

Good to be home from Iraq

By Michaela Kennedy

Specialist Mark Brasil of Rhode Island National Guard's 169th Military Police Company returned home safely last week from a 10-month deployment to Iraq. Family members greeted him with hugs, laughter and a few tears when he stepped off the plane.

Brasil is still smiling, relieved to be home. He is satisfied to know that his part in a goodwill tour affected lives across the seas in a positive way. An event as simple as a soccer game brought conflicting groups together, the soldier said.

The company to which Brasil was assigned traveled in the northern part of Iraq, near the Syrian border. As military police, the company set up traffic control points, according to Brasil. Just to the right of the train tracks in one area, three soccer fields attracted children to play. "As soon as one guy started passing out candy, suddenly you'd have 40 to 50 kids surrounding us," Brasil said. "They'd do anything, sing, dance. The kids had no fear of us."

A soldier throwing a soccer ball into a field where children kicked an old can was enough to strike up instant camaraderie, according to Brasil. Balls were coveted items. Brasil saw many given out. A sporting goods company sent a box of flattened balls, with an air pump, an example of many donations arriving from a variety of sources. Some soldiers, if they had a chance, would go to the PX on base and buy soccer balls to hand out.

Through the children the sol-



Mark Brasil is happy to be home after a 10-month deployment to Iraq. Photo by Michaela Kennedy

diers found a connection to the parents. "They were a breaking point to get the parents over and win their confidence," Brasil said.

Brasil and his fellow soldiers focused on ways to encourage communities, and factions within communities, together. While Brasil was there, the soldiers organized a soccer match between the Iraqi Police and the Iraqi Army, the first social event ever held with the competitive groups. After the match, the Iraqi police and soldiers sat down to dinner with the Americans. "These were the things we did to try to get communities to get along," he explained. Despite language and political barriers, Brasil experienced firsthand the mending of communities.

Brasil's eyes darted to the horizon when he remembered mili-

tary maneuvers. Danger was ever present, he emphasized, "and we never forgot it." As gunner, his job was to spot suspicious activity on the streets. Every time the soldiers went down a new road, they never knew what to expect. "You never knew if there was an I.E.D. (improvised explosive device) somewhere," he said.

Brasil will soon return to his job as a police officer at the University of Rhode Island, and complete his National Guard service in October. He breathes deep, and says he is looking forward to Christmas. "My niece Haley wrote the nicest letter to me," he recalled. In class around Christmastime she wrote that she wished her Uncle Mark was here. She told him she missed him, and that meant a lot to him.


Brasil admitted that he came back from deployment a little more philosophical, a little more cautious. Although his mother passed on a few years ago, her presence lingers deep in his heart. "Love everyone like it's your last day," Brasil said.



Act of love

Gaelyn Dwyer got her haircut at Anita Haircut for Locks of Love, a charity who makes wigs for children suffering from hair loss because of a medical diagnosis.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten



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