



"I looked for an Iraqi man, but God brought me a man from America," says Ehda'a of her new husband, Sgt. Sean Blackwell (with her during their Aug. 17 wedding).



# "I Do's" in Iraq

Two American GIs, Sean Blackwell and Brett Dagen, marry Iraqi women—and could face court-martial

One bride wore a flowery dress, the other a pantsuit. The grooms wore camouflage and bullet-proof vests—and carried M-16 rifles. On Aug. 17 National Guard Sgt. Sean Blackwell and Cpl. Brett Dagen snuck off street patrol and met their girlfriends—both Iraqi doctors—along with some of the women's relatives and a few other soldiers in the courtyard of a Baghdad restaurant. There the two couples were wed by an Iraqi judge, who recited passages from the Koran as the men scanned the nearby rooftops for snipers. After signing papers and exchanging quick goodbyes with their new brides, the men continued on their patrol. "It was the happiest day of my life," says Blackwell's new wife, Ehda'a, 25. "I felt at peace."

Not for long. Far from toasting the nuptials, Blackwell and Dagen's superior officer blocked them from making any contact with their wives, curtailed their access to e-mail and telephones and launched an investigation that could lead to the pair being court-martialed. "They are not being investigated for marrying Iraqis," says a spokeswoman for the military's Central Command in Baghdad, "but for dereliction of duty and disobeying their commanding officers. They were supposed to be in one place and they were in another."

Even so, their case has highlighted a gray area of military conduct: what to do when Cupid is firing the shots. War brides have always been a part of life in an occupied zone, but with military

officials wary about security in Iraq—where more than 100 U.S. soldiers have been killed since President Bush called an end to major combat on May 1—even innocent flirtations have been under tight scrutiny. Yet there is no blanket policy on soldiers dating or marrying Iraqi women—"It's up to each individual commander," says the Centcom spokeswoman—and that has led to confusion in the ranks. "Supposedly there was word that there was no marriage allowed," says Sgt. David McDonald, who heads a security division of 120 based at Baghdad's convention center. "I think one concern is that if someone gets married, it's more

## Controversy

responsibility than they should be dealing with. We have to worry about bombs, suicide drivers and bullets. We don't have time for that."

Blackwell, however, made time. He was on guard duty at the Iraqi Ministry of Health when Ehda'a, an English-speaking doctor (for her safety she does not want her last name used), came by to seek work at a Baghdad hospital two weeks after the end of active combat. When she told him she feared she was in danger in the Iraqi city of Kut because of her Western ways, he tried to find her work alongside his battalion surgeon. A few days later he invited her to tour Saddam Hussein's palace with him. "Everything in Sean impressed me," Ehda'a says of Blackwell, 27, a Pensacola, Fla., native who joined the Army at 18 and has two young daughters back home—one from a previous marriage and one from another relationship. "The way he talks, the way he smiles, he captured my heart from the first look."

She introduced a 26-year-old friend, also a physician, to Blackwell's pal Dagen, 37—who worked as a mechanic



"It's a great love story," says Sean Blackwell's mother, Vickie McKee (with his daughter Kiersten, 6).

religion. He did not try for physical, but emotional, love."

In a letter to PEOPLE, Blackwell says that when the couple began discussing marriage, his battalion commander objected and threatened to have him reassigned to Kuwait. Determined,

and Hill could not be reached.)

Back home the men's relatives were taken aback but supportive. "It took me a while to get over the idea that he would be marrying the enemy," says Blackwell's mother, Vickie McKee, 46, who exchanges regular e-mails with

Ehda'a. "But she will fit in with the family, no problem." Says Dagen's cousin Gwen Tutton: "It breaks my heart that he would be in trouble for following his heart." Now working as a translator for Dyncorp, a contractor assisting in rebuilding Iraq, Ehda'a says she has received death threats from fellow Iraqis. She hopes to move to the U.S. as soon as possible; Blackwell's tour won't end before February. For now,

she would simply like to see him. "I cry every day because I am not with my husband," she says. "I will never be happy until we are together."

**THOMAS FIELDS-MEYER**

Zelie Pollon in Baghdad, Steve Helling in Orlando, Anne Lang in Austin and Courtney Rubin in London

## Love Among the Ruins



Some American GI's—like these in Baghdad—often work with Iraqi women.

Of the 130,000 U.S. forces in Iraq, many come into daily contact with Iraqis, some of whom work with them—at security checkpoints, as translators, as doctors and cleaners. "Meeting at work is how so many people meet anywhere in the world," says a State Department official posted in Baghdad. "Why not here?" Though some women have encountered criticism from locals who see them as fraternizing with the enemy, and soldiers have to tread carefully under the watch of their commanders, romance has still bloomed. "As cultures, we haven't mixed for a long time," says Raghad, 25 (not pictured), an Iraqi translator who is engaged to a 35-year-old soldier she will name only as Brian. "But love is everywhere."

before he was called up to go to Iraq in February. "At first they were just friends," Dagen's aunt Rita Bolton, of Addison, Texas, says. "But then it blossomed into romance." Blackwell's affair also became serious; Ehda'a visited several times a week. "Six hours would pass as six minutes," she says. "We talked about our different cultures and

Blackwell converted to Islam (required by Iraqi law for those marrying Muslims). But the commander, Lt. Col. Thad Hill, sent an order forbidding the union, according to Blackwell, who says that a sergeant major told him, "Muslims and Christians just don't jive together." (The military would not comment on the case,