



March 2009

INDEPENDENCE *Gazette*



Down to Business
Independence Brigade settles in



INDEPENDENCE
Gazette

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All editorial content of the Independence Gazette is prepared, edited, and approved by the Multi — National Division Baghdad Public Affairs Office.

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Why the Independence Gazette?

The name for the 56th SBCT magazine and newsletter is derived from the unit's historic ties to Benjamin Franklin and the city of Philadelphia.

The 56th Brigade is known as the Independence Brigade because the brigade is headquartered in Philadelphia, the birthplace of American independence.

The name Gazette harks back to the "Pennsylvania Gazette," a newspaper run by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin did not start the Gazette but under his ownership the paper became the most successful in the colonies.

The legacy of Benjamin Franklin lives on with the 1-111th Infantry tracing its lineage back to 1747 when Franklin organized his Associators to defend Philadelphia from the threat of French privateers.

The Independence Gazette will chronicle the activities of the 56th in Iraq as it continues to build on the proud legacy of the Pennsylvania militia: "Citizen in peace, Soldier in war."

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On The Cover.

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Sgt. Oshea Washington (kneeling) of Easton, Pa., and Staff Sgt. Matthew Kilner of Philadelphia, Soldiers with Company C, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, take up positions at the corner of a building to pull security. The Soldiers conducted a patrol in al-Faris, southwest of Tarmiyah, Friday, March 13.



Taji effort key to Iraqi Railroad plan

By Capt. ED SHANK
1-108th FA PAO

Soldiers of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team are helping put in place a key piece of Iraq's future by working at a railyard. Railroad activity at Camp Taji is central to a larger government vision for a transportation corridor that would move goods from Arabian Gulf ports to the Mediterranean Sea.

The United States Agency for International Development's strategy for rebuilding Iraq calls for reforming Iraq's economy so that it can be self-sustaining. That includes revitalizing rails to reach USAID's goal of "building the capacity of Iraqi institutions to rejoin the international economic community and improving the general welfare of all Iraqis."

At Camp Taji – a joint U.S./Iraqi Army facility northwest of Baghdad – Soldiers of the Pennsylvania National Guard's 1st Battalion, 109th Field Artillery, 56th SBCT, are conducting several types of operations to support the railroad – an often forgotten transportation resource that is now a focus of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

Overseeing the joint Iraqi/U.S. effort is David DeCarme, Transportation Attaché for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. According to DeCarme, the operation of the Iraqi Railroad is a very important step toward his agency's ultimate goal – the diversification of the country's transportation system.

"Our view is that transportation, over all, is an enabler for many of the things to take place in the country of Iraq," says DeCarme. "Whether it's agriculture or oil or any of the various other ministries out there, they all rely in one way or another on the transport system."

"Right now Iraq's GNP is really heavily dependent on oil," DeCarme said. "As the price of oil fluctuates, so does the ability of Iraq to prosper. We would like to see the economy get diversified beyond oil. In order to do that, we would like to see an international trade corridor built that connects the Arabian Gulf with the Mediterranean Sea and the European markets. To do that requires a good, strong rail system. What you're seeing here today at



Photo by Capt. Ed Shank

Workers load cargo containers onto flatbed cars at the Camp Taji railyard. The activity at Taji is part of an effort to diversify Iraq's economy by expanding the Iraqi Railroad to move goods from Arab Gulf ports to the Mediterranean Sea.

Taji is an example of an effort to demonstrate that it is viable to move container cargo out of the port and into other parts of the country."

Although the security of the rail system throughout the country is not yet entirely stable, Capt. Joseph Ruotolo, commander of Bravo Battery, 1-109 Field Artillery, 56th SBCT, says he and his soldiers are doing their part to pave the way for safe rail operations.

"Today we are moving Conexes (steel cargo containers that can be loaded on both trucks and trains) on an Iraqi railroad that has not been operated successfully or efficiently since before Saddam's rule," says Ruotolo. "We've managed to get one set of rail lines inspected, approved for use and now, about once a week, an Iraqi train with 20 cars will come in, pick up our empty Conexes and take them out for delivery, which is step one in getting the Iraqi Railroad rebuilt."

When the trains pass through the

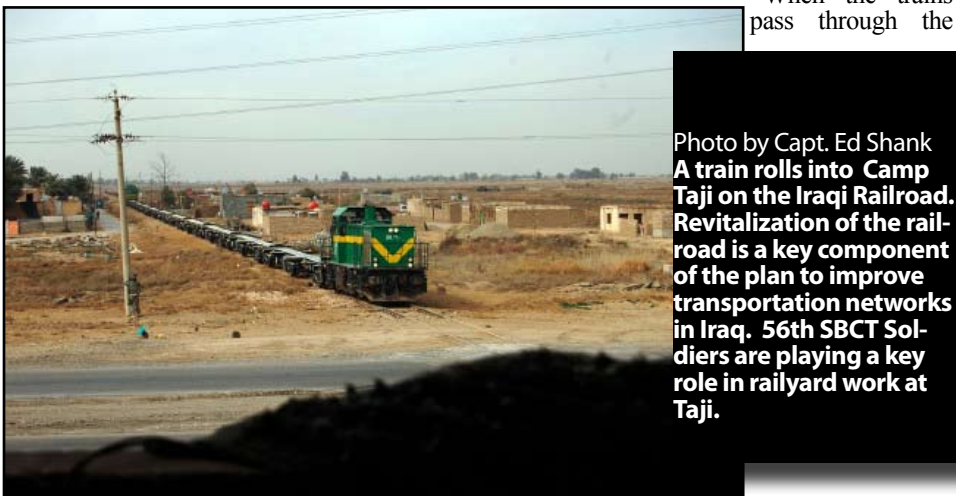


Photo by Capt. Ed Shank
A train rolls into Camp Taji on the Iraqi Railroad. Revitalization of the railroad is a key component of the plan to improve transportation networks in Iraq. 56th SBCT Soldiers are playing a key role in railyard work at Taji.

heavily-fortified gates to the camp, they are scanned, inspected and searched. Once the train is identified to not be a threat, Ruotolo said, the containers are loaded and prepared to move on. Once Ruotolo's Soldiers clear the train for movement, the barriers are once again moved and the train rolls back out. Meanwhile another team of soldiers stops traffic on the heavily-traveled civilian highway as the train passes by.

