

A Soldier Reflects

The following journal entries come from a young soldier deployed to Iraq during the early days of the war in 2003. He has shared his reflections, anonymously, so that others may know something of what young men and women in the military faced.

Seychelles, Seychelles by the Seashore

I would like to play the travel agent for this email. Subject: Seychelles. Beautiful islands, considering there are only 115 of them. Their history is a complicated one. They were colonized by the British, but they speak French.

Much of the British influence still remains. The buildings, although crumbling (which only gives the island its character), are of British origin. As we drove through the downtown on our way to check in with the boat our cab driver showed us the courthouse. Inside you could see the judge in his robe with his white wig.

The Island was liberated on June 5th 1977. We missed the celebration by one day. After its liberation it became a communist sympathizer. We had an Air Force base on the island and ironically enough it was a very strategic position for us. Our satellite on the peak of the tallest mountain on the island gave us the ability to monitor the entire Indian Ocean. The base was shut down in 1998.

The people gave up on communism around 1993. The same president has been in power for twenty-five years, and they say he is corrupt but it doesn't affect the people too much. For instance, the island is a large tourist trap for many Europeans, and Americans. The President has ordered the hotels and casinos to allow Americans to pay in U.S. dollars instead of rupees. It is five rupees on the dollar. There is a large Black Market for U.S. dollars. The President can save himself from losing money during the exchange when it comes time to pay their debts. The people are black; some of them are lighter-skinned almost looking like Arabs. They all have an accent that sounds South African. The people are truly the friendliest people. They are not afraid to talk to you, and show off their Island. They are used to tourists, and don't mind them a bit. After all the tourists are keeping them employed.

All over the island you find drifters, or travelers who have landed on the island temporarily. They all look the same. They are tanned with sun streaks in their long hair. They do a variety of jobs. One man we met who worked next to our bungalow was a fisherman. He and some of his friends had some wooden boats that they paddled out into the water to cast their nets each day. They offered to take us to Silhouette Island to go snorkeling. If we had had another day we would have taken them up on their offer.

Our diving guide was from South Africa and was working his way around the world working in dive shops. His next big job was working in Australia on the Barrier Reef. There were others who were waiters, bartenders, carpenters, and everything else you can imagine. When I see

that I wonder where they came from and why. I have always wanted that form of life style, but I have been bound to laws of nature and man.

We pulled in early on the third of June. The day before, while pulling in, we had crossed the equator, and to celebrate they had a beer day — two beers per man, and some BBQ ribs. Branson and I sat on the flight deck and it just felt different crossing the line that cuts the world in half. I could almost see an imaginary line, and I thought about all the places that lie on that line, and to the north and south. It was a magical experience that is hard to describe. We could not pull into a pier so the ship dropped anchor and we took LCU's to shore. The Military can take anything fun and make it extremely grueling. First we waited all morning for them to sound Liberty Call.

We had dropped anchor at 6:30 but liberty wasn't sounded for five hours after that. No one really knows why. Then we waited in line to sign out of the boat. We climbed into the LCU's, which are the large WW2 type boats that can drive up onto shore and drop their gates. They are hot, oily, and uncomfortable. After an hour of standing in the hot noisy well deck they finally let the water in and the boat pulled out from the back of the ship.

It was only a thirty-minute ride, but for security reasons the Navy had only requested one pier. We sat in the hot sun, only a swimming distance away from the pier and waited while the other one unloaded people. All in all we ended up finally getting on shore to enjoy our day and a half of free time around 2:30. It was one of those extremely frustrating experiences. Not to mention we had to check in with them twice, and it was a twenty dollar round trip to get back to the pier. Some things just never make sense to me.

After our long boat ride we were all in bad spirits, and frustrated. The island seemed less beautiful. I remember stepping out onto the flight deck that morning and getting my first good look at her: a small port with a light house; a couple of Islands sitting in the water beside her, and large, green mountains with majestic cliffs all over her. I took a look through the big eyes, and noticed the red roofed plaster houses. I knew if I could ever get to it, I would fall in love.

The group consisted of Branson, Cortez, and two of our Marines, Duncan and Greenlee. Branson is only about 24 but being the father of two kids has aged him quite a bit, and has turned him into a definite dad. He is skinny, and looks like an older man. He walks around with his map in his back pocket and his video camera around his shoulder. He walks fast so you have to rush to keep up. He likes to coordinate everything before it actually happens, and sometimes the coordination can drive you crazy. He's pretty stubborn so don't argue with him. If he said the sun is a cold place he could probably argue it into an ice cube.

The cab ride was absolutely beautiful in itself. One of the things that I would have liked to do was take a cab ride around the island just to see the whole thing. However our time was

limited, and my first priority was to kick my shoes off and relax. The streets were narrow, and to the side a deep ditch had been dug for drainage. The cab drivers always had something to say, and drove like all other cab drivers in this world.

We climbed up the side of the mountain, overlooking the downtown of Victoria, then through a gap in the mountains, and we exchanged one ocean view for another. We told the cab driver that we wanted to go to a cheap hotel. He drove us to the Boat House, and told us we could find lodging in that general area.

We stood on the side of the road with our bags by our sides. On one side was a green mountain and on the other a white sandy beach shaded by palms and mangroves. The water was crystal. One mile out was a large mountain of an island called Silhouette Island. There were a few stores, and a lot of restaurants tucked into the shade of the palm groves, and a lady sitting on a fence. "You need a room?" She said to us as we stood there mesmerized by the place our feet had landed.

She escorted us to a bungalow with a patio, and two beds. The floors were tile, and the walls a mahogany. There were only white sheets on the bed; there was no need for a comforter. It was cool there with the constant breeze coming off the water. We wasted no time in swimming, and checking out our surroundings: a beach store, a convenience store, and a dive shop along with a pizzeria and many other restaurants without walls. I checked out the dive shop and there were five spots open for the 12:00 trip the next day.

