

Malibu to Baghdad

Perspective of a PM Assigned to the Warfront

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The story that follows was captured from an e-mail received by Defense Systems Management College Professor John Higbee from Army Lt. Col. John Masterson, a product manager and 2002 graduate of DAU's Program Manager Skills Course (PMSC). Masterson wrote the e-mail enroute to Iraq.

On the evening of April 4, 2003, I drove my rental car leisurely down Ventura Highway toward Malibu, Calif. Upon arrival at Coastal Highway No. 1, my hunger pulled me into a place called Johnnie's New York Pizza. I sat at the bar to eat and watched Fox News updates on the war in Iraq, as a couple of patrons viewed my obvious military haircut and politely asked, "Goin' overseas?" A couple of Pepperdine U. undergrads peered up from their homework with polite smiles and I felt blessed by the most liberal of societies...surf-board-wielding Pepperdinians who cared enough to study.

Baghdad was to be completely in U.S. hands soon, and the most distant thought in my mind was to stand on the roof of an occupied building at Saddam International Airport 18 days later... watching tracer rounds pierce the night air toward Ad Dawrah to my east. An unbelievable series of events had transpired over a two-week period, and my physical movement went like this:

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California's Simi Valley to L.A.; fly to Newark, N.J., drive to Fort Monmouth, N.J., where I was stationed to pack all my gear...midnight drive to Washington D.C., and Fort Belvoir, Va., for reload and training on some special equipment; fly from D.C. to Atlanta, drive to Fort Benning, Ga., for 4 days of training on weapons and mask, and pre-deployment medical exams; drive back to Atlanta, fly to D.C. area to standby on mission call; visit with my dear Mother

who drove one solid day to see me as if she may never again; depart from D.C. in one-way rental car that I dropped in Wilmington, Del., then taxi to Dover AFB with a Vietnam-era cab driver named Dave who had virtually commanded a Hawk Battery as an E-4 in 'Nam.

This guy was ripping through traffic proudly delivering this high-ranking [right] lieutenant colonel to the nearby

I told my cab driver, Dave, who had virtually commanded a Hawk Battery as an E-4 in 'Nam, to be careful as he drove me to Fort Monmouth to board the C-5A Galaxy that would transport me to Iraq. "I think they'll wait on me."



air base, a trip Dave had made numerous times over the last few months, allowing his taxi service to survive. I told him to be careful, "I think they'll wait on me..." and called the desk at Dover to be sure the flight line knew I was on the way.

"I'm actually trying to get caught by the police," Dave replied, "because then they'll give me an escort to the base and we won't have to fight this traffic...." I didn't interfere with his plan and after convincing the gate guards that he was a Vietnam Vet (and not a "Communist Pig"), we sailed to the terminal just in time for a van to escort me (really) to a waiting C5-A Galaxy Transport Jet, that in all the hurry to get me and five special forces soldiers on board, then idled for another hour as fumes and noise poured out into the Delaware sound. (Testimony to the power needed to de-

liver war.) I finally exhaled as I strapped into temporary platformed seats above a cargo hatch that was loaded with everything one might need to wage victory.

Six hours later and four time zones away, we land in Spain, just north of Seville at a small transition point called Moron Air Base. Breakfast at the local dining facility was preceded by my walk across the base; the smell of a breeze that had gently circumvented a few palm trees was relaxing even though the sun was coming up four hours prior to my brain expecting it. We waited here for another three hours in the USO lounge that provided free coffee, paper, letters, and MWR (Morale, Welfare, and Recreation) ink pens for writing home, while on the tarmac the plane was drinking more fuel at the pump for the ride to Kuwait.

Landing in Kuwait was interesting in that the airport was divided into "civilian" and "military" sections. I had a coworker (who was already on site) pick me up and deliver me to Camp Doha about an hour west-northwest of Kuwait City. I had only been in Camp Doha a few hours when I found out that Baghdad was in my future, and by Wednesday morning a CH-47 Chinook helicopter with two massive blades whirled into Camp Virginia near Udairi Range in northern Kuwait. Twelve other soldiers and I crammed care packages and U.S. Mail on board and I strapped myself in across from a box that read:

To: Any Soldier
From: Troop 670, Northfield
Elementary School, MD

We took off in a storm of dust clipping the desert brush at 200 miles per hour. We flew with left and right-door gunners manning loaded .50 caliber machine guns and with the rear ramp dropped, we witnessed the land move beneath us. Unbelievable ride. Desolate scraps of civilization speckled the land between Kuwait's border and Baghdad.

