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The Iraq War: Recollections

By George Friedman

12/20/2011

The war in Iraq is officially over. Whether it is actually over remains to be seen. All that we know is that U.S. forces have been withdrawn. There is much to be said about the future of Iraq, but it is hard to think of anything that has been left unsaid about the past years of war in Iraq, and true perspective requires the passage of time. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to hear from those at STRATFOR who fought in the war and survived. STRATFOR is graced with seven veterans of the war and one Iraqi who lived through it. It is interesting to me that all of our Iraq veterans were enlisted personnel. I don't know what that means, but it pleases me for some reason. Their short recollections are what STRATFOR has to contribute to the end of the war. It is, I think, far more valuable than anything I could possibly say.

Staff Sgt. Kendra Vessels, U.S. Air Force

Iraq 2003, 2005

STRATFOR Vice President of International Projects

Six words capture my experience during the invasion of Iraq: Russian linguist turned security forces “augmentee.” I initially volunteered for a 45-day tour of the theater — one of those unique opportunities for those in the intelligence field who don’t see much beyond their building with no windows. My field trip of the “operational Air Force” turned into a seven-month stint far beyond my original job description. But in the end I wouldn’t trade anything for that experience.

I will always remember March 19, 2003 — not only because it was my 22nd birthday but also because it was the day that brought an end to the hurry-up-and-wait that I had experienced for the four months since I’d arrived in Kuwait. During that time it was a slow transition from the world I knew so well, which was confined to a sensitive compartmented information facility (SCIF) and computer screens to practically living in mission oriented protective posture (MOPP) 4 gear, working with a joint-service security team and carrying a weapon. The day I was pulled from my normal duties to take a two-hour refresher on how to use an M-16 was a wake-up call. I had shot an M-16 once before, in basic training. Carrying a weapon every day from then on was new to me. While my Army and Marine counterparts knew their weapons intimately, I was still at that awkward first-date stage.

This anecdote represented a broader issue. As much as we might have known ahead of time that we would eventually invade Iraq, I don’t think we ever could have really been prepared. There were definitely creative solutions, like issuing an Air Force intelligence Barbie an assault rifle.

The invasion of Iraq that I describe is narrowly focused, but that’s what I knew at the time. As far as seeing a bigger picture, I was subject to the opinions on CNN and Fox just as everyone was back home. The only morsel that stands out is a “need to know” briefing we had on weapons of mass destruction a month before things kicked off. Slide after slide of imagery “proved” we needed to go into Iraq. Those giving the presentation seemed unconvinced, but at our level, we didn’t question those presentations. We always assumed someone much higher up knew much more than we would ever have access to. So we drove on, kept our mouths shut and did our jobs as we were told.

As an airman, the most memorable part of the experience for me was the shock and awe of the initial bombing attack. All the days before and after are blurred in my memory — either because they all seemed the same or because I’ve buried them somewhere. There were so many mixed emotions — pride in the U.S. Air Force as we watched the initial attack live on the news, fear of what would follow and sadness in saying goodbye to my friends who would leave to cross into Iraq in the following days. Among those friends were our British counterparts who did not feel they had a stake in the fight but were there because they took pride in their jobs and wanted to do well.

Indeed, I always took notice of the many nationalities that were there to fight beside us. They were less than enthusiastic about being in Iraq and, of course, blamed the Americans for causing them to be there. This is when I first began to feel the “uncoolness” of being American overseas because of the war. I did not foresee how bad it would get and would eventually experience outright hostility in Asia, Europe and other countries in the Middle East.

Two years later, I was “deployed in-garrison.” This concept captures not only what I love about the Air Force but also why my friends in every other service always had ample material for teasing me. If we can’t take all the luxuries of home to the war (and believe me, we tried: surf and turf and endless ice cream in the chow halls, televisions in every living space and air-conditioning or heating as needed), we will bring the war to us. It seemed like a great idea at the time. I spent a year driving less than 10 miles from my duty station in the United States to carry out a mission in Iraq through radio, chat and live feed on television screens. We experienced the same crew day, tempo and real-world mission requirements but worked in over-air-conditioned vans parked inside giant hangars.

Anyone who has ever done this can relate to how bizarre it is to work inside one of these vans in full winter gear during the peak of summer. But in comparison to my first experience on the ground in Iraq, I felt I contributed far more the second time around. Our unit was able to see results daily and know that we were directly contributing to units in contact with the enemy. I could finally begin to see the forest for the trees, but by that time, I could also see that the situation on the ground was far worse than before.

