

CMOC

—Deb Hamilton

*Yesterday was my first day off since arriving at BIAP (Baghdad International Airport) last Wednesday. Today is Friday and I have decided to spend several hours of my off-day on a volunteer mission to a place called the CMOC (Civilian Military Operation Center). The CMOC is located on one of the Army camps here, just inside the wire. It's a clinic where Iraqi citizens can bring their children for free medical care. I learned about the CMOC from Senior Master Sergeant Taglieri or "Sergeant Tag" (as she's known by most military folks). The Iraqi people call her "Jennifer." I met SMSgt Taglieri at "The Oasis" where I have coffee every morning and write in my journal. I told her I was a writer of sorts, and she thought I'd be interested in the people at the CMOC. She was right.*

*30 JUN 2006*

It takes close to thirty minutes to get there by bus. Tag drives while I, two military doctors, and another volunteer ride in the bouncy seats. A few other people follow behind in government vehicles. When we arrive, a young boy comes running up to Tag's driver-side window, smiling from ear to ear. It is obvious that Tag is a familiar and most-welcomed face. As we stand outside in the dusty lot, waiting to go inside the aged, tan, concrete structure, the young boy greets each of us, smiling and shaking our hands. The kid looks to be about twelve or thirteen. I find out later from an interpreter that he is not a kid at all; rather, he is a young man of nineteen. Learning of our greeter's true age immediately causes me to recall my child development course in psychology. I conclude that the man's appearance is likely due to a lack of prenatal care and malnourishment, causing growth retardation.

The open room we enter into looks orderly, but also old and grungy. The floor is bare concrete and the walls are very plain. An area to the right is sectioned off with several dusty, black, cushioned chairs. Some children sit quietly watching a television set. “Scooby Doo” is playing in English. Straight ahead is a raised, concrete platform with folding tables set up on it. This station is used to place boxes of donated items for the kids and their parents. Of particular interest to the children are “Pez” candy dispensers that have been shipped over by a volunteer’s family.

At the center of the large room—just a bit forward—are several rows of the same black, padded chairs as those in the children’s TV area. The rows are half-filled with Iraqi adults, mostly women clad in the traditionally thick, black, Muslim attire (I keep forgetting what the heavy, draping garments are called). A few men are also seated there, wearing light-colored robes while the rest are dressed in outdated jogging pants or jeans and t-shirts. Cradled by some of the parents are infants and toddlers too small for the TV area. I can’t help but notice how tiny they all are: tiny, helpless babies at the mercy of all this conflict and poverty.

I watch as one man walks over to the children’s area with an infant son. He briefly positions the little one on the back of one of the padded chairs while supporting him securely with his hands. He lifts the baby in his arms and caresses a tiny cheek with the side of his masculine thumb. This is a father who loves his baby boy. His affectionate ways say more than the words of any language could about Love’s universal nature.

I go over to the man and ask if I can take a picture of the two of them. He smiles and grants me permission. Then he repositions the baby against him, facing him toward me in a sort of seated position. I realize then that the father thinks I only wanted a picture of his child. He seems surprised—pleased—that I choose to photograph them together. He smiles as I show him the tiny screen on

my digital camera. Later, I begin to speculate on a means of giving a copy of the picture to the man.

*02 JUL 2006, "Operation Photograph"*

I have a revelation and decide to drag Lindseye (my significant other back home) into it as an accomplice. I start thinking really hard about a way to give the photographs to the Iraqis who came to the CMOC clinic. My mind finally lands on the idea of a Polaroid camera, specifically, the kind that develops the picture while you wait. After speaking to Lindseye about my revelation during one of our allotted, fifteen-minute phone calls, she agrees to get involved and to see what she can come up with from her end. My original thinking is for Lindseye to check the pricing for cameras and film. If we can afford it, she will buy the stuff and ship it over.

"God Bless" my sweet Lindseye! She decides to turn "Operation Photograph" into a charity campaign back home. And she is already taking steps to see about getting camera supplies donated to the effort. Plus, she will rally our families and friends to participate. Not only will she ask for donations, she will request children's multi-vitamins and shoes. These are items they are in dire need of at the clinic. I'm hoping to have updated news on our project when I go in to work and check my email. I am beyond pleased with Lindseye's enthusiasm and I'm excited about the prospect of starting a small project for the Iraqis that will continue to live here after I'm gone.

