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Lt. Kurt's special force

Area man helps reverse Haditha fortune, image

By MATTHEW C. ARMSTRONG
Special to The Winchester Star

HADITHA, Iraq — A sandstorm stops everything, like an old fashioned camera. It freezes the actions of soldiers, casts a sepia shroud over Al Taqaddum Air Force base, piles rails of dusts in the cracked corners of bunkhouses, all the missions beached, all the choppers canceled, and there's no way you take a convoy.

"Why not?" I ask my public affairs officer.

This is the first of a multi-day series on two Winchester-area natives, one who is serving with U.S. Special Operations Forces in Iraq and the other, a childhood friend, who visited the lieutenant and wrote about their experiences in the desert.

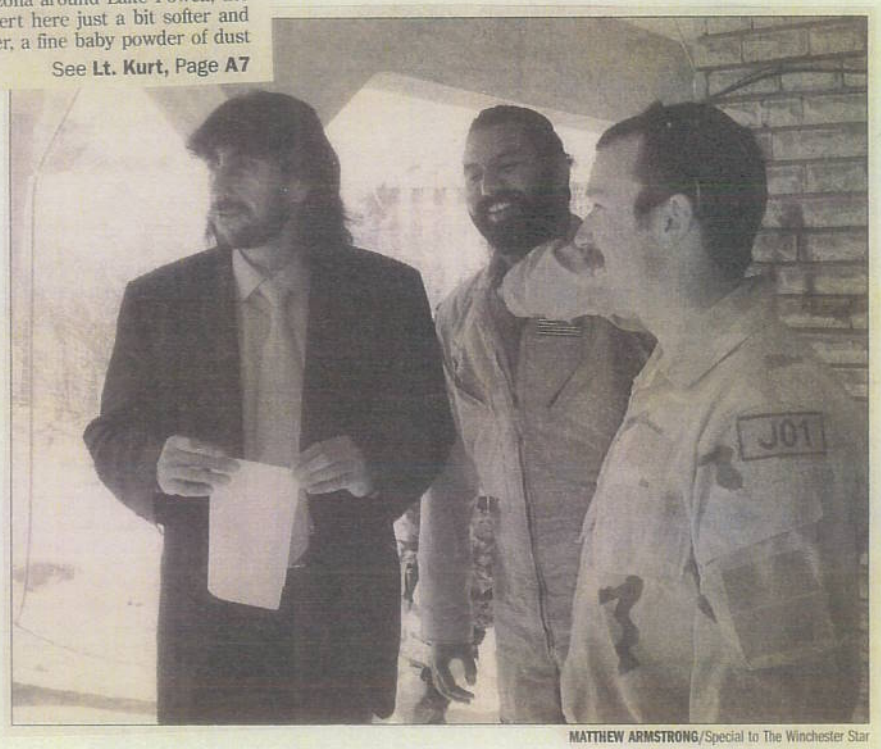
I want to move. I want to get to Haditha. But I'm greeted with a grimace I should've anticipated. You don't drive in Iraq unless you have to. You just don't.

So I wait. I blow my nose repeatedly. My PAO and I meet up with another soldier and the three of us tell stories for three days. We watch movies about warriors and assassins. We watch the sand settle at night, the stars pricking through for a few hours, and then come the strange clouds with the sun and the heat as we pack up our duffels and head down to the hangars, only to be told that it's back to the bunks, boys.

"Hurry up and wait," my PAO says. "That's the story of the military."

But then we get a break, an azure day over the Al-Jazira desert. Our Chinook (helicopter) lands. We fly over the Euphrates River toward Haditha, the landscape below much like the area of Arizona around Lake Powell, the desert here just a bit softer and drier, a fine baby powder of dust

See **Lt. Kurt**, Page **A7**



MATTHEW ARMSTRONG/Special to The Winchester Star

The special operation of Lt. Kurt

Lt. Kurt

from **Page A1**

that can find its way into anything.

The chopper touches down at Al Asad (Airfield), still south of Haditha where I plan to meet Winchester's own, Lt. Kurt M. (his last name won't be revealed to protect from Web searches by insurgents), but Lt. Kurt and his men improvise. Unlike a lot of the military, they have the ability to do so, to negotiate a sandstorm. They drive to Al Asad to pick us up.

It's been a long time since we've seen each other. I hug my old high school classmate. I make a joke about his bristly mustache. He makes a joke about the disproportion between the hair on my face and the hair on my head.