My take-away from the latter experience was the perception that the rest of the United States was detached from what was happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. I would spend 12 hours engaged with the reality on the ground, full of adrenaline and exhausted by the end of the day, only to wake up and do it all over again the next day. But between the missions at work I would interact with those not directly involved, and it was endlessly frustrating. My civilian friends were more concerned about what happened on “Lost” the night before or where they were planning to vacation during the upcoming holiday. This sentiment continues even today, as those of us who were directly impacted by the war reflect on how it changed our lives while others hardly notice that the war is coming to an end. I gently remind them that this is, in many ways, a victory for us all.

Basima

Iraq 2003

STRATFOR Middle East and Arabic Monitor

In 2003, when the news in Iraq began to report that U.S. President George W. Bush would invade Iraq, Iraqis began to wonder if this would really happen — and if it would be the solution to and the end of the tyrant era in Iraq. I was sitting with my father, an old man addicted to listening to the radio instead of watching the two boring Iraqi television channels that mostly broadcast Saddam's interviews, speeches and songs about him. I asked my father, "Dad, do you think the Americans will really come to save us and our country from this tyrant?" He said, "Yes they will, and there will be no other way to get rid of this tyrant but by a strong power like America." As all other Iraqis, I kept watching television and listening to the radio to follow the news.

My husband, my kids and I were all staying at my parents' house, along with my other two sisters and their families. We bought much food and stored water in a big container. We contacted our relatives and they contacted us, everyone wanting to make sure that the others were ready for the war and for the moment of salvation. If you draw an image of the Iraqi streets at that time, you will see very close and trusted friends secretly sharing their happiness about the idea that the Americans will come and topple the brutal regime. No one was afraid of the war because we are a people used to being in a war, and we were suffering enough from the blockade.

When the war began, I would say most Iraqis, if I cannot say all, were happy to see the end of the madman Saddam. When the statue of Saddam was pulled down in Firdos Square, my family and I were so happy our eyes were full of tears. They were not tears of sadness but of happiness. It was unbelievable. It was the moment of freedom.

After that, when the people began to get out of their houses, they could see all the military trucks and soldiers. And the people waved their hands and nodded or made signs with their hands to show the Americans that they were happy and thankful. For the first time in their lives, Iraqis practiced the freedom to speak in the streets freely and loudly without being afraid of Saddam's loyalists.

Sgt. "Primo," U.S. Marine Corps Task Force Tarawa

Iraq 2003

STRATFOR Tactical Analyst

As the C-130 ramp dropped at Kuwait International Airport in March 2003, I was hit in the face with a wave of heat and sand. I remember thinking to myself that this was going to suck, a lot. But at the same time there was a sense of relief at the finality and completion of mobilization orders and deployment, and despite the disruption of our civilian lives we knew that this was it, and it was all we had to concentrate on.

An infantry unit in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, we were a motley mix of professions and lifestyles — mechanics, school teachers, policemen, college students (roughly half of us), boilermakers, bankers, bartenders, small-business owners and kids straight out of high school. And we respected our leaders. Our commanding officer was a successful corporate executive, our company first sergeant and company gunnery sergeant had living-legend status in their respective law enforcement agencies, and all of our staff non-commissioned officers — most of whom were veterans of the first Gulf War and/or employed in law enforcement in their civilian lives — had served active-duty tours in their younger days, as did the NCOs that just got out of the Fleet and volunteered to deploy with us.

My squad (in which I had been unceremoniously promoted, as a lance corporal, to fire team leader) was pulling security for the command tent in the staging area in northern Kuwait when all members of the company staff gathered for a meeting with the battalion staff. The purpose of the meeting was for the battalion gunny to list all the ammunition that we would be allotted, and it did not include 5.56mm link or 7.62mm link and only a shockingly small amount of non-linked 5.56mm. We knew we were leaving soon, and we exchanged bug-eyed glances when we overheard the gunny listing the allotment. Fire suppression capability had been a central tenet of our training, and it would not be possible with the ammo we were getting. And there was only about one grenade per squad. If we hit action, our survival could depend on the pitiful first-aid kits we had been issued. Then “Doc” Chris showed up with a ton of “acquired” gauze, medical tape, iodine and morphine from battalion headquarters, which earned him a godlike status despite his many personal shortcomings.

