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## **This Easter brings peace, not violence, for Guard unit**

Monday, March 28, 2005

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MCNABB — Outrage over lack of armor for U.S. troops in Iraq led to action that saved lives last summer.

That's the word from Spc. John McKirgan, a McNabb soldier who ventured out in Baghdad on 12-hour patrols, five days on and five days off, for much of the past year. Part of the time, he worked as a gunner on trucks without thick armor and, after the call for more armor, he survived a car bomb explosion that destroyed his "up-armored" Humvee 1025.

McKirgan, who returned to northern Illinois along with other members of the Galva-based National Guard battery this month, opened up his laptop computer filled with digital photos of what some of the insurgents' explosive devices can do to armored and non-armored vehicles.

"That's what's left of my truck," he said, showing a picture of a burned out, broken down shell of a Humvee military vehicle.

But "left of the truck" definitely was the most important part of the image.

The armor plates on the side of the vehicle remained intact, as did most of an octagonal nest of thinner armor plates around the gunner's turret on top of the patrol truck. Largely because of the armor, McKirgan suffered only a minor injury. His sergeant's eardrum burst.

McKirgan said the armor around the turret probably saved his life.

And while the lack of armor for the sides of the military Humvees received much of the negative publicity and a confrontation of Dick Cheney by soldiers in Iraq last year, the lack of a proper shield for the gunner (other than Kevlar) also was an issue.

McKirgan and troops in his platoon got shot at fairly often and found unexploded, hidden explosive devices almost daily, in craters, wrecked cars and even in hollowed-out logs. He said if his part of the truck would have been armored in December the way it was last April, he probably wouldn't have come home from Iraq in good shape.

In December, his truck "got blown up" when a car filled with six 155-millimeter shells was detonated as his team was passing 20 feet away. He said only three of the 155 mm shells exploded. He said he and his buddies survived partly by "luck." He credits much of his good fortune to the gunnery turret armor, or gypsy rack.

"When I was over there at the beginning, gunners didn't have this luxury," he said, mentioning that National Guard gunners who are being activated should make sure they have the racks on their vehicles. "If it wasn't for that gypsy rack, I would not be here. If the gypsy rack wasn't there, shrapnel would have taken my head off."

He says he "got one of the easiest Purple Hearts in history." He broke his big toe in the explosion.

The McNabb 25-year-old was one of 25 in the Galva unit to receive a Purple Heart. One of the sergeants received three. A former Tiskilwa resident, Jeremy Wrotny, received one also, as did badly wounded former Wyanet resident Dustin Hill. SSG Daniel Quimby of Henry received less serious burns to his hands while trying to help Hill last fall, according to Spc. Dave Ashbeck of Henry.

Ashbeck and McKirgan both said the trucks they were using just one year ago had wooden pickup boxes and slight protection from sandbags in the boxes. McKirgan said the sandbags couldn't stop many bullets or much of the shrapnel. He said one round went through the truck box and wounded one of his buddies in the leg. The lack of armor bothered most of the members of the unit.

"There was a lot of frustration due to the fact that we couldn't get it," Ashbeck said.

Ashbeck, who usually drove the unit commander around to see what was going on in the zones within the unit's jurisdiction, said members of the unit occasionally drove to camps up to 30 minutes away to borrow armor. Before the armor kits started arriving from the states, the unit had gone around and asked for armor from units that weren't using it.

When his unit and several others were attacked by organized insurgents last Easter, most of the attacks came from soldiers with small-caliber weapons. Since then, the insurgents learned they cannot stand and fight the Americans. Instead, they set explosive devices, either with remote detonators or washing machine timer knobs, and then hide, McKirgan said. Or, a suicide bomber sometimes receives payment (for his family) to carry out an assignment, driving alongside American soldiers and detonating the car he is driving.

The most fierce battles occurred last Easter, when McKirgan and others on his team received the Army Commendation Medal for meritorious achievement. He finds it hard to remember all the things that happened that day.

First, his team and four other trucks were ambushed on a heavily traveled road between Baghdad and the airport. The team kept moving because they didn't know how many people were firing guns and rocket-propelled grenades at them. Soon, they found a large crater with an additional explosive device hidden inside it, traced a detonator cord to disarm the device and withstood mortar fire at the time.

In addition to defeating two enemy ambushes, the group protected a group of Italian civilians and also rescued a fuel convoy that was under attack. For several hours, the unit provided cover fire while the drivers and repair crews were working to get the convoy moving again and while medics were evacuating the wounded.

After helping to escort the convoy and soldiers back into camp, McKirgan and the others on his team obtained more ammunition and went back out to try to find the insurgents.

He said they could not locate their attackers, but "we could find where they were sitting in the reeds and grasses." The insurgents apparently left and carried their dead away. He said they stayed out on patrol until 2 a.m. because they had heard one of the insurgent armies was going to attack the camp.

It was one of the few times when his platoon was actually engaged in a firefight.

He said he doesn't think people in the states understand exactly what the troops are going through and what they are accomplishing.

He said he became accustomed to his job as a gunner, going on patrol, providing first aid and, on occasion, gleefully watching Explosive Ordnance Disposal experts harmlessly and loudly detonate explosives.

Although he gets a kick out of watching his video of the EOD detonations, he said if he were a parent, "I wouldn't want my kids to be there right now."

Despite the dangers, he says the United States is following the right path in Iraq. He also said the soldiers are "over there trying to do the right thing. I feel we should do it. Nobody else is going to. If they're trying to shoot us now, I'd hate to see what would happen if the soldiers were not there."

Ashbeck says news reports skew the reality of what's going on in Iraq. The soldiers have laptop computers and access to media reports and online reports while in Iraq, and it seemed to Ashbeck that at least nine out of 10 news reports focused on or included who was killed that day.

He said a unit attached to his rebuilt a school that was falling down. He said soldiers in his unit asked their families to send school supplies to them, and then they could provide school supplies for the children. In

addition, his unit rebuilt several water treatment facilities and provided security for construction crews, and during its last mission, his unit set up an Iraqi police station.

“There’s not too much (in the news) about the progress that’s going on over there,” Ashbeck said.

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