

Military Story

By Ralph Musthaler

When I think of the remote Iraqi village of Al-Karmah, the thought of its charm as an earnest agricultural town is quickly overcome by images of trying to breathe life back into two fellow soldiers.

I think about the improvised explosive device that heaved a nearly four-ton Humvee into a water filled embankment.

I will never forget our efforts in trying to resuscitate these two young men, and I certainly won't forget the odor of water and mud in their lungs, as we desperately performed CPR.

When remembering my 13 months as a volunteer soldier during Operation Iraqi Freedom, I still can't reconcile why these courageous men perished. Seven years later I am thankful I came home unharmed, I consider myself to be fortunate to have played a crucial role in liberating Iraq, no matter how history treats this widely unpopular war.

When I joined the Army back in the summer of 1999, US foreign relations were much different than what they currently are. Things were relatively peaceful, and it didn't seem like a war was in our future.

I joined primarily for the college money they offered, but I also joined for the experience. After two years of service during peacetime, September 11th happened. At this point I knew it was a matter of time before we were deployed.

In October of 2003, we were given our orders. While some of our comrades were being sent to Afghanistan, our orders stated we were to be sent to Iraq. Our departure from the United States was set for December of that year, stopping in Kuwait before we touched down in Iraq.

After two weeks spent in Kuwait, awaiting our flight to Iraq, we loaded our gear onto a C-130 turbo prop plane, the type paratrooper's use, and then we packed in like sardines.

Upon arrival at Baghdad International Airport we crammed into the back of a two-ton truck, along with our gear, and made our way to a controlled area within downtown Baghdad formerly known as the Green Zone.

We performed many missions while in Iraq, the first being the personal Security Detail of Ambassador L. Paul Bremer.

Blackwater Security and the 89th MP brigade trained us on this particular mission, which was similar to what the Secret Service does for the President of the United States. Everyday we were tasked with protecting his convoy as it moved from

location to location.

The 89th, at one point, told us that Bremer was the most wanted person in the world. Because we were guarding such an important person, we were given decent quarters. We had two heavily fortified concrete buildings that weren't exactly nice but protected us from mortar attacks.

Three weeks into our deployment we were moved from the heart of Iraq, to a remote encampment near the city of Baqubah, called Ashraf, near the Iranian Border. Our mission there was to provide security for an organization of Iranian defectors known as the Peoples Mujahedin of Iran.

These people were credited for committing terroristic acts against US diplomats in the 1970s, and had been accused of slaughtering Iraqi Kurds and Shiites, earning them terrorist status by the State Department.

Another part of our mission was to provide security for the camp's detainees, who were under close scrutiny by agents of the FBI and State Department. I remember escorting a seemingly harmless, grandmotherly woman who was supposedly an extremely dangerous well-trained guerrilla fighter, who would cut my throat if she had, had the opportunity.

Shackled and chained, the 70ish woman spoke surprisingly good English. Our superiors explicitly told us not to talk to these people, but when she asked me where I was from, I couldn't help but tell this seemingly sweet old lady that I was from Pittsburgh.

She told me that she studied at the University of Pittsburgh, where she received her doctorate. She then told me about the friends she made while in my hometown, and the many memories she had as young woman in a foreign land.

I tried to get her to stop because I was fearful that one of my superiors would hear us talking, but she persisted with her tales of Pittsburgh.

After our brief conversation, I handed her over to State Department officials. This strange Pittsburgh connection with this supposedly deadly woman, made me question whether she was actually a terrorist.

One night while patrolling the area, we came within a few inches of running over an unexploded ordinance, causing everyone in the vehicle to scream at the driver in a panic. Luckily we narrowly missed these explosives, but after we finished our patrol it took awhile for our nerves to settle.

Some of our details only required us to be ready in case something happens.

One morning after breakfast, we watched a report stating four private contractors, including some from Blackwater, were attacked while traveling through Fallujah. A small convoy was transporting supplies when insurgents ambushed them. Images of their burned corpses, hanging from a bridge, were shown repeatedly. Later in the afternoon our company commander called a meeting to tell us we were being sent to Fallujah.

The war was about to become very dangerous.

The following morning we left the relative tranquility of Camp Ashraf for Fallujah. After watching what happened there just days earlier, we were tense. My squad was tasked with rout-recon, which means we patrolled ahead of the main convoy for possible threats.

Despite our position at the front, we didn't immediately encounter any trouble, but we did run across a Marine squad whose vehicles were riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel from RPGs.

Their Humvees looked like they came from a salvage yard, yet they were still drivable. As we stood by their vehicles and talked about what just transpired, the fields around the roadway were in flames, and Apache helicopters were circling the area searching for enemy combatants.

The Marine sergeant told us his squad had just narrowly escaped an ambush in the exact location where we were standing. After hearing this, and considering we were heading to a presumably hostile place, we felt like worse things were to come.

As we approached Camp Fallujah in front of a setting sun, I had an eerie feeling when I saw a Marine squad in a defensive posture along the road that lead to the base. The Marines told us to keep quiet, which made me feel like something dreadful was going to happen.

As soon as we pulled through the gates, I experienced the sound and ferocity of incoming mortars, for the first time in my life. Back in Ashraf we were never mortared, and while we were in Baghdad, they were never close. Actually seeing mortar after mortar explode around me like a fireworks display gone wrong, I realized quickly I was at the center of the conflict.

We were quartered in a sheet metal building at Camp Fallujah, which once served as an Iraqi military base under Hussein's regime. From the moment we arrived, the incoming mortars shook the building like a freight train rolling past a trackside building. It felt like the mortars were getting closer with every explosion. I'll never forget an officer telling us to sleep with all of our gear on in case something happened, but that night, no matter how hard I tried, I could not fall asleep.