"What you don't see are all the behind the scenes stuff – the security pieces that have to be put in place here," Ruotolo explains. "There is both security in the air and on the ground, both inside and outside of the wire for this mission. It really is a very complete operation and very complex."

As far as DeCarme is concerned, Bravo's efforts are paying off.

"They're demonstrating that we can move large amounts of cargo through the [country], all the way through Turkey, Syria, over to the Mediterranean Sea," says DeCarme. "For ocean carriers, that saves them a lot of time, rather than going through the Gulf of Suez and through the Suez Canal. It is more secure for them, it is a shorter time for them and, because it is a shorter time for them, it costs them less."

"I think that this is an incredibly important effort," says DeCarme. "So far it has been a great success and we have every reason to believe that this is just the beginning of what we think is going to be a much more robust effort."

Engineers build ties with Iraqis

Efforts continue to better infrastructure, services



Photo by Capt. Maggie White
Engineers from the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, Multi-National Division - Baghdad, inspect the Fallahat Drainage Pump Station. Located on the Tigris River, the pump station is currently inoperative but American and Iraqi engineers are working together to restore service to the Taji area.

By Capt. MAGGIE WHITE
56th SBCT Public Affairs

National Guardsmen from Pennsylvania are providing expertise and assistance to the Iraqi Army and civil engineers in Taji, Iraq.

The engineers from 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team "Independence," 28th Infantry Division, Multi-National Division - Baghdad, recently assumed control of the battlespace north of Baghdad, and are working with Iraqi civil and military personnel to carry on the protection and reconstruction missions of the engineers.

"The 56th SBCT engineers are responsible primarily for route clearance and sanitation, force protection, and restoration of essential services" said Capt. Phil Benner, of Tuscon, Ariz., assistant brigade engineer for the 56th SBCT. The engineers are working closely with the Iraqi ministries and their Iraqi Army partners to accomplish these tasks.

Soldiers from the 856th Engineer Company and 1st Battalion, 108th Field Artillery conduct route clearance and sanitation. The brigade works with the 2nd Field Engineer Company, 9th Engineer Regiment, 9th Division, Iraqi Army in route clearance, Benner said. The 9th Engineers have an element that has been trained and is now able to conduct autonomous route clearing operations. Independence engineers are helping the Iraqi Army expand that capability and more.

"We want to make sure the Iraqis have the tools they need for success on their own," Benner said.

A school on Camp Taji teaches the Iraqi Army basic combat engineering, and the brigade builds on those skills on a daily basis.

Brigade engineers oversee the force protection mission at many of the remote joint security stations in the Independence operational environment. The Iraqi Security Forces are gradually taking command of these locations, so the engineers from 56th SBCT are preparing them for the task of fortifying the bases, said Capt. Curtis Drake, of Brookville, Pa., brigade engineer for the 56th SBCT.

"We conduct vulnerability assessments and quality control and quality assurance at the security stations," Drake noted.

Their work on restoring essential services such as power, sanitation, and the availability of water for drinking and irrigation is an ongoing effort. The anticipated opening of the North Baghdad Power Plant is just one example of a project where Iraqis are rebuilding the local infrastructure, according to Drake. The plant will provide 58 megawatts of power to the northern Baghdad area.

The brigade engineers work full time with three Iraqi nationals who are civil and electrical engineers by trade. They conduct all work and planning through the Government of Iraq ministries, with the 56th SBCT serving as mentors but working alongside experienced Iraqis.

"We don't want coalition forces to make the primary decisions in these processes," Drake added. "We want to support the Iraqi leadership as they step out in front during this process."



Photo by Capt. Maggie White
Capt. Phil Benner (center), of Tuscon, Ariz., assistant brigade engineer for 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, Multi-National Division - Baghdad, talks about what needs to be done to make a pump operational at the Khark Water Treatment Plant south of Tarmiyah. The plant serves much of the greater Baghdad area.



It's a girl ...

Web cam delivers daughter's birth to soldier at Taji

By Capt. MAGGIE WHITE
56th SBCT Public Affairs

A Pennsylvania National Guardsman participated in the birth of his daughter from more than 6,000 miles away. Sgt. Robert Badua, of 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, watched the birth of his daughter Rayana Mae live on March 4 as it unfolded.

"I had been talking to my wife on Skype out at Sa'ab al Bour," the Troop B, 2nd Battalion, 104th Cavalry Regiment Soldier said. "She told me she was headed to the hospital because they were going to induce labor."

Badua's chain of command arranged for him to travel from Sa'ab al Bour to the video teleconference site at Camp Taji. Badua was able to coach his wife, Katrina, throughout her six-hour labor. Badua and his wife were connected directly between Taji and the hospital in Allentown, Pa.

The teleconference was made possible by Freedom Call Center, a not-for-profit organization that connects deployed Soldiers with their families at home via free video conferencing, internet and phone calls.



"I'm so happy; I'm fantastic," the Easton, Pa. resident said. "The whole experience has been really neat."

The call center is one of five locations in Iraq. Katrina arranged everything ahead of time so that the camera was ready to go in the delivery room.

Spc. Kendrick Wells, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 10th Sustainment Brigade, 3rd Sustainment Command (Expeditionary), operates the call center on Camp Taji. He says many Soldiers use the video teleconference in the delivery room.

"Right now we probably get one delivery a week," he said. "Mr. John Harlow, the president of the Freedom Calls Center, will see if the hospital can provide video teleconference in the delivery room and coordinate the setup so the Soldier can watch."

Katrina is the vice president of Bravo Troop's family support group. The troop is hoping to draw upon the experience to help out additional expectant fathers with anticipated delivery dates during the deployment.

"We never could have imagined that my husband could have been here for the birth when he is 6,000 miles away fighting a war," Katrina said in a statement released by the Freedom Calls Center. "This means the world to me and my family."