"You're in the back," he says, as we walk out toward a Humvee named after a warrior from a movie I watched during the sandstorm.

"Are we driving?"

"You scared?"

"Should I be?"

"No," he says. "That's part of the story here."

I smile, try to seem like one of the boys, these thick lighthearted men of Lt. Kurt M.'s special operations platoon. I put on my Kevlar vest and helmet and jump in the back.

"Complacency Kills" says a spray-painted sign on the edge of the base.

We leave the world of the wire, the concertina and the cement barriers. We're on the road, listening to music. We approach a village, oncoming traffic pulling over to the shoulder as we drive up the middle, children running in the cinders, waving and smiling, their parents more placid, perhaps skeptical, arms akimbo.

There are fruit stands along this road, date palm and eucalyptus. Inside the well-armored vehicle there's a seriousness in spite of the music, a focus. Not a word is spoken. Perhaps it's this mood that delivers us safely to the city of Haditha. Perhaps it's this sense of purpose that has changed everything here in Al Anbar, what was once one of the most dangerous areas in Iraq.

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It's hard to rehabilitate certain names and places, certain words. It's hard to give back the mystery and complexity dramatic events conceal.

Think Abu Ghraib. Think My Lai (massacre that took place March 16, 1968, in Vietnam). Think Haditha.

Five days before I arrived, a story came down the wire. The court martial of Marine Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich was postponed. According to Marine prosecutor Nicholas Gannon, there is unaired footage from a CBS interview with Wuterich in which he comes clean about the Haditha massacre. In this footage, Gannon claims that Wuterich confesses to ordering his men to "shoot first and ask questions later."

The story of that day has been told repeatedly. After an IED (improvised explosive device) exploded, killing a lance corporal, members of the Third Battalion, First Marine Regiment, responded by raiding the city of Haditha, killing over a dozen Iraqis, including a 3-year-old child and an old man in a wheelchair. At the time of the attack, November 2005, Haditha, like much of Iraq, was in a state of chaos. As late as May 2006, there were an average of 144 attacks a day in the Al Anbar region. Now, nearly two years later, there are 155 attacks a month.

Things have changed.

Many of the people in Haditha credit Lt. Kurt and his Special Operations Force for this reversal of fortune. During my first night in the city, I meet with Capt. Al'A Khalaf Hrat. Al'A is the leader of the Iraqi Special Weapons and Tactics Team Lt. Kurt and his men created and trained. He is tall and thin with a trimmed beard and a mullet. He wears a brown pin-striped suit and a bronze tie.

"We have sunset and sunrise," he says. "In a normal day they used to kill my people and throw their dead bodies in the streets to send a message. They take the people of Haditha to the soccer field across the street from the police station to send a message. They make people watch as they cut off their heads."

This was the Haditha of 2005, a city of terror, a context of violence so extreme that it's unlikely an outsider could ever fully understand what it was like to be a Marine on that day when that IED went off.

We drive downtown in the middle of the day, an act in itself that used to fraught with imminent peril, the sort of thing you did not do unless you had to, the risk of violence.

But the streets are calm today. As the children run and wave along the path of the convoy, I hear one scream:

"Baby, baby!"

"The Marines used to throw candy," one of the soldiers tells me. "They think if you tell them there's a baby in the family maybe you'll bring back the days of the candy."

The Special Operations Force does a little bit more than throw candy. We thread our way through Jersey-style cement traffic barriers with Arabic graffiti, pass some vacant mud huts, a man in front of his home selling gasoline out of a five-gallon Tupperware drum like it's lemonade.

I step out of the Humvee, look up at dark windows for snipers. I see the soldiers take off their helmets. I take off mine. I walk around. I feel safe. I wonder if this is dangerous, this feeling. I walk inside the police headquarters.

There's a meeting taking place between the Special Operations Force and the Hadithan police. Al'A is there. A Col. Hamid, dressed in green fatigues, epaulettes, and golden patches, presides over the discussion. He sits behind a dark wooden desk, a glass horse mounted at the front, Iraqi music videos muted on the television in the corner, women tossing their hair around a man in an unbuttoned shirt, people expressing themselves freely.

"Salaam (the Arabic word for peace)," we all say.

Lt. Kurt introduced me as a reporter from his hometown, a city, like Haditha, about a hundred or so miles from the nation's capital. Besides the captain and the colonel, there are two Marines present and the mayor as well. The mayor, a former human rights attorney from Baghdad, holds tasseled prayer beads in his hand.

