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## War through a different lens

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By CATHY DYSON

Exhibit shows photos of everyday moments in Iraq

Think about all the images that have come out of Iraq in the last year: the blood and gore, the black smoke billowing from burning oil fields, the protests of angry Iraqis.

One you probably haven't seen is a Marine playing patty-cake with a local boy.

Or an Iraqi girl giving flowers to an American in uniform.

Or a taxi driver, surrounded by nothing but sand, waiting for his next fare.

These kinds of photos--and more--are currently on display at The Art Institute of Washington in an exhibit that illustrates moments of everyday life in the midst of a war. Called, "Operation Iraqi Freedom: The images you didn't see on TV," the show runs through June 30.

Most of the framed photos are the work of Christopher Reese, an institute faculty member who's also a Marine reservist. He spent six months in Iraq last year with the 4th Civil Air Group.

When the 31-year-old staff sergeant found out he was being deployed, he packed up all the gear he knew he'd need in the desert.

But he also was determined to carry an extra piece of equipment--his digital camera. He strapped that onto his uniform, in a Ziploc bag wrapped in duct tape, along with canteens and a chemical suit, a cartridge belt and flak jacket.

When he wasn't on patrol with an M-16 rifle, he captured images with his Canon D-60.

Reese had no idea what he'd do with this digital record, which turned out to be several thousand images of his own and even more from others in his unit.

"There was no plan, except to shoot everything I could get my hands on and come back and think about it later," said Reese, who lives in Alexandria.

But as he showed some of the prints to co-workers at the institute in Rosslyn, they were amazed--not just by the clarity of the photos, but by the story they told.

"We've been inundated by negative images of Iraq, that's all you see," said Ivonne Couret, public relations director at the institute. "There's nothing like this."

Reese's photos show that "it's a civilization, it's not just a war zone," she said.

There's only one image, of almost 60 at the gallery, that speaks to the devastation of war. It shows a burning building in the background and an angry Iraqi in the foreground.

The others are ordinary activities, and that's what Reese loves about them.

There's a man on the street, heating a cast-iron kettle of tea over a charcoal fire. The Iraqis constantly offered the hot drink to the Marines, and before Reese saw the man cooking in the street he wondered how the locals made tea, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

There are street scenes, filled with the hustle and bustle of city life, and beautiful images of the ancient ruins of Babylon in the fading light of dusk. Reese makes the most of light and shadow in scenic vistas of sand and centuries-old buildings, the same way a painter uses different strokes for emphasis.

Some of the photographs have a National Geographic quality about them, like the one of a boat floating along the Euphrates River. There's also a close-up of a young woman--similar to the famous portrait of the Afghan girl--that shows every detail of her face, down to the specks of sand on her nose.

That picture brings up another story, Reese said during an interview at the gallery last week. He and other Marines were taught that Iraqis, especially females, didn't want to be photographed.

But that theory was blown away the first time an Iraqi father and daughter approached the group. The man positioned his daughter next to Reese so another Marine could take her picture.

Other Iraqis, especially children, "were just as curious about us as we were about them," Reese said. Herds of youngsters chased after military vehicles to get a closer look at the Marines' tattoos or to snag one of the chocolate bars they offered.

Families from the desolate regions of Babylon to the streets of Nasariyah were friendly--at least in spring and summer 2003, when Reese visited. "I don't know how it is now," he said.

The show opened last month, about the time the scandal at Abu Ghraib prison broke, and Reese quickly pointed out there's no political motivation behind his exhibit. He was merely trying to share some of the scenes he and his fellow Marines saw.

"I was there to document the work of our civil affairs group," Reese said. "I wasn't there to document the war."

To reach CATHY DYSON: 540/374-5425 [cdyson@freelancestar.com](mailto:cdyson@freelancestar.com)

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