

# THE SEWERS OF BABYLON

By RALPH PETERS - In Iraq  
**BAGHDAD**

OUR Humvees splashed through troughs of sewage, between ponds of filth that covered several acres. Shanties crowded on accidental islands fringed with stands of reeds. A stall selling brilliant vegetables did a brisk business at the edge of the sludge.

The Risalah slum is home to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis no one ever cared about. *No one*. Until the U.S. Army arrived. And tried to make their lives better. We were on our way to inspect a "minor" project to change the lives of the poor.

Slum life in Baghdad is grim, yet colorful. Garish shop-front ads blaze through layers of dust under the midday sun. Black-robed women scurry past loitering young bucks. Bent old men laze in castoff plastic chairs. Garbage is everywhere, in phenomenal amounts. It's a world of instant dilapidation.

According to the media, our three-vehicle patrol should have gotten nothing but hostile glares. Instead, we got a surprising number of friendly waves. The turret gunners remained alert, but all we saw were simple human beings trying to get on with their lives.

I rode with Lt.-Col. Joe Gandara, the commander of the Special Troops Battalion of the 4th Infantry Division's 4th "Cobra" Brigade. In two decades of service, Gandara's never faced a tougher job than this one: hands-on oversight of 45 "immediate-impact projects" strewn on both sides of the Tigris River. He does everything from monitoring new construction to struggling to convince Iraqis that maintenance really is important (the Iraqis run the gamut from the risk-your-life dedicated to deadbeats — Gandara sorts out the latter over time).

From top to bottom, Baghdad's culture is broken. It often seems to be every man for himself, and damn the world. Yet, that first impression deceives: More and more Iraqis *are* stepping up to build a better society.

Saddam didn't just ravage the physical infrastructure — he wrecked the moral infrastructure, too. The recovery will be long and often painful. But the patient wants to get better, something that's easily lost amid skewed headlines.

After inspecting a number of antiquated water-processing plants, where Gandara offered tough love and tools to Iraqi managers (he'll deliver expertise and spare parts, but won't do their work for them), we wrap up the tour at the far western edge of Baghdad, where the dug-in poor live in shanties, and new arrivals huddle in squats.

At the edge of a clotted irrigation ditch, we pull in beside a small compound. As they do at every site, threatening or not, the troops flow smoothly into a defensive posture, making it look far easier than it is. But even before we can set up a hasty perimeter, we're attacked. By a horde of children. Rushing out from the edge of the slum.

I'm no softie for kids; I like 'em best after they hit 30. But these ragged, dirty children even get to me.

Gandara and his men are here to save the children's lives. The "minor" project is a nearly completed "compact sewage-treatment plant." Built from scratch for relative pennies, the plant will drain the sewage that routinely backs up into alleys and homes while further polluting a wretched water supply.

Gandara and his NCOs handle the business end first, inspecting the progress on the site. Then it's the children's turn.

The colonel and his troops take along a bit of candy for the slum kids. More importantly, they hand out school supplies (these children's families can't afford a tablet).

Pens, notebooks, rulers: You'd think we're handing out gold coins. The NCOs are great about making sure the bigger kids don't make off with the bulk of the goods, teasing them a little but putting something into the smallest child's hands.

Of course, those notebooks will be used up and the pens will go dry. It doesn't do to exaggerate the good impression our soldiers might leave behind. That sort of thing can be readily forgotten. What really matters is that new weapon of war, a bare-bones sewage-treatment facility.

We hear no end of tales of failure in Iraq. But because of one small project (and there are hundreds such in Iraq), 10,000 of our fellow human beings won't have to live with sewage in their streets and shanties. That makes a real, human difference. Yes, it might be minor in the great schemes of global strategy. It won't make us loved throughout the Middle East. But America's soldiers make a profound difference in here-and-now lives. How many armies in history could make that claim?

We've all heard plenty about human-rights abuses. What about those 10,000 dirt-poor Iraqis whose children will have a chance to escape disease? The old regime wouldn't spare them a few pipes and pumps. Isn't exposing a child to cholera while building palaces for yourself a human-rights abuse?

By the way: I didn't see any of our self-righteous critics in the Risalah slum.

But I did see Sgt. Maurice Harris, Spec. Victor Tsung and PFC (hey, promote that guy!) Brad Sheets, along with their comrades in arms. They were soldiers to the core, mastering a new type of war. And they were great Americans.

For all the bad news you hear — much of it viciously skewed — Baghdad *is* a city of hope. And it isn't thanks to Saddam — or to those in the West who opposed a tyrant's overthrow.

Great job, GI!

*Ralph Peters is in Iraq on assignment for The Post.*