

Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids / ROC Wheels update from Baghdad – 31 August 2009

A 2007 UNICEF telephone survey of one-thousand Iraqi families revealed that one out of every seven Iraqi children has a disability. UNICEF estimates 50% of all disabilities in Iraq are suffered by children, while Mercy Corps estimates 10% of Iraq's population of thirty million suffer from a disability. At the high end of estimates, there are 1.5 million Iraqi kids with disabilities; 150,000 at the low end. And there are no pediatric wheelchairs available for purchase or offered by the government. Disabled Iraqi children desperately need long-term solutions to their healthcare needs, and it starts with getting them up off the ground into pediatric wheelchairs as a basic healthcare necessity.

After returning to Baghdad from the US in early August, I received an email from Captain John Turner, Commander for the 2/8 Field Artillery Regiment of the 1/25 SBCT in Northern Iraq's Diyala province. CPT Turner had been trying to secure wheelchairs for disabled kids in his area of operations for a long time, and with his unit's time in Iraq drawing to a close he still had not found a solution to help them. Then he noticed a story on CNN about how Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids was providing high quality wheelchairs to disabled Iraqi children, so he contacted me immediately – not expecting to get a reply. I received his email, and discussed with him how I could provide wheelchairs to meet the needs of the kids he was trying to help. CPT Turner was surprised but encouraged that after all his seeking had only turned up closed doors, but at the last minute the last door one was opening - I was going to help him help his kids! There might be a lesson in there somewhere for people who keep getting doors closed on their requests...KEEP KNOCKING!! You never know which one will be the one that opens for you.

August 18 very late in the evening under cover of darkness, I flew out to meet CPT Turner with three of my associates: Navy Commander Steven Masee, Navy Captain Russell Hughes and Chad Adamson. It was a good thing I had them come along, as I would have had a tough time loading the wheelchairs on a waiting Chinook helicopter all on my own! We arrived at CPT Turner's location in the middle of the night after a not-as-hot-as-day evening ride. It's really a unique experience, flying in seats near the back hatch of a Chinook. With the back end wide open, cruising in the night one can see all the city lights – a vast improvement from early days of the war when night brought darkness almost everywhere.

Wednesday morning, we rolled out to a smaller Forward Operating Base nearby, where a number of the disabled children were brought by their families, patiently waiting for their new wheelchairs. Commander Masee has been out with me a number of times before on these distributions, and helps to ensure the events go smoothly on the operational side. He provides a birds-eye view perspective while I'm elbow deep helping soldiers get the kids into the wheelchairs and adjusted properly. He lets me know if anything goes awry, many times lending a hand to ensure everything stays under control. Chad, who works at Task Force SAFE, acted as my photographer. Lots of great pictures were taken by Chad (see following pages). Also, a Combat Camera Army news photographer/videographer came along. You can find his five minute edited video of the distribution at this link: www.dvidshub.net/?script=video/video_show.php&id=66667

Working with CPT Turner on this mission was truly an honor. He's passionate about his work, and I respect him greatly for the care & concern he showed in wanting to help the families in his area of operations who have disabled kids. Sometimes with these missions, everything seems to work out exactly the way it was intended - and this mission was one such mission. We transported the wheelchairs on a Chinook helicopter – I've never done that before. 35 people on the chopper when it landed on the heli-pad, with their luggage stacked in the middle where the wheelchairs were to be loaded. Thankfully, 21 of the 35 piled off just as we were walking up, which freed up exactly the amount of space we needed for the wheelchairs. The Loadmaster for the flight could have taken one look at our bulky wheelchairs and turned us back. But out of compassion for what we were doing, he was determined to help us get on with our mission and loaded / strapped them all down. That's the way this entire kids wheelchair program has progressed over the four years of its "life". There has been just the right intervention at critical times, by people who seemed to have been placed in key positions to help. It's like God wanted Iraqi kids in need to get these wheelchairs. After all, red, yellow, black and white, they're all precious in his sight - even challenged Iraqi kids in a war-torn country infiltrated with an insurgency. These kids are the most innocent of all people, not knowing exactly what's going on around them or understanding it, the bombs, the gunfire, the screaming and hatred. And the worst part - they can't run and hide when violence erupts because their legs won't carry them. I honestly cannot think of kids who have it worse off moreso than disabled kids trying to cope living in a war zone. Truly, these are the "least of these" in just about everyone's book.

