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U.S. ARMY EUROPE STRYKER SOLDIER TEACHES HIMSELF ARABIC TO HELP UNIT'S MISSION

By **Sgt. 1st Class Kap Kim**

2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs Office

BAGHDAD, Iraq -- Sgt. Jason Stisser of U.S. Army Europe's Troop O, 4th Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment says that when he found out he was returning to Iraq, he quickly brushed up on his Arabic to help himself and his platoon in their current duties.

Stisser's unit works out of Forward Operating Base Prosperity to cover the Karkh District in central Baghdad.

In a recent clearing mission dubbed Operation Saber Sweep, the squadron's "white" and "blue" platoons joined with with Iraqi Soldiers in moving from apartment building to apartment building gathering census information on area residents, many of whom complained that they had received wrongful eviction notices. The "Outlaw Troop" Soldiers collected data such as lease agreements or ownership documents to ensure residents would not be further harassed.

As their Stryker armored vehicles rolled up to the apartments before sunrise, the Vilseck, Germany-based troopers cleared each floor of each building before waking residents.

"We have to get here early -- before they head to work," said Staff Sgt. Joaquin Reyna.

Stisser's ability to talk with residents helped make the Stryker Soldiers' information gathering easier -- and earned them a breakfast of cheese and bread.



SGT 1ST CLASS KAP KIM

Sgt. Jason Stisser of U.S. Army Europe's Troop O, 4th Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, keeps an eye on security during a clearing operation in Baghdad's Karkh District as part of "Operation Sabre Sweep" Nov. 26. Stisser taught himself Arabic to be better able to assist his unit on their missions amongst the district's residents.

“It’s such a big deal when you try to speak their language, just like at our home station. I don’t think we should be walking around Germany without learning how to say, ‘Excuse me,’ ‘Please,’ and ‘I’m sorry’ ... just the basic stuff.”

“Right now, my grammar is like ‘Me Tarzan, you Jane,’” he said. “Sometimes I’ll get into a conversation with an (Iraqi Soldier) and get in way over my head, so I’ll have to bring an interpreter over.”

Stisser said he is currently studying Arabic using interactive computer software, but he also learns a lot by carrying index cards with a few vocabulary words wherever he goes.

“I try to use each of these words in a conversation at least one time a day,” he said, pointing to the list of phonetically written words on the cards. He said he doesn't feel his language skills are truly valuable to the platoon yet, but his goal is to help the group reduce its need for interpreters for certain missions by March.

Although the platoons takes Iraqi interpreters along on their missions, its members say a U.S. Soldier who speaks Arabic seems to build more trust, and makes it easier for the unit to communicate with residents, merchants and Iraqi Soldiers.

“There’s a stigma with what we do; they think we think they are terrorists or something,” Stisser said. “What I try to tell them (is that) all I need is info.”

Stisser says he started learning conversational Arabic following an “embarrassing event” while he was deployed in Taji, Iraq with the 4th Infantry Division in 2005.

“I was taken off the line,” said the scout. “It’s one of the most embarrassing things for a scout to be taken off the line; it’s like punishment. So when I was put back on the line I tried to be more valuable to my platoon.”

Stisser began learning Arabic by having his unit’s interpreters help him master simple phrases he could use to get children to buy drinks and snacks from local vendors. Now, he says, he spends so much time talking with Iraqi Soldiers around the squadron's living quarters at Coalition Outpost Ramagen that his fellow scouts have started calling him “jundee,” which means “soldier” in Arabic.

He’s the closest thing we have to an (Iraqi army Soldier),” joked Sgt. Kevin Baker.



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