Every 20 miles or so where some stream crept from nowhere, you could see mud-hut homes adjacent to pitifully meek gardens. Staff-leaning shepherds standing on horse-thin ankles kept watch over skinny sheep that seemed to wonder where the greenness had gone. Where the stagnant streams became actual trickles of water, the life forms were more animated.



Often you'd see youngsters clad in bright robes popping out with arms flailing and bright smiles to wave at the big noisy machines that dusted their incomplete rooftops. I noticed the door gunner throwing Tootsie Rolls gently from the chopper; one hand on a loaded

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.50 caliber machine gun, the other searching diligently for candy from a clear Ziploc bag at his side. Quite a contrast and certainly identifying of the spectrum we have presented to the Iraqi people over the last two months.

The Chinook landed for hot fuel-up, blades cranking, just south of a place

code named "Dogwood"; then took off in a flurry toward Saddam International Airport...fittingly name-changed to Baghdad International by coalition forces.

Unbelievable occupation of a city. The airport was one big headquarters for an entire operation that now had the daunting task of calming the harassing fires of rogue bands in and around the city and restoring order. Picture me sleeping on the ticket counter at Reagan National, and the scene is set for how we completely came into this place...I found a corner office full of war dirt and fallen ceiling tiles and cleaned it away so I could sleep soundly in a waterless, powerless, and hot meal-less world. I had no room to complain having talked to several soldiers who had not been in a shower since mid-March...in war, the entire environment is relative...and there is always someone that has lived an extreme that you, personally, will never breach.

Easter morning was a bit different this year. By noon, I would have gone in an armed convoy through the toughest neighborhoods in Baghdad and at 1 p.m. found myself on the west bank of the Tigris River listening to the perimeter security take AK-47 rounds throughout the afternoon. The entanglement between U.S. Army battalion commanders and local mafioso-clerics was like two third graders arm-wrestling in the lunchroom, but with guns to the temple of the loser.

The Iraqi mentality centers on power, and showing any weakness in front of these people is a sure way to lose your shirt. Rage, aggression, and fire power are very clearly understood and Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) that pierce the perimeter are met with total to-the-throat reactions. Two nights prior to my arrival, the battalion commander in the zone I was visiting counter-attacked decisively to make a point that we will not tolerate neighborhoods that let the rogue Palestinians and Syrians pepper our troops with small arms fire. This tactic works. Calm reigned with the strong-arming and U.S. soldiers slept.

I had spoken to the real warriors of the 3rd Infantry Division and came to realize that our sheer dominance of night vision and superior weapons are brought about by an American society that will accept very few casualties in war. This has demanded that we stay on the leading edge of weapons development; and though we put undue pressure on commanders in the field to execute their missions with zero loss of life, it is that very thing that keeps the acquisition community prodded for excellence.

I realized then that giving your life for your country is relatively easy. You walk into a bullet that you didn't mean to walk into. The timing is bad and non-consequential to your life that is now, physically, over. The giving of a life for the country is what families do—Moms, Dads, Brothers, Sisters. Mothers who get out of bed and change diapers. Dads who get Johnny on the bike and teach him how to throw a ball as soon as possible...hardworking Americans who desire their kids to become productive citizens, who teach them manners and go through all the trials and tribulations of raising this kid through the all-knowing teenage years to become a young adult...and then the call comes and they find out that that soldier, airman, marine, or sailor is returning through Dover for one final trip home without saying goodbye...that's giving a life for a country...so we all thank the relatives of all who have suffered that.

A cool breeze kicked up from the Tigris and I pictured this land as it has been since man walked the earth. Hard to believe we were just upstream from the Garden of Eden where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers make full confluence...and yes, a long way from Malibu.

God Bless the U.S.A.

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Editor's Note: The author welcomes comments on this article and may be contacted at John.Masterson@iews.monmouth.army.mil.