

## Punch lines ON THE FRONT LINE

► Continued from 7D

Tuesday, Feb. 24

BAGHDAD INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, Baghdad

### A step ahead of insurgents

We do two shows today on the airport grounds. The first show is on a basketball court outside in the blazing sun by day. And the second show is in a boxing ring outside in 40-degree cold by night.

The base is completely blacked out for security reasons, but the performance area is lit up by huge halogen lamps. We joke that we might as well have a big bull's-eye on our backs.

We return to our camp at 9 p.m. I wanted to squeeze in a workout in the fitness tent, which is next door. Unfortunately, I can't because they shut it down between 7 and 11 p.m. because that seems to be the preferred time for insurgents to fire mortars into the camp. So I ask an officer everyone calls "Lt. Dan" (think *Forrest Gump*) to please explain to me the difference between getting hit with a shell in my bed or on a StairMaster. He just stares at me.

Wednesday, Feb. 25

CAMP FALCON, CAMP WAR EAGLE and CAMP SLAYER, Baghdad

### 'This is the worst day ever'

We do three shows today. It's a long one. We're scheduled to convoy to Camp Falcon, about a half hour from the airport. The journey's mostly highway, but we'll go through some areas of Baghdad. The soldiers arrive with two open-top vehicles that have armor plating on the side and a gunner on top.

After failed attempts to come up with anything more secure (you don't want a "convertible" in a war zone), we reluctantly pile in. Jennifer, however, stays behind, and I don't blame her. She misses the first two shows but joins us for the third.

As soon as we reach the city, we come to a complete stop. What the hell is going on? I slowly poke my head up. Trashy buildings with lots of balconies and terraces overlook our stalled group. Fortunately, our convoy has caught up with another one that's also delayed, so we have plenty of firepower just in case.

We learn that they're removing a homemade bomb from the road. Forget the Mosul and Junction City drives in an armored Humvee. We're in an open-top vehicle where someone can easily fire a rocket-propelled grenade, start shooting from a nearby rooftop, you name it. We're sitting ducks.

I'm getting a better sense of what the troops' daily lives are like — how they have to stay aware of their surroundings at all times. My heart was just pounding out of my chest. Even the gunner said, "This is the worst day ever." This was the scariest moment of the trip for me. I can't imagine having this much adrenaline coursing through me constantly.

We joke later about the convoy delay at Camp Falcon, and the troops understand.

Says one soldier: "Welcome to our life."

That night we're supposed to stay at the Radwaniyah Palace compound. We call it our "Saddam Sleepover" and are as pumped as fifth-graders. After days of sleeping in tents and slogging through muddy fields, we get to have some fun — a palace!

Turns out "Lt. Dan" didn't tell us the whole story. We five comics, the tour producer and Army escort Chase Martin bunk down in what appears to be a gardening shack. Some palace.

Using the closed fitness tent and the botched slumber party as ammo, I go after the lieutenant during the evening show. The rank and file, obviously, can't make fun of officers. But I can.



Photo by TONY DARO

#### 'My heart was just pounding out of my chest'

The comedians are delayed in a stalled convoy in Baghdad as Iraqis look on. (The road is being cleared of a homemade bomb.) Warren B. Hall is at right. 'We're crouched behind him,' Derek Richards recalls. 'We're in an open-top vehicle where someone can easily fire a rocket-propelled grenade, start shooting from a nearby rooftop, you name it. We're sitting ducks. . . . My heart was just pounding out of my chest. Even the gunner (left) said, "This is the worst day ever." This was the scariest moment of the trip for me. I can't imagine having this much adrenaline coursing through me constantly.'

Thursday, Feb. 26

CAMP VICTORY, Baghdad

### War movies and combat games

We shuttle from Lt. Dan's Motel 6 to Camp Victory, a palace compound on the west side of Baghdad. This is the last stop on the Iraq portion of the tour.

I've never seen a residence this large. The palace looks like a three-story mall. The foyer's open to the roof with a chandelier the size of an SUV. There are excerpts from Hussein's speeches on the wall in gold-plated brass.