When we received the warning order in our platoon hooch later in the evening we were told we were going to Nasiriya, where a battle was still raging. In the morning, we threw on our overloaded packs and said our goodbyes. With the sound of helicopters in the air, the company gunny rolled up in a Humvee overflowing with 5.56mm link, 7.62mm link, more grenades and much-

needed bandoleers. Every rifleman had the equivalent of about 12 magazines and the squad automatic weapon (SAW) gunners had about four or five 5.56mm link boxes.

Fortunately, the landing zone (LZ) we were flown into in Nasriya was not hot. We spent two days in Camp White Horse and then moved on into the city and took up positions, which we fortified when we were not patrolling or running raids. After a week, we were moved to the Saddam Canal, the site of a fierce battle just days earlier, where we set up checkpoints to control anyone going to or from the city over our bridge. After about a month of bridge security, patrols and raids in the nearby neighborhood, we were moved to Qulat Sikkar, south of Al Kut.

While the Shiite Muslims in our area of operation may not have wanted us there, the United States took out Saddam and we were there to help them, so there was a tentative peace. While the locals outnumbered us, they did not want to rock the boat, nor did we. For all intents and purposes, we served as the local government, court and police of Qulat Sikkar. For the first few weeks, we raided residences of suspected Baath Party members, Fedayeen and criminals. You never knew what was behind the door, which was quite stressful, but you got used to it. However, it didn't take too long to realize that despite the weapons caches we would occasionally find, a good portion of the information we were receiving to conduct these raids may have had more to do with personal revenge than actual threats.

What we were trying to do was maximize our strength at the street level by interacting with the locals as much as possible during foot and mounted patrols, which we ran 24 hours a day. We wanted the locals to know that we were ready for anything while our medical corpsmen were helping injured civilians and kids who were brought to our position for care. Locals would come to us to report criminals and other threats, which we would respond to. The professional policemen in our reserve unit trained local police. Because of this, and the fact that the local Shia were happy to see Saddam ousted and were not politically organized, we experienced no serious attacks, nothing more than the occasional spray-and-pray or potshot. The people, all of whom were destitute, just tried to keep on living and begin building an uncertain future as we continued our patrols, dreaming of home in our spare time.

The uncertain future became most evident when local Iraq army veterans began asking for their pay or pensions and we told them to go away. And while the Bush administration's decision to remove all Baath Party members rather than just the unsavory elements from official life was not such a factor for us in the Shiite south, the move was something that we debated endlessly. The majority of the Marines in my platoon — college students and working men alike — saw it as a very bad idea and something that would almost guarantee a resistance movement.

We stayed just under six months and did a lot of good for people who have not faced much good in their history. The reality of war is that sometimes you are lucky and sometimes you are unlucky. During that deployment, we were very lucky. No Marines in our unit were killed in action, and no Marines were seriously wounded. The Italians who replaced us were not so lucky. A few months after our departure and after becoming fully immersed in civilian life again (except for drill weekends), I turned on the television to see that Nasiriya had been hit by a major suicide bombing and that 19 Italian soldiers — some of whom we had undoubtedly dined with at Camp White Horse just weeks earlier — were killed along with 11 civilians. I remember thinking that this was just the beginning of a different type of war that would last a long time.

Cpl. Nathan Hughes, U.S. Marine Corps Regimental Combat Team 1

Iraq 2003

STRATFOR Deputy Director, Tactical Intelligence

Looking back, the paradigm that pulls it all together for me is one of a military that has spent too many years in garrison going off to war. By March 2003, 9/11 had dominated everyone's thinking for a year and a half, but only a tiny fraction of the military had actually been to Afghanistan. And there had been no time for operational lessons that might have been learned to percolate through the system.

None of that was apparent then. When we first came ashore in February, the negligent discharge of a SAW at the port in Kuwait and seeing servicemen from other units carrying their rifles slung muzzle down stuck out to us after six months with a Marine Expeditionary Unit (pretty much the height of readiness and cohesion for a Marine infantry battalion at that point). The truth was that even six months at sea in 2002, aside from the loss of Marines in a shooting in Kuwait, did little to prepare us for the post-9/11 realities that would become so apparent in subsequent years.