After a nice swim in the ocean we met at the pizzeria. The floor was sand, and no place on the island required shoes, and everyone walked around in their bathing suits, so I figured why try to fight culture. It wasn't hard to give in, and I started to relax, and the worries of being on the ship melted away. We ate our pizza and sipped cold beers beside the water.

Branson and I had a four-hour duty from 6:00 until 10:00 that night. We had to leave everyone and go back to the pier. During the duty we eavesdropped on people who were upset that the island was so boring. They wanted more nightlife. I filled out a crossword puzzle and thought 'that is the greatest part about this place.'

We met up with the rest of the guys. They were at the boathouse and were going on and on about the food, and how good the wine was. Duncan introduced me to the manager. I told the manager that I was in the market for the best glass of wine that he had. He took me to the back room, and handed me a bottle of French wine. "For the best drink pour it elevated over the wine glass to allow the air to get trapped in it." It was a nice glass.

The evening found us at the Casino. Branson enjoys a nice game of Black Jack. I am afraid that I would end up liking it, so I stuck to playing solitaire. I was just sitting by the bar watching people when a man walked up beside me. He asked for a glass of Scotch. I noticed his thick

Scottish accent and was perplexed by his dark complexion. He looked Arabic. The bartenders were bad about their service. He started complaining to me about them and I just agreed with him. Before you knew it I found out his father was from Pakistan, his mother from Glasgow. He was born in Glasgow as well. He worked for a travel agency and was being paid to spend a couple of weeks on the island.

It wasn't long until the whole bar was filled with the English. A man from Wales sat beside me. He disagreed with the war, but "What can you do?" he said. An older woman from London was the ringleader of the whole excursion. Another man came from the other side, the good side of London; and so on and so forth. I think I talked to all of them and by the end of the night I was talking like our friends again: "You can't sell a bloody Ford Focus that you have never driven, mate. Can't sell an Island you have never been to."

We talked about politics, and our countries. We talked about the island. We talked about home. We shared stories. The travel agency paid for the night, anything we wanted. It was a nice experience getting to know them, and it was easy to detect their accents and where they were from.

Since there wasn't enough room for us all in the bungalow, I took one for the team, and slept on the patio. I like sleeping outside anyway. I took one last dip in the ocean then fell asleep listening to the nightlife. I didn't even need a blanket and slept very well. I woke up that morning to find the lady who gave us the room, draping a blanket over me, and putting a pillow under my head. She said something to me in French then she was gone. Such kindness is hard to find in most places. It helped me to sleep a little easier into the morning.

We ate a breakfast of eggs by a stream that flowed into the ocean, checked in with the boat, and then we were diving. It was a beautiful dive. The guys fell in love with it. It had been so long I had forgotten how beautiful it is. We swam with the schools, swam by the coral, and played Frisbee with the starfish.

Our guides were from all around the world. They told me about the beach on the south end of the island where the waves broke at twelve feet. Some of the more dedicated guys from the ship had gone surfing. I wanted to surf, but I also wanted to go hiking ... and hiking ... and so much more.

After getting back, Branson and I walked down the beach and met up with Cardoza. He was about to rent a small catamaran, so I jumped at the opportunity. We had to paddle our way out past the shore, and even then the winds came in gusts only. The people rented the boat to us for an hour, but forgot that we were out there. We stayed on the water for close to two hours. The island looked different from the water. You could see the rain forests that inhabited the hillside. The people on the shore were so small and far away. It was quiet.

We lounged around and talked about business and made plans for Australia. There were sail boats moored off the beach. We sailed around them, and back again. I have always wanted to learn to sail and spend my life roaming from port to port, from island to island. I wonder if they knew how well they had it.

Dinner was spent at the Boat House with another bottle of wine for the table and the best seafood buffet I have ever tasted. It was right off the grill, and the variety was endless. There was something for everyone.

The desserts were some baby bananas served in a rum sauce. Afterwards we sat by the beach talking to some natives about their island and their life. We talked about books, and Shakespearean plays. We left late that night to get back on the boat.

I remember discovering Jimmy Buffett and Bob Marley. I remember traveling to Puerto Rico for two weeks almost four years ago and discovering the tropics. Islands seem to have their own atmosphere. They have their own way of life. That idea has always been with me since I was a sophomore: that there has to be a place on earth where things make sense.

In a song, Jimmy Buffett writes, "Everyone here is just more than contented to be living and dying in 3/4 time." I can't think of a better phrase for the lifestyle there. It is a place you can go and be away from everyone and everything; hang up a hammock and kick off your shoes. So why can't it be like that back home? For some reason it just isn't, but it does offer an idea for the way I would like my life to be. After we left, I think I took a little something for myself from there: I took a memory of a dream, and it feels good.

An-Nasiriyah

"These were the streets where calloused men walked, shrouded women worked, and curious children played. They were lined with trash and the cloud of flies too dense to see through. The power lines like spider webs hanging over these beautifully sad streets."

An-Nasiriyah was the town where Jessica was captured, and a platoon of Mortars overrun. American bodies were drug through these streets. The Marines before us lost 18 men defending a bridge. So when they told us we were going into this town, we envisioned a blood bath. Tension grew, and I learned that the only thing to offer others and myself was a good sense of humor at the appropriate times.

The fighting ended twenty-four hours before we entered the town. We left our position from the Iraqi military base that served as their boot camp. The sun was setting over the marshes as we loaded onto five-tons. I was armed with my Beretta, but I borrowed a shotgun off of our point man, who also carried a rifle. I think I kept it close with me the whole time because of the security I felt with it. I had no intentions of using it, but these were untrusting streets.

Our convoy halted as gunfire began just a few hundred yards to our left. Echo Company was engaging a target and their tracer rounds bounced off the ground. It was amazing what you could sleep through. Our men were sleeping in shifts. We were not planning to sleep at all that night once we finally hit the deck. I couldn't sleep. The stars were out and the rhythm of the guns just echoed in my ears. I reviewed everything I had learned over and over again in my head—sucking chest wounds, arterial bleeds, and compromised airways. One can only think about such things for so long. My mind wandered to family and friends. I had to shake myself out of it. I tried to keep from thinking about people and places that I loved while I was across the border. It only made me homesick. I wanted to keep focused. I didn't want to fail my Marines.

