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On Duty in Iraq

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Their boots hit the streets often in the service of a dual purpose. In one hand they might carry a new soccer ball, in the other a dusty M-16.

The neighborhoods of Iraq are the scenes of key battles of this war, battles where U.S. troops shoot at the enemy moments before smiling at young children and handing them candy. Clad in camouflage, they see themselves as frontline ambassadors for freedom and democracy, trying to win over a new generation while resilient loyalists of an old dictatorship try to destroy them.

Explosions sometimes act as crude timepieces, waking the soldiers in the early morning and sending them off to sleep at night. Gunfire breaks the chilly afternoon calm, and massive car bombs turn their heads. They go on midnight raids and hunt for weapons stockpiles. Back at their base, they play video games and watch movies to forget where they are.

And while combat missions and patrols are frequent, the soldiers understand they are on the ground to make a difference in ordinary people's lives. They speak eloquently about their desire to help, they commune with elders gathered on street corners and learn of the need for a sewer system, heating oil, potable water. They supervise power plant reconstruction and hospital renovations. They train and equip the police.

They hand out money to schools for electricity, books and playgrounds. In the schoolyards these armed men and women are like movie stars and politicians, with high school girls giggling and shrieking and little children bouncing in their seats. It is here, many say, that they remember what they're fighting for.

There are also the horrors of war: the dread, the losses, the mourning. Medics sweep into action when roadside bombs tear through flesh; calls are made in the middle of the night to let families know their son or daughter won't be coming home. The pictures of those killed have prominent spots in command tents and on palace walls so that no one will forget who made the greatest sacrifice.

At the end of the day, each soldier simply wants to complete the mission and make it home. Some say they refrain from telling their loved ones about what they have seen or what they have done, lest they worry them even more. They cope by developing enduring friendships with their fellow soldiers, sharing the grimy battlefield and the moments of rest and relaxation, with the only people who can truly understand what they're going through.

-- Josh White

White, a staff writer who covers military affairs, was in Iraq in December, embedded with several U.S. Army units.