



USAF instructor makes her mark on Iraq's future

by Senior Master Sgt. Trish Freeland
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10/20/2008 - **AL TAJI AIR BASE, Iraq** -- Master Sgt. Jennifer Ravidoux was not in the room when Abraham Lincoln said, "You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today." But the Bayonne, New Jersey native leads as though she had written those words herself.

On her way to work one morning, Sergeant Ravidoux, a military training instructor deployed from Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, watched her Iraqi Air Force lieutenants march their flights to the parade ground for graduation practice. Rather than the well-disciplined precision marching Sergeant Ravidoux expected, she saw the trainees taking a leisurely stroll, heads bouncing, arm-swing too high, feet out of step.

"I couldn't take it anymore," said Sergeant Ravidoux. "I had to get out of that car and correct what I saw. To just drive by and let things look bad would set a bad example for my instructors."

But rather than demand immediate correction as she would have done back home in San Antonio, she pulled the lieutenant leading the flight aside and inquired what was going on.

"He told me the trainees lacked discipline and would not listen to him. I told him you have to demand that they listen to you," she said.

That's not the sort of thing an American woman would expect to say to an Iraqi man, but Sergeant Ravidoux is an air advisor to Iraqi air force basic military training instructors as part of the Coalition Air Force Training Team. She's serving a one-year tour at one of Iraq's largest military bases and has a direct hand in helping young Iraqi air force leaders establish and manage their own basic military training program.

"When I first got here a lot of the men would not make eye contact with me. They didn't know me, and I had to prove myself," she said. "I knew that regardless of how they felt, they would see how I lead by example and all of my military experience."

Eventually the Iraqi instructors stopped seeing her as a woman, but rather as a senior noncommissioned officer they respect and a good example of how women can be valuable assets to a military team.

"I'm an ambassador not only for the U.S., but also for women," said Sergeant Ravidoux.

Sergeant Ravidoux has been a military training instructor for the last four years, fulfilling a dream she's had since her days as a staff sergeant. A traumatic experience during a previous Iraq deployment helped her decide to leave behind a 16-year career in the medical corps to become an MTI.

In 2003, Sergeant Ravidoux deployed to Talil Air Base in southern Iraq, now known as Ali Base. She would forever define that experience as the best and worst time of her life.

"We lived in tents, bare base conditions, and got to work with the U.S. Army and Coalition Forces. It was a great experience," she said.



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AL TAJI AIR BASE, Iraq -- U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Jennifer Ravidoux, basic military training superintendent, 370th Expeditionary Training Squadron, poses for a photo during a parade practice at Al Taji Air Base, Iraq on Sept. 27. Ravidoux, a Bayonne, N.J. native, is deployed from the 320th Training Squadron, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Paul Villanueva II)

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But watching a friend die painfully made it the worst experience as well. Sergeant Rabidoux had made friends with members of the Italian Carabinieri who were responsible for security outside the base perimeter.

"Their compound was next to ours, and I wanted to experience how another country's military lived and of course the food was a perk," said Sergeant Rabidoux.

But on a day that would eventually alter Sergeant Rabidoux's career path, two car bombs were driven into the Italian compound in Nasiriyah. Sergeant Rabidoux was on duty at the hospital when her friends were brought in for care.

"It was a mass casualty situation. I saw people I had been hanging out with the night before all injured and one of them died in front of my eyes. He basically bled out," she said.

Sergeant Rabidoux, a strong, fearless, almost stereotypical drill sergeant still fights tears remembering that day.

"I kept thinking what if someone had just done their job a little better...if someone would have noticed what was happening...and where do you learn all of that? Attention to detail, following rules, etc. You learn that in basic training."

"I not only get to have an impact on the American instructors I'm involved with here, but on the Iraqi instructors and eventually a whole nation by helping them build their basic training program. I'm the luckiest person in the world to be here."

The Iraqi instructors are pretty lucky too. By the time graduation day arrived, they had taken Sergeant Rabidoux's advice on how to motivate their flights. As the flight did its final pass and review for the Iraqi Air Force commander, they looked sharp. Their flight instructors felt proud. Their advisor simply beamed.

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