

Adopt a Soldier Platoon,

Its 3:42 am, June 6, 2007.

I'm sitting comfortably on my couch where a little less than two years ago I could only dream about being able to do. The hours of 3-4AM (what I call the magic hour) has embedded itself into my body as a wakeup call that I cannot turn off.

I'm guessing one reason is this was the time myself and my "battle buddy" (an Army term used for friend or fellow soldier) SFC Angel Aponte would be heading out on night missions to a water tower in Habbaniyah, Iraq. Our job was to ensure IED's were not placed in harms way of civilians coming to work the next day. The tower was a metal structure that sat 300 to 400 feet off the ground and was covered in sand and pigeon poop. It had a perfect vantage point to the city of Habbaniya and our ECP (entry control point area where civilians were staged to enter our camp).

This mission was a result of a recent IED attack that killed an 18 year old Iraqi boy as he and his father walked to work. I remember seeing the father's face as he sat on a curb and cried mourning the loss of his young son. I remember thinking how would this father explain the news to his wife as he walked into his home that night. Perhaps this is why this fire still burns in my heart and wakes me at this magic hour.

You're probably asking yourself what does this have to do with Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon? Please let me explain in the best way I can. We Americans have the privilege of being shielded from so many realities of the world. Yeah, we may see some live videos with sound of events that occur around the world but we tend to see part of it or lose interest as news about our favorite celebrity or member of a sports team caught doing something out of the ordinary overtakes our curiosity. I go back to this word "ordinary."

As we returned from our night missions we would eat chow at our favorite mess hall. This was a place where we would watch some TV and see news about events back home. Once finished we would head back to our hooch (place where we lived) and sleep for several hours. On one particular day we woke around 2 PM and headed for the shower trailer to conduct personal hygiene. I noticed several Iraqi workers (usually members of the same family) and mostly young boys with Id's saying they were 17 picking food scraps from a dumpster. We yelled at them in both English and Arabic to get away or they would get sick or "Madiff" (Iraqi word for sick). They smiled, waved and continued digging. Once we finished, we returned to our hooch to work on getting supplies for our training academy we were assigned to begin.

As we discussed our plan, this relatively quiet day erupted with the “ordinary” sound of explosions. A daily occurrence in Habbaniyah. These were particularly close so we know they were mortars, in fact they were being “walked” in to our area. Suddenly our radios became alive with chatter. Usually we hear damage reports or the approximate location where the explosions landed. This time to enemy was able to hit “something” of value. I use the word something because they really are not aiming at anything. They are intending to hopefully hit something. This time they were successful in hitting 14 Iraqi workers that were taking a break and eating their afternoon snacks.

The casualties were being brought to a collection point two buildings down from ours. We suited up and ran over to assist. We walked into the “ordinary” world of death. Men lying on the ground crying, moaning, screaming, bleeding and some already dead. As combat life savers (a qualification we received prior to deploying) we provided first aid to the less severe patients while the more trained medics handled the serious wounds. After the ambulances from our parent unit, the 2nd Infantry Division, took away the injured and dead we returned to our hooch.

Now your saying to yourself this guy still has not said anything about Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon. The word “ordinary” is what this program brought us and I’m sure many other adoptees. Being able to relate to things back home is what it does. Opening mail has had such a positive affect on soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen throughout history because of that special moment in time that they are transported back (at least in their minds) to the ordinary and routine task of receiving items at home. Knowing that some one cares enough to take the time to think about them is precious. This is why Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon is so successful. It brings us normalcy in a world that is not. It reassures us that we matter and that everything at home still works the way it was intended and will be there when we return. It’s these little moments in time that we all remember. Thanks, Adopt-a-Soldier Platoon and all who of you who make this happen.

(AaSP NOTE: This letter was written by SFC Francisco “Frank” Maciel for the Unilever Ambassadors Club “Links” newsletter. Frank formerly worked at Bestfoods and many of us had the pleasure of working with and knowing Frank and his lovely wife Arelis, who also worked for Bestfoods. When we learned Frank had been deployed to Iraq, we immediately “adopted” him. We not only sent him our regular care cartons of snacks, personal care items and other goodies, we sent him boxes of supplies for school children. As a drill sergeant, Frank was training the Iraqi military and part of their mission was taking care of the Iraqi recruits and their families as well. Frank and his team built schools. And they provided much-needed supplies to the children to help them learn and enjoy their education just a little better. Frank and his “battle buddies” have our gratitude for their heroic service to our country.)