

E-Mails From Capt. Robert Secher, USMC

From: Robert Secher
Sent: Tuesday, December 06, 2005 5:31 AM
To: [Pierre Secher]
Subject: Hello

First of all, make sure you save (print and save) all the emails I send you [...] I am going to keep extensive journal notes on this deployment so I can write TWO books, one when I get back and of course the one I am working on now—Every email you save can help me [...]

Our team is made up of Marines from a variety of occupational specialties: supply, logistics, infantry, intelligence, communications, artillery (me and a sergeant), and of course we have a Navy corpsman (our medic). We will be located at an Iraqi base, living, eating [...]and fighting with the Iraqis. They are apparently the 1st Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 7th Iraqi Division or 11217 Iraqis. We'll be in Hit along the Euphrates River in the Al Anbar province and part of the Sunni Triangle [...]

As you know, when Roman centurions inspected their men during morning formations, the soldier would smack his fist on his breast plate above his heart and say "Integritas," which is of course "material wholeness," referring to the soldier's upkeep of his armor and demonstrating his dedication to combat readiness. You can rest assured that my mind and my gear will always be focused and ready.

Integritas, Robert

Secher's 12-month Iraq tour officially began on his arrival in Kuwait on Jan. 24. On Feb. 18, he wrote to a good friend, Peter, in New York, from the Anbar province town of Hit, where his team was sharing a camp with some 500 Iraqi soldiers.

Peter,

I got your care package today and am humbled and extremely appreciative for it! Everything in there is exactly the type of stuff that is useful and needed! The integritas patches are awesome. I'm going to sew one on my Kevlar and one on my flak.

Our camp is about 1 km from the Euphrates, with palm groves to our east and the desert to our west. Hit is a lawless town with most of the fight in the north (the insurgents control/influence the southern part). [...] Camp Hit is a series of wooden huts surrounded by [earth-filled barricades] and a berm perimeter with triple strand concertina [wire]. [...]

My first impression of the Iraqis is that I really like them. They are warm and hospitable and the

friendliest people I've met. I also feel very sorry for them. Their lives are out of their hands and they have known nothing but dictators (Saddam) and occupiers (us) for years. As we convoyed at high speeds thru the town (speed is the best defense against IEDs) you could clearly see the look on the eyes of the people: sick and tired. First a generation of Saddam, now insurgents and occupiers. Everyone makes promises and no one keeps them. [...]

I hope all is well. It is cold over here. It must be freezing in New York. Take care and I'll talk to you soon.

Your friend, Robert

On the morning of March 3, Secher and his men were driving into town when they spotted an improvised explosive device disguised as roadside litter. They blocked off the area and called in an explosives team. In an e-mail to his family, he told what happened next:

With absolutely no warning (and less than 10 minutes after we got there) the IED blew up. In one split second I saw the huge black smoke then the noise, everybody outside the vehicles dropped to the ground [...] About that time we started taking fire to the rear of the convoy. The Iraqis identified where it was coming from and immediately returned fire, but by the time they successfully translated where the fire was from it had stopped [...]

Anytime an American fires a weapon there has to be an investigation into why there was an escalation of force. That wouldn't have stopped us from firing, but it prevents us from just firing indiscriminately. We have to have positively identified targets. That is why I am now a big fan of having the Iraqis with us. They can fire at whatever the hell they want, we call it the "Iraqi Death Blossom." These guys receive one shot and the whole unit fires at everything in sight until the attached American unit gets them to control their fire. That's fine with me.

His mood had dimmed when he wrote again to his friend Peter on April 23:

Whatever "good" is happening in Iraq, isn't happening here. The bright side is there is no sectarian violence here like in Baghdad. In other words the insurgents around town don't target civilians. And there are even established warning signals so civilians know not to be around.

My 3 month informed opinion (based entirely on what I see in the Hit region) is that this war is futile. Even the Iraqi soldiers tell us that when America leaves, they'll quit. They trust us because they know Americans can take care of them, but they don't trust their government, or the Ministry of Defense, and they especially don't trust their officers [...] Funny, I feel the same way sometimes.

Anyway, the weather here is getting hotter, it's windy all the time, the flies are terrible.

Secher reacted angrily to accounts of the killings at Haditha and Hamdania. On June 22 he wrote to his father:

Of course you've heard about two different sets of Marines being charged with murder. [...]

I feel bad for those guys. Bush should be ashamed of the predicament that this nation has been put in. And anyone who calls those young Marines killers should think twice. War puts perfectly ordinary young men in situations that can't be judged by laws. They are the situations of survival. The dirty little secrets of war, no one would want to know the horrible things that the "greatest generation" did to German and Japanese soldiers and civilians. [...] If you really want to win a war you have to be brutal. You have to be Sherman and raze Georgia as you march to the sea.