Clockwise from top, left: Sgt. Robert Badua kisses his bride, Katrina; Rayana Mae in peaceful sleep; the Badua family - Katrina, Rayana Mae and Riley, 3. Photos courtesy of Bruce Winter, Easton Express Times

Independence Brigade dons combat patch

By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO

The 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, marked another milestone March 19 in its yearlong mobilization, train-up and deployment to Iraq – receipt of the order for Soldiers to place the brigade's combat patch on their uniforms.

The Pennsylvania National Guard brigade arrived here in late January and will be in Iraq through the summer.

The Soldiers will wear a black keystone on their right sleeve for the rest of their deployment. The patch mirrors the left shoulder division keystone worn by all division Soldiers. Soldiers are authorized to wear the combat patches they earn for the rest of their career.

"You should be very proud of what you're doing here," Brig. Gen. Jerry G. Beck Jr., division commander, told Soldiers during a ceremony in which he placed patches on several Soldiers.

He said the brigade has met many landmarks in its mission to transition to a Stryker Brigade and deploy to Iraq. He said receiving the order to wear the combat patch "is one of the stops along that mission," a mission, he noted, that has garnered much media attention back in Pennsylvania.

"Let's keep focused," Beck said. "You have become very well known throughout the commonwealth. Congratulations on earning this combat patch."

Col. Marc Ferraro, 56th SBCT commander, told Soldiers gathered for the ceremony that the brigade's mission is to support the Iraqi people while providing security. He reminded his Soldiers to remain vigilant and maintain an offensive posture.

Ferraro recalled the death of a brigade Soldier in late February. Two other brigade Soldiers had sustained serious injury by the time of the patch ceremony.

"We've shed blood and lost one of our own," Ferraro said. "Wear this patch with pride and remember why we wear it."

"Today you all go through a rite of passage," Ferraro added. "As the only Stryker Brigade Combat Team in the reserve component, today you make your mark."

Beck, Ferraro and Command Sgt. Maj. John Jones, the brigade com-



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles

Brig. Gen. Jerry Beck Jr. (center), 28th Infantry Division commander, places a black keystone combat patch on the right sleeve of Staff Sgt. John Dell of Aston, Pa., Protective Security Detail, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, during a ceremony March 19 at Camp Taji. Beck is flanked by Col. Marc Ferraro, brigade commander (right) and Command Sgt. Maj. John Jones, brigade command sergeant major. Ferraro and Beck have removed their left shoulder, black keystone division patches to present them to soldiers during the event.

mand sergeant major, moved through a formation of two ranks of Soldiers, applying the patches. Soldiers representing the battalions of the brigade stood to the rear of that formation during the ceremony, which ended with a closing prayer and the playing of the division song.

Col. Bert Kozen, brigade chaplain, prayed that this combat patch would be worn "as a sign of service" and would add to the storied history of the 28th Infantry Division.



At right: Morning light streams over the barrel of a 1st Battalion, 108th Field Artillery M777A Howitzer at Fort Polk, La. in November. Photo by 1st Lt. Jeremy Whitmer, 1-108th FA

Above: Clouds swirl over the 56th SBCT headquarters area as the sun sets at Camp Taji in February. Photo by Spc. Mark Reed, Troop B, 2-104th Cavalry RSTA

See more photos by 56th SBCT Soldiers. Go online to www.dvidshub.net, click on "News From The Field," and scroll down to 56th Stryker.

Sunup to Sundown





Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

Spc. Michael Frost (second from right), of New Castle, Pa., with Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, MND-B, began distributing a bag of "Dog Tags for Kids" keepsakes to Soldiers working in the 56th SBCT HHC area March 18. Frost ordered a shipment from the DOGTAGSFORKIDS Web site. The organization reports on its site that 420,000 of the tags have been distributed to deployed Soldiers, at no cost to the Soldiers who then mail the tags to their children. Receiving tags from Frost are, from left: 1st Lt. Robert Clancy, Grove City, Pa.; Sgt. Robert Kerecman, Scranton, Pa.; Sgt. 1st Class Jason Range, Elizabethtown, Pa.; and Capt. Nathan Haecker, Lincoln, Neb.

Diplomatic arm wrestling

2-104th Cavalry Soldier forges relationship during tabletop competition



Photo by 1st Lt. Justin Cassidy
Sgt. Frank DuBeck, of Harrisburg, Pa., Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 2-104th Cav., 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, arm wrestles the son of a local sheik, helping to forge a better and long lasting friendship with the people of Iraq.

**By Sgt. RYAN NOLAN
 HHT, 2-104 Cav.**

The Secretary of the Army has declared 2009 to be the "Year of the NCO." The sergeant is said to be the backbone of the U.S. Army. While it is the responsibility of the officers to plan the mission and the objectives, it is the responsibility of the noncommissioned officer to execute that mission and see to its success. It is obvious that these duties include leading men into combat, but the NCO's list of titles also include "counselor," "coach," and, as of late, "diplomat."

Diplomacy is often thought of in terms of State Department efforts to create peace and friendship between two nations. However, diplomacy is also being handled on a much smaller scale by NCO's working in Iraq. They are the ones who deal with the Iraqi populace every day.

During a lunch meeting with Sheik Nadeem, a local Iraqi leader, Sgt. Frank DuBeck from Harrisburg, Pa., a vehicle commander from the Personal Security Detachment, 2-104th Cavalry Squadron, was awarded a unique opportunity to wear his diplomatic hat.

"I was outside standing guard when one of my guys came up to me and said the Sheik's oldest son wanted to wrestle me," DuBeck said. "At first I was confused: 'Why does this guy want to wrestle?'"

As the NCO entered the Sheik's home, he realized what was in store.

"Everyone was gathered in a circle around a little table. Then I realized they were talking about arm wrestling," DuBeck, a weightlifting aficionado said. "I thought, 'This looks like a big dude,' but the Squadron Commander said it's okay to win, so I thought, 'Man, I better win!'"

The two men shook hands and knelt down at the table. A crowd of U.S. soldiers and Iraqis grouped around the competitors, cheering and laughing as the match began. Both athletes used all of their effort, but in the end it was DuBeck who came out on top.

In the end, there were no hard feelings, only respect for one another. The two men stood up, shook hands and executed the sacred "bro hug," a one arm shoulder hug. Even though the diplomatic efforts of the day were based on competition, a friendly atmosphere was maintained.

