

## **Diana Griego Erwin: E-mail offers glimpse of postwar military life in the Iraqi desert**

**By Diana Griego Erwin -- Bee Staff Writer**

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In my teen years, some friends felt a deep connection to U.S. soldiers in Vietnam because of the aluminum bracelets they wore engraved with the names and vital data of POWs. Despite the immediacy of live television coverage today, many Americans have lost touch with the real men and women serving in Iraq. With one young soldier's permission, I invite you to eavesdrop over the next few weeks on e-mail sent home by Sacramento-raised 2nd Lt. Rommel Uniza, an Army nurse somewhere in the desert outside Baghdad with the 21st Combat Support Hospital. Uniza and his wife, Taylor, also a nurse, were deployed to Iraq on July 13, their one-year wedding anniversary. They met in the ROTC nursing program at the University of San Francisco. Both are 22.

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Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2003: "I woke up today and said, darn, still here! Over 140 (degrees). Again. One mortar attack. Again. People make fun of me cuz I kind of freak out. I walk quickly to my protective gear and get down. Everyone else moans and walks to their things. I guess they're used to it. Or maybe I'm just a wimp. Call me a wimp if you want. This wimp is leaving Iraq with all fingers and toes.

"I worked with the Iraqi prisoners today. What gets me is they complain about heat. I'm like, 'Don't you live here ...?' "We had some American civilian contractors bring in some toilets and showers. That's exciting. Our poop pile is filling up and the odor is getting bad and people are getting sick. I scrub my hands for a while after using that nasty place. As always, the girls' side is clean. ... I guess what we're getting are actually flushing toilets. ... "Electricity is now guaranteed in the hospital all the time! That's always good when patients are on ventilators or in the operating room. ..."

Later, Rommel shared his bedtime routine: "I take off my DCU (Desert Camouflage Uniform) and slip into shorts and a T-shirt. With the heat and all, my clothes are soaked and my legs are drenched with sweat. I'll run over to the showers before they close it for female shower time. ... Go chat with Taylor if she's not busy. ... I make sure to grab my flak vest and my Kevlar (that's my helmet). Walk quickly back to the sleep tent cuz it's the most common time for a mortar attack. It's also prime time for mosquito attack and camel spider attack. Make it back and I start tying my mosquito net around my cot. ... I babywipe my hands and take off my contact lenses. I put my glasses inside my helmet and lay my flak vest next to me in bed. I line my shoes up so I can jump into them and run to the shelter area when the next attack hits. ... I do a little practice run through and think 'Vest-Helmet-Glasses-Shoes-RUN!' I've got it down to probably 10 seconds from the first boom that I hear. Oh yeah, and I tether an extra flashlight I have to my flak vest (in case) there's no moon out. "After my escape plans are ready to go, I say a few prayers asking God to keep the enemy from mortaring any part of the compound and praying for our soldiers to hunt them down. I give thanks for being an American.

"I set my little battery powered alarm clock to the very last minute I should be getting up and then I go to bed. If the air conditioner isn't working, I place my fan near my head and turn it on. The sweat and the fan create this cooling effect. ... I keep water next to my alarm clock so I don't dehydrate. So far we've had three deaths from heat injury.

"Have a great day and I'll have a good night's sleep (pending mortar attacks). ... I hear the Apaches flying around on patrol. ... "

Aug. 20, 2003 Busy, Busy, Busy "It's a busy day here at the 21st Combat Support Hospital. We were the closest hospital to the UN (compound) bombing (in Baghdad), so we are getting all the injuries. Packed with patients and much of the staff was called in at about 2 a.m. to help. The OR (operating room) staff have gone nonstop. What a scary place this has become... It's difficult to walk through the ICU and see so many people injured from a terrorist blast. ... Makes me want to get the heck out of this area! ..." Read more notes home from Rommel and Taylor Uniza in the weeks ahead.