After a four-hour wait in the piercing cold of the night, the trucks jolted and we slowly moved into the town. We drove by little houses tucked away in a grove of palms and into a field. The houses of the town lined the other side. We off loaded. Our platoon was to head back along the road and set up security while the other platoons got into their footholds. Then as the sun came up and the people woke up we would be in their front yards and they could not protest us.

We hiked back through the village in the grove along the Euphrates. We pushed back along the road. The wildlife of the Euphrates reminded me of nights in Virginia with all the wildlife of Tidal Waters calling through the darkness. Frogs and crickets called out, breaking the cold night. Animals have no concept of anything around them. They wake up, eat, and go about their daily routine, then rest. The next day is the same for them, uninterrupted and simple. They did not know that the animals that were the highest on the food chain were at war with each other. And the men that invaded their habitat were armed and scared. They could not understand these things, and I couldn't either, but I wanted to be like them so much that night. I wanted to wake up in a warm bed and not have to be apprehensive and focused.

A single shot rang out and I heard the sound of the impact as it bounced off the ground. It was close, twenty feet away, maybe more. Every one dropped down. It was too loud to be an AK-47. "It was CAAT platoon," our radio operator said as he strolled past us in the middle of the column, "they said they won't shoot at us again." We moved into our position, and sat. We sat for hours by the river with the stars, the wildlife, and the cold to keep us awake. In the military you sit around a lot. You form this ability to block out time. Two years ago, four hours was a lifetime. Sitting for hours now is just sitting for hours, and when it is over you never knew it was there.

We displaced and moved back to the village where we slept in watches. It was three o'clock in the morning. We had to stand to at 5:30. I fell asleep with the root of a palm tree as my pillow and no sleeping bag for warmth. The sleep was often broken by the sound of roosters and the dogs. When it wasn't broken by that I woke up shaking from the cold, and counting the time until I would see light again.

These War Torn Streets

We did not have to see the combat that came before us to know what happened in An-Nasiriyah. We could see it in the faces of the people who walked these war torn streets. I remember hearing a story about Ernest Hemingway. They say when he was a correspondent, and researching his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* during the Spanish Civil War, he spent his days in a bar. He would listen to the stories of travelers and soldiers as they took refuge there. Although he rarely saw the real combat the stories came to him.

So it was, for the most part, with us. I had a room that I lived in with two other guys, and people would come to visit and tell the stories of all that was happening beyond our small section of patrol. The room was founded after an extreme distaste and stand off about the way things were being run.

We dubbed it the village. Our building for the company was across the soccer fields from Saddam Hospital. It was the agricultural building for that area of Iraq. The building had a fairly open first floor, and the second floor rooms were open as well, and the five floors above that were offices. We lived on the left hand side of the second floor.

As you entered the large room it was darker than the rest. There was a small window at the end of the rectangular room, and on the sides there were small diamond shaped windows. As you entered the room to the left there was a bathroom. Iraqis don't use toilets. They have porcelain holes in the floor. We could never get used to not having a seat.

The room just past the bathroom was a room within the big room. It had two doors on either side as well as small windows. It was completely tile. When the platoon moved in we shoved all the broken glass into the room along with radiators that had been broken off the walls by looters.

For the first couple of days I slept in the middle of the big room. Things were getting ridiculous. People were up all night talking. Patrols would come in late at night and wake us up as they took off their gear. The people around me were beginning to annoy me. We would wake up at 5:30 when our patrols weren't until 8:30 or 9:00. I was getting tired of waking up just to eat breakfast then go back to sleep.

The attachments lived in the back corner by themselves. They were a close group of guys who didn't listen to the reveille call. They were the machine gunners and demolition guys that had been attached to us from weapons platoon.

I got to know the machine gunners in a unique way. First they were all country boys that

discussed fishing and hunting all day. I don't know much about fishing and hunting, but I do know how to relax and tell stories about the woods. I stopped by their machine gun nest one evening and stayed up with them.

We talked about the situation in the town. We talked about the platoon and the problems that would go unspoken forever. We talked about the mountains back home. It became a daily routine. Every evening I would get tired of the same voices so I would climb the steps to the gunners nest. I was the only one in the platoon who kept them company and they respected that.

Eventually Bell asked me why I just didn't move in with them if I didn't like the guys I was living with, "Or why don't you just move into the bat cave?" The next morning they woke me up at 5:30 and Hamilton started in on me. He was joking around, but I was ready for a change.

I spent the whole morning cleaning the room out. I put a bookshelf in the door to block the view from the big room and hung an old torn Iraqi Flag from the window. One of the Machine Gunners took notice and told me he was moving in. Before long we had a table in the middle. Pictures of places and things that reminded us of home hanging on the wall. We had shelves for everything we needed. We made seats out of the radiators. We cut holes in an old paint can and laid chicken wire over the top to make a stove.

Corporal Barr came in to see our progress. He was a demolitions guy from Stafford, VA. Five minutes later he had moved in to and we were boiling eggs and heating water for our coffee. "You know what I want for dinner. I want an omelet." I said sipping my coffee. Bonds smiled, "Doc I can make a good omelet."

The rest of the day we spent shopping. We were trading MRE's for pots and pans. We bought oil lamps, potatoes, eggs, onions, garlic, chi, incense, candles, cooking oil, and cokes (all the cokes were either Pepsi, Seven Up, or orange soda). They came in glass bottles that looked like something from the fifties. The kids would make you return the bottles so they could take them in to get refilled.

From that day on we were cooking. Everyday we would go out in town and buy and trade. A family finally took us in. We would make an order with them and they would make the bread for our meals. Bread was a big deal for these people. They cooked it in circles the size of pizza and thicker than Mexican tortillas. We used the bread as plates.