"It was cool, everyone was happy and joking around. The Iraqi's even congratulated me," DuBeck said proudly.

The true story here is not about a competition between two men, but rather a testament to the mutual respect being forged between the U.S. military and the Iraqi people. Soldiers, such as DuBeck, are working everyday to make Iraq a safe place for its people.

Families welcome detainee release

By Capt. ED SHANK
1-108th FA PAO

In a narrow hallway lined by holding cells on either side, 20 Iraqi detainees stand in a row – each man's toes nearly touching the heels of the man in front of him, hands behind his back. Not a single word is spoken among them. It is a position the men have assumed every day since their capture.

Today, however, there is something different about the formation – nearly each man has a smile on his face. It is a smile of anticipation for what's to come. Today these men, 64 in all, will be released.

At the front of the line stand several coalition soldiers in uniforms from armies of the United States, Iraq and Romania. For members of Battery C, 1st Battalion 108th Field Artillery, this is the first time they have been tasked with the security of the detainees as they are transported from a detention center (near Baghdad) to their hometowns. Although it is a new mission for the battery, for Sgt. 1st Class John M. Veater and his men, dealing with detainees is nothing new.

Back in Pennsylvania, Veater is a York City police officer with 17 years of experience on the force. There he processes prisoners on a daily basis. While the rules may differ at the detention facility, his posture remains the same – alert, aware of his surroundings and ready to react to any incident that may come his way.

The men Veater has chosen for the processing also have experience. All are corrections officers who work for Pennsylvania state prisons.

"Being a police officer helped me a lot with this mission," Veater says. "I knew enough to pick the right people for the right assignments. We have four people in our platoon who work as corrections officers at various prisons in Pennsylvania. I utilized them for the handling of the detainees."

Although nearly all of the detainees are excited about their release and more than willing to comply with the wishes of Veater and his men as they process them for release, one man is not as eager.

Prior to the battery's arrival, one of the detainees refused to take part in the proceedings. He was separated from the group and confined to a holding area within the facility. Upon their arrival, Veater and his men were briefed on the situation and told that the man would more than likely have to be shackled and forced to comply. The thought weighs on the team's mind as they search the others for weapons and contraband.

When the last man in line is loaded on a bus, it is time for Veater and his men to focus on the man in the holding cell.

More than a dozen American and Iraqi soldiers position themselves in a semi-circle around the door to the cell. Although none of the soldiers are holding weapons, each takes a stance that projects a "don't try anything stupid" demeanor. None of the members of Charlie Battery have seen the potential trouble-maker, which has conjured thoughts of a monster of a man who will try to use brute force to resist their efforts.

The door is unlocked and swings slowly inward, revealing a young man of about 22 years old – weighing about 130 pounds with tears streaming down his face.

Through an interpreter, a U.S. Army psychiatrist speaks in a gentle tone, explaining that no harm will come to the man and that, if he complies with their wishes, the soldiers will take the man to his village where he will see his family again. After several long moments, the detainee agrees to go with Veater and his crew, thus averting a crisis. Like the others, he is blindfolded, zip-tied and placed on a bus.

"I consider the detainees that we deal with to be similar to any other detainees that I've dealt with in the past," says Veater. "It isn't necessary for us to know the reason for their detention, just that they should be treated with respect and dignity, but dealt with carefully."

Iraqi motorists move out of the way as the convoy of military vehicles and buses passes

through the gates of the base and onto the civilian highway.

"The normal, traditional field artillery soldier coming to Iraq is trained in shooting cannons and in blowing stuff up, not necessarily in personal security-type missions," says Capt. Bryan Hanisko, Charlie Battery commander. "But, because we knew we would be assigned a BDOC (base defense operations center) mission, we trained to do other things. My guys picked up right away on conducting PSD (personal security detachment) missions and they've been doing a great job."

Once inside the MRAP (Mine-resistant, Ambush-protected) vehicle and away from the detainees, the soldiers begin to talk more freely about their experience inside the compound, stopping in mid-sentence to interject sentences like "watch this guy in the white truck on the right" and "OK, traffic is slowing down – watch your sector."

After nearly an hour of driving in rush hour traffic, the first vehicle pulls into a dirt parking lot outside an Iraqi police station where several men in blue uniforms stand in front of law enforcement vehicles holding AK 47 rifles. "We're here," says the driver.

A crowd of excited civilian men, women and children has gathered to greet the released men. Children are held up to the windows of the buses to see their fathers and brothers for

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Photo by Capt. Ed Shank
Witnessed either from a seat in a bus, or in this case, through the window of an MRAP (Mine-resistant, Ambush-protected) vehicle, the scene is still one of excitement. Family and friends cheer as a bus arrives at an Iraqi Police station in Taji Feb. 26 carrying their loved ones from a detention facility. Before detainees are released, they must be vouched for by local community leaders in the towns in which they live.

MNF-I commander patrols with 56th SBCT



Photo by Spc. Kimberly Millett
Gen. Raymond Odierno (left), Multi National Force-Iraq commander, talks with Col. Marc Ferraro, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team commander, during a walk through the Tarmiyah market March 21. Odierno praised the work of the brigade and also asked about the welfare of Soldiers.

(any) Letters from home



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Pfc. Andrew Lafrance (at right), of Avondale, Pa. receives an "any soldier letter" from an unidentified mail carrier as his brother Pfc. Christopher Lafrance (second from right) also of Avondale; Spc. Justin Venezia, of Philadelphia; and Spc. Eric Seibert (seated), of Malvern, Pa. read their letters. The soldiers from Co. B, 1-111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, MND-B (28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania Army National Guard) are shown at Joint Security Station Mushada, Iraq, Feb. 26.

Families

(Con't from Page 6)

the first time since their capture. Several men are dancing as women shout. The feeling is one of happiness to see their loved ones again.

Photos are taken and pleasantries exchanged in broken English and Arabic as the soldiers dismount their vehicles and greet Iraqi law enforcement officials. Charlie Battery's mission is over for today without incident.

Once the unit is confident that the IP has taken control of the men, the soldiers resume their positions in the MRAPs and head to their headquarters at Camp Taji.

Later, Veater thinks back on events of the day.