After weeks of waiting in Kuwait (to the point where unfounded rumors of the death of Jennifer Lopez were beginning to get too much traction) and after we had resigned ourselves to never leaving that miserable place, we suddenly received orders to immediately mount up. We were a U.S. Marine regiment on amphibious tractors, unarmored Humvees and seven-ton trucks. I remember feeling bad for anyone who got in our way, and how that illusion crumbled over and over again in the subsequent weeks.

I remember exactly how shallow the first fighting positions we dug had been at our staging area south of the Iraqi border. The ground had been ridiculously tough, and we knew we were moving in as little as a few hours. That expediency was fine until the first “Lightning, lightning, lightning” came across the net, signaling that an Iraqi “Scud” missile had been fired. We were already in our MOPP 1 attire, which we would wear during most of the invasion, but despite endless drills (and laps around the flight deck on the way over in MOPP 4), it had taken us distressingly long to suit up. And lying in a far-too-shallow fighting position recalling how useless I had been — how useless we all had been — learning how to fire a rifle while wearing a gas mask in 1998, I mulled over everything I knew about fighting in a chemical or biological environment. The only thing I knew for sure was that doing so was a terrible, terrible idea.

On the outskirts of Nasiriya, we saw the first burned-out hulks of American vehicles and the first section of our platoon was moved, briefly, from our unarmored Humvees to the “protection” of the welded-aluminum hulls of amphibious tractors. Before someone somewhere cancelled the whole maneuver, we were on the verge of following an artillery barrage through a city where the entire urban expanse had been declared hostile. One surreal experience flowed into the next.

Between spending a night where no one slept because we had erected our 81mm mortar gun line in an exposed position in the middle of an Iraqi village and reconnoitering for positions in a pair of Humvees with our heaviest weapon, a SAW, it became clear how desperately thin we were spread. The civilian looting of Baghdad was comprehensive and immediate. As we moved to our initial objective, there were already stolen construction vehicles with air-conditioning units chained to the shovels moving down the shoulders of the city’s roads. The magnitude of pacifying an urban population — and our complete inability to do so — was blatantly apparent.

By the time we fell back to Kuwait that summer (even the senior-most Marine commanders were assuring us in good faith that the objective was kicking in the door and seizing Baghdad and that the Army would take it from there), it was already a different world. Children that had once been restrained by their parents or their own uncertainty would now stand inches from moving tracked vehicles and demand candy. What we had achieved, in other words, was done in the space created by “shock and awe.” But the shock and awe had already worn off and the Iraqis were adapting and settling into the new reality with a frightening speed.

Staff Sgt. Paul Floyd, U.S. Army Special Operations Command

Iraq 2005-2008

My unit worked under Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and our primary role was high-value target (HVT) kill or capture missions. These missions were meant to apply pressure to or destroy enemy networks, not to win over popular support. I served eight tours overseas, half in Iraq. Our deployments lasted anywhere from 90 to 140 days. During these deployments, my platoon conducted hundreds of missions and killed or captured many HVTs. Most missions were successful in the sense that we got who we were after. Some missions were not successful. The following are the missions that stick out.

My first deployment was in 2005 to Baghdad. I was scared and didn't know a damn thing about where I was going, and my team leaders and squad leaders were not about to enlighten me. After a short layover in Germany, we flew directly into Baghdad instead of Kuwait, where most units staged. The lights in the cargo bay went red, the crew donned body armor and they dropped the plane onto the runway like it was crashing to avoid being shot down. We had arrived in the middle of the night and were still recovering from the sleeping pills they had provided for the flight. We had to unpack all of our mission-essential gear from our cargo pallets and prep our gear for a helicopter flight into our operating base. Our leaders still didn't divulge many details about where we were going even as we loaded magazines and donned body armor.

We loaded a CH-47 with half of our platoon and our personal bags and lifted off to what I had been told was the most dangerous city in the world at that time. When we landed, I was a little beside myself as we rushed off the helicopter to establish security, sweeping our sectors of fire and waiting for our first firefight while others frantically threw bags off the bird. It took a few minutes, but the helicopter finally took off to pick up the rest of our platoon and then we were able to hear the laughter. "Hey dumbasses, we are in the Green Zone and you are pointing your weapons at the guys who guard our compound," our team leaders said between guffaws. "Welcome home."