The family would give us chickens and goat meat. They had a little girl with crossed eyes, and two little boys. One was just reaching his teens and spoke excellent English. We were cooking pasta, Mac and Cheese (the cheese came from the MRE, and they also have spices like cayenne pepper in some of the meals), burritos with goat meat, rice, omelets, and the list goes on.

It wasn't a matter of whether or not the food tasted good. The point is that we were surviving. We were making the best of our situation. People were coming from all over the compound to our room just to visit.

They all said it was something out of *Platoon*. It was from the Vietnam era. Bunch of hippies. We were playing cards, dominos, and jeopardy until all hours in the morning and sleeping in. Everyone in the "Village" had their job. One person would clean; the other would do the dishes. I would help our Mexican friend cook, and Bonds would collect the firewood.

We were improving the room. Bell made hooks to hang from the water pipes so we could hang the pots and pans. He also made a stirring spoon and spatula, seeing as how we had been cooking with K-Bars up until then. We were like a group of prisoners, and we were that close, too.

Eventually our leaders became irritated with the room. They thought we were separating ourselves from the platoon. They hated the attitude the room carried, so Staff Sergeant made us take the posters down and move out. I was mad but we moved out. It worked better. The room wasn't so cluttered and we still cooked.

So that is how the stories came to us. They were stories on top of the ones we were living. We lived in the place where people would go to sit down, have a smoke and tell their stories. Now I will tell the stories to you, but there are too many to write in one sitting. They will come in waves, as soon as I can figure them out.

The Children of Kabron

Kabron was the Village. It rested on the side of the river. The houses were made of brick, and a family lived in one house. A family could consist of 20-30 people. The houses were no bigger than our houses. Each house, or group of houses, flew a different color flag to represent the family. In the middle of the Village was a hole, and in that hole the town's trash was thrown. It was a filthy place that smelled like feces. As we woke up the people woke up. They let the cows and dogs out of their small courtyards. The chickens began picking through the trash for food. A band of Bedouin shepherders walked their flock through the main street of the town. A man on a camel lead the herd, and dogs marched dutifully beside the herd.

The people were timid with us. They stood inside their doorways watching us. A man came out of his house, and as soon as he saw us he turned around and went back in. There was a small girl around eight. She was watching with curiosity as we ate breakfast, and cleaned our weapons. I had a packet of charms in my pocket. I slowly approached her. She began to back off into her house. I stopped and held the candy out in my hand. Her eyes lighted up as she

reached for it, and her smile was beautiful. She placed the candy in her mouth and disappeared into the house.

The little girls in Iraq were special. The boys would grow annoying as they pestered you for candy, and money. They would crowd around you and say, "Mister, Mister. Money. Give me." It would make us so angry that sometimes we would have to push them away. They would come in large crowds. If you gave one person something you had to give them all something. It was a mob. The girls, however, while there were a few that would follow us, most would just watch with a smile on their face. They learned at a young age to express everything with their eyes and facial expressions. They had to because their beauty would be shrouded at a young age. They had character, and personality where as the boys were all the same. However, in Kabron they were new to us, and we were new to them.

An old man came out and approached us. He spoke broken English. "Is it ok for them to come out?" he asked. Our Lieutenant spoke to him and instructed the man to tell them to go about their daily lives. The man walked up and down the street calling out to the people, and like the munchkins after the wicked witch from the east was crushed by Dorothy's house, they came out. The man came to us with his list of complaints. No water, no electricity, they can't go to their jobs, the people were sick. The Lieutenant called me up to the road. As I came up I could hear babies crying. Men were shouting, "Doctor, doctor!" They held their kids out to me. A baby with dysentery and his belly swelled up, crying from hunger. A man with a tapeworm that wound all the way around his leg, and an infected ingrown toenail that colored his toe yellow and black; men with perennial abscesses; all things that I couldn't treat. I told the man I was only a medic with battle dressings. He pushed me and pushed, but I couldn't help them. I think it was then that I began to realize that I am wearing the wrong uniform. I took it hard, and hated the fact that I couldn't help them. I was upset with the Lieutenant. He apologized.

The day went on. We sat in our positions looking down the road. The people were becoming braver and braver. They would move in closer and watch us with curiosity. Finally, a group of boys, walking arm in arm, sat down with us. The men were very affectionate with each other. They would hold hands, walk arm in arm, hang on each other, and lay in each other's laps. When they talked to each other they would get very close and in your face. That was one thing we could never get used to.

"Michael Jackson?" One kid asked. I laughed.

"Van Dam?" "Jackie Chan?" I asked in return. He smiled and nodded. "Whooooaaa!" I screamed, doing my best impression.

He began to laugh. Before long they were bringing us tea and bread. A crowd gathered around us. We were entertaining the people.

“Ali Baba,” one kid said, pointing to his friend. I was confused. He said it again. Then it struck me. Thief. They would point the Ali Babas out to us constantly. Ali Baba was pointing at my medical bag asking me what was in it. I pulled some dressings out. Of course they were in the sterile bag and didn’t look too interesting. I unwrapped one to show him what it was. They couldn’t grasp it. I took his arm and began putting it on.

“Say, ‘Aaaaaaaahhhhhh!’” I said to him. He looked confused. I made a sign of carrying a gun and shooting him then said “Aaaaaaaahhh!”

The boy began to cry out in imaginary pain as I over acted applying a dressing. The people began laughing and coming out of their shells. I put the bandage on his head and colored a black circle on it. I did my Jackie Chan impression. He looked like the Karate Kid, as he did it back.

We showed them pictures of loved ones. They did not see pictures that much so they were amazed when they saw the clothes we wore, and even more what the women in America wear. They laughed at me pointing out my long hair from long ago, and a flower shoved behind my ear. They made a motion of a halo over the head. We smiled to each other. “Angels,” we said blushing. We sat down and began to learn each other’s language. I became somewhat proficient in some of the greetings, and key phrases. I taught them to say “Hey dude!” They would say it whenever they saw me.