Looking around at this cast of characters, I'm aware that I am — to some extent — on a publicity tour. In an ideal world, I would see Iraq without a net, without an escort, without a translator, without biases built in left and right. I wouldn't know the man I'm embedded with, yet would still have access to him. But that's not the situation here.

My visit to Haditha is plotted, coordinated. My PAO is by my side. He won't be tomorrow when

we go on reconnaissance, but today he does his job. He follows me everywhere, reminding me what I can and cannot say to you. This is standard operating procedure for a press embed.

"Do you want the Americans to stay?" I ask.

"Yes," Al'A says. "We want them to go everywhere in the world and do what they've done here. But maybe they should be half of what they are. Maybe it is time for that."

Al'A is wearing the same brown suit as the night before. All of the Iraqi police are smoking. A small boy named Unis arrives with a tray of chai tea.

"Unis!" all the soldiers shout, like he's Norm from Cheers.

Unis blushes and smiles. The colonel seems momentarily confused by this surge of affection.

"We've had no insurgent attacks since July," the colonel says.

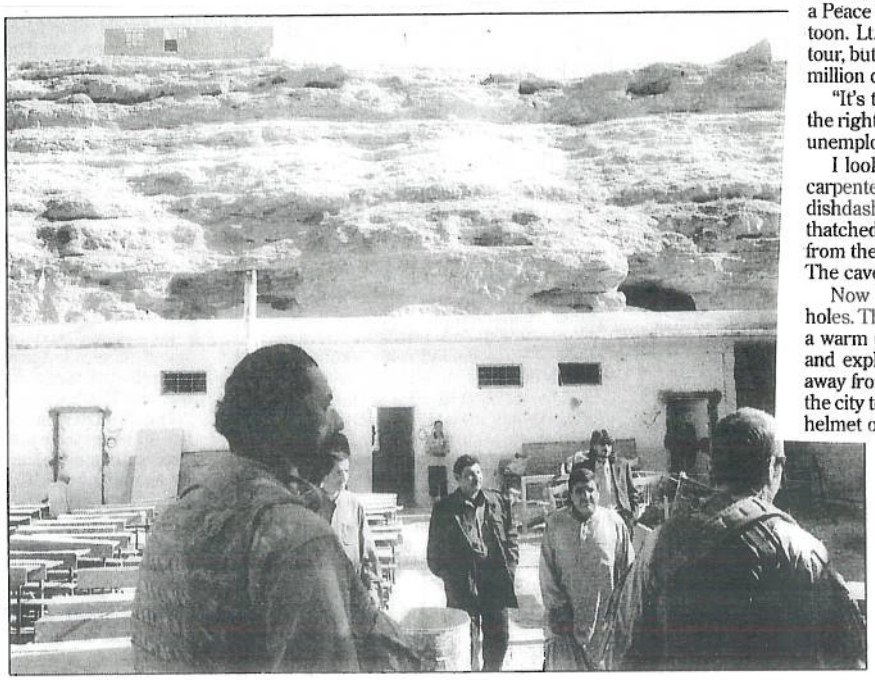
"We've shut down 13 cells," Al'A says. He then refers briefly to a weapons cache that he and his men discovered and destroyed just that week.

"We couldn't have done this without Capt. Kurt."

Kurt is a lieutenant, but I don't try to correct the captain. I love that they call him this, the way it echoes off the Star Trek hero, the fact that we, too, used to call him "Cap'n" back in high school.

Be all this as it may, this meeting is not just back slapping and toasting, smoking and drinking. There was a kidnapping up on Beiji Road, three Iraqi travelers abducted the previous night. No one knows if they're alive. Strategy is discussed. There is a shared desire for greater power, greater freedom of movement, greater jurisdiction. Lt. Kurt and his men, both Iraqi and American, know they're effective. The statistics and the feeling on the street back them up. They want to put their skills to use where they're needed, but there are tribal boundaries to consider, roughly, very roughly similar to our issues with districts, only more fractured, more personal. The Beiji Road area is about 50 kilometers northeast of Haditha. For the time being, Lt. Kurt asks the police to be patient.

"We'll talk," he says.



BELOW: Insurgents hid in this all-girls school, then in the caves behind it when U.S forces bombed it. Reparations handed out by Lt. Kurt's forces are helping to rebuild the school.

The meeting adjourns. There's a "goat grab" in the courtyard, silver shield-sized plates piled with white rice and stewed beans, large bony chunks of meat, a layer of naan (a round flatbread made of white flour) beneath. I dig in with my right hand. The food is good. I watch others lick their fingers and hope our hands are clean.

