

York Dispatch

Iraq, through a new lens

'Images You Didn't See on TV' showing at Bradley Academy

By PETER MERGENTHALER *For The York Dispatch*

Thursday, February 10, 2005 - A child rides his bike through a dusty dirt road. A donkey-drawn cart ferries bottles through a city. A merchant peddles fruit from a canopy-covered stand.

These may not be scenes one commonly associates with the streets of Iraq, but Johnstown, Cambria County, native Christopher Reese, 32, wants to change that.

"It actually was much more positive and much more productive than anyone was seeing back here in the states," Reese said of American forces' work in Iraq.

Indeed, many of Reese's pictures show a softer, simpler side of the war zone. In one photo, a Marine reads a book from his perch several stories above the streets of Diwaniyah. In another, an Iraqi youth shows off a "USA" tattoo on his left shoulder, his right hand flashing the camera an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

But not all of Reese's photographs feature such unbridled patriotism. Some show sandbag walls, mud-soaked city streets and collapsing, long-abandoned buildings, a grim reminder of the turmoil that has seized the country of 26 million people over the last several years.

A Marine: Reese, a staff sergeant with the 4th Civil Affairs Group of the U.S. Marines, earned a bachelor's degree in communications media from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 1996. He then completed graduate work in instructional technology at Bloomsburg University, and he is now a full-time faculty member at the Art Institute of Washington in Washington, D.C.

Reese shipped out to Iraq in February 2003. He spent the first several weeks of his deployment in Kuwait, where he sustained a severe knee injury during martial arts training. Reese was reassigned to a desk job, but when his entire unit was assigned to Iraq, he lobbied to be sent with them.

Reese was eventually allowed to travel with his commanding officer, camera in tow, to survey different regions of Iraq. Traveling between regions afforded Reese the perfect opportunity to capture images from throughout the country.

For the next month, Reese was assigned to a variety of media-related and clerical missions in Kuwait and different parts of Iraq.

"Every time I took a trip, I took more photographs," he said. "Sure, there was violence, there was danger. We didn't take anything for granted. But we got to know the Iraqis we saw every day. ... We would interact with these folks, and it was generally a very positive feeling."

The children: Much of Reese's photography in Iraq was candid, though children occasionally asked to have their pictures taken. To them, the technological wizardry behind a digital camera being able to see their pictures immediately after they were taken was like magic, Reese said.

Children feature prominently in many of Reese's photos.

"Some of the greatest memories I have is dealing with the younger children," he said. "Any of the building that's going on, any of the elections and everything, it's all for the next generation. ... Whatever the outcome was, they were going to have a better life than their parents did."

Reese is currently on "inactive reserve" status, which means he could be summoned for duty at any time but has no current monthly responsibilities.

The U.S. Navy plans to release a 220-page book about Operation Iraqi Freedom in March, Reese said. The book will showcase Navy and Marine Corps involvement in Iraq, and it includes several of Reese's photos.

Images

A collection of Christopher Reese's photographs, titled "Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Images You Didn't See on TV," will be on display tomorrow through March 1 at the Bradley Academy for the Visual Arts in Springettsbury Township.

For more information and samples of Reese's photography, go to www.rockyblues.com/oif.