A couple of weeks later I was walking through the streets and a kid came up to me. “Hey dude,” he said, extending his hand. I recognized his soccer jersey and shook his hand. As we were running out of words to exchange I pulled out my bandana and began telling them a story my father used to tell to us. He learned it from his seminary professor, Glenn Bannerman. You fold a handkerchief into the shape of a house and tell the people that it is a house and in the house lived a mouse. The people in the house wanted the mouse on the outside of the house so they began rolling the house to push the house mouse out (roll the bandana until you get to the attic). The people decide to turn the attic inside out (turn it inside out and roll it up so that it looks like a lopsided tire). The long and short is that they find a picnic basket (you have a bandana with handles and it looks like a little picnic basket). So the people decide to go on a picnic (then you pull the sides out and it is a tail, then you fold the opposite side into a head). The people fall in love with the mouse and decide to keep it (with your finger tucked underneath it you stroke the mouse with your other hand and make it jump). The mouse jumped into the crowd and they began to smile and take turns petting the mouse as it jumped out at them. Their smiles revealed their dirty, broken, missing teeth. They were beautiful smiles.

“Michael Jackson?” one kid asked, “Disco?”

“Disco.” I said doing my best John Travolta impression. They began singing and clapping their hands. I started dancing for them. They grew louder and louder chanting, “Disco! Disco!” I let myself get carried away as the kids began dancing too. Staff Sergeant started yelling at us to break it up. The people were not used to yelling and began wondering what was wrong. Staff Sergeant is a veteran from the first Gulf War, and carried a grudge for these people.

“You are forgetting where you are, Doc! We are in a hostile area, and as soon as you turn your back on these people they will kill you. Don’t trust anyone.”

Just like that the party was over, and I was often reminded not to be friends with these people. To a degree he was right, but I think that this was the greatest medicine I could offer these people. I couldn’t heal their wounds or start the water generators. I could make them laugh and smile. Laughter is truly the greatest medicine. We all forgot that we were in danger, and they forgot about their pains. I felt in a way I was earning their trust. I felt I was in a small way opening the relationship between us. Showing them that we were good people. But I forgot that this wasn’t the mission for the Marines. I forgot that I am one of them.

I spent the rest of the day leaning up against the house catching the shade with some older men. They laid out blankets for us, and put pillows at our backs while they sat on the dirt. We tried all we could to converse, but the language barrier was too strong. They told me of the hospital and the condition of its medicine. They told us of the soldiers who beat them, and of Jessica. We tried to tell them that help was on the way soon. The palms offered shade as they served us tea and bread. The bread was like pizza crust or thick Mexican tortillas. We took pictures and everyone ran to get into it.

As we departed I found myself growing sad. I walked around shaking their hands and saying “Masalama.” Meaning goodbye. “As salam alaikum.” (Peace be upon you) and in return they would say, “Was alaikum salam.” (And also with you) It was a sad time but I feel that good first impressions were made on both sides. It was April the 2nd, a day I will never forget. I don’t think I would have seen the beauty in these people if I hadn’t spent that day in the village by the river. I felt proud and happy. I felt that we had done some good that day. For the first time I felt I had a reason for being there. When things would get rough and the people would irritate us I would remember the smiles of the children of Kabron.

We walked out of the village as the sun set over the river. It was a beautiful orange sunset with red clouds hanging over the green marshes and palm trees of the Euphrates. I felt that God was smiling on us.

Patrols Across the River

“As we walked through the streets like a conquering army the people cheered and the kids danced. I often wonder if it had been a Communist army would they have been dancing? They

say the people who lived on the Mason-Dixon line a hundred and fifty years ago had to be able to whistle the Battle Hymn of the Republic and Dixie with the same enthusiasm.”

Patrolling was a daily chore for most, but with each patrol was a new experience. One day we were showered with flowers, another we were hauling in one of the many weapons caches, or drinking chi in the house of some family. A week after our beautiful day with the children of Kabron, we crossed the river to the real An-Nasiriyah.

Across the river is where the market was. There were many schools, and of course the housing of an inner city. Weapons caches were found in any local building. Baath party headquarters were quickly discovered and the locals were eager to give up any information now that we were the new power in the city.

By every government building, and on all the street corners we found large paintings of Saddam. The people would gather around us and beg for us to tear them down. They were afraid to do it themselves. One day we met the artist who painted the portraits, “I do it because I have to. They would kill me if I didn’t.”

We walked down the main street of the town and it was as if we were walking through the streets of San Diego. We had to walk around people that were going about their daily lives. The only difference is that we carried rifles, and wore heavy gear. We turned into a small street, and the people began coming out of their houses. They were cheering for us. They offered us cigarettes and asked our names. The crowd became so thick it was hard to see the other Marines around us. It was our first experience with a crowd, so naturally it was flattering. We felt like a triumphant army marching through the streets of a conquered city. We were innocent to the past.

I remember sitting in a smoke filled room with the ceiling fan hanging over my head by a single wire. It was dark inside and a crowd that had been following us the last couple of blocks were outside cheering and yelling. Arabic men had piled grenades, mortars, and anti-aircraft munitions at our feet. The sweat rolled off our faces onto our chemical suits. A clean-cut young man in a gown approached me in my corner.

“Excuse me mister.” I looked up at this man who was staring me in the eye. He was only inches away from my face. I took off my helmet and smiled back at him. “I would like to introduce myself.”

I was surprised that this young man spoke good English. After the introductions he asked me a haunting question. “Why did you kill my friend?”

I was stunned and speechless. My first impulse was “Who the hell did he think he was to come straight out and ask me an incriminating question like that?” I almost replied, “Hey man, I didn’t

kill anybody.” Then I remembered that I was a part of a system, and I realized that this question had to be handled carefully. “Who was your friend?”

