



Print Page

Sunday, June 5, 2005 Last modified: *Thursday, November 11, 2004 10:09 AM PST*

Double duty: Marine photographer's exhibit is window into wartime Iraq

BY RAHNE PISTOR

U.S. Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Christopher Reese says he's a soldier first and an artist second, but now his photographs of the war in Iraq get to take a front seat in his new exhibit, Operation Iraqi Freedom — The Images You Didn't See on TV.

Reese's photographs were taken from March to September 2003, during the initial invasion of Iraq, when reservist Reese was called up for active duty. An opening reception is scheduled for 6 p.m. Thursday, November 11th, at the Art Institute of California's Los Angeles Gallery, 2900 31st St., Santa Monica. The exhibit remains on display through Friday, December 10th.

Admission is free.

Reese says his photos show a more up-close and personal view of the day-to-day activities of Marines and also shows reactions of everyday Iraqis and children to the oncoming troops.

As a member of the Fourth Civil Affairs Group under Colonel Mike Shamp, Reese participated in tactical analysis (sizing up situations and assessing possible reconstruction endeavors) after areas had been secured by U.S. troops.

From this experience, Reese's lens was able to capture bombed out buildings, street life scenes and activities of everyday Iraqis after the invasion.

"Iraqi people are not so different than us," says Reese. "They are hard-working people and proud of their heritage."

"I got to take part in meetings with sheiks and village elders and to hear the concerns people voiced," says Reese.

Reese's unit traveled through much of southwest Iraq, including Al Kut, Najaf, Karbala and Nasiriyah, but the only time he faced combat was during the earliest stages of the war, when U.S. troops were assembling at "Camp Commando," a military outpost in neighboring Kuwait.

It was there that the Iraqi military was firing missiles at the newly assembled troops.

"We had 37 attacks in two weeks," says Reese.

"A siren would go off and the troops had a short amount of time to get into a bunker, to protect themselves from shrapnel."

Reese says that no U.S. troops were killed from the missile fire of those two weeks.

It was this time that he captured some of his most riveting photographs. He shot gas-mask-laden U.S. troops huddling in bunkers with their assault rifles, marching troops kicking up a storm of dust, rolling tanks and troops working to reinforce makeshift bunkers with sandbags.

At first, Reese, like many other U.S. troops, carried a camera to document his personal experiences in war.

He rigged himself a camera bag out of an extra gas mask bag that he had, giving the impression that he was over-cautiously, carrying around two gas masks.

But after a knee injury during training, Reese was assigned a lighter duty of documenting the efforts of the Civil Affairs group in Iraq.

Some of Reese's shots of smiling children playing soccer and Iraqis holding up welcoming signs were not as carefree as they might appear.

Reese says he only felt safe enough to take out his camera and start snapping away in immediate areas that were secured by U.S. troops. He also shot many of his pictures while traveling through Iraq in military vehicles.

As a military soldier serving in Iraq, Reese got the opportunity to assess what was happening in Iraq firsthand. Thinking about the ever-rising human toll and weighing reasons given for being there are surely thoughts that frequent any soldier's mind.

But Reese says that he made a personal decision to think about the situation more in terms of serving his country honorably and being a Marine.

"Once the decision was made to go, it was no longer a matter of whether I felt it was right to go or not, it was a matter of going in and making sure the job was done right," says Reese.

"They didn't find weapons of mass destruction," he admits. "And there is ample evidence that maybe those weapons didn't exist."

Yet he says he has a sense of pride in being part of the "liberation" of the Iraqi people.

But with curfews imposed, the shutting down of the Iraqi media, marshal law, new attacks on Fallujah, and a U.S. military presence with no end in sight, when can the Iraqi people expect to see signs of liberation?

"I think after the elections are held," says Reese. "I'm hoping there will be a singular figure that Iraqis look to as their leader."

Once the country is stable enough to hold elections, Reese says he hopes to see "self-motivated reconstruction" and a new beginning for the country.

Reese admits that his photos do not show the entirety of the war effort. Rather, they are one soldier's journal of experiences.

But as far as his experiences in the country go, the photo collection is as thorough as it could possibly be, he says.

"There were some times when I was too actively involved in a situation to be able to stop and photograph it," says Reese.

Reese says that he is a soldier first and photographer second, but that any moment he possibly could, he sought to capture the essence of a soldier's experience through his lens.

Reese now shares his experience as a Digital Media Design faculty member at the Art Institute of Washington.

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