Our final stop of the day is a short drive away. We are headed to the all-girls school downtown. As we prepare to leave, I speak with the mayor. He still has his prayer beads in his hands. He offers me a "mella," a toffee and caramel candy.

"This school was bombed by the U.S. three years ago," he says. "But we don't blame the U.S. now. The insurgents were cowards. They hid in the schools and mosques. When the school was [illegible]bed they went to the caves."

Sure enough, when we arrive at the school, there is a hive of caves, a porous wall, directly behind the classrooms. Where our children might have a yard with a jungle gym, the Hadithans have caves.

I walk inside the school, a two-story hollow-centered square of rooms, the empty center a playground with a basketball court, all the desks clustered together there so the reconstruction can take place, a project that would be impossible if Lt. Kurt and his men hadn't coordinated reparations, a project that seems more like the work of a Peace Corps team, not a Special Operations platoon. Lt. Kurt is there that day not just to give a tour, but to talk with the workers and hand over 12 million dinar, about 10,000 American dollars.

"It's the third of four payments," he says. "It's the right thing to do, and besides, look: 70 percent unemployment here, and it gives them jobs."

I look. There are painters and plasterers and carpenters, a contractor named Nassam in a gray dishdasha. Several rooms are complete. There is a thatched shelter over the site of the bombing, and from the roof I can see where the insurgents fled. The caves are that close.

Now there are drying clothes in the jagged holes. There is a white cat perched atop a rock. It's a warm spring day. I want to take off my helmet and explore the caves like a tourist. Even here, away from the police station, on top of a roof, with the city teeming beneath me, I feel safe. I leave my helmet on.

MATTHEW C. ARMSTRONG/Special to The Winchester Star

Soldiers from Lt. Kurt M.'s platoon examine their Humvee after it sank in the desert sand during a patrol.

A friend in the desert

'Capt. Al'A' is a leader in the new Iraqi police

By MATTHEW C. ARMSTRONG
Special to The Winchester Star

HADITHA, Iraq — We enter the desert.

One of the soldiers turns on his iPod — "Run Through the Jungle" by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

There are discarded drums and tire treads stuck in the yucca.

Then there's nothing but sand.

"How often do you guys patrol up here?" I ask.

"The places we're going today, we've never been before," says Lt. Kurt M. of Winchester, the leader of the platoon.

This reconnaissance mission is scheduled to take 12 hours, maybe longer. Depending on what we find, we may not return until dawn.

We'll search out seven NAIs (named areas of interest). These may be homes or vehicles, or perhaps nothing more than unidentified sites of movement and light, discrepancies in the intelligence.

This is the final story in a series about two Winchester-area natives, one serving with U.S. Special Operations Forces in Iraq and the other, a childhood friend, who visited the lieutenant and wrote about it.

There are four Humvees in our convoy. We drive for several hours.

The soldiers of Kurt's platoon search a mud brick home on a hill for a cache. They find nothing.

We drive on, see silver glimpses of Lake Qadisyiah to the west. We approach another home.

Our vehicle begins to slow and squeal. We're sunk in the sand, the fine powder that, according to one soldier, turns to "snot" when it's wet.

"I'm stuck," says our driver.

Up ahead, I see the dark windows of the hut, several trucks outside, clothes on a line.

After hearing that the exhaust pipe is stuck in the mud, I violate my orders and step out of the Humvee with the rest of the platoon.

I see a woman in black pass behind the hut. I can see that one of our lead vehicles, up ahead, is also stuck.

Several men now emerge from the home, one raising his hand to his forehead like a salute.

It's a bright day. There's not a cloud in the sky.

Lt. Kurt M. gives an order into his helmet microphone. Several of his men, with their guns raised, begin to walk toward the hut and the men outside.

"Look," says one of our "terps" — code for interpreter.

I turn to my left and, initially blinded by the sun, see only two dark figures. And I'm scared. Our vehicle's going nowhere.

But then I notice what appear to be soft white bushes all around the

See **Captain,** Page **A6**

Captain

from **Page A1**

two figures: sheep. At least a hundred in the herd.

"Hey," one of the soldiers says. "No worries. They're friends of Capt. Al'A."

Our search team has dropped its guns. They are talking with the Iraqis in front of the clothesline.

Out here, in the middle of nowhere, it turns out we have a common friend.

