

SAVING BABYLON

**The Heart of
an Army Interrogator in Iraq**

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PERIHELION PRESS

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Published by Perihelion Press, 3641 Little Rock Drive, Provo, UT 84604
www.perihelionpress.com

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Names and other identifying details of some individuals have been altered to safeguard their identity.

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Cover design by Diane McIntosh
Interior design by Marny K. Parkin

Cover photo by Spc. Sean Kimmons, courtesy of U.S. Army.

Holton, Paul Roy
Saving Babylon : the heart of an army interrogator in Iraq

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005925715

ISBN 978-1-933434-00-1

*To the Iraqi people who believed in freedom
and the American soldiers who were willing to fight for it.*

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Chapter Four

A Home Called Bucca

After three weeks of civilian life, my orders came to return to the Middle East. By May 7, 2003, I was back in the sand. While I was gone, the toppling of Saddam had become quite literal as U.S. Marines helped a crowd of Iraqis pull down a massive statue of the dictator in the heart of Baghdad. Widespread looting, lawlessness, and general chaos followed. Throughout the country Iraqi Army divisions surrendered or instantly disbanded as U.S. troops restored order to places like Tikrit, Mosul, and Kirkuk. Those of us in MI had a mounting supply of work with the daily capture, defection or surrender of generals, government ministers, Baath Party leaders, and other characters whose faces appeared on the deck of playing cards featuring our most wanted suspects.

It was both a peculiar and familiar feeling coming back to the desert. Sure, there were a few days of readjustment; reintroduction to sand, wind, heat—and the war. Many of my good friends had moved on to other assignments, to fulfill other missions. It was strange to see the camp so empty, with almost everyone I knew gone. My unit had been spread out all over Iraq on variety of missions.

From the moment I arrived back at camp there was a stream of long days working into the late hours of the night, generating and editing reports from MI assets in the field on critical issues. When I arrived at my tent around 11:30 PM, most people were already fast

asleep. It's not easy trying to fall asleep to the sound of 40 guys snoring all at once. Fortunately, the constant humming of the generator outside the tent muffled the roar of snoring soldiers.

The intelligence flow was steadily increasing in the early weeks of the war, bringing in more and more valuable information about people, places, and events of interest. The pieces of this puzzle were all coming together as our team of interrogators continued to interview POWs and other detainees.

In my short absence there had been many changes, not the least of which was the increasing heat. Many mornings I was awakened abruptly by sweat running down the middle of my back and was surprised to see the temperature in the tent had already reached over 100°F.

Fortunately, temperatures fell quickly in the evening, cooling to a bearable temperature for sleeping. Of course, it was still springtime and too early to know what the heat of summer had in store.

One new addition to camp was an increasing insect population sharing our tent. The flying bugs were especially attracted to the light of my computer screen. They swarmed around my head as if at any moment they were going to launch their assault and take over my computer.

With the increasing temperature came a cool amenity—ice. Our camp now had ice deliveries on a daily basis, which really improved the quality of life. Each morning a truck with a big semi-trailer full of ice made the rounds, passing out ice to the troops at each stop along the way. We dug a pit outside our tent and lined it with Styrofoam hoping to keep the ice from melting the minute it was received.

The nights were unusually calm, with nothing more than a slight cooling breeze drifting across the desert floor. There was a reassuring calm and certain serenity to the desert on nights like that. It beckoned me out of my tent to roam the sands, capturing a rare moment of peace. The desert has a split personality. Normally a harsh place,

unforgiving and unbearable; yet it was still capable of winning your trust with its moments of calm, only to turn on you with its next hot breath of sand and wind. This daily unpredictability added a level of diversity that actually made the desert more interesting.



Understandably, Mother's Day was a difficult day for me. As I reflected on my mother and her unexpected passing, I missed her deeply. She was a great woman and had a profound impact on the man and the soldier I had become.

At church they had a special program about mothers, which was quite moving. Some of the men came up to me after the meeting, understanding how difficult it might have been for me, to console me and express words of comfort. Several remarked that I had been in their prayers on that day. I was touched by such thoughtfulness while in a war zone.

In the week since my return I could see that the conditions of camp life and the war were starting to wear on people. The heat, the sand, the insects, our close quarters, the lack of amenities, the lack of creature comforts, all started to affect people in different ways. As soldiers continued to wait in this harsh environment for their assignments, their true self usually crept to the surface. Some spoke about suicide, others would just as soon kill someone else that was getting on their nerves. Some just couldn't stand it anymore and didn't know what to do; others got depressed or frustrated.

The conditions were grinding away, taking some people to the limits of their tolerance. We all had our breaking points, some reaching theirs sooner than others. We had to watch each other, being aware of the signs that might appear when someone starts down that road. There were a few people to whom I paid particular attention, just to make sure I kept them moving along in a positive direction so that they would get home in one piece mentally.

Some people shut down, making it difficult to know what was really going on inside. Others were closed to begin with and would not open up to discuss their feelings. Those of us who maintained a strong healthy outlook were fluid; we accepted our circumstances and embraced changes, whatever they might be. I was fortunate not to be too affected by most of what was going on around me, making the best of the situation; there really was nothing else I could do. I refused to get too worked up about things over which I had no control.

I focused on our mission, our purpose for being there in the first place. Our challenge in Iraq was to help free a people from a dictator and assist them in setting up a new government with a bunch of untested people—people without a strong democratic tradition. We wanted them to get off on the right foot now that Saddam was gone. We knew there were many different groups and factions, all with competing and conflicting interests. Everyone there seemed to have their own agenda, with an overriding desire to protect their own domain. We knew forging freedom in that environment would be difficult. But the magnitude of that mission enabled me and many other great soldiers to keep their head in the game.