*Note: Operation Photograph turns out to be a real success. Thanks to many good folks back home in Eastern Kentucky, a package arrives just before I leave Iraq. It contains a digital camera, a photo printer and lots of paper and ink supplies. My correspondence with Tag and others after I leave Baghdad reveals that the Iraqi families enjoyed receiving pictures of their children immensely.*

*03 JUL 2006*

I meet the most remarkable young man at the CMOC. He is dressed in a U.S. Army uniform and stands at a solid six feet or more. I notice that in place of where Army rank is normally displayed—just below the “v” of the collar—there are the initials “I.T.” I learn that this stands for “Iraqi Translator.” His nametag reads, “Zeeman.”

I would have never guessed that this young man is an interpreter. He looks more like an average soldier. Even more surprising, I would have never guessed him to be from Iraq! His hair is lighter than the dark black I have grown accustomed to in Iraqis; it even has touches of red in it. Zeeman speaks English incredibly well. Sometimes, he speaks so fast that I can’t quite keep up. Another odd thing is that I have noticed his English seems to have a French accent. Sure enough...he speaks fluent French, too!

During the course of our conversation, I (and others standing close by) learn that Zee was raised in an elite environment. Zeeman tells us that his family members are all either physicians or lawyers (including an aunt who is a psychiatrist in the United States). Zee explains that he is the “dark sheep” of his family and that no one supported his decision to translate for the American military. It is unclear from our conversation why Zee’s family members are against his chosen profession. I figure it either went against his elite background or it has something to do with their personal feelings about America’s involvement in Iraq. I determine to learn more about his family and their views during our conversation.

Sure enough, the more Zeeman speaks with our small group, the more I become enamored with him. Unlike the stoic pose he maintains in the photographs taken with me, he is, in actuality, full of smiles and very animated. He appears to almost burst with energy and enthusiasm. I admire his personability with the civilians at the clinic for treatment.

Zee's disposition absorbs much of my attention as he shares his personal experiences and concerns with us. He tells us that when he first began his job as an interpreter—three years ago—he was positioned with frontline Marines. He speaks of the battles he witnessed and participated in. One time, he turned to check on a wounded buddy and was shot while exposing his back. Zee does not elaborate on the extent of his wounds. But he goes on to tell us in his matter-of-fact way that he'd seen many people killed: "One minute your friend is right there with you and the next minute he is gone."

We do not press Zee with questions. We are all too humbled to pry deeper into his tales. We assume that the friends he refers to are Americans—friends that he had come to know—and that they had accepted him as a fellow warrior. As he speaks, I find myself wanting to learn more about the Iraqi up-close as well as hear more of his personal accounts of the war.

Mr. Z shares that his fiancé had also served as an interpreter. Zee said she was killed in Fallujah. He says her death made him decide to come off of the front lines. His mention of her brings with it a momentary change in his demeanor. His face becomes relaxed and his eyes stare at the floor. It is obvious that Zee loved this girl and that he was shaken by her loss.

Zee's demeanor quickly recovers as he goes on to tell us that he hopes to go live with his aunt in the states. Zee explains that if he stays in Iraq, he will be killed as soon as the US troops leave. It is unclear to me exactly who he is referring to (the threats he describes are acronyms that I am unfamiliar with). I'm quite positive at one point, though, that Zee says the very people we are currently training will be the ones to kill him. Zee claims that they will kill him and "anyone else who helped the Americans."

During our discussion, Zeeman motions for another translator to join us. She is an attractive young woman wearing a low, v-neck top, tight-fitting, Capri style jeans, and very tall platform sandals. The girl wears makeup and has very large,

brown eyes. Her hair is shoulder length and her English sounds more American than Zee's, perhaps even more than mine! Her name is Rafen.

Rafen corroborates Zee's concerns about being murdered. She says that she has to get out of Iraq and that she can't wait to leave. I find Rafen a quite interesting complement to Zee. Her demeanor and commentary remind me much of young, urban-American women. For instance, when one of the airmen asks her the name and significance of the long black garments worn by many of the Iraqi women, she rolls her eyes sarcastically, saying simply that the burka is worn for religious reasons. As the discussion continues, Rafen explains that the women believe it is pleasing to God for them to cover themselves. Rafen also points out that she is not religious and that she doesn't believe that God cares much about what people wear. Internally, I smile because I can see the dawning of change in this young woman's posture. She is somewhat of a rebel; but her spirit is guided by logic and intelligence. As with Zee, I want to learn more about Rafen and her thoughts about our world.