“He was a simple man, a good man. He carried eggs. Your...” he paused for a minute with a loss of words. He made a motion symbolizing a helicopter. “It blew up his house. He was a simple man.”

I can only imagine the look on my face. My jaw was wide open and I felt far away from home and alone. “I am sorry, but I didn’t kill anybody.”

He continued smiling. I felt like he was getting satisfaction from seeing me quiver. From hearing me stumble for words. I couldn’t blame him. I have never had my next-door neighbors die in an air raid. He changed the subject and we began talking about the future of Iraq, and America. By the end of the conversation we were friends.

I will not forget the sinking feeling in my heart, the feeling like I had been the one who pulled the trigger. Many Marines talk about getting their confirmed kill. What was a confirmed kill? A kill witnessed by others. I think a confirmed kill is when you feel the death, and I could feel it in that question. “C’est le guerre,” I mumbled to myself. “Such is war.”

Later that day we cleared the hospital of weapons. The doctor who had treated Jessica approached us, and we asked what had happened to her. He said that both of her legs were broken, and her arms as well. I looked around the hospital. People were crying. A religious leader walked and talked to people as they lay on cots with IV’s that expired in July 98. When he talked they listened.

A man came in with one side of his arm completely burned. I was fifty feet away from him, sitting in a chair leaning on the shotgun. I caught his eye. He made a motion of a helicopter then pointed to his burned arm. It was a dressing change, but the wound was still fresh. Another man was rushed in wearing a blood soaked shirt. He was barely conscious. He had been shot in his shoulder, missing his thoracic cavity by inches.

The operating room floor was covered in dried blood with a thick cloud of flies. The doctor told us that there were American soldiers buried in the back, but the soldiers had already come to get the bodies. He did not want to speak to us more than necessary. The whole time he talked his eyes were on the floor, and when he did look up there was no life left in them. I couldn’t blame him. His hospital had two emergency rooms, and not enough supplies to fill them. I have never treated men who died innocently from a war that they were not even fighting.

It was only our first day across the river, and we had patrolled all day in the heat. We collapsed in the open room of our CP. I had been sick the day before so I hadn’t had anything to eat for two days, and we didn’t have any food that night. Almost everyone got sick at least once. The

symptoms were that of the twenty-four hour bug, throwing up, diarrhea, nausea, weakness, pain in your joints. I lay on the dirt floor of the house we had taken shelter in. I remember trying to drink water, but the water was bad. I threw it up immediately. I was lying there with my eyes open, staring out the window, looking at the kids across the river as the mosque called the people to prayer. The kids were jumping in the river, and the women were gathering poisoned water. The water contained cyanide, and other chemical agents. We had not been taking any malaria pills, due to the fact that our Gunny had forgotten them back in Kuwait and all of our faces and arms were covered in red bumps. I was too sick to be scared. I was the first one to get sick, and had feared that I had caught malaria, or was suffering from a reaction from the river.

As I watched the kids swim, and listened to the songs from the loud speaker, I felt like I was outside of my body for a second, almost like I was in a dream. I recovered the morning that we left to move across the river. One of the other guys and I sat in the room as the night closed in on us. We were tired from the day's events. We began talking about the war. I was still holding on to the notion that we should have tried for a peaceful resolution. He became upset, and we were arguing. I couldn't argue that night. I had lost the heart for it. I was beginning to believe that our presence was possibly needed there, but I was still holding onto the desire for peace. That conversation was the beginning of the end of our friendship.

There was another patrol where we were clearing a house. It was around lunchtime for us. We cleared a house that was located next to a mosque. The family was in charge of its upkeep. They invited us in warmly. A young girl who looked no older than 15, and spoke good English, invited us to stay for lunch. We accepted the offer and the men escorted us into the sitting room. They made sure we had pillows at our backs. They brought in bread, and boiled tomatoes with lima beans. There was a bowl of soup on the tray. It was a thick broth, with chunks of white meat in it. The girl told us that the meat came from the goat's underside. I put a piece on the bread and tried a bite as to not be rude. It was extremely tough and hard to rip. I chewed on it like you would chew on bubble gum. One of her six brothers sat beside me. His wife had died years ago, and left him only a son. He was deaf and mute. He made horns with his fingers then pointed to his tongue. I realized what it was that I was chewing on. I took a closer look at the meat and could see the taste buds of the goat's tongue. If I had quit eating it would have been rude. I took another bite of the meat, and chewed it with a fake smile.

The girl told us that she was 25. It was hard to believe. She taught English in a school, and 26 people lived in her house. The family had a good sense of humor, and I felt peacefulness in the house. I felt that they were good people, and that the house was full of love. Mike asked how it was that she was not married because she was beautiful. She bowed her head then looked up and smiled. He immediately realized that he was rude and began to apologize. She told us she was sick, then pointed to her side. I don't know what kind of cancer she had, but I began to see strength in her that most Arabic women possessed. She was teaching for the remainder of her

years, and her words on the war were probably the wisest I had heard. She was devout in her religion, unlike most of the people we met. She was able to laugh and joke with us as she pointed to the pictures on the wall explaining the prophets that they honored. The women and little girls peered at us through a crack in the door as we finished our meal. Any time I would look at them they would giggle then close the door only to reopen it seconds later. We left the house and regrouped on the street corner.

The barbershop was open for business. I hadn't had a haircut for weeks, and the Marines had found some clippers and were insisting that I get a "high and tight." As a compromise I went into the barbershop for a hair cut. I placed my gear in a corner, keeping my flack jacket on and my helmet in my lap. He draped the cloth over me, and spun me around to get a look of myself in the mirror. It was the first time in a month I could study my face. I had a thick mustache that had been growing since we had left the ship. My hair was natty from three weeks without a shower. I kept staring at my gear through the mirror watching the men who were gathering around it, but they paid no attention to it. Boys gathered in the window and crowded into the room to see the American get his hair cut. The barber had no electric razors, and used only scissors and a comb. The room had the usual high ceilings and was painted a light color of blue with a wooden frame around the mirror. The plaster was chipping in some places giving the place character. I felt like Clint Eastwood in High Plains Drifter with his pistol under the cloth watching as the hired guns crept up to the window from off the street. I was nervous that the men by my gear would get curious or take off with it in a dead sprint. It was one of the best haircuts I have ever received. When I was done, the man offered to cut off my mustache. I laughed and replied, "Laa, menfudlick." No thank you. I had begun growing it when we left the ship and I shaved it when we got back on. They said it added years to my face, making me look like I was in my late twenties. I paid the man with an MRE.

