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U.S. Army sergeants tell HAHS students how they kept a sense of home while serving in Iraq



Thursday, 07 December 2006

By KENT JACKSON

When there was no water in Iraq to do laundry, U.S. Army Sgt. Derek Pollard hung his uniform on the back of a moving vehicle and sprayed it with Febreze to air it out.

"It smelled like it came out of the dryer," Pollard said.

Army Sgt. Frederick Fencher built an entertainment center in his tent from empty meal cartons.

"You can do a lot with duct tape," Fencher said.

While speaking on Wednesday to students at Hazleton Area High School, the sergeants told how troops retained a sense of home during assignments in Iraq.

Pollard of Campbellsburg, Ky., served 13 months in Iraq and Fencher of Pelham, Ga. spent a year in Iraq before they returned to the United States in April 2004 and were assigned to the Hazleton recruiting office. An instructor in self-defense and a logistics specialist, Fencher was stationed in Umm Qasr in southern Iraq. He arranged rail service with American and British forces. He said Army squads develop camaraderie as they train to protect one another.

"I was closer to a lot of them than my family," he said.

Pollard, a mechanic for Bradley Fighting Vehicles, said most Iraqis whom he met liked Americans.

"Like people in the U.S., you pick and choose who you get close to," he said.

Pollard was stationed in Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit and was about 300 meters away when the dictator was pulled from a spider hole in December 2003.

"It was a great day," Pollard said.

In Tikrit, he lived in a bomb-damaged gymnasium.

A professor who taught English at a university told Pollard that the Americans paid him \$30 a week to repair wiring in the gymnasium, whereas he earned \$30 a month while teaching during Saddam's reign. Pollard and Fencher said easy access to telephones and e-mail kept them in contact with friends and family in the United States.

In Iraq, they had chances to play sports and video games, lift weights, watch movies, attend daily religious services and help themselves at the dining area.

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Fencher said his unit ate steak and lobster every Friday. Pollard said Burger King, Pizza Hut and Baskin-Robbins were among the restaurants that served soldiers on base. "It's a little piece of home," Pollard said. They celebrated Christmas with parties and big meals. Pollard's mother sent him a Christmas tree approximately as tall as the 5-footer standing in the school library as he talked. Fencher said troops appreciate mail, care packages, and drawings from children. "The little pictures – we hang that up. Some of us write back. Don't think we don't read all the stuff we get," he said. He said people can drop off items to send to soldiers at the post office in Harleigh and go on the Internet to anysoldier.com for ideas on sending mail and packages to U.S. forces. Pollard said early during his assignment, mail took 60 days to arrive, but he didn't care as long as it reached him, which was a concern. One mail truck blew up. A roadside bomb that detonated caused partial hearing loss in Pollard's right ear, but he said soldiers train to deal with what scares them. "Can you find the positive in the fear?" he said. Fencher said even the toughest guys are afraid. "We use fear as motivation."

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