

Multi-National Division - Center

Media Release

HQ, MND-Center

Baghdad, Iraq

APO AE 09342

VOIP: 822-7482

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
RELEASE 20080526-05

May 26, 2008

Iraqi girl travels to U.S. in effort to see for first time

By Sgt. David Turner, 2nd BCT, 3rd Inf. Div., PAO

FORWARD OPERATING BASE KALSU, Iraq – During a morning visit to Taha Naji Deyad's house, 1st Lt. Michael Kendrick sits at the family table, eating flatbread with jam and fried eggs, and sipping chai tea.

"I eat a lot of meals here," Kendrick says.

It's clear he is a welcome guest and a family friend, and not just because he's the leader of the platoon responsible for this neighborhood in al-Buaytha. As he sits at the table talking to Taha, Taha's 5-year old daughter Noor insists on sitting next to him. She often holds his hand; sometimes she whispers in his ear or offers a kiss on his cheek.

Kendrick, the father of two young daughters himself, is not only tolerant; he enjoys the little girl's company. She wears a pair of purple children's sunglasses that Kendrick's wife, Robin, sent as a gift for her.

Soon she may need them.

Kendrick's visit today is special. With him is Lt. Col. Hyun Lee, battalion surgeon from the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, who is here to review final preparations for a trip Noor is taking. It's a trip that, if successful, will give Noor the ability to see, something she has never been able to do.

Noor has been blind since birth. A condition called sclerocornea makes it possible for her to detect only vague impressions of light. Her father, a schoolteacher, has a brother with the same illness who lives with the family in their house on the banks of the Tigris River.

When Kendrick arrived here last year as part of 3rd Platoon, Company D, 1st 30th Inf. Regt., 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, he began meeting residents of al-Buaytha, often leaving the safety of his armored vehicle to walk in the neighborhoods.

"Our philosophy, especially mine, is that we would get out and get with the people to talk about what their issues were, what their problems were," he said.

Soon he met Taha, who in addition to teaching at the nearby al-Harah school, is also a contractor and community council member, working on projects to rebuild his village's damaged infrastructure.

"He's been our go-to guy," said Kendrick, from Phoenix. "He's a friend of mine, he's a friend of all of ours. He takes care of my men and we try to take care of him and his family. He's part of our extended family as far as our platoon is concerned."

Taha helped work on several community projects, such as rebuilding and improving the school. He said his friendship with Kendrick began as soon as they met. Then Kendrick visited the family's house and met young Noor.

"When I started talking with him, Noor just seemed to follow right along. She follows [Taha] everywhere. Because his house was in my area of responsibility, it was natural that I would find her," Kendrick said.

"When he came and sat with me, he saw Noor," Taha said. "Noor sat with him and touched him, because she can not see. She thinks everyone cannot see, like her. After that, she asked me about Kendrick: 'Father, where does Kendrick come from? Father, is Kendrick a good man or a bad man?' Every time she would ask about him. One day she told me, 'Father, I want to tell you something, but I don't know if it's good or bad.' I said, 'Tell me.' She said, 'I love Kendrick.'"

After the initial visit, said Kendrick, he and Taha stayed in touch daily.

"We're there five to six days a week on patrol, so Noor was naturally part of our patrol. We'd check in with Taha, see how they were doing and check in on Noor as well," Kendrick said.

Then Kendrick got the idea to try and do something about Noor's blindness.

"We inquired through our medic what the process was in getting her seen by a doctor and getting an evaluation," Kendrick said.

They sent pictures to the battalion surgeon, Lee, who then personally evaluated her. The ball started rolling from there, Kendrick said.

As it turned out, little Noor was a prime candidate for surgery, further involving the battalion.

When Lt. Col. Kenneth Adgie, 1-30th Inf. Regt. commander, heard about Noor, he backed the project.

"He had the opportunity to meet Taha [and Noor] one-on-one, and that's all it took. As soon as he met Taha and saw what kind of man he was, he just went with it. He's been fully supportive," Kendrick said.

Initially, Air Force ophthalmologists were to perform the procedure, but when that option failed, other avenues were explored. The Eye Defects Research Foundation, a non-governmental organization based in Los Angeles, stepped in to help. They found a doctor in the United States willing to perform the procedure and secured visas for Noor and her mother Shaymaa to travel there.

Early Memorial Day morning, Kendrick and members of his platoon picked up Noor, Shaymaa and Taha and gave them a ride to Baghdad International Airport in the back of a Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle. Noor smiled as the vehicle bounced up and down dirt roads, her mother holding her tightly. At the airport, Noor said goodbye to Kendrick and her father. After giving Kendrick a last

peck on the cheek, she and her mother were escorted to the terminal. For a while afterward, Taha wept.

Kendrick, who is scheduled to redeploy with the rest of the 2nd BCT in July, would like to see Noor return home before he leaves.

“It would be an awesome capstone, to get this done,” Kendrick said. “This is one of a hundred things we’ve accomplished as far as improving the lives of people in our area. As far as my piece of the puzzle is concerned, I can lay my head at night knowing I’ve done everything I can do.”

Kendrick was careful to point out that his measure of success for his time in Iraq doesn’t necessarily depend on the success of Noor’s surgery. He has many other good experiences to look back on. When he arrived in al-Buaytha, terrorist violence was still common; now it looks as if peace is becoming permanent.

“It was awful. Now you’ve got kids going to school every day, kids walking to school. You’ve got families opening stores. People walk around their [neighborhoods]. They’re proud of their communities again,” he said.

Though the surgery isn’t guaranteed to give Noor her vision, Taha, as a father and a teacher, is hopeful of her prospects.

“Before now, we told ourselves maybe she cannot go to school. Now we hope to see Noor next year in my school, with my kids,” he said.

CUTLINES FOLLOW:



080525-A-8273T-028

Noor, a young girl receiving eye surgery in the U.S., entertains 1st Lt. Michael Kendrick, platoon leader for 3rd Plt., Co. D, 1-30th Inf. Regt., while he eats breakfast at her family’s house in al-Buaytha, Iraq, May 25. Noor suffers from sclerocornea, a condition which has left her blind since birth. With help from Kendrick and other Soldiers of 1-30th Inf. Regt., she is traveling to the U.S. for surgery that may restore her vision. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. David Turner)



080525-A-8273T-037

Noor, a young girl receiving eye surgery in the U.S., leads 1st Lt. Michael Kendrick, platoon leader for 3rd Plt., Co D, 1-30th Inf. Regt., on a walk through her yard in al-Buaytha May 25. Noor is wearing the sunglasses Kendrick's wife sent her as a gift. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. David Turner)



080526-A-8273T-075

Noor, a young girl receiving eye surgery in the U.S., says goodbye to 1st Lt. Michael Kendrick, platoon leader for 3rd Plt., Co. D, 1-30th Inf. Regt., at Baghdad International Airport, May 26. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. David Turner)



080526-A-8273T-088

Noor says goodbye to her father, Taha Naji Deyad at Baghdad International Airport May 26 before flying to the U.S. to receive eye surgery. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. David Turner)



080526-A-8273T-139

Noor, a young girl receiving eye surgery in the U.S., waits with her mother, Shaymaa, at Baghdad International Airport, May 26. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. David Turner)

For queries, contact the Multi-National Division – Center Public Affairs at MND-Center_PAO@iraq.centcom.mil or by phone at Commercial 912-767-3373 during the day and 912-767-4966 from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m.

For MND-C news, go to www.taskforcemarne.com.