

LIFE AFTER IRAQ: A Soldier Comes Home

By Susan J. Sherman, Editor



The sign read “daddy I miss you”. It was the first thing Sergeant Miguel Figueroa saw, bleary eyed, as he deplaned four years ago after the long, arduous trip back from Iraq. He can still remember seeing his daughter Marisol, then four and one half, struggling to hold up the sign, her shining face beaming, outstretched arms and then the hugs and tickles and the tears.

It’s hard to believe it’s been four years since Parkland resident Sergeant First Class Miguel Figueroa, 203rd Military Intelligence Battalion, a reserve unit, returned from his tour of duty in Iraq. Still, he remembers it like yesterday. Based near Baghdad International Airport, sanitary conditions were somewhat more tolerable than many of the other units’ locations. “We had improvised potties, army issued cots and took pillows from the airplane for comfort.” He remembers distinctly the unusually dirty odor he lived with for eight long months as a fetid mix between “garbage, human waste and oil. There was oil and garbage in the streets everywhere,” he said. “I’ve never smelled anything like it. The EPA would have had a field day.”

Amidst the rank odor and the unbearable 130-degree dry heat, the men were challenged to find creative solutions to their discomforts every day. Huge flies reigned supreme. “We would sit down in the mess hall to eat,” recalls Miguel, “and flies would pop out of nowhere. Men would be screaming like idiots, and cursing at the flies. Mosquito nets were a staple at night or else you’d be eaten alive. You had to literally turn your head from side to side every ten minutes or your pillow, if you were lucky enough to have one, would be soaked from sweat. Some of the guys were very creative, and knew how to do things. We improvised a shower with camper bags and later, one of the guys fixed a 600-pound generator we found, so we had air conditioning. For recreation we even played volleyball in a pool in one of Saddam’s abandoned palaces. We put some water in, stood knee deep, cooled off and played. We did what we could to get by.”

Fortunately, the memories of Iraq are of an earlier time in the war when, he says, “the conditions were like night and day. When I initially went

over, the Iraqis were first learning how to blow things up, their weapons were rudimentary and casualties were low. Now, their weaponry has vastly improved and people are, unfortunately, dying everywhere.” Miguel strongly believes, “things are just getting worse, something needs to change with the war, something needs to be done.”

His reserve unit, whose mission was to acquire intelligence on Iraqi weaponry, was activated in March 2003 throwing his peaceful world with his wife of 17 years, Evelyn, and their daughter Marisol, now nine years old, into turmoil. He and his family had just moved to idyllic Parkland a few months earlier from New York and were expecting Miguel to settle comfortably into his position with the government and for Evelyn to enjoy setting up their new home. Then the call came for Miguel to report to duty. Things took a turn for the worse when Miguel was in a car accident just two days before he was scheduled to leave for Iraq. The car was totaled and he left Evelyn with the stress of having to buy a car and the financial responsibility of running a home. But Evelyn rose to the occasion, believing the eight months her husband was gone made her a stronger person and encouraged her to seek out new friendships on her own. Evelyn says, “God provided for everything that I needed.” Today, the friends and neighbors that lent her and her family support during that difficult time, are still her closest friends today. Evelyn jokes that she became so independent while Miguel was away that it took her a few months before she got comfortable with his doing the family finances again.





Visiting a Muslim orphanage was one of Miguel's unit's last missions and one of the most humbling. The soldiers surprised the children with candy, toys, and food and the young girls sang beautifully for them in Arabic. They took photos with the kids. "They were so happy just to see people," says Miguel. The next morning they loaded up their trucks and went to a tiny village which was Iraq's version of the slums. Poverty and malnutrition was evident everywhere. "People slept on top of cardboard with tires to hold their structures up. We gave out MRE's (meals ready to eat) and whatever leftovers we didn't need. The locals didn't trust us and couldn't believe that Americans would want to give them anything. So we just put down the food and left."

"It's not until you experience something like this war first-hand," says Miguel pensively, "that you truly know what it means to appreciate what you have. You realize life is too short, your family is precious and you've got to make the most of every day you have here."

Today, Miguel is a little more relaxed and secure about his future. "When you first get back you think the world is going to wait for you, but then you realize, life has gone on and you have to catch up." He's still working for the government as a supervisor but he and Evelyn have just started a new business venture, a document scanning company called, appropriately, M.E.M (Miguel, Evelyn, Marisol) Scanning Services. They can scan any personal document to a digital format, and put it on a CD, which holds about 20,000 documents. Miguel says their services will appeal to attorneys, doctors, publishers; anyone that keeps a lot of paperwork and needs to free up cabinet space.

Now retired from the reserves with twenty years of service in his pocket, there is no chance of ever being deployed back to Iraq. Miguel keeps in touch with some of the men from his unit by email; some have already gone back for a second tour. But at this time in his life Miguel is happy to be sharing the new business venture with his wife. It keeps him close to home, amongst family and friends, where he plans to be for a very long time.



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