CPT Turner recently posted these words on his Facebook page:

“A few days ago, I posted some pictures from a pediatric wheelchair fitting made possible by the hard work of Brad Blauser and the Soldiers of Alpha Battery, 2-8 FA. I cannot stress to you enough the impact that these chairs have on the lives of these children and their families. Most families of ‘disabled’ children don’t know for sure what afflicts their children due to the lack of access to medical care and to the lack of diagnostic supplies and equipment. Brad stated in an email to me, “They’re the most innocent people, not knowing exactly what’s going on around them or understanding it all-- the bombs, the gunfire, the screaming and hatred. And the worst part - they can’t run and hide when the scary times come because their legs won’t carry them.” These chairs give the children a sort of freedom and mobility they have never known, which, in turn, frees their families.”

“We checked up on a few of the children a couple days after the fitting. Mustafa absolutely REFUSES to leave his chair for any reason. He eats, sleeps, and spends all day in his wheelchair; his father told us how much happier (and manageable!) he is now. Bariq, the little boy who Brad taught to use the wheels, is still pushing himself around his father’s house and seeing the world on his own.”

“People often ask me how they can help support the troops, what they can send to help out, and I finally have an answer. Watching my Soldiers fit these children into their chairs was one of the most fulfilling and moving experiences of my life. As chairs were adjusted to fit each child, Brad told the families through our interpreters “this is the true America.” The people in attendance that day saw a trait they might not have expected from the Americans, people they have been told are barbaric infidels out to destroy the Muslim faith and way of life. My soldiers—our soldiers—are some of the best in the world not because of their superior weapons or tactical knowledge but because they are caring, compassionate human beings. As a commander I have striven to ensure that, in all ways, my Soldiers are ambassadors of the true America. We may not have chosen this war, but we have absolute control over how we choose to act in the course of fighting it.””

Thank you to all who have donated to sponsor wheelchairs, so troops like CPT Turner and crew can have such a life-changing experience in helping the helpless in such a significant way. Check out the pictures on the following pages of this great distribution. Commander Masee says he thinks it ranked among the best organized while he’s helped WFIK.

Two more distributions are ahead soon, but no dates have been scheduled on the calendar.

For those who missed it – my good friend David Jacobs nominated me for the CNN Heroes award, as well as the FoxNews coverage. CNN came out and filmed in June at one of our distributions with the 225th Engineers from Louisiana and 82nd Airborne from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Check out the links:

CNN Heroes print story: <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/07/30/cnnheroes.blad.blauser/index.html>

for two CNN videos: <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2009/07/30/cnnheroes.brad.blauser.profile.cnn>

“Thinking big for the little ones”:

<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2009/07/30/cnnheroes.brad.blauser.extra.cnn>

a short interview with Larry King: <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2009/07/31/cnnheroes.blauser.lkl.cnn>

and a video on the CNN Heroes Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=137193985109>

FoxNews Dallas: http://www.myfoxdfw.com/dpp/news/N_Texan_Helps_Disabled_Iraqi

FoxNews Las Vegas: <http://www.fox5vegas.com/video/20130944/index.html>

CBS News Dallas: <http://cbs11tv.com/local/Brad.Blauser.iraqi.2.1111998.html>

Good news: over \$100,000 has been donated in the four weeks since the CNN Heroes stories and local FoxNews Dallas/FoxNews Las Vegas/CBS News Dallas have aired! Right now, CNN Heroes is passing the profiles over to their 'blue ribbon' panel to determine who will be in the top 10. The top 10 get \$25,000 for their cause, and the winner gets an additional \$100,000. That would buy a large number of wheelchairs for kids! I'm told their Blue Ribbon Panel this year will include influential people like Colin Powell, Elton John, the wife of Daniel Pearl, etc. If WFIK does make the top 10, I'll need a huge number of people going online to vote (repeatedly) to get WFIK in the winner's circle so we can buy more wheelchairs for kids (FYI – I won't take the money for myself – it will go back to the cause).

Thanks to all of you who have donated to sponsor wheelchairs. Thanks also to those who have joined the Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids Facebook Cause and invited friends to do the same! You're all making a difference in bringing attention to the plight of disabled kids in bad situations. Be sure to check out the photos following their captions with stories.