Another building houses armed forces recreation, and the troops constantly watch war flicks. *Windtalkers* is on when I walk in. Earlier this week on other

## 'Mom and sis, I love you'

While in Iraq, West Palm Beach comedian Derek Richards sought out local troops and asked if they wanted to relay a message home to South Florida. Here are their greetings to family and friends:



Photo by DEREK RICHARDS

**Col. Gary Beard**  
West Palm Beach  
FOB Champion Main,  
Ramadi



Elaine, and my sons, Josh and Jordan.'

**Staff Sgt. John Hanke**  
Pompano Beach  
Camp Babylon, Babylon site



son John Jr.: We'll be home soon.'

**Master Gunnery Sgt. Doug Todd**  
Delray Beach  
Camp Babylon, Babylon site



Thanks for all your support.'

**Pfc. Romina Chevallet**  
West Palm Beach  
FOB Ridgway, Habbaniyah



get home. Keep me in your prayers.'

**Sgt. Ryan Owen**  
Palm Beach Gardens  
FOB Caldwell, Kir Kush



soon.'

**Spec. James Truitt**  
Palm Beach Gardens  
LSA Anaconda, Balad



soon.'

**Sgt. Daniel Nason**  
Lantana  
FOB Caldwell, Kir Kush



soon.'

**Sgt. Nelson Brites**  
Boynton Beach  
Camp Babylon, Babylon site



soon.'

**Spec. Tommy Bottcher**  
Boynton Beach  
FOB Champion Main,  
Ramadi



soon.'

bases, I saw troops watching *Three Kings*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *When We Were Soldiers*.

Also, I notice that whenever these folks play video games, it's *Socom: U.S. Navy Seals*, a PlayStation 2 war game. That night in my act, I ask: "Don't you guys get enough of this? I mean, you don't see a plumber playing a game called *Pipefitter*, do you?"

The crowd roars.

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.

It's sad to be doing the last show in Iraq. And it's sad to leave all the military personnel and civilian contractors who've been so nice and appreciative. But I also feel a big, deep sigh. Man, tomorrow we are out of here.

Friday, Feb. 27

BAGHDAD INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, bound for Kuwait

### 'A lot of these dudes ain't going home'

This is where Capt. Chase leaves us. This behind-the-scenes guy was not only our military liaison but also our security blanket. He was all business when we first met him, but at the end of our nearly two weeks together, he was throwing out one-liners like the rest of us.

We joke that after he leaves the Army, he's going to go on the road and be a tour manager for Aerosmith. Grow out his hair, get some bad habits. We're going to miss him.

We board a C-130, and there are a couple of soldiers heading home to the States. They don't say much, and they don't have to. Their eyes say it all. There's no cheering, just some hugs and subtle high-fives among the outbound crew.

I ask one soldier why he isn't jumping out of his skin with excitement. I know I'd be.

"A lot of these dudes ain't going home," he replies. "I don't want to rub it in."

## About Comics on Duty

Rich Davis is looking for a few good comedians.

That's how the producer found Derek Richards and the other performers who traveled to Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Djibouti, Africa, for the 26-show Comics on Duty World Tour.

"They've all headlined at comedy clubs across the United States," he says. "They have to be willing to take a significant amount of time off from clubs and corporate shows to go. My mission is to get to as many locations as we can."

Big-name acts, as a rule, would be too pricey to hire for a monthlong trip. (The Defense Department paid about \$65,000 for the February tour, Davis says.) Plus, celebrities are more likely to demand creature comforts and an entourage, neither of which is feasible in a war zone.

"The comics I hire not only have to be really solid on stage," says Davis, who lives in Pleasant Ridge, Mich., and coordi-



nates the tour with Armed Forces Entertainment at the Pentagon. "They also have to be willing to carry their own bags. Mobility is key. Every day is a performance day or travel day."

He relies heavily on word-of-mouth to pick performers.

"Most of the people I select have been referred to me by other comics who know their mind-set and whether or not they'll be a whiner."

Davis has run the Comics on Duty program for more than 12 years, producing about 1,300 shows worldwide. Richards' tour was the third of its kind in Iraq.

"When troops are in a war zone, they're working 24 hours a day. We provide some shut-down time — a break so they can let loose and laugh."

Each show runs about two hours, followed by a meet-and-greet with the troops if time allows.

"The reason we can live the way we do — where we can go to Starbucks and not worry about it blowing up — is because of the armed forces," Davis says. "That's the reason I do what I do."

—Loretta Grantham