



(U//FOUO) Camp Virginia to Camp Victory: Into Baghdad

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(U//FOUO) Note: This is the conclusion of [REDACTED] two-part article.

(U//FOUO) After the fall of Baghdad, we packed up our tents and began a two-day, 60-vehicle convoy across the Iraqi border and on toward Baghdad. Armed with a 9mm pistol and an M16 rifle that I prayed I would never have to use, I rode the whole way in a five-ton truck, with easy access to thermite grenades that could be used to destroy our classified cargo in the event of an ambush. We passed many Iraqi civilians - some waving American flags, some begging for food or trying to sell something, but most just watching in apparent awe as our trucks and humvees passed. We also saw numerous Iraqi tanks, rocket launchers, and personnel carriers that had been destroyed by US troops and aircraft as they advanced toward the capital city. Aside from frequent stops for repairs and fuel, we had a fairly uneventful trip to Camp Victory, Baghdad.



Convoy to Iraq

(U//FOUO) Our new home was in one of Saddam's former palace complexes located just east of Baghdad International Airport. Unfortunately, other than the change of scenery and the permanent structures in which we worked, this new facility offered almost no advantages over our makeshift tent camp back in Kuwait. We ate nothing but MREs for the six weeks we were in Iraq, and many times we were rationed two MREs and two bottles of water per day. When we first arrived I went almost two weeks without a shower, and for several weeks our restroom was a small tent surrounding six metal drums covered by plastic toilet seats and separated by small sheets. At that point I was working nights and trying to sleep during the day. This proved to be extremely difficult since temperatures routinely reached 110 degrees and we did not have any electricity in our tent for air conditioning or even fans, so I found myself averaging about two or three hours of sleep per day. We often heard explosions and saw tracer fire or smoke coming from the direction of downtown Baghdad, but I felt relatively safe inside of our heavily guarded compound. The conditions gradually improved as more people settled into the camp. Eventually the metal drums were replaced by porta-johns and we found a clean water source for showers and a generator for fans in the tent.



One of Saddam's former palaces in Baghdad

(U//FOUO) I took advantage of any opportunity I had to leave Camp Victory and experience as much of the country and the culture as I could. Although this often occurred during the day when I would normally be sleeping, I knew that if I didn't take full

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advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I would probably regret it for the rest of my life. Our excursions included Blackhawk helicopter trips to the Tikrit and Mosul areas, a humvee ride out to the Ramadi and Fallujah area with some of our CIA colleagues, and several trips into downtown Baghdad; including visits to the parade grounds, the republican guard palace, and the former Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS) headquarters to witness the debrief of an informant.

Blackhawk helicopter tour

(U//FOUO) My adventure in Iraq concluded in a somewhat bittersweet manner in mid-June. On my last day in country, I accompanied a group of army engineers to a school in eastern Baghdad, where they were going to make some repairs to the sewer system that served an elementary school. A large crowd gathered and became a bit unruly. They then began hurling stones at us, and suddenly we heard two rounds fired from the top of a housing complex about one hundred yards away. No one was injured, but it left me with a somber feeling as the C-17 departed Baghdad en route to Rhein Main Germany. I had learned much about my ability to cope with adverse situations. I was proud of the work I had done, and I was happy to return home to my family and girlfriend. But hundreds of thousands of Americans remain in harm's way around the world, living in conditions far worse than mine and in much greater danger than I ever was. Many US service members have been away from their families for almost a year or more, and some have no end in sight. More important than what I learned about myself, my experience in the Middle East helped me develop a deeper appreciation and respect for those who dedicate their lives to fighting for our freedom.

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