Brad Blausner

www.WheelchairsForIraqiKids.com

<http://apps.facebook.com/causes/196199/18186576?m=6d54c0aa>



Unloading the wheelchairs at Forward Operating Base Lion, Northeastern Iraq's Diyala Province. Troops are an integral part of my program, for without the security, transportation and manpower they provide, I'd just be a guy with a bunch of wheelchairs with no way to deliver them to the kids!



Here I'm teaching the US Army soldiers of the 2/8 FA, 1/25 SBCT about the wheelchair, how to adjust it to fit the kids needs. I don't have enough hands to adjust all the wheelchairs – so the troops do it for me. I stand back and watch, providing pointers and checking to make sure the wheelchairs fit the kids' disabilities so the wheelchair helps and doesn't hurt them. I've had the privilege of helping hundreds of kids into wheelchairs, so I back off and let the troops do most of the work so they get the full effect of hands-on helping give these great gifts to the kids who need them so much.



Captain John Turner shakes the hand of the Iraqi Army Colonel who helped locate the kids for this distribution. The Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police know the people in their areas of responsibility, and generally know where disabled kids are located. Reaching out to the families, they bring them to the distributions and play a major role in getting aid to the kids who need it most.



These are pictures of some of the kids who showed up this day. Most of these kids have birth defects – Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida, intermarriage complications (Man married his female Cousin). Typically, 5-10% of children who appear to receive wheelchairs are victims of violent injuries – most from IEDs, suicide bombers in marketplaces, loose rounds laying around, land mines, etc. Some are from injuries which occur in normal life, unrelated to the war (burns from grease, oils, etc). The older boy in the picture above is one example (more on his story in the following pages).



This boy is having his wheelchair adjusted to fit his needs. The parents don't know what's wrong with him – only that he was born this way – he simply can't walk. Guess his age? Try 13 years old, so we're told. The kids usually come to the distributions with bare feet, as during the Summers it's a little warm for socks and their feet don't touch the ground anyway. But the problem is when their feet touch the black footrest and it's out in the sun, it gets very hot very fast. On this day, the temperature gauge read 144 degrees Fahrenheit. If anyone wants to send me a bunch of kids' socks in varying sizes (light brown or sand color preferably), we can help keep their feet from getting burned by the footrests!



This girl was all skin and bones. Her arms and leg muscles were virtually non-existent, about the thickness of a six-month old, not a nine year old. Possibly she suffers with Muscular Dystrophy, possibly Polio? No one knows, however her parents were grateful to get a wheelchair to help meet her needs, getting her up off the ground so they could all live an easier, healthier more dignified life.



A happy boy with a crooked stiff leg gets his first wheelchair. Most of these kids do really well, excited and anxious. Some are very apprehensive, and just want to get away from the strangers and get back home as soon as possible. This boy was a combination of both, and was really cool because he would let you know when he was ready for us to get away from him because he would keep repeating 'bye-bye, bye bye'! Made us laugh, which made him smile!!



This girl seemed almost like a zombie – relatively motionless except for the smile when she sat in her wheelchair for the first time (see above). Her mother didn't bother to brush the flies away from her open mouth, as they didn't seem to bother her or her mother. Flies here are just a part of life, and are so aggressive that many give up trying to keep them away. You can see in the first picture how heavy these older kids get; just look at the strain on the mother's face. All of the families were grateful to receive the wheelchairs, as they won't have to lift the kids as much, and the kids will live a healthier more comfortable life up off of the floor. **Thanks to the designer / inventor of this wheelchair Wayne Hanson in Bozeman Montana. He was thinking of kids just like this girl when he made these chairs specifically for non-profit distribution. He has more and better things in store for kids in this part of the world, just wait and see.**



This child as the others, is unable to walk. If that wasn't bad enough, this child has some sort of injury to the nose and face. In the US, this child could receive reconstructive / plastic surgery to greatly improve the appearance. But in Iraq, to receive this level of care is unthinkable – especially for a disabled child from a poor family. I asked around, and no-one seemed to know if this child was a boy or girl – it was hard to tell by looking. But when asked, his father reaffirmed he was a boy. Part of the challenge – he was wearing unisex pajamas with embroidery around the collar. Many times, disabled children do not have typical clothes like their siblings, as they never leave the house and go out into the community – so why spend scarce funds to buy them nice clothes? This boy also seemed cognizant of his surroundings, and was very patient in waiting his turn (last) to receive his wheelchair. Sometimes you can just tell when the kids have a good temperament. They have quiet, shy, obviously obedient demeanors which exemplifies kids who just want to please their parents. This boy was happy to just be alive. And happier to get his first wheelchair! Note in the lower right picture, my new military sponsor Captain Russell Hughes, replacing Commander Steven Masseur.