"The advantage that we have in the Guard is that I have a PFC (Pri-

vate 1st Class) that might be in his 30s and he's got a lot more life experience than a soldier of 18 or 19 year of age. They have a lot more life-experience than perhaps many active duty units," he says. "Each different profession that we're drawing from brings its own set of experience and rules in dealing with people, whether they're corrections officers or police officers or a salesperson that has to constantly deal with customers who may not be happy with what they're receiving as a customer."

"I'm proud of my guys," says Capt. Hanisko, "because they can pick up a mission and not only do the mission, but exceed the standard and take ownership of that mission and their heart's in it...you can see it."

Building relationships in Kem



Soldiers meet villagers during Iraqi-led cordon and search

Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
Sgt. Norman Thomas (left) of Philadelphia, with Company A, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, MND-B, bids farewell to an Iraqi family in Kem Village. Thomas used tape to mark the gates of homes following a cordon and search mission led by Iraqi Army soldiers March 3.

**By Sgt. DOUG ROLES
56th SBCT PAO NCO**

Soldiers from two 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team units participated in a joint cordon and search mission led by Iraqi Army soldiers Tuesday, March 3 in Kem Village, north of Camp Taji.

Soldiers used the mission as an opportunity to meet locals and get a feel for service and infrastructure needs. No weapons caches were found.

"It's about establishing relationships," said 1st Lt. Patrick Smith, of Reading, Pa., commander of Company A, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th SBCT, MND-B.

"My Soldiers don't just see Iraq from their Strykers. They stop and buy sodas at the shops. They get invited into these people's homes for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"My Soldiers don't just see Iraq from their Strykers. My guys stop and talk to the regular people in our AO,"

1st Lt. Patrick Smith, a Reading, Pa. resident, commander of Company A, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, on interaction with Iraqi locals

"My guys stop and talk to the regular people in our AO [area of operations]," Smith said.

Soldiers went house to house looking for explosives and meeting Kem residents to talk about their concerns. Kem is included in the 56th SBCT's area of responsibility, north of Baghdad.

"The significance of it was the planning and execution of the mission by the Iraqi Army. That was the success," Smith said. "It was their idea and we coordinated concurrent planning."

The patrol came several days after an attack by insurgents using grenades, near Kem, fatally wounded an 8th Military Police Brigade Soldier who was attached to 1st Cavalry Division.

"I think it does send a message," Smith said of the patrol, "that when there are attacks we'll focus our energies on an area."

Smith said roughly 70 percent of the population of Kem is internally

displaced persons. He said the transient population creates "a seam" that insurgents try to exploit by operating in an area where they may be more likely to go unnoticed.

Spc. Anthony Pompliano, of Carry, N.C., 856th Engineers Company, operated a metal detector during the mission, which also utilized

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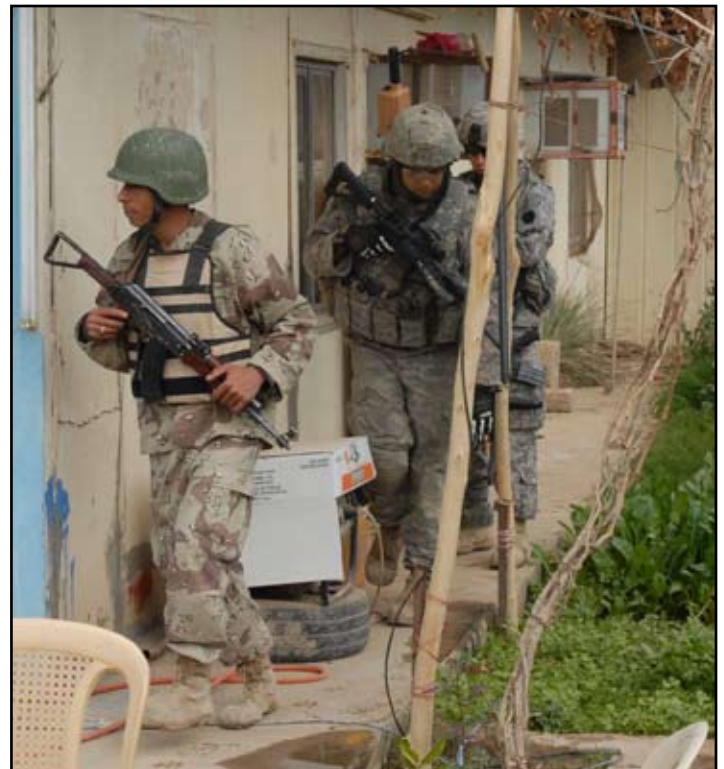


Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
An Iraqi Army Soldier leads a movement into the courtyard of a Kem Village home during a cordon and search operation conducted March 3 with Soldiers from the 856th Engineer Company and Company A, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, MND-B.

Kem

(Con't from Page 8)

an explosives-sniffing military dog and other detection tools.

"I think it definitely sent a message. If something happens we'll be there asking questions," Pompliano, a combat engineer, said of the search.

"The engineering purpose and task was to assist the Iraqi Army and the 1-111th in a cordon and search," Staff Sgt. Mickey Stormer, of Brookville, Pa., also a combat engineer with the 856th Engineers, said.

"It went slower than I thought it was going to. It was a big area to cover with one company but we adapted to it," he said.

Stormer, who as a civilian works as a police officer for the Borough of Brookville, said his Soldiers are doing a good job and said the deployment so far has been what he's expected. Stormer said he has worked with Iraqi Army personnel previously.

"I'm very impressed with them. I get along with them. They have a good attitude and a good sense of humor," he said.

Pompliano, who attends Bucknell University, Pa., agreed with Stormer about the Iraqi Army soldiers who led the day's mission.

"They're very enthusiastic. They have the right mindset," he said.



Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles
1st Lt. Patrick Smith (above, left), a Reading, Pa. resident, of Company C, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, leads a patrol through a portion of Kem village March 3 as Iraqi schoolboys greet his Soldiers. Troops with 1-111th and the 56th's 856th Engineer Company conducted a cordon and search operation with Iraqi soldiers.