Before breaking from our group, I take the opportunity to ask Zeeman his age. He says he is twenty-years old, which means he started his military job when he was only seventeen or eighteen years old. My knee-jerk response is to say, "You're just a pup!" Then I quickly acknowledge to Zee that he has already seen and dealt with more turmoil than most men three times his age. Rafen, as it turns out, is also a well-seasoned twenty-year old.

As I bid my new acquaintances farewell, I thank them for all for what they have done and are doing. Never before had I considered the troops in need of such support. Zeeman and Rafen have crossed so boldly over to our side of the line. May Allah cover them with protection and teach the world through their voices.

*14 JUL 2006, CMOC, Visit #2*

I have returned to CMOC with SMSgt Taglieri and several other Air Force members, including a doctor ranked as a Lieutenant Colonel. There are quite a few children at the clinic along with their parents, mostly mothers shrouded in burkas. I snap only a few pictures of the kids. I'd rather wait until the photo printer arrives from Lindseye so I can offer photographs to keep. I start looking for Zeeman. But I don't see him anywhere. I ask if he will be here later and am told that he might. He never shows.

Rafen isn't there either. But there is a young woman named Huda. I met Huda on my previous visit. We talked for a while and I could tell she was in much different spirits. She and the other Iraqis who associate with Americans are in more danger of being attacked than normal. This is because a contracted security company, KBR, is leaving Iraq. I've received word from two different sources that the US government has failed to pay KBR millions of dollars. One of my sources—a Technical Sergeant with the Security Forces—claims that a large group of troops are being sent to Sather to take over airport security. Also, a military group known as "Red Horse" is coming here to make repairs to the runways. I'm not sure if they will only fix our runways, or, if they'll fix the Iraqi commercial runways as well. KBR has been keeping the perimeter surrounding the local airport safe. Huda, her family, and lots of other Iraqi people live in an area known as, "The Village." The Village is kept safe by KBR. And now that they pulling out, The Village is vulnerable to attack.

Everything I am told about the situation seems to be true; we now have an over abundance of Security Forces personnel swarming our compound. I don't know if Red Horse has arrived yet, or not. Tag told me yesterday—after we returned from CMOC—that one of the young Iraqi men who worked at CMOC was almost abducted since her last visit on Saturday. The young man is David, the one I thought was merely a child on my first CMOC visit. Tag said that David did not live in The Village; rather, he lives with his parents somewhere in

Baghdad. I recall David telling me that he lived “far” when I spoke with him earlier that day, before knowing of his precarious situation. Tag went on to say that the Army makes David stay on the base in order to protect him. Also, they are supposedly protecting his parents in their home. It is still very unclear to me who the bad guys are. I don’t know if they are Saddam loyalists, insurgents, or rebel groups of some other origin. My goal is to have clearer understanding of all this before I depart.

One person I am sure can help explain things to me is an Army man I met at CMOC yesterday. His name is Perez. He is filling in as NCOIC (Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge) while sergeant Noah of CMOC is on leave. I spoke with Perez close to the time we had to leave CMOC, and he had time to tell me how much he relates to what the Iraqi people are going through. He said his own country, the Dominican Republic, went through very similar circumstances twenty to twenty-five years ago. Perez said, “I am no different from these people. I even look like them.” Afterwards, he went on to say, “These people did not ask us to be here.”

Working for Civil Affairs, Perez’s duty takes him outside the wire on many occasions. Civil Affairs is tasked with smoothing relationships between the local people and our military. When US troops go into a town or certain areas of the city, they are sometimes met with hostility. Perez’s job is to communicate with the local people in such a way that they become cooperative with the Americans. He also goes into areas following violent engagements. This places Perez at much risk because he deals with Iraqi citizens whose homes and lives have just been destroyed.

I asked Perez if he was ever scared and he said, “No. I believe if it’s your time to go, then it’s your time to go.” All of his words were spoken in a heavy Latino accent. Just before leaving, I asked Perez a question. His answer struck me as most intriguing. I asked him if he felt that the job of Civil Affairs was a sincere



one. He cocked his head to the side and tilted his shoulder, saying, "I have my own opinion about these things."