Our mission was to establish several checkpoints around the entrance of the city. We searched every ambulance or food truck going into and leaving the city and had a curfew in place. Only women and children could leave the city, and males over

the age of 15 were forbidden to leave.

Our checkpoint was a location, which became known as the “cloverleaf.” The cloverleaf was named because of the unique shape of the two highways intersecting. Because the overlapping highway provided us with cover from mortars, we used it as our casualty collection point.

On our first day in Fallujah, we watched Marines being taken out of the city with terrible head wounds. We were told the Marines were afflicted by a sniper from Syria, who was intentionally taking headshots and in most cases hitting Marines in the neck. He eluded Marines by jumping across rooftops, and was armed with a Dragunov sniper rifle. We never got briefed on exactly where he was, but it was clear he was near our checkpoint. Luckily he never got a clear shot at us.

Everyday we dealt with people screaming at us in Arabic and throwing rocks at us, solidifying the fact that we were unwanted there. This wasn't exactly the type of greeting we expected, in some ways it made us feel as if our efforts of rebuilding Iraq were in vain.

While working our checkpoint, we found several humanitarian aid vehicles smuggling weapons. The most heartbreaking situations were finding wounded children in the ambulances during our search. Some of these children had near fatal wounds, sometimes unconscious and sometimes so heavily bandaged that you could barely see their faces.

If the tremulous month of running checkpoints in Fallujah was not intense enough, our second mission performing roving patrols around the suburbs of Fallujah was. Part of our mission was to get out of our vehicles at night to patrol the desert alongside the highway with metal detectors with hopes of finding IEDs before they killed anyone.

It was hard to stay focused during this particular mission and it intensified the stress that I was already enduring. Doing such a job made it seem like coming home is something so distant. It felt like it wasn't going to happen.

The worst and most traumatic thing that happened during our deployment was during a night patrol around the town of Al-Karmah. A Humvee with three soldiers was hit by an IED, flipping it into a body of water alongside the road.

When my squad arrived the lifeless bodies of two men I knew were being pulled out of the water. Trained in CPR, I quickly tended to one of the men who I realized a few months earlier told me that he was a new father. For several minutes, I tried breathing air into his lungs while another soldier performed chest compressions with hopes of resuscitating him.

When we arrived back at Camp Fallujah, the company commander told us the two soldiers had died. The news was shocking and horrifying, I always knew it was

possible that some of us would die while in Iraq, but that didn't make it any less painful. Even though we were in a war zone, what had happened was almost unconscionable. Plenty of soldiers were in the theater of operations without experiencing any sort of violence or death; I just wondered why it had to be us?

The next day we had a memorial service for our fallen comrades. As a chaplain read a few passages from the Bible, I couldn't stop thinking about what happened that night or the fact that both of the men who died were fathers. It seemed like everyone was overcome with deep sadness and remorse. I knew these men fairly well by that point and we had been deployed together for several months. I saw them every day. It was hard to overcome our loss, but we had to move on.

A new mission was only days away.

Still baffled from seeing the evils of war, we were tasked with the security of the Iraqi Interim Government. This was similar to the mission we had with Blackwater Security shortly after our arrival, except this time we were working with Navy Seals. Because this mission was so dangerous, Blackwater refused to accept it.

Each platoon was assigned a different political figure. The most prominent of which was Ayad Allawi, the interim prime minister, who was assigned to 3rd platoon. My platoon was assigned Ghazi Mashal Ajil al-Yawer, the Iraqi interim president.

Apparently these people were high valued targets with bounties on their heads. Because these people were so valuable, the Seal commander briefed us by stating that some of us would die during this mission. After the deaths in Fallujah, hearing him say that was not enough to dissuade us. We knew what we were in for the worst at that point.

Fortunately for us, we never encountered any danger during this mission, and everything was executed according to plan. In fact, we performed our mission so well that the Seals wanted to keep us longer. After experiencing the death of our comrades in Fallujah, knowing that we were doing well boosted morale. Finally we could see the end of our deployment, and coming home was now on the horizon.

Our last and final mission was the personal security detail of Ambassador John Negroponte. This mission came with many benefits. We no longer had to sleep in dilapidated buildings with no running water; instead we were assigned two-man trailers with our own shower. We ate chow in a palace, and had plenty of down time. From here on out it was easy going, it was just a matter of waiting out our deployment.

Our departure was set for January 15th, 2005. I was extremely eager to return home after a long and traumatic deployment. Upon arrival in New Jersey, a snowstorm hit. This was the first time in over a year that any of us had seen snow. We welcomed the otherwise obnoxious weather, as we prepared to continue with the rest of our lives.

After my subsequent release from military service I spent much of my time trying to find an adequate job. I also spent a fair amount of time relaxing and adjusting to civilian life, which seemed a little strange. The fact that I didn't have to watch over my shoulder on a daily basis was a difficult adjustment in itself.

I also spent time reflecting on what happened while in Iraq. It seemed like an extremely unpopular war, something I couldn't think about while I was over there. When people ask me my stance on the issue, I usually choose neutrality. I personally don't like politicizing what had happened, especially knowing that two comrades died while serving. I just hope that someday, what we did will make the world a safer place, but that may be too idealistic.

Regardless of the political ramifications of the war, I believe we executed our mission successfully. We participated in protecting important political figures, which in the broader scope of the war brought forth progress for the Iraqi people. Despite the tragedies that occurred, I have a new sense of appreciation that only can be attained after enduring such stresses.