Photos by Sgt. Doug Roles

Above, left: Iraqi Soldiers and Soldiers of the 856th Engineer Co. and 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, MND-B, conduct a cordon and search mission in the village of Kem, north of Taji, March 3. Above: 56th SBCT Soldiers sweep a courtyard with a metal detector. At left:: Sgt. Brian Reger (right) of Christiansburg, Pa., pulls security while Spc. Anthony Pompliano of Carry, N.C. prepares a metal detector for use near the village of Kem. Both Soldiers are with the 856th Engineer Company. Pompliano serves in the Pennsylvania Guard through an interstate transfer from a North Carolina unit. He attends Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pa.



I WANT YOU – to use your Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits

**By 1st Lt. ROBERT PRAH
56th SBCT Education Officer**

The Post-9/11 G.I. Bill is the most comprehensive education benefit package since the original G.I. Bill was signed into law in 1944. 56 SBCT Soldiers who are eligible for this new benefit may begin using it Aug. 1, for training that begins on or after that date. Soldiers are also encouraged to contact the brigade education officer for more information.

Basic Eligibility

Only active duty service performed after Sept. 10, 2001, may be eligible for determining benefit amount. To be eligible, you must have served at least 90 aggregate days on active duty. However, some individuals honorably discharged for a service-connected disability who served 30 continuous days after Sept. 10, 2001, may also establish eligibility.

Basic Benefits

The maximum basic benefit provides the following:

- a. Cost of tuition and fees, not to exceed the most expensive in-state undergraduate tuition at a public institution of higher learning in the state you are attending school;
- b. Monthly housing allowance equal to the basic allowance for housing payable to an E-5 with dependents, in the same zip code as the school you are attending; and
- c. Yearly books and supplies stipend of up to \$1,000 per year.

The maximum basic benefit is earned after serving an aggregate of 36 months of active duty service or after 30 days of continuous service for those individuals who were discharged for a service-connected disability. Individuals serving between 90 days and 36 months of aggregate active duty service will

be eligible for a percentage of the maximum benefit.

The percentage level is based off the amount of time served. The percentage ranges from 40percent of the basic benefit for those whose service is between 90 days and six months to 90percent for those who served between 30 and 36 months. For example, a soldier in the 56th SBCT with 13 months of qualifying service could receive 60percent of the tuition benefit, 60percent of the monthly housing allowance, and a maximum of \$600 books and supplies stipend.

For those individuals entitled to the maximum tuition and fee benefit and whose tuition and fees exceed the highest in-state undergraduate tuition at a public institution (i.e. graduate training or training at a private institution), the amount payable is equal to the highest in-state undergraduate tuition at a public institution, unless benefits under the Yellow Ribbon provision apply. (See next month's issue for information on the Yellow Ribbon Program).

Individuals will generally receive 36 months of full-time education benefits. This should, in most cases, allow a soldier to receive benefits for a four-year undergraduate degree based on a nine-month academic year, however, individuals may continue to receive benefits for approved training at an institution of higher learning (degree granting institution), including graduate training, provided they have remaining entitlement. If eligible for more than one benefit, individuals are limited to a maximum of 48 months of benefits. Those individuals transferring to the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill from the Montgomery G.I. Bill (Chapter 30) will be limited to the amount of their remaining chapter 30 entitlement. Individuals will remain eligible for benefit for 15 years from

the date of their last discharge or release from active duty of at least 90 continuous days.

The monthly housing allowance is equal to that of an E-5 with dependents. The housing allowance is based on the location of the school and will be sent directly to the veteran for each month of enrollment in school training at more than half time. Individuals on active duty, anyone training at half time or less, and those solely pursuing distance learning are not eligible for the monthly housing allowance. There may be changes in the regulations pertaining to BAH for students attending online in the near future.

The maximum yearly books and supplies stipend is \$1,000 and will be paid proportionally for each quarter, semester, or term attended in a school year. Payment, as of now, will be made to the individual during each term he or she is enrolled.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is not currently accepting applications for the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefit. For additional information, including how to apply for benefits, contact the 56th SBCT education officer, or visit the Veterans Affairs Web site at www.gibill.va.gov.

In next month's issue: Details outlining the Yellow Ribbon Program and Veterans Service Organizations that provide scholarships for advancement in higher education.

Interested in learning more about your education benefits upon redeployment? Interested in having an education briefing for your unit? Contact 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team Education Officer 1st Lt. Robert Prah at robert.prah@iraq.centcom.mil or education NCOIC Sgt. Warren Wolfe at warren.wolfe@us.army.mil for more information or to set up an education brief.



Fire Safety Training

Photo by Lt. Michael Green
56th SBCT Safety Officer
56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team fire wardens recently completed training with the Camp Taji Fire Department. Training included instruction on the use of fire extinguishers using the P.A.S.S. acronym: Pull pin, aim nozzle, squeeze handle and sweep fire.

Did you know ... ?

The 56th SBCT is part of the oldest division in the U.S. Army

DIVISION BIRTHDAYS AND/OR UNIT DAYS

Division	Birthday	Unit Day
1st Armored	1 March 1932	15 July 1940 (reorganized as an armored division)
1st Cavalry	13 September 1921	-
1st Infantry	8 June 1917	-
2d Infantry	26 October 1917	-
3d Infantry	21 November 1917	-
4th Infantry	10 December 1917	-
10th Mountain	15 July 1943	-
25th Infantry	1 October 1941	-
28th Infantry	12-20 March 1879	-
29th Infantry	25 August 1917	-
34th Infantry	25 August 1917	-
35th Infantry	25 August 1917	-
38th Infantry	25 August 1917	-
40th Infantry	25 August 1917	-
42d Infantry	5 September 1917	-
49th Armored	4 June 1917	-
82d Airborne	25 August 1917	15 August 1942 (reorganized as an airborne division)
101st Airborne	2 November 1918	15 August 1942 ("")

Information compiled by Col. Andrew Schafer,
56th SBCT Deputy Commanding Officer

www.army.mil/CMH/faq/divbr.htm

Soldier to Soldier ...

Keep good order, write home

We are moving along on our mission and starting to get traction. Some of the joint security stations have received new containerized kitchens, helping to improve the facilities that feed the troops. Meanwhile, other locations have worked on their gates and guard towers improving their force protection. This is work that doesn't end. While we are here we will continue to improve our areas providing our troops better living conditions and a more secure environment.

