

## **Books, not bombs, for Iraq**

**By Nicholas A. Basbanes**

BAGHDAD: American troops assigned to Camp Anaconda, 42 miles north of Baghdad in the Iraqi desert, call the sprawling encampment Mortaritaville — a place, they wryly say, where every hour is happy hour.

On the evening I arrived aboard an Air Force C-17, a smattering of shells lobbed from 'outside the wire' kept my aircraft idling on the outer tarmac for half an hour, our helmets and flak jackets in place until the all-clear sounded.

The next day, my escort on what was the unlikeliest of bibliophilic adventures, Lt.-Col. Brian C. McNerney, took me to a recreation centre in which a new library was about to open its doors to eager readers. The freshly installed wooden shelves had been stocked through the efforts of octogenarian Army veterans in the United States, the same men who 61 years earlier had helped organise the first libraries to be established in Germany after the cessation of hostilities in the Second World War — an interesting circumstance for a writer who has said on more than one occasion that he will go anywhere in pursuit of a good book story.

A few weeks earlier, about 3,000 volumes had been shipped out of Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, with 7,000 more following shortly thereafter. The two loads made up the core collection of a library intended for use by the 25,000 service personnel and civilian workers stationed at Camp Anaconda, and later, when they leave, by Iraqis in the nearby city of Balad, who have expressed a keen interest in acquiring whatever reading material is available to them.

I am a collector of details like this, as my five books about books readily attest. That's why McNerney, public affairs officer for the 3rd Corps Support Command, sent me an e-mail in February telling me about the new 'library initiative' he had just organised in the combat zone. He extended what must have been a semi-serious invitation to attend the dedication ceremony.

To the shock of everyone, I accepted, on one condition. Would the Army help me visit Ur, the Sumerian city in lower Mesopotamia? Yes, came the answer.

But before there could be any magical trips to archaeological sites, there was the new library to consecrate. A career Army officer with a master's in English from Michigan State University, McNerney had mentioned the idea last year to a group of Second World War veterans from the 65th and 71st Infantry divisions, who in 1946 had set up what today is the municipal library in Passau, Germany.

Point man for the effort was Robert Patton, an 84-year-old resident of Chapel Hill, who was among the first American soldiers to liberate the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria in 1945.

"My imagination went out of control," Patton told me. "I felt that regardless of whatever political views anyone had about the war in Iraq, books give all of us common ground."

Patton mobilised dozens of volunteers, including staffers at the Chapel Hill Public Library and Boy Scouts from Troop 39, who boxed books and loaded them onto trucks for transfer to Pope Air Force Base and then to Iraq.

The 10,000 volumes they gathered included fiction and nonfiction, 'a pretty solid critical mass of material to get us started', McNerney said as he walked me through the acquisitions. The first book to be signed out? Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, borrowed by Pfc. Stephanie Richardson, who said she had seen the movie and was eager to read the original.

McNerney laughed when I suggested that he might be a modern-day Don Quixote embarked on a book mission that others might find fanciful in the extreme. But he agrees with the observation I made at the dedication ceremony — that where there are books, there is always hope.—Dawn/The Los Angeles Times News Service