In most distribution events, typically at least one child stands out and becomes everyone's favorite, if it's ok to have favorites? All are highly valued and appreciated, but usually one just jumps out and steals everyone's hearts. I think this child was everyone's favorite – thus the extra pictures. His legs were stiff, but he had full use of his hands and seemed to have a bright mind which could respond to most everything said to him through the translators. During these events, I look for the kids who could push their wheelchairs on their own – those who have cognitive awareness, those with control over their arms. This boy seemed to have both, so once the soldiers had adjusted his wheelchair just right for him, I pushed him and his chair to one side of the room. Showing him where to place his hands on the big wheel handles, I pushed his hands down and moved the chair for him. He caught on quick, and as soon as I stepped back he propelled himself forward in the chair! We made our way out the door of the stuffy little outdoor room, all the while he was looking up at me smiling broadly, realizing that for the first time he had the freedom of the gift of mobility. No longer will he have to rely on his father or mother to get him around the house, or even go outside. Once outside, I walked down the sidewalk and turned, squatted down, held my arms out and motioned him forward to me with my hands. He smiled a huge, gitty grin and strongly pushed his wheelchair over to me as if he were taking his first 'steps'. 'Steps' both he and his family missed which he should have taken during his first year, but because of his disability he didn't get to take. As he was rolling his chair towards me, I looked around at the American and Iraqi troops watching along – some smiling just as proud Dads do when sons take first steps, others gasping as to not show their emotions about to escape from their faces. Very gripping moments indeed. Moments which caught most on-lookers off-guard and unprepared for a wave of misty eyes which came on so suddenly and unexpectedly. There are shared experiences we all can relate to in life – whether Iraqi or American, whether we speak English or Arabic. Helping disabled kids and watching them respond with enthusiastic, joyful expressions crosses cultural and social boundaries in a powerful way. When it came picture time, I started waving at the boy to get his attention and have him look at the camera. He waved back, and was so excited started waving BOTH hands! Everyone watching laughed and cheered him on, as he basked in the attention he was receiving. Check out his smile in the pictures above – he was absolutely thrilled! It is truly a priceless experience to help a disabled child discover a new found freedom to move about on his own! Many of these troops have young children back home – the same ages as those who receive wheelchairs. They often take more time with the kids, ensuring their comfort and reassuring them throughout the process as they would their own children. Note the lower right picture in this set – it's Commander Steven Masseur (US Navy), my military sponsor here who has helped me interface with the Multi-National Forces, Iraq commanders. He comes out on distributions to observe and help with the organization of the event. While I'm elbow deep in wheelchair fittings, he's got my back in the larger scope of the event details to ensure everything is going as planned. I'm sad CDR Masseur will be leaving for home soon (yet glad for him at the same time), but very encouraged another has stepped up to take the sponsorship role for WFIK – Captain Russell Hughes (US Navy). It's not a part of their official job duties, but they do so because they so believe in the success and growth of this mission. If we're able to achieve my ultimate goal of putting in place a national wheelchair program, it will be because of their direct support and intervention, along with the same from other very significant MNF-I Commanders.



Again, disabled children are often 100% cognitive and have the reasoning/thinking skills of non-disabled kids of the same age, just without the formal education afforded to the non-disabled children. This boy is another example. He seemed to not be aware of his surroundings until I was evaluating the fit of his wheelchair. I pushed his torso back against the vertical support of the chair to make sure the neck-rest was at the right height to support his head. With my other hand, I reached out and held one of his. Much to my surprise, he started gripping my hand. And gripping it HARD, too! This boy was STRONG, and started to hurt my hand. I said loudly 'OUCH!', which attracted the attention of those standing around. I looked and noticed the boy smiling broadly – he knew EXACTLY what he was doing! He was trying to show me his strength! I pointed out his smile to those standing around, and he started giggling...and made me laugh too. I underestimated this young man's awareness (and strength). His father explained to us that they boy was very aware and smart. When he was born his body became lodged and immovable in his mother's birth canal which caused his disability – including his blindness. Thus I mistook his blindness for mental incapacity – and I was wrong. A valuable lesson learned - never underestimate the abilities of the disabled. Many times they are more capable than one might realize.



