

MAJOR MARK THOMPSON

"It was nothing like I expected," admitted MAJ Mark Thompson of his months spent in Baghdad, Iraq last year, his first deployment.

Stationed at Victory Base Camp (VBC), MAJ Thompson spent a portion of his time in theater in a place most would not imagine of someone deployed with the 11th Military Police Brigade: near a playground.

Originally deployed as a MP Task Force/Brigade G2 (Intelligence officer), MAJ Thompson was remissioned soon after arriving in Iraq. He was selected to serve as commander of a high-value detainee facility located at VBC.

U.S. soldiers had previously built a children's playground right outside of the detainee facility, set within the center's secure grounds. Said MAJ Thompson, Iraqi children visiting loved ones detained in the facility would come play atop the seesaws and swings, interacting with the troops in the process.

As commander, the playground - and the opportunity it provided to reach out to the Iraqi youth- unexpectedly became one the biggest tools for boosting morale amongst the soldiers.

"Once I see kids playing, I want to play too," laughed MAJ Thompson, father of a 12 year old son. "I'm the biggest kid."

He, as well as many of the other soldiers under his command, often found themselves kicking soccer balls around and enjoying an unanticipated taste of home. Amidst their regular tasks in theater, MAJ Thompson's soldiers also collected toys and school supplies for the Iraqi children who had seamlessly become a highlight of their deployment. Their dedicated work with the local kids was one that many back home would not automatically have associated with the operations of the detainee facility.

"We were changing the negative stereotypes some were lead to believe about Americans," noted MAJ Thompson, who received the Bronze Star for his leadership in Iraq.

During his ten months abroad, MAJ Thompson also encountered another group of individuals that made an impression on him as not only commander, but as an officer in the Army.



Major Mark Thompson was awarded the Bronze Star for his service as a commander in Iraq last year.

"There are a lot of civilians paying prices as well there," said MAJ Thompson of the non-military serving abroad. "I truly appreciate all of the sacrifices they make. They truly support us."

Since returning stateside to Fort Dix in New Jersey, MAJ Thompson has once more found himself in a leadership position. He is now Commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, U.S. Army Support Activity. Yet again he is responsible for ensuring soldiers' safety and morale, just set against a different backdrop.

"The mission is different, but the goal is the same," explained MAJ Thompson.

And the larger goal, as always, remains taking care of his fellow soldiers.

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