The order finally came and was an answer to prayer. I was finally moving into Iraq to work directly with Iraqi POWs at Camp Bucca in the south near the port city of Umm Qasr. I had been biding my time, trying to make the most of things in Kuwait; but there was an inner burning to move to my next station, closer to the action. I was sure there was a reason for my extended stay at Camp Udairi; it was a stepping stone preparing me for my next assignment.

Camp Bucca was a POW camp set up on a large plot of land which would be the temporary home for several thousand Iraqi

prisoners. The piece of property was virtually unused by the Iraqis before the war, except for the radio station and tower that sat right in the middle of it. I expected to be there until my mission was over and all the POWs were sent back home, a process which had already begun when I arrived. Once the information they had was exploited, or if we determined they didn't have any real intelligence value, they were sent on their way. Those of higher rank or position in Saddam's regime, including 14 Iraqi generals, were still on site and were continually being questioned for information.

I had been out driving beyond the boundaries of our base a few times and had been able to see the Iraqis living in the area. Overall, the response from the locals was very positive. No matter where I went, there were crowds of kids out on the streets waiting for an American to drive by, in hopes that they would be able to catch our



Local residents come out to greet the troops with a "thumbs up."

attention. The kids stood patiently waiting on the side of road enduring the heat of the day. As they saw us coming from a distance they begin waving. As we got closer they held up the peace sign or gave us a thumbs up with a big smile on their face. They yelled out English phrases, some obviously picked up from other passing troops, like “I love you” or “Give me water.” There were also some older people, perhaps the children’s parents, that had come out to wave to any U.S. military personnel. Cars full of Iraqis would drive by, honk their horns, and wave.

The military had to be careful, especially with the kids that hung out on the sides of the roads. They would stand in the middle of the road, even lying down at times, in an effort to get us to stop. They usually sent out the smallest cutest kid so that they could encircle the vehicle trying to steal things from inside. The bigger kids usually went right for open windows or any doors that weren’t locked and then just started grabbing stuff. Their actions seemed prompted more by curiosity and childlike playfulness than out of any malicious intent; still their actions posed a risk to them and to us. Despite the warm welcome, in the back of my mind there was a lingering concern that those who might want to hurt us could appear at any time, even in what appeared to be a welcoming throng.



Camp Bucca was named in honor of Fire Marshall Ronald Paul Bucca, who died on September 11, 2001, during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. Radio transmissions revealed he had ascended to the 78th floor of one of the buildings and was putting water on a fire when he died. His body was found close to one of the stairwells on October 23, 2001. In addition to being a 23-year veteran of the Fire Department of New York, Ronald Bucca was also a 29-year veteran of the military and held the rank



Antenna for Saddam's propaganda radio station in the center of Camp Bucca.

of warrant officer in the U.S. Army Reserve. Most of his career was with the 11th Special Forces Group and the Defense Intelligence Agency as an intelligence analyst.

Camp Bucca in its prior life was a propaganda radio station for Saddam Hussein. The huge radio antenna positioned in the center of

the compound reached high into the clear Iraqi sky. Local villagers told us of the types of things that were broadcast during Saddam's reign, which included deliberate misinformation on the progress of Coalition troops during the early days of the war. Major Price and I occupied the radio station buildings, set up our office and operation center, and made this our home.

In an effort to make it seem more homelike, I set up our clotheslines, laid out the prayer rugs, and neatly arranged our boxes around the room. But during the intense heat of mid-afternoon, which hovered around 120°F, our office was like an oven inside. The temperatures inside the tents were no better, easily climbing to 125°F. To escape the heat, several of us slept on the roof. Every night we climbed a ladder, bedding in hand, to sleep under the stars, where a cooling breeze made conditions a little more bearable and sleep a little more possible. There were six of us sleeping on the roof, while the rest were sleeping in the tents set up not too far away. Occasionally, when the wind picked up you could see our silhouettes scampering around, grabbing our stuff, and heading down the ladder to get out of the storm.



Improvised rooftop barracks at Camp Bucca.

We had made a large cooler with pieces of Styrofoam found lying around. This makeshift ice chest was about three feet square and appropriately named the Mother of All Coolers. Amazingly, it really worked. Bags of ice could be kept in there for days. I thought that my next project would be to build the “cooler coffin,” big enough to sleep in. That would have been the perfect camp bed, sleeping in a cooler on ice.

At its peak in May, there were over 10,000 prisoners at Camp Bucca, which was an unbelievable sight and an indescribable stench. It’s difficult to comprehend the mess that many people can create. In addition to the prisoners, there were thousands of U.S. forces living in cramped quarters, with all of us using nothing more than a slit trench for a bathroom. Even after the prisoner population was reduced to about 1,000, there was still a stench about that place I will never forget.

Flies quickly became a serious problem. Millions of these pesky little insects would feast in the slit trenches and then zoom straight for our faces and food. They were carrying bacteria that if touched would make anyone sick. We named it the Bucca Bug, which sent many of our best soldiers running to the nearest outhouse. Miraculously, I did not get sick even once, being extremely cautious about what I touched and always keeping my hands sanitized and away from my mouth.

Through various media channels I continued to hear reports of accusations of prisoner ill-treatment by American soldiers. Self-serving human rights activists took every opportunity to cry foul play as they looked for any excuse to condemn our methods of handling prisoners. We were accused of making them live in tents in extreme temperatures, forcing them to eat substandard food, and making them endure sandstorms, snakes, scorpions, and crowded quarters. Welcome to Iraq. Where did they think all the U.S. military were living? American soldiers were surviving under the same conditions,