

Email From George Corbett

I received this from one of my Military Intelligence Officers in Iraq.

We knew there was a dinner planned with Ambassador Bremer and LTG Sanchez. There were 600 seats available, and all the units in the division were tasked with filling a few tables. Naturally, the 501st MI battalion got our table.

Soldiers were grumbling about having to sit through another dog-and-pony show, so we had to pick soldiers to attend. I chose not to go. But, about 1500 the G2, LTC Devan, came up to me and with a smile, asked me to come to dinner with him to meet him in his office at 1600 and bring a camera. I didn't really care about getting a picture with Sanchez or Bremer, but when the division's senior intelligence officer asks you to go, you go.

We were seated in the chow hall, fully decorated for Thanksgiving when aaaaaallllll kinds of secret service guys showed up. That was my first clue, because Bremer's been here before and his personal security detachment is not that big.

Then BG Dempsey got up to speak, and he welcomed Ambassador Bremer and LTG Sanchez. Bremer thanked us all and pulled out a piece of paper as if to give a speech. He mentioned that the President had given him this Thanksgiving speech to give to the troops. He then paused and said that the senior man present should be the one to give it. He then looked at Sanchez, who just smiled. Bremer then said that we should probably get someone more senior to read the speech.

Then, from behind the camouflage netting, the President of the United States came around. The mess hall actually erupted with hollering. Troops bounded to their feet with shocked smiles and just began cheering with all their hearts. The building actually shook. It was just unreal. I was absolutely stunned. Not only for the obvious, but also because I was only two tables away from the podium. There he stood, less than thirty feet away from me! The cheering went on and on and on. Soldiers were hollering, cheering, and a lot of them were crying. There was not a dry eye at my table. When he stepped up to the cheering, I could clearly see tears running down his cheeks. It was the most surreal moment I've had in years. Not since my wedding and Aaron being born. Here was this man, our President, who came all the way around the world, spending 17 hours on an airplane and landing at the most dangerous airport in the world, where a plane was shot out of the sky not six days before. Just to spend two hours with his troops. Only to get on a plane and spend another 17 hours flying back. It was a great moment, and I will never forget it.

He delivered his speech, which we all loved, when he looked right at me and held his eyes on me. Then he stepped down and was just mobbed by the soldiers. He slowly worked his way all the way around the chow hall and shook every last hand extended. Every soldier who wanted a photo with the President got one. I made my way through the line, got dinner, then wolfed it down as he was still working the room. You could tell he was really enjoying himself. It wasn't just a photo opportunity. This man was actually enjoying himself! He worked his way over the course of about 90 minutes towards my side of the room.

Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to shake a few hands. I got a picture with Ambassador Bremer, Talabani (acting Iraqi President) and Achmed Chalabi (another member of the Ruling Council) and Condaleeza Rice, who was there with him. I felt like I was drunk.

He was getting closer to my table, so I went back over to my seat. As he passed and posed for photos, he looked me in the eye and said, "How you doin', Captain." I smiled and said "God bless you, sir." To which he responded "I'm proud of what you do, Captain." Then moved on.