This was not what I was expecting. My first mission was the next night. I was a top gunner on an up-armored Humvee manning a medium machine gun. We worked at night, and all I knew was that we were going to get some guy in some place in Baghdad. In other words, I could barely understand what I was seeing, didn't know where I was and had no idea who we were after. The last thing my team leader had told me before we rolled out was to shoot back if we were shot at and if the vehicle rolled, try and get clear because the night before a Humvee had been hit by an improvised explosive device (IED) and rolled and everyone inside had burned alive. He might have been lying, but it stuck. We rolled through Baghdad for about 15 minutes and finally stopped 200 meters past an intersection. To help with radio communication, we turned off our

jammers, per standard operating procedure, and an IED detonated at the intersection we had just passed. We went on two more missions that night and, over the course of 90 days, conducted around 120 missions.

My second deployment was to Ramadi in summer 2006. At that time, Ramadi was falling apart. The entire city was hostile, every single place we went. One mission during this deployment sticks out more than any other. We received intelligence on the whereabouts of a target high enough on the food chain that the strike force commander launched us during the day. The coordinates we had been given led us to what was essentially a strip mall on the side of the road. Since it was daytime, we found it to be more successful to move hard and fast, so we “landed on the X.” As we were leaping out of our vehicles, we realized there were more than 100 people running in all directions. We detained every single military-aged male. It took hours and we had to call in the regular army to help us move them all, but we got the al Qaeda cell leader we were after and his lieutenants. We didn’t make any friends that day, but we accomplished the mission and then some.

On a similar mission, we found ourselves being launched during the middle of the day to capture a man who we thought was a major piece of the Ramadi insurgency. This time we drove to a house, contained it, blew down the door and seized it. All we found inside was a woman and 13 teenage girls. We started to search the house, and I was tasked with searching the room where the girls were being kept while a younger guy watched them. Searching a room in the desert while wearing body armor is miserable work. About halfway through I heard some light giggling and looked up to find that two of the girls had taken a fancy to their overseer and were trying to flirt. There he was smiling from ear to ear while they both were moving their veils and hijab’s just enough to show a little hair and some of their faces. I started to laugh when the radio explodes with chatter about a car returning to the house. We quickly rearranged ourselves and detained the men as they pulled into the driveway. It was their uncle who had to pick up an associate and who also happened to be our target. We detained him and left.

My third deployment in Iraq was back to Ramadi in 2007. This was after the local tribal leaders had banded together and begun working with the United States to push al Qaeda out of the city. This meant that the enemy had moved to the countryside, and we were going to air assault instead of drive. Every night, we flew to the countryside and walked to our targets. This deployment was different. I experienced more firefights in those first seven missions than I ever had before.

On my eighth mission, the intelligence that drove us to a target was literally “there is a suspicious blue truck there.” We ridiculed that assessment as we boarded the helicopters. I was

point man for my platoon and led it up to the house. As I cleared the initial courtyard I saw a man open a door, stick his head out and, clearly frightened, duck back inside, leaving the door partially open. Following my training and not wanting him to have any more time to prepare for a fight I followed him through the door with my fire team. I kicked the door fully open and two men armed with what I later learned was an AK-47 and an M-16 fired on us as we came through the door. I cleared my corner and returned fire while my teammates did the same. Suddenly my firing hand was thrown off of my weapon. I placed it back but found that I could not pull the trigger. It seemed like time just stopped. I looked down to find that my finger was flapping wildly against my weapon and realized that I could not shoot. I took a knee and yelled “down” to let my team know I was out of the fight and they adjusted their sectors of fire. There was a brief pause before another armed man opened fire from behind the door. I thought I was dead. The fire team behind us entered the room immediately and eliminated the threat.

I had been shot in the hand while one of my team members had been shot through the arm and the other had had a bullet graze the side of his head. We all walked out of that room in time to see the rest of the house erupt with gunfire. My platoon moved us back under fire and returned fire. A man then ran out of the house and our rounds detonated his suicide vest. His head and leg landed in the road in front of us. The fight ended with two 500-pound bombs and a medevac helicopter to Balad. I went home early that deployment.

My last deployment to Iraq was in 2008, back in Baghdad. One again we were driving, part of a task force assigned to counter Iranian influence. The new threat was the explosively formed projectiles being imported by the Iranians. These next-generation IEDs could punch through any standard armor we had. U.S. troops adapted with solid metal plates bolted to the sides of vehicles with an 18-inch standoff. The enemy adapted by aiming the IEDs slightly higher so the force of the blast would miss the metal plates and take heads off in the passenger compartments.

