

Local News

SBCC-trained diver plunges into unusual mission in Iraq

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By NORA K. WALLACE

NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER



Santa Barbara City College's marine diving technologies program isn't set up to train people for desert warfare, but for one gung-ho graduate that's exactly what it did.

On an April day in Iraq, Specialist Emmet Cullen's unit was unwilling to wait for military divers to come to check out a weapons cache reportedly buried in the bed of the Tigris River near Mosul. With his SBCC training, Spc. Cullen volunteered to enter the murky water. After checking out the current, temperature and depth of the river, and with nothing more than

his camouflage pants and T-shirt, he plunged into the Tigris.

"It was beyond the call of duty," said Spc. Cullen's buddy, Henry Babcock, a Ventura resident who studied at SBCC with him. "Diving is not part of his call of duty at all. There was a high risk factor. He's so gung-ho. He free-dove with no equipment."

Photographs taken that day show the young soldier with boxes of ammunition, as well as tubes used for rocket-propelled grenades, that he pulled out of the Iraqi river.

Diving is far removed from what he's been doing since joining the Army after Sept. 11. Instead of spending his time underwater, the young Army specialist is a sniper with the 1st Brigade, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, which is part of the 25th Infantry Division from Fort Lewis, Wash. His Army

hitch ends in 2007. Gone since last fall, he won't be on U.S. soil again until October.

His actions during the volunteer mission have him on track to earn an Army Commendation Medal, said Mr. Babcock, who is not in the military. The soldier's commander is recommending him for the medal.

Mr. Babcock, who corresponds with his diving pal via e-mail, would also like to see the specialist pinned with the Army's Soldier's Medal, an honor of higher degree awarded for those distinguishing themselves by heroism outside of actual combat.



"I recognize the extra danger involved in an underwater operation," Mr. Babcock said. "He keeps talking like it's no big deal."

But the weapon recovery wasn't like jumping into the Pacific Ocean for some scuba diving.

"After going down for the sunken ammo about 15 times, I began growing quite cold and shaking," recalled Spc. Cullen via an e-mail from Iraq. "As I had no goggles, I just opened my eyes underwater and looked around for the shiny ammo cans. Staying calm helped conserve air to look around underwater."

A fellow soldier pulled him ashore at one point via a rope tied around his belt, but the rancid water made him vomit and gag before he could go back under for more of the weapons, he said.



"At the SBCC marine diving technology course we trained in cold water, and learned to be level-headed under pressure while underwater," remembered Spc. Cullen, who played water polo for San Marcos High School. "During and after my schooling, I worked, diving commercially for a bit, in currents and poor visibility conditions. When the opportunity arose to use some of the skills I had acquired, I jumped at the chance."

A typical day in Iraq involves much different work, said the soldier. He and members of his unit "roll out" in the area, gathering intelligence about any insurgent activity, he said. The soldiers sometimes check out deadly "IEDs," or improvised explosive devices.

"From time to time my sniper section takes up OPs (operations) in the city to watch for enemy activity, such as people shooting mortars, or planting IEDs," said Spc. Cullen. "Sometimes we



escort Civilian Affairs to outlying towns in the area. We try to make it to the gym in the course of the day. And if we have time, check our e-mail to see how the family is."

The soldier's mother, Merced resident Aleta Morris, was caught off guard when her only son joined the military. Though she's not a "military fan," Ms. Morris said she came to realize her son and the Army were a match.

"He loves the discipline," she explained. "He loves being part of team. He loves getting up at 6 a.m. and running for miles and being challenged."

Learning from his tough water polo training during high school, her son excels when pushed, she said. He wasn't a perfect kid, she said, and was "always on the verge of trouble" when in school. She sees a change since he joined the Army.

"Emmet has a sense he's seeing history happening," she said. "He's meeting people. He has a real sense of adventure over there. It seems like he's matured a lot since he's been over there."

During a two-week visit home in February, she said she was reassured that her son was well.

"I was worried about what the war was going to do to his psyche, if it would break his spirit or he'd have a mental breakdown," Ms. Morris admitted. "He's like a puppy. He's really got a kind heart inside. I was worried about if he was really understanding if he had to kill someone and what it would be doing to him."

After seeing her son in February, she said he showed no "dark side" from his experiences.

Though the diving adventure turned out safely, Spc. Cullen is finding himself in dangerous situations almost daily. In the last few weeks, a suicide bomber rammed into the squad's vehicle, but the bomb went off prematurely and instead of killing any GIs just showered the area with the assailant's remains.

Aside from his regular patrol or sniper duties, Spc. Cullen's unit helped set up a polling place in Iraq during the January elections. A number of his interactions with locals have been friendly, he said. Children swamp the soldiers, asking for candy and soccer balls, he said.

"Sometimes it feels very good to visit these friendly towns," he said of outside areas, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan. "People come out to shake your hand, offer food, ask your name. It reminds me of how our troops must have felt in newly liberated France. Or how I imagine they would have felt."

Still, it's a war zone, and he's always aware of the potential for injury or death. His past platoon master sergeant was killed, and he and other soldiers found that hard to deal with. And the danger is never very far away.

"Though attacks slow down from time to time, the threat of being hit by an IED is always there, and always random," he said. "Sometimes we get lucky and spot the bombs early. Sometimes you get hit and everything is all right. Unfortunately from time to time people are hit and killed."

It is sometimes easy, he said, to get lulled into a false sense of security when attacks are infrequent.

"But the truth is that you never know when you will get hit or what will come of it, only that it is likely to happen."

e-mail: nwallace@newspress.com

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMMET CULLEN

Army Spc. Emmet Cullen emerges from the murky water of the Tigris River with part of a weapons cache that was submerged near Mosul in northern Iraq.

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

On this Memorial Day, Spc. Emmet Cullen is one of the dozens of men and women from the Central Coast deployed to military hot spots like Iraq and Afghanistan. Do you have a loved one serving in Iraq or Afghanistan? Do you expect to be deployed sometime this year? Have you already served a tour in one of the world's current hot spots? Call reporter Nora K. Wallace at 736-1070 or 564-5162, or e-mail nwallace@newspress.com.