

Troops headed to Iraq get lessons in ancient artifacts

Iraq-bound troops get lesson in ancient artifacts



C. Brian Rose, deputy director of Penn's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, talks with soldiers from the 352d Civil Affairs and Communications outfit about ancient Sumarian tablets.

By Tom Avril, Inquirer Staff Writer

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While stationed in Afghanistan's rural Kunar province, Fred Straka sometimes came across mud-brick buildings where villagers were selling all manner of bric-a-brac, including old coins and bronze daggers.

"You'd see a lot of what looked like artifacts," recalled Straka, a Newark, Del., resident who was in the Delaware National Guard.

Though he bought an imitation Enfield rifle, Straka said he stayed away from objects that looked like antiquities.

Good move, he learned last week during a special two-day session at Fort Dix and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Straka is now a lieutenant colonel attached to the Army's 352d Civil Affairs Command, which is headed to Iraq next month to support local reconstruction efforts in 14 provinces.

He and 60 other soldiers heard presentations about how to respect the nation's vast cultural heritage, whether that means thwarting looters of ancient sites or helping to preserve museums and mosques. The message was reinforced with a tour of the archaeology museum in West Philadelphia, where the troops got to see artifacts of the kind they might encounter overseas.

The idea for such briefings came from museum deputy director C. Brian Rose, in the wake of the 2003 looting of the Iraq National Museum - when an estimated 15,000 artifacts were stolen, 7,500 of which have since been recovered. Rose, who now is also president of the Archaeological Institute of America,

imagined that U.S. armed forces could play a role in preventing future desecration. After going through various channels to enlist the military's cooperation, he gave the first lecture in 2005, at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Rose and other scholars who spoke last week had an obvious professional interest in encouraging troops to tread carefully amid the very sands of history, in a part of the world that includes the Mesopotamian cradle of civilization.

A respectful attitude has strategic value as well, Rose said.

Showing appreciation for local culture - past and present - helps troops to win the "hearts and minds" of the nation where they are deployed, whether it is Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere, Rose told his audience.

"You are playing a fundamental role in keeping the culture of these nations alive, and therefore a fundamental role in keeping the nations alive," the archaeologist said.

Moreover, looted antiquities, along with drugs and guns, are sometimes sold to finance insurgencies, he said. So anything the troops can do to discourage such activity - such as choosing not to buy purported artifacts, as Straka did, or reporting suspicious activity to a commanding officer - is helpful.

At Fort Dix, Rose was accompanied by two other volunteer speakers: Barbara Roberts, a Washington-based art conservator who served on a U.N. mission to survey war damage in Croatia, and Corine Wegener, an associate curator at the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts.

Rose, a slender, bespectacled academic in a brown sportcoat, seemed right at home addressing a crowd that consisted mainly of burly, fatigues-wearing men with close-cropped hair.

Wegener was at home, too, as she used to be in the Army Reserve.

She told the troops how, when stationed in Baghdad in 2003, she was part of an effort to recover the famous 5,000-year-old Head of Warka, a precious mask that was among the items stolen from the Iraq National Museum. A civil affairs officer herself, Wegener helped circulate a description of the mask among U.S. military. Acting on a tip, U.S. military police eventually identified a man who had buried it in his backyard.

"These guys were heroes, absolute heroes," Wegener said.

Roberts, the conservator, gave the troops tips about how to handle artifacts (don't do it, unless asked, and then only with planning and great care). And she stressed that none of the advice from her and her fellow scholars should be interpreted as taking precedence over the soldiers' efforts to ensure their own security.

During a question period, Straka, the former guardsman, asked if there were any way for a layperson to tell which items were genuine and which were fakes.

Most are probably the latter, he learned, but it's better to steer clear, as identifying the real thing requires deep expertise.

"If there's any doubt in your mind," Rose told the troops, "you don't want to have anything to do with it."

Another soldier asked for the profile of a looter.

At the lowest level, Rose said, it could be a poor farmer digging for ancient objects in his backyard, trying to make extra cash in a ravaged economy. He might try to sell such things to middlemen, some of whom could have ties to insurgents or organized crime, Rose said.

The next day, the troops visited the museum at Penn. Among other things, they saw ceramics, tablets, and a sarcophagus from what is now Iraq.

Lt. Col. Carl Mahnken said that he had heard previous presentations like the one at Fort Dix but that the added trip to the museum really brought the message home. Most of the objects in its collection were scientifically excavated by archaeologists.

"This tells me something about history because it was found in its context," the Kansas native said of such artifacts.

When objects are looted, on the other hand, there is no record of how and where they were found, depriving society of the chance to learn more about the ancient peoples who made them, the troops learned.

In the museum's storage area, several of the troops seemed particularly interested in one object: the smashed skull of a Mesopotamian soldier who was buried with his helmet on. Lead conservator Lynn Grant fielded questions about the victim and the material used to make his helmet (a copper alloy).

Rose tailors his briefings depending on where a group of soldiers is going. He recounts the exploits of past military leaders in the area, such as Darius of Persia and Alexander the Great. (Trivia question: What city in Afghanistan bears Alexander's name? Answer: Kandahar, which comes from *Iskender*, the Arabic version of Alexander.)

Rose said that response to past presentations had been very good and that soldiers had stayed in touch with some of the lecturers even after deployment, e-mailing questions from overseas. He, Wegener, and Roberts said they planned to keep giving their talks as long as needed.

And if any of the troops were looking for a post-military career, Rose told them there was a way that they could learn to appreciate antiquities even more:

"Come to Penn and study with me for eight years, and then you can do it."

Contact staff writer Tom Avril
at 215-854-2430 or tavril@phillynews.com.