

## Bibliophiles inside the wire

At an Iraq camp nicknamed Mortaritaville, American warriors young and old install a library near book lovers' sacred ground.

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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 center 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 organize the first libraries to be established in Germany after the cessation of hostilities in World War II — 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 organized 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 where the Old Testament tells us the prophet Abraham was born, where writing as we know it began to take shape about 5,000 years ago, where humanity's first literary text, the "Epic of Gilgamesh," may have been composed, and where some of the world's first libraries were located? Yes, came the answer.

But before there could be any magical trips to archeological 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 World War II 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, N.C., 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 mobilized 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.

Until McNerney's library became operational, there was no library on the Balad base at all. There were two swimming pools, a gym, a movie theater and dozens of computer terminals with high-speed access to the Internet, but no place for books. McNerney said the omission was partly because of priorities young people have today for their leisure activities but also because of uncertainty over the time the Americans would remain in Iraq.

"Nobody knows how long this base is supposed to exist, so there were infrastructure issues," he told me. "But when we leave, all of these books will go over to the Iraqis, and some well before that."

In fact, phase two of the project, which will be directed by the son of a veteran of the 71st Division in Virginia, will send books to Balad that have specific appeal to Iraqis: richly visual children's books, for instance, or titles that bridge language barriers, or professional monographs such as medical texts, for which there is an immediate need.

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.

The next morning, we left Balad aboard a C-23 Sherpa bound for Tallil air base to the south. Within two hours of landing, I was walking about the ruins of Ur with Dhief Muhsen, a third-generation Iraqi caretaker whose grandfather helped excavate the site in the 1930s. He pointed out some bricks in the royal tombs, many of them bearing tracings of cuneiform characters. He said we were standing on ground that harbors thousands of buried artifacts, many of them, he is certain, bearing texts of extraordinary cultural importance.

Just 11 days later, Italian archeologists would report stumbling across "a trove of ancient stone tablets from the fabled civilization of Ur," dating from the 3rd millennium BC. "The place where the tablets were found, not far from the surface, leads one to suppose they contain information from a library," one scholar said. "There could be thousands of them down there."