Leave Those 'Trophies' Behind

MAJ PATRICK J. CHAISSON
42ND INFANTRY DIVISION
CAMP DOHA, KUWAIT

I've seen all kinds of things as officer in charge of the 42nd Infantry Division liaison cell in Camp Doha, Kuwait. Every day I see Soldiers attempting to bring illegal and dangerous souvenirs home from Iraq. This article takes a humorous look at these "mementos" of wartime service, but I hope you'll see this is a serious subject.

So, you're about to leave the combat zone for home. Your tour is over, and you want a souvenir of your time in the desert. But maybe you're not sure what constitutes an "appropriate" memento from Operation Enduring or Iraqi Freedom. That's why I'm here—to help you decide!

Part of my job is to brief Soldiers on what they can and can't bring back from Southwest Asia. I'll share these tips with you now. First, your keepsake must be tasteful, safe and legal. The military customs inspector at your redeployment camp determines what's safe and legal; your spouse back home has the final say on taste. While shopping for souvenirs, think about what your wife or husband will say (or scream). That life-sized brass camel statue that looked so attractive in the bazaar will get through customs but most likely won't pass inspection with the "Household 06." If you can imagine your spouse exclaiming, "There's no way you're bringing that thing into my house," you might want to reconsider your selection.

All kidding aside, there are some "trophies" you simply cannot bring back to the United States. These banned items might seem obvious to anyone blessed with common sense, but as we all know, common sense really isn't that common. That's why friendly customs inspectors search your stuff before you go home. To make their jobs easier and speed up your return home, here's a partial list of contraband that CANNOT be brought back from overseas.

- **Sand**. Southwest Asia currently is experiencing a critical shortage of sand—not even one grain can be spared! Besides, there's a real threat that the spirit of an ancient warrior king, like the one in "The Mummy" movies, lives in the sand and will hurt you bad. The king's spirit isn't the only thing living in the sand that can hurt you either. Just imagine all those microorganisms that aren't organic to American soil. Trust me, there's already plenty of dirt in your backyard.
- **Weapons**. A select-fire assault rifle is an excellent and even necessary item to have in the combat zone, but not so much back home. Your neighbors might be impressed with your new AK-47, but local law enforcement authorities likely will be even more impressed. They'll probably want to talk to you about how you got such a powerful weapon—maybe even through a bullhorn!
- **Ammunition, explosives, and unexploded ordnance**. Of all the things that can be used as a paperweight, a hand grenade is a poor choice. It'll roll all over your desk and maybe even detonate without notice. The term "dud" is commonly used to identify UXO, but it also applies to anyone challenged enough to play around with such stuff. Just because an explosive hasn't gone off doesn't mean it won't. It's easy—keep your hands to yourself and keep your hands! But don't worry if you "accidentally" pack something you shouldn't. The big bomb-sniffing dogs at the customs inspection will find it.
- **Cuban cigars**. Anything that tastes this good has to be either illegal or bad for

you. Cuban cigars are both. Enjoy your Havanas in Iraq because at customs you'll encounter a squadron of talking parrots specially trained to sniff out communist tobacco.

- **Pets**. The list of prohibited pets includes grasshoppers, lizards, camel spiders, scorpions, snakes and anything else that can make you say "ouch!" Whether they're dead or alive, squished, stuffed or encased in plastic, there's no earthly reason why you need a sand viper. And admit it—the whole time you were deployed, all you thought about was home. The desert is their home. If you bring a pet back to the States, it'll spend the rest of its life missing home. Is that what you really want?

Hopefully these hints will help you find the perfect—yet safe, appropriate and tasteful—souvenir that'll pass a customs search with flying colors. Selecting the right memento will lead to years of pleasant memories, something you'll cherish long after the sand flea bites heal.