



News

Captain honored for Baghdad Zoo rescue

By CARA SPAZIANI / Journal Staff Writer



Capt. William Sumner kneels next to one of Uday Hussein's cheetahs at the Baghdad Zoo during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.
(Submitted photo)

MARTINSBURG Sunday, April 22, 2007— Crouching down to the ground, Capt. William Sumner wasn't petting just any ordinary cheetah.

As a captain in the U.S. Army's 354 Civil Affairs Brigade during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, Sumner, a Martinsburg resident, was responsible for the wartime rescue of the Baghdad Zoo.

That rescue, which took place after the fall of Baghdad, included caring for cheetahs once owned by the son of Iraq's former

president, Saddam Hussein.

“They were Uday Hussein’s cheetahs,” Sumner said. “He would take them out on the town with him, in the car. They were fairly tame animals, so we played with them on a regular basis.”

Sumner was recognized in March for his efforts in helping to rescue the animals of the Baghdad Zoo by being presented with the first recognition award by The Earth Organization, an international conservation group.

Sumner’s story was also recounted in “Babylon’s Ark: The Incredible Wartime Rescue of the Baghdad Zoo,” which was written by Lawrence Anthony, the founder of The Earth Organization. CBS’s Sunday Morning show will feature Sumner’s story at 9 a.m. today.

Originally deployed to Iraq to be assigned to the Baghdad Museum to investigate the disappearance of the museum’s artifacts, Sumner’s colonel reassigned him to maintain the zoo.

“He said, ‘I have a little zoo, can you take that off my hands?’” Sumner said. “I figured it would be a little petty zoo type thing. I was pretty stunned when I found out what it was.”

Instead of a small zoo, Sumner found one of Baghdad’s only green spaces to be the remnant of a large battle. Ammunition was now stored in the animals’ cages, and looting had occurred throughout the zoo.

“It was a fairly intense battle site, and then right in the middle of it, there was this zoo,” Sumner said. “Basically anything that could not fight back had been stolen. Literally, when the looters came through, they stole toilets, doorknobs, anything they could get their hands on. I had never seen anything like that. It was a new height in looting as far as I was concerned.”

Left at the zoo were two tigers, 11 lions, two bears — one of which killed three looters on its own — and a host of other animals, Sumner said.

All of the animals were malnourished and were contained in a caged area with nothing more than a concrete pad to sit on, Sumner said.

“We had to start buying donkeys in the local market and butchering them to feed the carnivores,” Sumner said. “The animals were in pretty bad shape by the time we got there. The workers had been stealing the food for the animals because they needed it for themselves.”

Looting continued to be a problem for Sumner as he worked to make improvements and provide enrichment activities at the zoo, such as ropes for monkeys to swing on and hang from.

“The looting was still ongoing when I was there,” Sumner said. “We were actually going out and grabbing looters and putting

them in cages and making them work at the zoo because the best form of punishment was humiliation. We'd catch them and contain them, make them spend the day working at the zoo and give them something to eat before letting them go along their way. Most of the time, they never came back."

Besides updating the zoo's facilities, Sumner worked with the citizens of Baghdad to educate them on aspects of Iraq they were never taught and partnered with local orphanages to allow its children to visit the zoo.

"When you look at the full picture, we were actually trying to help the community around it," Sumner said.

Every day Sumner spent at the zoo was "odd and unique," including transporting his favorite pet camel, "Lumpy," in his Humvee, chasing a baboon through a movie theatre and the time the captain escaped a shot from a sniper while hauling a 600-pound bear across town.

"Apart from the news and the death toll and who is blowing up what, you just don't hear the work that has been done over there by civic groups," Sumner said. "The work we did over there — it was probably one of the more useful things I've done with my life. I look back on it ... and what I did there seemed to have made such an impact."

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