



**By Carolyn Lee**

***The Imperial Republican***

“The life of a soldier is not meant for everyone. The life of a deployed mother is meant for even less. Some days, I wonder if I am meant for it, if I am strong enough.”

Those are the words of former Imperial resident Candace Hayes Coon, who is serving a tour of duty at Camp Liberty, just outside of Baghdad in Iraq.

She departed from Broken Bow last May, where she lives with husband Lance and 16-month-old son Jonathen, to accompany her unit, the 1195th Transportation Company out of Kearney, Lexington and McCook.

The Nebraska National Guard Unit first trained in Fort Stewart, Ga., then was at Camp Beuhring, Kuwait for about two weeks before moving to Iraq.

She hopes to return home in April or May.

This is the Sergeant’s first tour in Iraq. As part of the National Guard, she was deployed to Kuwait in 2004-05, and also provided Hurricane Katrina relief in 2005.

Coon’s unit provides convey security. “We escort package trucks, both military and civilian, from base to base in Iraq.

“As it nears the end of this deployment, we all get a little antsy and nervous. Will our luck still hold up that no one gets injured on the road?”

During her second month of deployment, Coon said a sister company that serves with hers lost two soldiers and had another severely wounded when an EFP (Explosively Formed Penetrator) hit their lead vehicle.

In October, rockets hit a barrier around one of her unit’s combat housing units, throwing shrapnel through three buildings.

About once a month the soldiers are warned of incoming rockets and mortars near the camp.

“Several IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) have been found on the road ahead of us by a Route Clearance Team,” she noted.

Coon has trained on how to react if her convoy is attacked. She explains that it’s hard to extract a 180-pound soldier with 50 pounds of gear from a vehicle high above ground level.

And yet, there are compensations. The Sergeant gets to see beautiful architecture in Baghdad, or what’s left of it. She hears the Muslim “Call for Prayer” all day from the loudspeakers of the mosques.

“The beauty of these places still shines through. As I look at them I can picture what they used to look like, with palm trees lining the sidewalks and lights shining through fancy tapestries in the big windows.”

For now, Coon communicates with her husband by computer, telling him when she leaves for and returns from a mission.

“I tell my husband every day that I love and miss him, because I don’t know when and if I will get to talk to him again.”

She also talks to Jonathen by skype video call.

“I want him to remember my voice, my face, remember that I am Mommy.”

Coon looks forward to the day when the roar of helicopters doesn't break up conversations as the ground shakes; when she doesn't hear packs of stray dogs howling.

"I'm looking forward to the day that I can step off of that bus, give my husband a hug and kiss, and hold my son in my arms again. The little things..." she explains.

Once back home, the soldier plans to be a stay-at-home mom for awhile, to catch up on all she's missed. She has three years left on her National Guard enlistment.