



# Sun Exposure and US Army Troops in Iraq

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Sunset in Iraq is welcome after a day of great heat, intense ultraviolet radiation and at some seasons, sandstorms.

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## An interview with DAVID HANKE, an attorney for the Army deployed to Iraq.

It is well recognized that the risks of ultraviolet radiation exposure include sunburns, photoaging, skin cancer and cataracts. Despite large numbers of US troops deployed to hot, sunny regions in both past and current military conflicts, the problem of ultraviolet radiation exposure to US soldiers and veterans is seldom addressed. Furthermore, scant data exist on the development of skin cancer in this population. Anecdotally, a high rate of skin cancer and photo-damage can frequently be seen in older Caucasian veterans who report a history of military service in hot, sunny climates. Studies have corroborated this observation with an increased incidence of melanoma and other skin cancers demonstrated in service members who have served in the tropics.

## David Hanke, please tell us about your current assignment in Iraq.

A. I'm currently deployed to northern Iraq with the 101st Combat Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). I'm an attorney for the Army and, at the moment, I'm serving as the senior legal advisor and prosecutor for our brigade, which includes several thousand soldiers. I also advise commanders on administrative law and operational law issues, e.g., how to conduct a command-directed investigation into an accident, and how the rules of engagement apply in various situations.

Right now, we are stationed on a sprawling airbase. My office here is right on the airfield, surrounded by aircraft hangars, bunkers and multiple types of Army helicopters. With helicopters flying in and out all day long, it can be a very noisy place.

## Have you any interesting experiences to share with us?

A. The Army infantrymen, aviators and other "combat arms" soldiers who are out patrolling the streets and skies here are the ones who could tell about interesting and unusual experiences.



US Army soldiers wear heavy protective equipment including helmet, goggles and vests.



Soldiers endure the heat while wearing uniforms designed to protect against attack, not heat, usually with no natural or structural shade.

They are the ones out fighting insurgents and helping the Iraqi people rebuild their war-torn country. Because of the nature of my duties, I spend most of my time indoors, well inside the secure perimeter. Nevertheless, it has been an honor just to be a part of this mission in Iraq. Our soldiers and other military service members are dedicated to this mission and are giving it everything they've got, despite the tremendous personal sacrifices that they and their families have to make. I believe history will remember them for what they have done and what they continue to do.

### *Please describe the climate in northern Iraq.*

**A.** In the summer, temperatures are around 110 degrees during the daytime. It seems to be the hottest here in the afternoons. About a week ago, we had several consecutive days of 120-degree heat. In the fall months, the weather here is nicer. Temperatures are cool and just about perfect for staying comfortable in long sleeves. The winter weather was surprisingly cold. I wore my Army-issued fleece jacket nearly every day to stay warm. Near the end of the winter, the rainy season started. There were a dozen or so torrential downpours, at least three of which caused floods in living areas here on the base. Temperatures were still mild though. Then came the end of spring, which brought us sandstorms.

There's nothing quite like getting a face full of dust while walking home from work at the end of the day. The summer can be the harshest. The blazing hot sun comes out each day to vaporize everything in its path. I had a thermometer, up until recently, that could show temperature readings up to 120 degrees. I put it outside my office in the direct sunlight to check the temperature a few days ago. When I came back out to check it 30 minutes later, the thermometer had been permanently fried by the sun and would not even give me a reading. With temperatures that high and the sun beating down that hard, this can be an unforgiving place.

**With 120° temperatures and intense sunlight, Iraq can be an unforgiving place.**

### **Are sunscreen and sunglasses issued to protect soldiers from ultraviolet radiation?**

**A.** The Army made sunscreen available to us at the beginning of the deployment, but it wasn't an "issue item" – it was just there if you wanted to take some. As for sunglasses, yes – the Army definitely appreciates the importance of protecting its soldiers' eyes. The Army issued us multiple pairs of durable, high-quality

sunglasses and goggles which I was very happy to receive before we deployed from the United States. Sunglasses are also provided to troops in Iraq. We were each issued many good quality ballistic sunglasses and goggles.

*Were you given any information from the military about sun protection and the dangers of excessive sun exposure prior to your deployment to Iraq?*

A. We were briefed before we deployed on the importance of wearing sunscreen when out in the sun for any length of time, and there have been safety briefings during the deployment. In addition, every so often, you'll see a safety posting on a bulletin board informing you about the importance of wearing sunscreen. However, I'm not sure how much attention soldiers pay to any of this.

*Do you feel there is a level of sun protection awareness among your fellow colleagues and soldiers?*

A. No, I believe the vast majority of troops here are unaware of the risks posed by the prolonged sun exposure that many of them

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get on a daily basis. Realistically, most soldiers have no idea about the potential effects of repeated sunburns and probably think that wearing sunscreen is an unnecessary precaution. I haven't seen many soldiers use sunscreen out here, which is quite surprising.

*Have you observed sunburns in the troops? If so, are they frequent and severe?*

A. Absolutely. In an Army aviation brigade in Iraq, many of our soldiers spend hours and hours in the sun each day. We have

aviators, crew chiefs, mechanics, fuelers, transporters and countless other types of soldiers whose jobs put them outdoors under the sun for a good part of the day, seven days a week. The majority of sunburns I see here are on the necks, ears and faces of our soldiers. Our long pants and long-sleeved tops protect our skin from sunburn. However, the necks, ears, faces, and especially the noses of our soldiers remain exposed.

*Do you think that education on sun protection and sun protective measures has been effective in preventing sunburns and excessive ultraviolet radiation exposure in members of the military?*

A. Not really, but only time will tell. I'm not a doctor but, in a decade or so, I wouldn't be surprised if our country has a spike in

***I wouldn't be surprised if there is a spike in the skin cancer rate.***

the skin cancer rate, due to hundreds of thousands of veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom here in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. In both countries, soldiers are exposed to excessive amounts of the sun's rays while serving their country in these hot climates.

*What do you think could be done to make our troops more aware of skin damage from UV radiation?*

A. I hate to say it, but I think showing our troops photos of some terrible skin cancers would be effective. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. The visual would show them what might happen if they do not guard against sun overexposure. Soldiers respond well to pictures and videos during briefings of all kinds. These pictures could be included in the numerous safety briefings they receive before deploying to the Middle East.

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