Capt. Al'A Khalaf Hrat has one of the saddest and most triumphant stories I've heard from this war. I sat down to talk with him several times over the course of my visit to Haditha.

During each encounter, he wore the same dark suit, the same bronze tie. Each time, they appeared freshly pressed.

"When the war began, I was a thief," he said.

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In 2003, Al'A, like many Hadithans, was poor. He made his money stealing copper wire and other scrap metals from trash yards.

Now, five years later, his life has changed. He is the captain of an elite Iraqi strike force, handpicked by Lt. Kurt M.'s Special Operations Force.

Al'A has been subjected to rigorous physical and tactical training. He is one of 30 men on the ISWAT.

He now wears a suit and carries a Glock and an AK-47. He has a truck he calls his own.

He has tremendous pride in the people of Haditha.

"Come downtown with me," he says repeatedly. "Come see the suk [market area]. It used to be so small you could fit it into the back of a truck. Now, it's like, it's like . . . .

Al'A's eyes and arms go wide with enthusiasm and linguistic frustration.

"It's like Europe," he says in Arabic. "It's like Paris."

My interpreter laughs. He tells me it's not quite that nice.

But the point is taken. The city has changed.

Several years ago, Haditha was like a ghost town, people afraid to walk outside. Capt. Al'A knows this fear perhaps better than anyone.

"Growing up under Saddam [Hussein] was hell, like a prison. Hush. Hush. Don't curse the Baath party. I couldn't even watch [the cartoon] 'Tom and Jerry.' Five minutes of 'Tom and Jerry,' no more."

After the war began, things got worse.

"I lost eight family members. Three brothers kidnapped and killed. My uncle, who was the police chief, he and his three children were murdered."

It was a horrific time for Hadithans, Al'A tells me. Hundreds of people left the city. He explains the confusion and the fear through the story of an insurgent:

"The man speaks to Americans in public so everyone can see. Fifteen minutes they talk so everyone can see. Then he goes and kills an old innocent man, a barber. What do you think people thought?"

Capt. Al'A is a Jughayfi, what was once a disenfranchised tribe in Haditha. He was born the son of a worker at the local refinery. He witnessed the Iran-Iraq war and the first war with America.

For a long time, like most Iraqis, his hatreds were pure, thoroughly controlled by an oppressive regime and its lockstep media.

"You were not allowed to think," he says. "Everything was military. Even summer vacations, Saddam would take you to the camps to train."

Yet shortly after meeting Lt. Kurt M. and the SOF, Capt. Al'A began to see the war and his history in a new way.

"We have a saying," he says. "Do the good and then throw it into the river. This is the Americans. They have helped us, but they expect nothing back."

His eyes dart. He makes a throwing motion. He sits up straight, two pistols holstered to his chest, his flowing black mullet like a mane, his haircut enough to get him branded a homosexual in some cities, enough to get a man tied and down and branded, according to one of Kurt's men.

But Al'A doesn't care.

"My men and I are not afraid of death," he says.

He makes a motion with his hands, like windshield wipers clearing away the rain.

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We adjourn for dinner, walk into the room next door in what a year ago was an abandoned army outpost riddled with bullet holes. Now there are tasseled couches and television sets, computers with high-speed Internet, peach sheets across the cracked ceiling.

We stand over plates of fresh Iraqi tomatoes and onions, fingers of goat sausage, rotisserie chicken.

Al'A asks Kurt if he misses his home.

"Three years I've been away," Kurt says.

"That's nothing," Al'A says.

Kurt looks him in the eye and nods with humility. With his right hand he removes a drumstick and takes a bite.

"You realize," he says to Al'A, "that we are going home soon. You guys are pretty much on your own."

"Yes," Al'A says.

This is the sobering fact of the month.

The war has been going on for five years. Schools are being rebuilt, power lines have been reinstalled by the SOF. The ISWAT team has been trained and mentored.

Starting in April, the SOF will hand over its work to another platoon, a group of men who will no longer have solo arrest capability.

Haditha, once again, will belong to Hadithans.

We lick our fingers, begin to move toward the door.

"You know the one thing wrong with Americans?" Al'A asks.

"What's that?" Kurt responds.

"You don't know how to say goodbye. You don't say goodbye."

MATTHEW C. ARMSTRONG/Special to The Winchester Star

Capt. Al'A Khalaf Hrat, who works with an elite Iraqi strike force: "We have a saying. Do the good and then throw it into the river. This is the Americans. They have helped us, but they expect nothing back."