This teenager was playing 'football' on the street in his neighborhood when a roadside bomb exploded next to him. He was close enough that the blast devastated his legs, and tore flesh and muscle from his forearms and left hand. After Iraqi doctors treated him to the best of their abilities, significant injuries remain which still require medical attention not available in Iraq. I was given his medical profile, and told him I would try (no promises) to find a way to get him to a hospital somewhere either in the Middle East or in the US, as hospitals in Dallas and Hawaii have offered free medical care to disabled kids from Iraq. I've inquired at the US State Department, my military contacts elsewhere, as well as IOM / Iraq but have received no response. I heard that travel visas are no longer granted to Iraqis seeking medical treatment outside of Iraq, because local hospitals have the ability to treat all medical conditions found in country. I hope this isn't the case, because I see many many disabled children with birth defects and injuries who need serious medical intervention and aren't receiving it. If anyone reading this can help get answers, please contact me at Brad@WheelchairsForIraqiKids.com. The boy above was much too big for one of our children's wheelchairs, so I gave him my last adult wheelchair which came from Marc Krizack at Whirlwind International. It's their Roughrider model for rough terrain environments – just as with the ROC Wheelchair - perfect for use in Iraq.



At the end of the distribution event, CDR Masee gave out Beanie Babies to the kids which his daughter had sent from home. They were a HUGE hit, making all the kids smile, which in turn made the soldiers smile (see CPT Turner above). The boy in the first picture received a small orange bird, which chirped a song when squeezed. He loved it, and for last 15 minutes of the event everyone could hear that “bird” chirping out its song, which entertained him and yet made the other kids somewhat jealous.

I was given an opportunity to speak to the families, the Iraqi Army/Iraqi Marines and the local TV stations that came out to cover the story. I thanked the Colonel of the Iraqi Army who organized the event, as well as Captain Turner who helped get my people and the wheelchairs to FOB Lion. I made sure the families knew that families from around the world had donated these wheelchairs from their hard earned monies. This is a completely unique opportunity for families outside Iraq to have a direct impact on the lives of the neediest families inside Iraq. The desire to sacrifice and help others: this is the “true” face of America – one which reaches out families in need regardless of who or where they are.





Special Thanks to Chad Adamson(lower left below) from the US Corp of Engineers / Task Force SAFE for coming along to capture the great photos. Thanks also to CDR Steven Masee (dark glasses, standing behind me center) and CAPT Russell Hughes (with mustache) for direct assistance and support at the event and moving the wheelchairs on the helicopter.



Huge thanks to Captain John Turner and the Alpha Battery 2-8 FA, 1/25 SBCT. Without your request and hands-on intervention in these kids' lives, they would likely never have received pediatric wheelchairs to meet their needs.



Thanks also to my long-time met-in-Iraq friend and fellow Texas Aggie Bill Culpepper (on right).

Without his intervention, I would have returned home to Texas after my first year in Iraq in 2005.

Because of actions taken by Bill, the Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids program grew and flourished into the internationally recognized effort it is today. Thanks Bill.

Thanks to Brigadier General Kurt Stein (Director of Operations, Multi-National Forces – Iraq, upper right in picture), who became one of my biggest supporters after telling him my story in his palace office. Hopefully with his support and the support of others, we'll win over the Iraqi government into establishing a national wheelchair program for disabled kids!



Thanks to Commander Steven Masee and the team of volunteers from his office. They wanted to assemble the wheelchairs to make for easy transportation to the field, so two nights before flying we held a wheelchair assembly party. See the pictures below – typically these guys don't get outside the wire much but still wanted to help with the Wheelchairs for Iraqi Kids program. Thanks guys – you helped make it possible for the children in the pictures above receive the wheelchairs.





Reach Out and Care Pediatric Wheelchair from Bozeman, MT
at Aw Faw Palace, MNF-I Headquarters, Camp Victory – Baghdad, Iraq

Distributed worldwide by Reach Out and Care Wheels

Designed by Wayne Hanson

Andrew Babcock, ROC Wheels Executive Director

Holly Floyd, ROC Wheels Associate Director