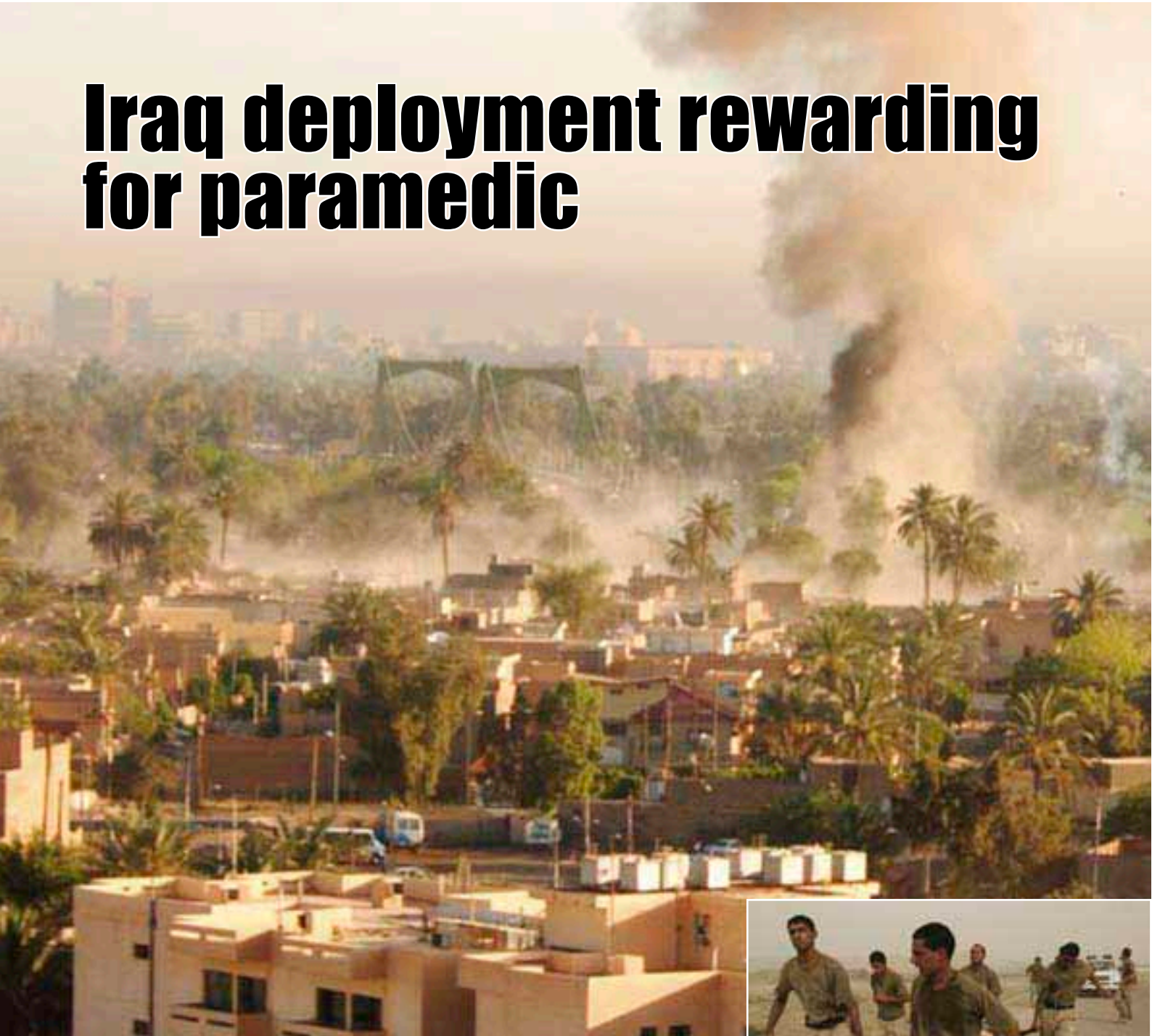


# Iraq deployment rewarding for paramedic



By Daniel Landon

When Sunshine Coast Intensive Care Paramedic Rob Lamb arrived for his first day of work in Iraq, it was not to the ‘hellos’ of colleagues but to a 20,000-foot tactical vertical descent, the reality check of burned out Humvees and the sound of explosions and gunfire.

As you can tell, this was not downtown Brisbane, but downtown Baghdad.

In 2005, Rob spent a period working in Iraq as a paramedic, seeing first-hand the situation in the country and encountering clinical situations far different to those in Australia.

While in Iraq Rob, who is now back working as the Clinical Support Officer on the Sunshine Coast, was

contracted through an Australian company to the United States Department of Defense as an armed tactical medic.

Rob admits the first 24 hours was a shock. It included the hair-raising approach to the Baghdad airport and a journey to the city’s heavily fortified international zone known ‘RPG Alley’, because of the numerous rocket-propelled grenades fired at passing military convoys.

After that, Rob’s day-to-day role was running a clinic and conducting medical training at an Iraqi police academy in the country’s south.

“It was a very basic medical post, with the aim of being able to treat

minor conditions on site and stabilise and hold patients for medivac to a larger facility,” Rob said.

“For most Iraqis though, there was nowhere else to go. Local medical facilities were non-existent, so I would help as much as I could.”

He treated training accidents and many conditions not seen in Australia such as tuberculosis. He also undertook minor surgical procedures, and even dentistry.

“My interpreter was an Iraqi dentist and able to teach me a great deal,” he said.



He ran the clinic by himself, and consulted with an Iraqi doctor running an army clinic attached to the base and, if required, US doctors at the MASH unit in Baghdad.

“The experience of working in a remote environment with limited support was a fantastic opportunity to broaden knowledge and skills, and sharpen my ability to think outside the square, improvise, and adapt to whatever is presented to you,” Rob said.

Among the challenges he faced were:

- Having limited tools to diagnose health problems;
- looking after seriously ill patients for extended periods before they were evacuated to hospital;

- language barriers, with important clinical detail being lost in translation;
- deciding which of the numerous people with chronic medical conditions to treat – because Iraqis in general had so many health problems and the limited supplies, there was a lot of triage and ethical decision making; and
- learning about and treating third world disease processes he had never been exposed to before.

Despite these difficulties, it was very rewarding.

One of the big differences to Australian patients, Rob said,

was the rapid response of Iraqis to first- generation antibiotics.

With medicines in short supply during the regime of Saddam Hussein, the population had not built up resistance to the drugs, meaning antibiotics ‘worked miracles’ on sick Iraqis.

Rob said that medical aid was as important as any military exercise in the quest for peace.

“The Australian way of operating within foreign theatres is to win the hearts and minds of the locals,” he said.

“That’s our biggest defence strategy and that’s a lot greater than any weapon or force that you can provide. I particularly looked after the medical needs of local Iraqis, to generate that trust, respect and support.”

Although the base was fairly safe, travelling in convoys to Baghdad at high speed, hoping to avoid improvised explosive devices and ambush on the road, was the real danger time.

Rob said there were times when he’d never been so scared.

“I do think, ‘why did I go?’,” he said.

Asked why, Rob said: “To know what’s really going on in the world.

“With Iraq there are so many points of view, you don’t know who or what to believe. I wanted to see what the real story was, and this was an opportunity to do that – despite the dangers.

“The Iraqi people I met were great. I came back feeling I could understand their plight.”