

## DODGING MORTAR ATTACKS

Eileen Padberg

BY NICK SCHOU

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2006 - 3:00 PM



Illustration by Matt Bors

"Don't walk anywhere alone," the officer warned them. "Don't pick up anything on the street—there are improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, everywhere in Baghdad, and even a \$100 bill can be rigged to explode."

"That's when the reality of my decision to go to Iraq finally sank in," Padberg says. "Before that, I really hadn't thought about how dangerous Iraq really was. I started asking myself, 'What have I done?' But by then it was too late to turn around."

Padberg speaks about her experiences at Chapman University this Tuesday. Flak jackets and gas masks are optional.

Eileen Padberg was a Republican political consultant from Laguna Niguel until two years ago. That's when she dropped everything—on something like a lark, but more sober given that it involved moving from the relative tranquility of Orange County political infighting to a real, brutal killing zone—to help Iraqi businesswomen. It wasn't until she put on a gas mask for the first time that Padberg had second thoughts about the decision.

She was standing in an air-conditioned conference room at a Kellogg, Brown & Root office inside the Khalifa Hilton, located on a beach 40 miles south of Kuwait City. It was late May 2005 and blazingly hot outside. In two days, Padberg and her Iraqi-American associate were scheduled to fly to Baghdad on a lumbering U.S. Air Force C-130 cargo plane. An American military officer was patiently showing her and about 15 other American civilians how to attach the masks to their faces quickly enough to survive a biological weapon attack.

Along with the gas mask, Padberg had just been issued a 41-pound flak vest and a helmet. With the equipment came a briefing.