Along with improving our physical structures we must maintain standards in our living areas as well. I want to emphasize to every Soldier that fires of any kind are not authorized near living areas. This is very important to safety.

Also, we must maintain our living quarters and keep them clean and orderly. This is a practice that can help prevent fires and a practice that can also aid your state of mind. When you keep your area clean it helps you be organized and better prepared and I'm sure your roommate will appreciate it.

Once again our leaders need to continue to enforce the standard and we all must maintain vigilance



when outside the wire. You are all doing a good job and just need to keep up the good work.

Finally, don't forget to write home and let your loved ones know how you are doing. When Soldiers get busy they tend to put that on the back burner but you need to make the time. It's good for your state of mind and the folks back home need your support as much as you need theirs.

By Command Sgt. Maj.
John E. Jones,
56th SBCT Command

It's time to 'get' Equal Opportunity

EO is Called to War

Our National Guard men and women have been called to war to fight for liberty and freedom. Our mission is clear. Liberate Iraqis from tyranny and let freedom and democracy ring for all!

Liberty and freedom are significant principles of Equal Opportunity. So let's call it like it is – we are fighting a war for basic Equal Opportunity principles.

Let's review the military roots of equal opportunity. During the Viet Nam War, naval ships carrying our service members to the war zone had to turn around due to the civil strife and race rioting. The Department of Defense responded by establishing the Department of Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI). Military leadership realized that effective combat readiness needed more than tactical leadership. Leadership needed Equal Opportunity to bridge the equality gap.

As Equal Opportunity progressed and transformed through our military history, Equal Opportunity took on kinder and gentler names: Caring Leadership, Health and Welfare, Total Quality Management (TQM), Mentorship, Diversity and now, Wellness. No matter what name you give Equal Opportunity the bottom

line to effective combat readiness is treating our men and women with dignity and respect and ensuring fair and equitable policies are implemented.

Yet when Equal Opportunity issues grow quiet, we move Equal Opportunity to the back seat with second class principles. Why? Too many of us believe we no longer need Equal Opportunity because "We Get It."

If we get it, why then did we experience Tail Hook? A traditional activity passed down to aviators from earlier aviator generations. Do we get it yet? Aberdeen! Leaders involved in fraternization by taking sexual advantage of female trainees. Do we get it yet? Air Force Academy! Sexual harassment and assault passed on from one class to another as a right of passage. Do we get it yet? Abu Ghraib! And today, the sexual assault crimes in the war zone. So, I ask? Do we get it yet?

We cannot be lulled into thinking all is well just because reports show that sexual harassment complaints are down in our organization when sexual assault crimes are taking place by our military men against our military women. Someone is still not getting it.

Equal Opportunity ensures our men and women in uniform are paid, promoted, recruited, retained, assigned and educated equally

throughout the organization. Under the Equal Opportunity umbrella, E S G R representatives ensure re-employed rights are honored by civilian employers; Family Support Center advocates work on family needs; and NG lobbyist at the Capitol work for fair and equitable benefits.

Equal Opportunity is not a fixed principle that fits squarely into the protective categories box. It's time to give EO the respect it deserves as a combat multiplier. Equal Opportunity is what Equal Opportunity does!



By Sgt. 1st Class Eugene Burns
56 SBCT EO NCO

Chaplain's reflection

Spring traditionally a time of rebirth

Spring is a time of rebirth and if we were home nature would be treating us to a time of growth, color and new life. Except for the quickly warming temperature and the occasional green vegetation that we encounter it may be hard for us to realize that we are in Spring. For a number of faith communities Spring coincides with significant religious celebrations.

The Jewish Faith celebrates Passover- a remembrance of the deliverance of the Chosen People from the bondage of Egypt and their "Exodus" to the Promised Land. The Passover Meal (Seder) is an important part of this celebration as the story is retold and the meal, of haste and journey, is shared.

For the Jewish Soldiers in our midst the opportunity for them to celebrate these days is available through the Tigris River Chapel.

If anyone is interested please contact Tigris River Chapel, Warrior Chapel or any of our Brigade Unit Ministry Teams.

For Christians Spring brings the time for celebrating the most important days of our year. The final days of the earthly life of Jesus Christ are kept with great solemnity.

Some refer to this as Holy Week and events that are commemorated (Palm Sunday- Entrance into Jerusalem, Holy Thursday- Last Supper and Betrayal, Good Friday- Passion and Crucifixion and Easter- Resurrection) constitute the core of the Christian Faith. Times and locations of specific, liturgical events can be found on the portal or by contacting Warrior Chapel or any of the Brigade Unit Ministry Teams.

With the mission and its duties and responsibilities it may be difficult for us to celebrate

these days. I encourage you here, to the best of your ability, to maintain whatever traditions and practices you usually do at home on these days. It will not only help to keep you connected with family, traditions and your faith, but it will also help you to experience the renewal that this special season offers us and perhaps even have an impact on this land of Iraq.

By Col. (Chaplain) Bert Kozen
56th SBCT Chaplain



Legally speaking ...

Claims are paid out after careful review

Under the Foreign Claims Act (FCA) the brigade's claims team, primarily comprised of Spc. Jonathan Davis, Staff Sgt. Dana Snell and Maj. Frank McGovern, pays legitimate claims for personal injury and damage to real or personal property caused by noncombat activities of U.S. military personnel. Excluded claims are those injuries or damage caused by direct or indirect combat activities. The proper claimants are the local nationals, Iraqis.

The foreign claims process from intake to final payment takes on average a week. However, there are claims that can take much longer. We receive all claims at the Government Information Center (GIC), outside of Gunner's Gate. At that time we give the claimant a return ticket for the following Saturday or Wednesday to show up at the GIC where we will either pay or deny the claim and state the reasons for such a decision.

After receiving all claims, we work with an interpreter to translate the documents the Iraqis have submitted in order to review the claim. In addition, we check to see if the claim packet has an "Iraqi Claims Card." This is a yellow 3.5 x 4.5-inch card that units are supposed to hand out to Iraqis when there is an accident. It basically states the who, what, when, and how of the incident. At times the situation may not enable units to hand out a claims card. The reasons are many — the unit is in a convoy and the area they are driving through is not safe for stopping, Strykers travelling through a farmer's field because a road is blocked or illumination rounds that damage an individual's property.