Although most patrols were strenuous and long, there were some that were enjoyable. Some days we would go out in the streets with our money. We bought headdresses and prayer beads. One day the man who owned the shi sha bar by the main intersection invited us in for a smoke. The intersection was a block away from the river, and in the middle stood a statue of a prophet with his arms out and palms up. He wore a thick beard and stared down the main road. The sidewalks in the circle were wide with many benches to sit on. Restaurants and shi sha bars lined the town circle.

We sat down in the houses' finest seats and smoked all the different flavors they offered. The men from the town sat with us and we talked in our hand signals and broken languages. They invited us to their restaurant. They took us to the second floor. We sat by the windows staring down at the people as they were beginning to finally go about their lives. We ate goat meat with boiled tomatoes and onions on bread. We drank a case of Pepsis in the old glass bottles. We came back many days after that. Ten of us could eat and drink for eight dollars.

I remember that last day we were in An-Nasiriyah. I sat there drinking a cold Pepsi looking down on the streets. I did not want to leave. I was falling in love with the town. Perhaps I was becoming trapped by the dream we were in. I was like Peter Pan in a never-land, forgetting that there was a real world out there for us. The streets seemed to hold their own soul that I was becoming affectionately intertwined with. The town was becoming a part of me. The world that I live in was becoming distant and seemed like a fantasy. Email, televisions, cd players, and ice in a drink. I was forgetting that I was not a citizen, or a part of these streets. I was a bystander, a visitor.

Now that I am back, those streets seem like a dream, another world. There was a definite difference in the way I saw the streets, and the way that the Marines in my platoon saw them. They felt like it was a chore to be a part of them. They felt they were policemen in them. They felt the power of being able to walk into any store and men wait on you hand and foot. They felt entitled to that service because they were liberating the people who served them. They pressed the standards of western civilization on the people because of their anger at the town for killing Americans in bloody battles, or because they were being forced to be away from their families because of the conflict. I felt like a visitor. I felt that I was intruding into peoples' lives by walking into their homes. I couldn't understand them because I have never lived in a town where gunshots ring out through the night on a routine basis. I made my mistake when I tried to force that philosophy on others in my platoon. After all, we do need people like those men who are not affected by the poverty and filth of foreign lands, who can separate themselves from the reality of that dream, and follow orders. It is men like that who are able to fight wars.

The Beginning and the End

We sat together around a makeshift table in the poorly lit tent. We toasted each other, and we toasted ourselves. We told stories and laughed like there was no tomorrow and for us there wasn't one in the shadow of the uncertainty of war. In that uncertainty life became hypnotic, and beautiful.

It was the beginning and the end of the war that scared me the most. It was a time that no man can understand. It is the bond between men in the face of an uncertain future. It was the night before we thought that we would be flying across the berm into Iraq.

We had been living in the tents for the last week. The rest of the MEU had moved to Camp Coyote. Camp Coyote was a forward camp a mile away from the berm. It is said that the Scout Snipers had stuck their heads over the berm to see what they could see. In return rounds impacted on the dirt in front of them.

Being a helicopter unit we were used as the reserves for the British and the Marines. If any unit got into trouble we could fly in and reinforce their lines. After they had secured their positions we would fly in and take the old port of Um Qasr, and the Coast Guard station there. Therefore the best position for us was to stay in the same camp we had been for well over a month, and we waited listening to a small radio to hear the news from Kuwait.

We heard the announcement that Bush was giving Saddam 48 hours and we cheered. We cheered because the waiting was over. I felt a transition beginning to occur. The Air Wing pilots had managed to find some chicken, rice, and Cokes for all the men. We ate them in our tents under poor fluorescent lighting. We let the grease run down our hands and faces. We told stories from our high school years before any of us could have imagined being there. We took pictures of each other. We toasted our comrades. We drank the Coke as if it was whiskey, and a certain drunkenness overcame us all.

It was as if the time ceased for a couple of hours and nothing else in the world mattered except that night. Everything became beautiful, as if it were out of the colors of a painting, or the words of a writer. As if I were watching a movie from the inside. No one argued. No one was sad, and no one was thinking about the next twenty-four hours.

“On The Road Again” played repeatedly over the radio. We wrote letters to the ones we loved and put them in our flack jackets. Hamilton and I exchanged last requests for things to be done in case we perished.

A cross in my gas mask, a picture in my flack, dog tags, and bandanas; those were the only things left that carried any sentimental value. You would think it would be awkward to discuss such things, but not that night. We all had some sort of acceptance to the possibility of the road our fate might travel. For that night we were brothers, we were happy, we were drunk with truth.

Nothing is as fearful as having no control over your fate. The feeling that something is hunting you, and no matter where you go or what you do it is coming. We had calls come into the radio all the next day that Scuds were inbound. Nine gas warnings. We stayed in our chemical suits. The first five scared the hell out of me. The rest were routine. As we sat in our gas masks that day and we became sober.

That night was a long night. Every hour or so we would get scud and gas warnings. We slept in our gas masks and flack jackets.

The day came and we prepared for our departure. Our schedule was to leave by ten. We marched to the helicopters with all our gear, and staged beside them. As we sat there in the hot sun the hours began to tick away.

When I was on the wrestling team in High School I gained a respect for nervousness. I had rituals so to speak: tying my shoes, taping the laces, stretching, laying face down on the mat in the locker room and concentrating.

