The New Ernie Pyles: Sgtlizzie and 67cshdocs

On Internet Blogs, Soldiers in Iraq Offer Up Inside Story on the War

By Jonathan Finer

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, August 12, 2005; Page A01

BAGHDAD -- There were no reporters riding shotgun on the highway north of Baghdad when a roadside bomb sent Sgt. Elizabeth Le Bel's Humvee lurching into a concrete barrier. The Army released a three-sentence statement about the incident in which her driver, a fellow soldier, was killed. Most news stories that day noted it briefly.

But a vivid account of the attack appeared on the Internet within hours of the Dec. 4 crash. Unable to sleep after arriving at the hospital, Le Bel hobbled to a computer and typed 1,000 words of what she called "my little war story" into her Web log, or blog, titled "Life in this Girl's Army," at http://www.sgtlizzie.blogspot.com/.

"I started to scream bloody murder, and one of the other females on the convoy came over, grabbed my hand and started to calm me down. She held onto me, allowing me to place my leg on her shoulder as it was hanging free," Le Bel wrote. "I thought that my face had been blown off, so I made the remark that I wouldn't be pretty again LOL. Of course the medics all rushed with reassurance which was quite amusing as I know what I look like now and I don't even want to think about what I looked like then."

Since the 1850s, when a London Times reporter was sent to chronicle the Crimean War, journalists have generally provided the most immediate first-hand depictions of major conflicts. But in Iraq, service members themselves are delivering real-time dispatches -- in their own words -- often to an audience of thousands through postings to their blogs.

"I was able to jot a few lines in every day, and it just grew from there," Le Bel, 24, of Haverhill, Mass., said in an e-mail. Her Web site has received about 45,000 hits since she started it a year ago.
Web site has received about 45,000 hits since she started it a year ago.

At least 200 active-duty soldiers currently keep blogs. Only about a dozen blogs were in existence two years ago when the U.S. invaded Iraq, according to "The Mudville Gazette" (http://www.mudvillegazette.com/), a clearinghouse of information on military blogging administered by an Army veteran who goes by the screen name Greyhawk.

Written in the casual, sometimes profane language of the barracks, the entries give readers an unfiltered perspective on combat largely unavailable elsewhere. But they are also drawing new scrutiny and regulation from commanders concerned they could compromise security.

In April, Lt. Gen. John R. Vines, the top tactical commander in Iraq, published the military's first policy memorandum on Web sites maintained by soldiers, requiring that all blogs maintained by service members in Iraq be registered. The policy also barred bloggers from publishing classified information, revealing the names of service members killed or wounded before their families could be notified, and providing accounts of incidents still under investigation.

"We don't have a problem with most of what they write, but we don't want to give away the farm," said Lt. Col. Steven Boylan, a military spokesman in Baghdad, who said such guidelines are nearly identical to those required of news organizations that cover the military.

Enforcement of the policy was left to the discretion of unit commanders. In late July, Arizona National Guard Spec. Leonard Clark became the first soldier found to have violated the new policy. He was fined $1,640 and demoted to private first class for posting what the military said was classified material on his blog.

His site has since been shut down, although much of the content has been posted elsewhere on the Internet. He did not return e-mail messages seeking comment.

His postings -- which included long entries detailing attacks against American patrols and convoys -- described his company's captain as "a glory seeker" and the battalion sergeant major as "an inhuman monster." In at least one entry, Clark, who has run for political office in Arizona several times and was widely expected to run for Senate in 2006, suggested that his fellow soldiers were becoming opposed to the U.S. mission in Iraq.

"A growing number of men here are starting to wonder why we should continue to risk our lives for this whole mess when we know that the government will probably pull out of here," he wrote on April 11.

Other soldiers have said they decided to take down their Web sites after warnings from superiors. In December, after an explosion in a soldiers' mess hall near the northern city of Mosul killed 22 people, including 14 U.S. soldiers, Maj. Michael Cohen, the doctor on duty at the nearest medical facility, wrote about the carnage on his blog, http://www.67cshdocs.com/.
"As I stepped outside, I couldn't believe what was going on. There had to be at least 30 patients on the ground waiting for medical care. We divided and conquered, going from patient to patient trying to determine who had the worst wounds and who needed to be treated first," he wrote. "We identified several patients with femur fractures as well as two humerus fractures. We also had two patients who were paralyzed from the waist [sic] down, another with some bleeding in the brain, and two more with eye injuries."

Soon after, however, he posted this message:

"Levels above me have ordered me to shut down this website. They cite that the information contained in these pages violates several Army Regulations. I have made a decision to turn off the site."

At least one former military blogger, however, is channeling the publicity his blog earned in Iraq into a new career. Colby Buzzell, a soldier who during his 12-month tour of duty started a blog called "My War" (http://www.cbftw.blogspot.com/, which stands for his initials plus an antiwar epithet), was eight months into his deployment when he read a magazine article about blogs and decided to give it a try. Within weeks, he said, his blog was receiving thousands of hits a day, and literary agents began peddling their services.

"It all happened at an alarming rate, basically overnight, after I wrote about a firefight. I have no idea how the heck people found out about it, they just did," said Buzzell, who got out of the military six months ago.

His book about his time in Iraq comes out in October. He has also written two articles for Esquire magazine. Now 29 and living in Los Angeles, he called blogging from the war zone "therapeutic."

"You go out on a mission or patrol, come back and sit down at a computer, and it was kind of a release," he said in a telephone interview. "I wasn't writing for a book deal, I was writing for myself. It was a way to deal with the madness and made the days go by a little faster."

Soldiers' Web sites vary from multimedia presentations of digital photos and videos to simple text written in journal form. Many bloggers say they do it to keep friends and family up to date or to counter what they consider the biases of the mainstream media.

Many entries are deeply personal. Battered but still able to perform her duties, Le Bel returned to her unit a few days after the roadside bomb attack. She attended the memorial service for her driver, whom she never named, and shared her thoughts with the readers in a Dec. 7 posting:

"I am now deathly afraid of the nightmares I have already seen bits and pieces of. I can see them in my mind when I close my eyes, I see the truck slamming into the wall and it scares me all over again. Why did I walk away from a wreck that killed a comrade and friend?"