Later that day, Secher had cooled off:

Hi Dad,

After reading my last email I don't want you to think that I condone the actions of the Marines, and if in fact they are guilty they should be held responsible and punished. My point is that this is the reality of what war is. This is what war does to normal young men. This is the whole tragedy of war. People are so quick to only criticize the Marines and to demonize these young men. I pity them. Their lives are ruined, ruined by their actions which are judged by men who have never been in those situations.

As the summer wore on, his frustration deepened. On July 23 he wrote to friends:

Hello everyone,

Tomorrow will be our 6 month mark, and then only 6 more months to go! Everything is fine and works in cycles. Some weeks see more activity than others based on the insurgents' cycles of regrouping and refitting [...]

The biggest lesson I have learned over 6 months here is that the Iraqi culture is incapable of maintaining a western style military. The Arabic-style military [...] is distasteful to western soldiers: officers who hit their men; officers and senior enlisted men who regularly steal from their men; using leadership to openly grant yourself more food and 'standard of living' items while your men go without [...]

Many of our [Iraqi] soldiers went AWOL; new food supplies came in yesterday from Ramadi but were grossly insufficient; new soldiers arrived but their initial military training is substandard and you can tell they are really just here for a paycheck [...]

So that's about it. Hope all is well. The weather here has cooled down. It's only 110 this morning. Take care and talk to you all later.

Robert

Still, new Iraqi officers had arrived, and Secher cheered up after seeing them in action. He wrote to his father on July 25:

In defense of the Iraqis, this new battalion commander and executive officer we have are starting out on the right foot. So far so good, see, there may just be some professionals in the IA [Iraqi Army]. Today an Iraqi soldier stole jewelry from a woman at a vehicle checkpoint. When it was discovered, the Iraqi was identified and the XO had an investigation done immediately, and the same day we transported the soldier to the jail on Camp Hit (where he is right now) and we'll take him to Al Asad in a week to be fired.

This is such a long process. Maybe 20 years from now I'll look back with pride that I helped make a difference in Iraq, but right now I'm just not into it. I just want to come home alive. [...] The war in Iraq itself, yeah, it was the right thing to do, but the way it was carried out, man, Bush, Rumsfeld, and Cheney have nothing to be proud of.

But I'm still glad to be here. At least I can say I was here, and 20 years from now that will be all that matters. I did my part (though my attitude was less than desirable). [...]

Tomorrow will be my 100th convoy and I'll get to command it again, which I enjoy. If there is one thing war has taught me, [it's] how much time we spend in life worrying about stupid s--t. I hope I don't forget that.

Love, Robert

As summer ended, Secher was leading Iraqi soldiers on house-to-house searches for insurgents. He described the process in a Sept. 30 e-mail to his father.

We went out with the IA to do cordon-and-searches, where we cordon off a city block [and] then go in small groups from house to house, initially knocking, but we had to kick in a few doors and gates. I had to shoot the lock off of one house. [...] The Iraqis I was with did a really good job. I had Mathan [an IA member] and our interpreter Joe, who are both good soldiers. We did the searches at night between 2300 and 0500, so it was a rude awakening. It caused some people to freak out, some were more calm, no one threatened us. We did take some sniper fire, but nothing sustained. I was surprised at how beautiful some Iraqi houses were on the inside. Not at all what I was expecting. [...]

The whole thing felt kind of weird. Especially when you have kick in a gate, go charging in, weapon on fire, finger on the trigger, charge to the front door start banging on it, and then some

old man comes to the door [...] That was about the least enjoyable thing I have done here. As an American it really feels odd to enter peoples homes and question them, and with the authority that if they don't want to cooperate, I can detain them. This is what martial law would be like.

His final e-mail arrived a week later.

From: Robert Secher
Sent: Friday, October 06, 2006 3:56 PM
To: [Pierre Secher]
Subject: Hello

Dad,
How are you? I will be down in the city [...] operating out of firm base 1 until probably Nov 1 so I won't have access to email very often. I should make it back up to camp every few days to shower and do laundry, and I'll check my emails then. The clearing operations are continuing throughout the town. It'll be sleep all day and go on operations each night (searches and raids). A lot more interesting than being on the camp. Give my love to [stepmother] Lucy, I'll talk to you all soon.

Love, Robert

POST-SCRIPT FROM MS-NBC.COM

Captain Secher died two days later, shot by a sniper while on patrol in Hit. "There are many challenges out here," Marine spokesman Lt. Col. Bryan Salas told NEWSWEEK. "Captain Secher and the Marines who worked with him tackled those challenges with tremendous zeal, and served with dedication and great personal sacrifice. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family."

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