This react and counteract game never stopped. We were there during the winter, which meant it actually rained a fair amount for a brief period. I was a convoy commander on this deployment. On one particular mission, we had stopped to let the assault force off more than a kilometer away so as not to spook the target at night with our engine noise. After they assaulted the house, they called to us to pull the vehicles forward. During the height of the sectarian violence of 2007, Baghdad neighborhoods had trenches and earthworks to protect them. On this wet winter night, we were forced to drive through one of these trenches to get to our platoon, and it took about three seconds to get my vehicle stuck.

Since we were running skeleton crews at this point and it was my fault, I decided to jump out by myself to perform the vehicle recovery. This is a pretty simple process of just having the nearest

vehicle pull up, attaching a tow cable between the two and pulling the stuck vehicle out. As we started the pulling part, I stepped back to make room only to plunge into a hole filled with water well over my head. I was submerged, wearing about 60 pounds of armor and equipment and barely hanging onto a ledge. I thought about the irony of dying in Iraq not because of enemy fire or an IED but by drowning. I managed to extract myself, and since no one could hear or see me, I calmly walked back to my extracted vehicle. If my gunner wondered why I was soaking wet and freezing, he didn't ask.

Staff Sgt. Benjamin Sledge, U.S. Army Special Operations Command

Iraq 2006-2007

STRATFOR Senior Graphic Designer

I had done a lot in eleven years in the military: Afghanistan, language training, John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, and Iraq. But Iraq would be the nail in the coffin of my military career.

In Iraq I kicked in doors, took shotgun pellets to the face (courtesy of a trigger happy Marine), watched IEDs explode in front of my vehicle, watched people shoot at my vehicle, made friends with the locals, rebuilt infrastructure, had the locals tell me they loved me and had the locals shoot at me. I also watched people shoot my friends, attended memorial services, cried, laughed, got depressed, ranted, fought, got dirty, got dirtier, cried some more and then went home.

The twin bloody battles of Fallujah in 2004 would move the insurgents to a city 20 miles west named Ramadi, which we would lovingly nickname the "Meat Grinder." The rules of engagement were so lenient that if someone popped their head around the corner twice you could shoot a warning shot. The third peek was considered hostile and you could engage the person with lethal force. Every morning the roads were declared clear for about 30 minutes after an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team had spent the night clearing them. Thirty minutes later, every road had multiple IEDs on them. By noon, you were guaranteed to get shot at.

The turning point in my deployment came when a former Special Forces captain named Travis Patriquin came up with a simple — and hilarious — PowerPoint slide mocking how complex the American war machine had made the war in Iraq. My team began to work with him and other teams trying to win over the tribal sheiks and empower the people in the area. In accordance with

a plan devised by Col. Sean McFarland, commander of the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Armored Division, U.S. troops also began to occupy all points of Ramadi in small combat outposts. In time, the tide began to shift and we began to see a significant, perceptible change. For once, my spirits were lifted and I thought we would achieve some success in the war. Capt. Patriquin would not live to see it. He was killed by an IED, leaving behind his wife and three small children.

When the war shifted in Ramadi, my team began to work hard rebuilding infrastructure instead of slinging lead, but complications soon arose. After the fighting died down, staff officers found new ways to look like rock stars in order to advance their careers. This was when my faith in the U.S. military began to crumble. Instead of working on the power grid or sewage system — basic life necessities that the people desperately needed — I was ordered to win hearts and minds by building soccer fields and other “Iraqi entertainment” venues. (Aid money was poured into a multimillion-dollar soccer stadium that only collected trash.)

After asking instead to work on the power grid, I was threatened with administrative punishment by a colonel in the 3rd Infantry Division. I acquiesced, then filed a report about waste and abuse of taxpayer dollars. More threats, more soccer fields demanded, but my unit never backed down. We eventually got electricity running in the city 18 hours a day. This was a big deal, though the cost was high: Purple Hearts, Bronze Stars with valor and marital problems. (A third of our 30-man team left Iraq divorced, including me.) Coming home should have been a joyous occasion, but after 15 months, we were all very different and the world was not the same.