My favorite was when before the match we would circle the mat and huddle close together in the center. There we were the closest group I have ever been with. Laying face down close together talking softly about strategy, we would bow our heads and say the Lord's Prayer. I wanted to share that ritual with the men there. I hoped it would give me the same kind of ease that it always had given me.

Hamilton and I gathered everyone together and I gave them the last piece of advice I knew. Move swiftly, think deliberately, watch the men around you, and keep your heads down, I don't want to see any of you today. I asked if they had anything to say, but with silence as an answer I asked them to say the prayer with me. It did not have the effect I had hoped. Only three of us knew the prayer.

An hour later at three o'clock we were on the helicopters and flying over the desert. Our crew chiefs loaded the fifty caliber machine guns, and pointed them at the deck. I will never forget them holding up one finger and pointing to their watches. Then I looked down and saw the city of Um Qasr below us, children running through the streets.

We flew over the port pitching high and to our right. A large blue crane sat by the water, boats tied to the pier, buildings, and we landed in a cloud of dust. We off loaded, dropped our packs in a pile and sat in a defensive posture. The helicopters left, and we were stuck in the dead silence with nothing to break it but the echoes of gunfire in the distance.

Then there was the end. We were full of disbelief that it was fast approaching us, even long after we received the word and we were back loading to the ship. Time was beginning to crawl, and the sun was getting hotter. In all my letters that I received from home there was news of a beautiful spring with flowers and green grass. For a town that lies between two rivers there was no spring. There were flowers and they only survived among the desert of that town.

It was a time for reflection, but instead depression was overcoming everyone. It was becoming harder to get off of the floor in the morning. We were losing the motivation to keep clean. We sat around all day playing cards, or dominos. I had a constant headache, and most of the day I spent feeling nauseous.

Sometimes I would retreat to the roof seven stories above the town. I would watch the people go about their daily lives. The people began digging in the intersection just outside of our compound. They were digging for an underground prison that they believed to be there. They thought they would find family members who had spoken out against the regime and then disappeared some ten years ago. They dug up a grave site from underneath the soccer fields.

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I would watch the people on their roofs. I would watch the sunset and the pigeons flying above the houses. Brown ones, and always one white dove mixed into the flock. I would listen to the prayer call. All in all I could only find temporary shelter there.

We lit the oil lamps at night and talked about beliefs, and events. We would play games to take our minds off of the world around us, and the time left there. As I have said, it wasn't until the last couple of days when I was sitting in a restaurant, that I was beginning to miss the town and the people.

I had spent so long trying not to think about going home because it seemed so far away that when it was close, I was not ready for it. The day before we left Wilson and I walked across the street to the family that had been selling us food. I knew that they had been ripping us off, but they were always kind, and the food was always there and of good quality, so I didn't care.

The day before their little boy had seen me pass by on a patrol. A few blocks down the road I heard him begin yelling at me in Arabic. He was running as fast as his little legs would carry him. He was only five at most. I tried to tell him to go home, but he wouldn't listen. He grabbed my hand and walked with me talking in rapid Arabic.

The rest of the Marines told me to get rid of him. We couldn't have him follow us the whole way. I tried repeatedly to tell him to go home. I made hand signals, but he ignored me. My walk was a trot for him, and he held my hand the whole way speaking in between breaths. I didn't mind having him along if he could keep up, and I kind of liked having a little buddy. So I held his hand and listened to him talk.

"Doc, tell that kid to go home!" one of them started insisting.

I explained to him that I couldn't; that the kid was a friend of mine. I figured he would eventually get tired and go home himself.

The Marine turned around and started yelling at the kid. The little boy stood stunned, then just yelled back. I could never have yelled at that little boy for his innocence. An Arabic man grabbed him and began taking him down the street. The boy was kicking and crying the whole way.

"That's how you have to do it Doc. You got to let these people know that you're in charge."

"And who is to say that boy wasn't just kidnapped. Was he endangering our mission? Kids follow us every day. The only difference is that I know this one."

"You don't understand Doc."

“You’re right, I don’t.”

That was the end of the discussion.

As we walked into the house the children came out to see us, but the little boy did not. I was afraid something had happened to him, and hoped he was just mad at me. I had some things from an Easter care package that had been sent to me. I had some bunny ears, bubbles, candy, and a lot of left over MRE’s. We passed them out to the family as a present.

I put the bunny ears on the little girl. She stood smiling with her hands behind her back looking up at us as she always did. We said our good byes.

They were not in the usual spirits that they had been in before. They did not offer to sell us anything, or give us tea. I hope it was nothing. I just shook their hands and then we walked out of each other’s lives.

We took trucks out of the town, early that morning, then hopped on a C-130. It was a long ride. Hot, and the engine fumes filled the cabin. When we landed we were in Kuwait. There was nothing special about the place, but I did notice that the hangars were shot up. They told me that it was from the first Gulf War. The Iraqis had taken all of Kuwait’s officers and lined them up in those hangar bays, then killed them.

The people who were stationed there were all Army. They showed us to their chow tent. We stepped into that air-conditioned tent, and it was as if we were being released from a prison. We were returning back to a real world.

It was that moment that the war was over. There were coolers full of ice cream and Snapple; a serving line with Chicken Cordon Blue. They treated us all like war heroes, and offered us as much food as we wanted. We filled our bellies, and laughed together for no reason.

It is a feeling I cannot describe. It all seemed to wash away. It became a memory. It was a feeling of relief that we would never have to do that again. It was as if some one snapped their fingers and we woke up. It doesn’t even feel real anymore, because it was such a different place than that of which we knew.

The Helos arrived and we loaded our gear. We flew over Camp Bullrush were it had all begun. We flew over the desert and into the Gulf. Kuwait City stood like Emerald City. The crew chief passed out ice-cold American sodas to all the men on that bird, and we lifted our drinks in a toast. And as the Tarawa came into view we knew that it was over, and we drank to everyone making it back alive.