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Former Army doctor: I treated Saddam like any other patient

POSTED: 2257 GMT (0657 HKT), September 1, 2006



CNN's Alex Quade interviews Dr. Sudip Bose about his time in Iraq.

By Alex Quade
CNN

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Editor's note: In our Behind the Scenes series, CNN correspondents share their experiences covering news.

NEW YORK (CNN) -- Did you hear the one about the doctor and the dictator?

It may sound like the beginning of a joke. At the time, Dr. Sudip Bose thought, maybe it is.

It started as a relatively quiet night for Bose, a U.S. Army Captain serving medical duty at the Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad. "Quiet" being a subjective term in a war zone. Then, as he says, all hell broke loose.

"They just secured the area and he came in," Bose tells me.

He's referring to former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, brought into the hospital for Bose to treat by U.S. forces "armed to the nines."

It was a pivotal event that came as a complete surprise to the doctor. He was given no warning that he'd be the physician treating Hussein in the weeks after his capture from the so-called "spider hole" in December 2003.

I asked him what it was like to be with the former Iraqi dictator.

"I just really didn't have time to think of anything. I just treated him like I would any other patient," Bose says.

"Only after the fact, you realize the weight of the moment -- that I was face-to-face with somebody who signifies so much," he adds.

Because of doctor-patient confidentiality, Bose says, he will not tell me what he treated Hussein for.

He smiles when I point out what must have been the irony of the situation -- that Saddam Hussein was being treated by a U.S. Army doctor in what had been Hussein's family's private clinic, which was taken over by the U.S. Army and converted into a combat support hospital to treat wounded U.S. troops.

"It was definitely one of the more memorable parts of my deployment," Bose says.

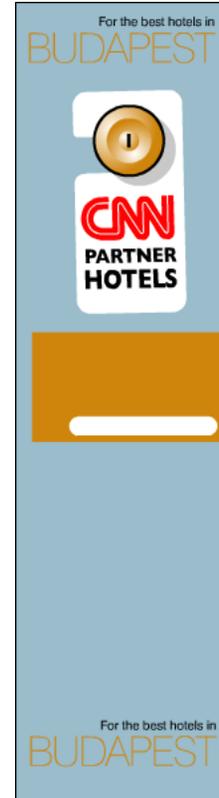
It is only now, two years after I met Bose and long after he treated Saddam Hussein, that he is allowed to speak of him with me, a reporter. That's because he is no longer in the military, we are no longer in Iraq, and I am no longer under military embedding guidelines, which might consider Hussein's treatment an operational security issue.

I met Bose at that same hospital in the Green Zone where U.S. forces brought Hussein. The night I was there, the hospital was anything but quiet.

"Mine attack! Head injury! Right hand and right leg," an Army Black Hawk air medic shouted to Bose as the gurney, with a bloody U.S. serviceman on it, was rushed to the emergency room.

That was the handover from air medic to hospital. It was now up to Bose, the Army doctor on duty. And it wasn't long before other wounded U.S. servicemen and women were rolled in for him to treat.

"Most of them are explosive sort of injuries," Bose told me at the time. "Improvised explosive devices or car bombs. Bombs in anything -- soda cans, cars, dead animals, whatever. Wrong place at the wrong time. It's a bad injury, usually."



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Bose shared with me then how difficult it was to be a soldier serving with other soldiers and then be the doctor treating them, too. He once treated a soldier he'd had breakfast with earlier that day in the mess hall.

"The blood and the guts ... you're ready for it. What's different here is that there's another level of attachment to your patients, which are the soldiers. Because they're like all of us, soldiers too," Bose said.

Because of operational security issues, there were things he couldn't tell me about at the time: Primarily about having treated Saddam Hussein, but also about treating would-be suicide bombers -- Iraqi detainees and prisoners with grenades and other explosives still inside their bodies.

But that was then.

I kept in touch with Bose, and he is now retired from the Army, but not from medicine. He works as an emergency physician at Advocate Christ Medical Center, the busiest trauma hospital in Chicago, Illinois.

"There are several nights here that seem like Iraq all over again, with all the shootings and car accidents that come in to the ED [Emergency Department]. But no IEDs [Improvised Explosive Devices]. And that's nice," Bose tells me during his rounds.

In the two years that I've been following Bose and the stories of wounded U.S. troops in Iraq, I've come to learn that the good doctor is a master of understatement, especially when it comes to discussing Saddam Hussein.

"He was a patient. And I just tried to treat him like any other," Bose says.

Then he continues his rounds in the Chicago ER: "How's your stomach, sir?"

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