Though the Iraq war is ending, it will never be over for those who went. Anytime someone finds out you’re a veteran and a little about what you did, the question comes up: “Did you kill anyone?” And with that inevitable question comes an inevitable floodgate of memories, good and bad.

Anonymous, U.S. Army Human Intelligence Collector

Iraq 2007-2008

STRATFOR Tactical Intern

I remember following the U.S. invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq from the comfort of my living room with no idea what a war zone was really like. Little did I know that one day I would have my own experiences in the Iraqi and Afghan cities I was watching on television.

A couple years after the fall of Saddam Hussein I was running human intelligence (HUMINT) operations in Baghdad, having one-on-one conversations with U.S. adversaries. I was elated by the opportunity to hear the perspective of the enemy. In the interrogations, our conversations varied. We would discuss anything from a planned attack on a convoy to the art of raising homing pigeons. While the typical image in Iraq was one of U.S. soldiers in fierce battles with insurgents, I would find myself smoking from a hookah with someone who had killed dozens. The polite nature of Iraqis carried over to the individuals with whom I would have conversations. A man who had just detonated an IED against an American convoy would offer me his prison-issued jacket if the weather was cold. I was shocked to see how cordial a detained insurgent could be, even if uncooperative.

There was a steep cultural learning curve for me, beginning with my mission in Iraq. Having never left the Western Hemisphere and having focused on Latin America with my previous unit, I was amazed to see what a different world the Middle East was. Language barriers were surprisingly easy to work around with interpreters, although my ability to gather intelligence depended on my cultural understanding. Picking and choosing which interpreter to use in communicating with a source was the first step. (An outspoken Lebanese Christian would not be very effective with a Sunni extremist.) It was also important to consider the gender, age and Islamic sect of interpreter and source. Putting aside intelligence gathering and turning instead to light-hearted conversations revolving around the source's life not only improved my cultural understanding but also helped elicit critical information and actionable intelligence.

My time in Iraq was quite different from that of a soldier patrolling the streets of Baghdad. While I left my friends and family behind and worked long hours, sometimes exceeding 48-hour shifts, I still enjoyed most of the comforts of home that many soldiers in Iraq could not enjoy. The dangers were minimal compared to those faced by soldiers who kicked open doors and endured regular ambushes and IEDs. I often felt that I was not really doing my part compared to others who were risking their life in combat. However, I cherish the knowledge I gained from the Iraqi people and hope my contribution in Iraq was to save both U.S. and Iraqi lives.

Sgt. Frank B., U.S. Marine Corps

Iraq 2008

STRATFOR Junior Tactical Analyst

During our operations in northern Anbar province, I was continuously struck by the unintended consequences of our actions. As a platoon size, eight-vehicle element, we conducted patrols around the region checking in on disparate parts of the population. However, due to a lack of good road maps we relied on aviation charts that made it hard to identify good or established ground routes.

In our effort to survey our area of operations for security threats (in addition to other taskings), we found that our two mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) trucks, weighing more than 10 tons apiece, would easily crush the simple, mud-packed irrigation networks in the area. This would result in the limited water supply being quickly absorbed by the vast expanse of baked earth. And our communication and electronic countermeasures antennae, some 15 feet tall, would routinely pull down or short out the low-hanging, rudimentary power lines that tenuously fed electricity over long distances to isolated populations.

All of this was impossible to avoid while executing our tasking orders and providing mandated levels of protection to our unit, yet it hampered our ability to build any kind of rapport with people in areas that had had limited contact with the ousted Baathist regime in the first place. I remember realizing at the time that many of our interests and actions negated one another, and I often wondered how much more of that was happening with the many different units across the country.

I would later realize this example would prove to be one of many examples where our best operational intentions were obfuscated by the complexity of procedures, precautions and logistics necessary for our activity within the country. I'll never forget walking away from my time in Iraq realizing the one-step-forward-two-step-backward reality of my unit's time in Iraq, and how it forever changed how I understand the net costs of military and foreign interventions everywhere.

Conclusion

I know each of the authors well enough to have been startled by their recollections of the war. The humor, dedication and bitterness expressed in these pieces show me dimensions of each of

them that I had not known were there. War reshapes the soul and makes people we think we know into mysteries. Life goes on, but not as it once was. No geopolitical meaning can be extracted from these memories, but human meanings can be. Suffice it to say that I am proud to be associated with these men and women.