and sit. Quiet, dark and freezing. No one for miles around. The Chinook fires up the rotors and takes off. You don't know empty until you sit in a situation like this. The moon looks familiar, so you've got that going for you.

But the darkness, considering where we are, makes me shake — and not just from the cold.

Saturday, Feb. 21

FOB JUNCTION CITY and FOB CHAMPION MAIN, Ramadi

No big welcome near Fallujah

We take off in the Blackhawks to Champion Main, a bombed-out Hussein palace on the Euphrates River in Ramadi, west of Baghdad and Fallujah. The front of this massive residence will be our backdrop for the show tonight. Now, though, we're in a convoy from Champion Main to Junction City for a lunchtime show.

The ride is about a 15-minute trip through some hostile territory. Turns out this area is home to many former Baath Party members who have time on their hands and an ax to grind.

Even though we're in armored Humvees, the same creepy feeling comes back that I experienced in Mosul. Lots of locals sitting on the side of the road staring at you. Unlike other parts of Iraq where people wave, these do not.

Outside the perimeter of Junction City, a U.S. patrol finds a replica of the base laid out in Red Bull cans in the sand. Somebody was, or is, planning something.

That night during Tom's set at Champion Main, a

gun goes off. We grab our heads and duck. Turns out it's not hostile fire, just an 82mm illumination round that was shot off over the Euphrates. Coalition forces use this to scare insurgents.

The comics off stage duck, and the troops howl with laughter. Tom keeps going.

At comedy clubs, you "get the light" when it's time to quit. (The manager will flip on a bulb to indicate that your time is up.) We agree that none of us has ever gotten "a light" like this.

Sunday, Feb. 22

GUARDIAN CITY and FOB RIDGWAY, Habbaniyah

A crash course in crashing

Just before the lunchtime show at Guardian City, a major sandstorm hits. Like a summer storm in Florida where you see a wall of water coming at you, this is a sheet of brown about a mile away. We take cover inside the tent where we'll be performing.

Halfway through Tom's set, we hear a huge crash on the roof of our tent. It sounds like a truck is rolling over the top of us. The storm had pulled the tent next door out of the ground and over ours. Everyone says it's a miracle that we didn't get a direct hit from that tent. If so, it would've smashed through our roof.

After the late show at Ridgway, we're off via Blackhawks to Camp Babylon. Our pilot briefs us before take-off: "If we crash, I'll probably be dead, so help yourself to any of the survival gear I have on my person. If we have a crash landing, run 600 feet beyond the nose of the helicopter. You'll know if you haven't gone far enough if the crew runs by you. If we crash-land in a hostile area, go to the front of the helicopter and wait for my instructions."

I then ask him the obvious. "What if the bad guys are at the front of the helicopter?"

He replies, totally serious: "Then we'll meet elsewhere."



Photo by RICH DAVIS

'This palace was a hangout for Baath Party loyalists, and here I am telling jokes'

Troops gather Feb. 26 to hear Derek Richards, flanked by Armed Forces Entertainment banners, at a former Saddam Hussein palace now part of Camp Victory, a U.S. compound in Baghdad. It's very surreal to think

that just over a year ago, (Hussein's sons) Uday and Qusay were kicking back having wine here. This palace was a hangout for Baath Party loyalists, and here I am telling jokes.'



Photo by TOM IRWIN

'They love getting their picture taken'

Iraqis employed by the U.S. military at Guardian City in Habbaniyah cluster around Derek Richards (center) for a photo Feb. 22. They've just finished unloading sandbags from a flatbed truck. 'They love getting their picture taken. They'd see a camera and in broken English say, "Picture. Come, come!" These people, who're happy to have a job, face hostility from insurgents, who resent them for working for Americans.'

Monday, Feb. 23

CAMP BABYLON, ancient city of Babylon

Hooking up with hometown guys

Camp Babylon is the Multinational Division Center South headquarters. All around the base are flags from coalition participants: Italy, Poland, England and Australia, to name a few.

We're greeted this morning by some U.S. Army intelligence people who invite us over for coffee. This is the first decent cup of java we've had on a military base. "War is one thing, but bad coffee, that's out of bounds," says Doug Harris, who's from Fort Meade, Md.

The day is dedicated to sightseeing with one evening show. Our guides are Marines from the 4th Air/Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (4th ANGLICO) in West Palm Beach. One of the guys says, "I can't wait to get back and have a beer at O'Shea's on Clematis."

Another remarks, "The sand is familiar, but I sure could use a little hometown ocean."

We go to the ruins of Babylon and an outdoor market run by locals. They know Americans have money to spend. People try to sell you everything from jewelry, "authentic" Babylon souvenirs, Iraqi flags, old Hussein money and military award pins from the old Iraqi Army to DVDs — DVDs from movies that are still in U.S. theaters. Go figure.

The highlight of the show is Tony teasing a two-star Polish general in the front row for having too many consonants in his name. "It looks like the last line on an eye chart," Tony quips. The other coalition forces are on the floor, and even the general wipes his eyes, laughing.

Continued, 8D ▶