We contact the unit to verify the incident occurred and/or that the claims card is valid.

Having a claims card and unit verification that the incident occurred is the best case scenario for determining that a claim is valid but not having a claims card by no means elimi-

nates the possibility that there is a valid claim. Nevertheless, Iraqis are selling claims cards at the local markets so we must be diligent to root out the fraudulent claims. When claimants submit photos used in successfully obtaining payment of a claim, the camera shop will start to sell those photos and we will then start to receive the same pictures submitted by other Iraqis. Some even photoshop themselves into the pictures. We keep a historical record of photos that regularly appear in the office to sort out the fraudulent claims and we also keep a record of paid claims to avoid paying out a claim multiple times. If a claim has been paid previously, and a new unit takes over an area, some of the Iraqis will try to resubmit a claim that worked to see if it will work again. We have experienced some of this situation. It is important to realize that the average Iraqi earns approximately \$1,500 to \$2,000 per year, therefore an Iraqi Claims Card can be like a lottery ticket. Soldiers are advised not to give out claims cards unless the actual incident is witnessed.

Often we hear stories about having many children to feed, being a widow, or just having an extremely difficult time and needing assistance. We have to explain that we are not a welfare office and that we wish that we could help every individual who walks in the door but that is not possible. This is U.S. taxpayer money and we can only use the funds for the specific purpose for which designated. We treat each individual with polite and courteous attitudes because it does us no good to call them a liar or be disrespectful. A lot of people are having difficult times even though the situation is much better here now than it was just a couple years ago.

Finally, we do meet many honest Iraqis who are filing legitimate claims and it gives us great pleasure to be able to compensate them for damages or injuries, because we want

to show them that when we cause an accident, we take responsibility.

If a decision is made to pay a claim, it is because the claim passes the statutory requirements of the FCA and we are able to verify that the incident in question did in fact occur. We then decide how much to pay for the claim which is often based off of receipts, estimates, documentation of interests in real property, medical records, and witness statements. The main goal of the FCA is to pay Iraqis for legitimate claims caused by U.S. military personnel. It is no different than what we would expect if someone sideswiped us while driving a car in the U.S.; we would expect to be compensated. The most common types of claims that we see are vehicle accidents, land occupied by U.S. Forces, damage to the infrastructure of a village (downed power lines), damage from illumination rounds, damage from controlled detonations, injury to pedestrians on the street, and destruction of crops from helicopter flares.

On a typical claims day we will pay, on average, from \$30,000 to \$60,000, but there are days where we have paid out less than \$10,000 and more than \$100,000.

The Brigade Claims team is doing an important non-lethal mission that will hopefully pay dividends for those doing missions outside the wire. We are doing our best to assist in the mission to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis by doing the right thing with the claims mission.

By Frank J. McGovern MAJ, JA
Claims, Contract and Fiscal Law Attorney
56th SBCT



Commander's Corner

Citizen Soldiers answer the call, always

Over the past 260 years, since Benjamin Franklin and the Associates founded the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, the citizen Soldiers of Pennsylvania have always answered the call. From Brandywine during the revolutionary war, and now to the cities and towns in the northern province of Baghdad, we stand ready to accomplish the mission and assist the government and people of Iraq. Today, the Soldiers of the Independence Brigade will once again bear the colors of our forefathers as we write another chapter in our history book.

The Soldiers of the Independence Brigade stand ready to serve side by side with their Iraqi counterparts to support their endeavor to build a safe and prosperous Iraq. We look forward

to working alongside the Iraqi Security Forces and should be inspired by the hard work and sacrifices they have made for their country. We will remain focused on our mission. We will be vigilant in all that we do. We will pursue the enemy, while at the same time working with the government, local populace and the ePRT to ensure the people of Iraq have the basic needs to survive.



To the Soldiers of the Independence Brigade, you should be proud of your accomplishments. You have come a long way since October 2004 when our transformation to a Stryker brigade first started. You have had to endure many challenges, which you have overcome. There is no doubt in my mind and there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the challenges that lie ahead we will face head on with tenacity and iron will just as our founding fathers did. Benjamin Franklin once said "well done is better than well said." I know at the end of the day nobody will have to say anything to the Soldiers of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team. Your accomplishments will do the speaking for them

As you are all aware, on Feb. 21, we lost a great American. Staff Sgt. Mark Baum was killed in action as a result of a direct fire incident. For his actions this day, Baum was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for Valor. Staff Sgt. Baum clearly demonstrated courage, commitment to duty, and distinguished himself as a leader for all to emulate. Our sincere condolences go out to the Baum family. Rest assured, he will remain in our hearts and the family will remain in our prayers eternally.

The environment is dangerous. We must ensure that we remain vigilant, do not become complacent, and most of all look out for one another. Stay focused, maintain an aggressive posture and an offensive mindset. Never let your guard down. I look forward to seeing you out in the OE.

"Strength Through Honor"

Marc Ferraro
Colonel, Infantry
Commanding
"Independence 6"



Have a Soldier story to tell?

The *Independence Gazette* welcomes story ideas and submissions.

Those submitting photos for publication should include their rank and full name (for photo credit) as well as caption information including the "who, what, when and where" of the event.

Submissions should be sent to: independencepao@yahoo.com

Find 56th SBCT news online at www.dvidshub.net
Click on "News from the Field" Scroll to 56th SBCT

1st Battalion, 108th Field Artillery

MARATHON

in cooperation with

Invites you to challenge yourself by participating in the
**Camp Taji Memorial Day Marathon
and Half Marathon**

Starting at 0500 on 25 MAY 09 (Memorial Day)

- No fee for participants (but donations are welcome)
- Pre-Register before 23 MAY at 1600 to avoid lines the day of event
- All proceeds will be given to the family members of 56 Stryker Brigade Combat Team WIA's and KIA's
- Food and water points will be located at several points throughout the course

Point of contact for registration:

1LT Jeremy Arnett

(jeremy.arnett@iraq.centcom.mil, DSN 834.3625)

