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AFTER

AN AUSTRALIAN OFFICER IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN
GARTH CALLENDER



BLAST

AFTER THE BLAST

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GARTH CALLENDER



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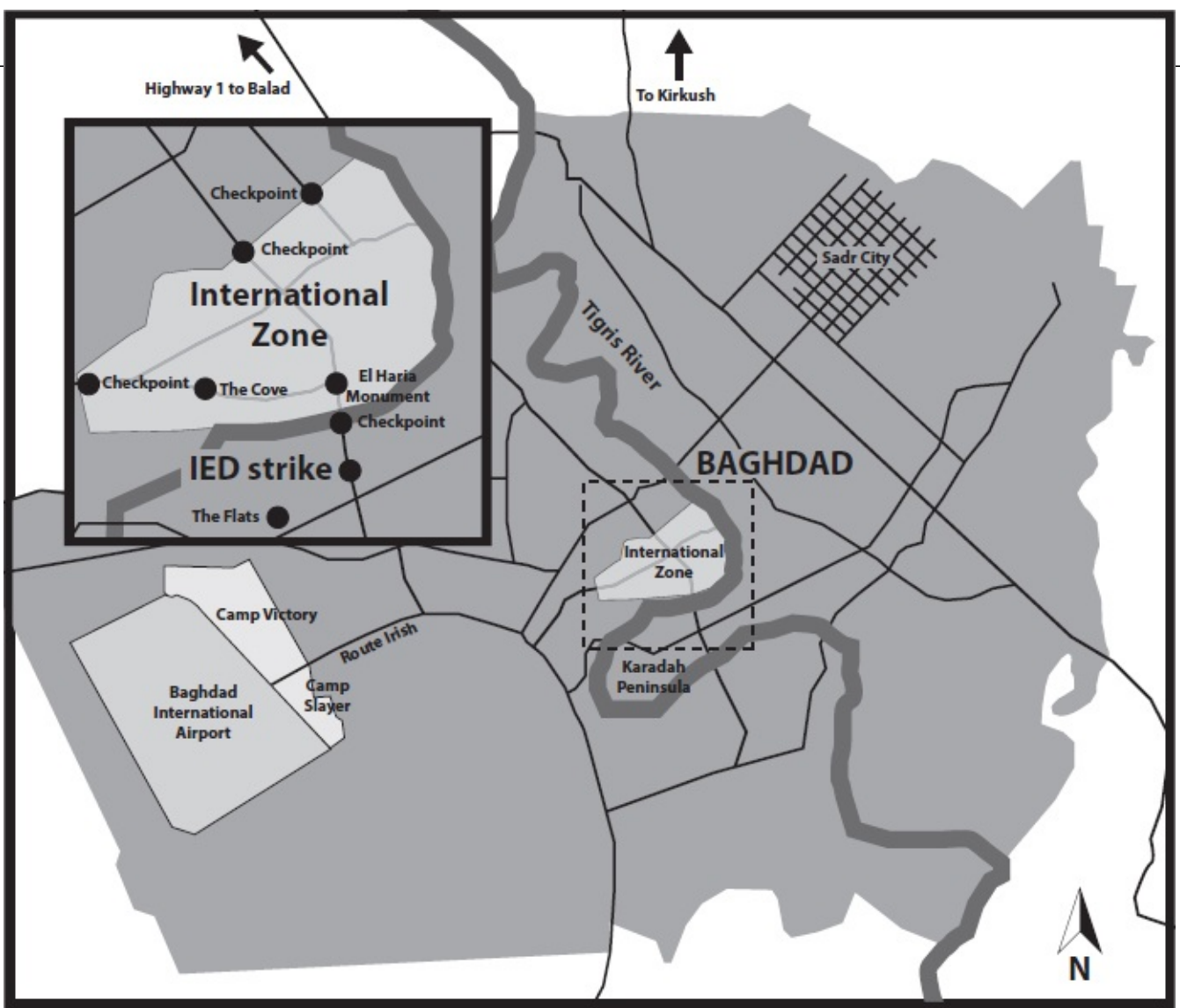
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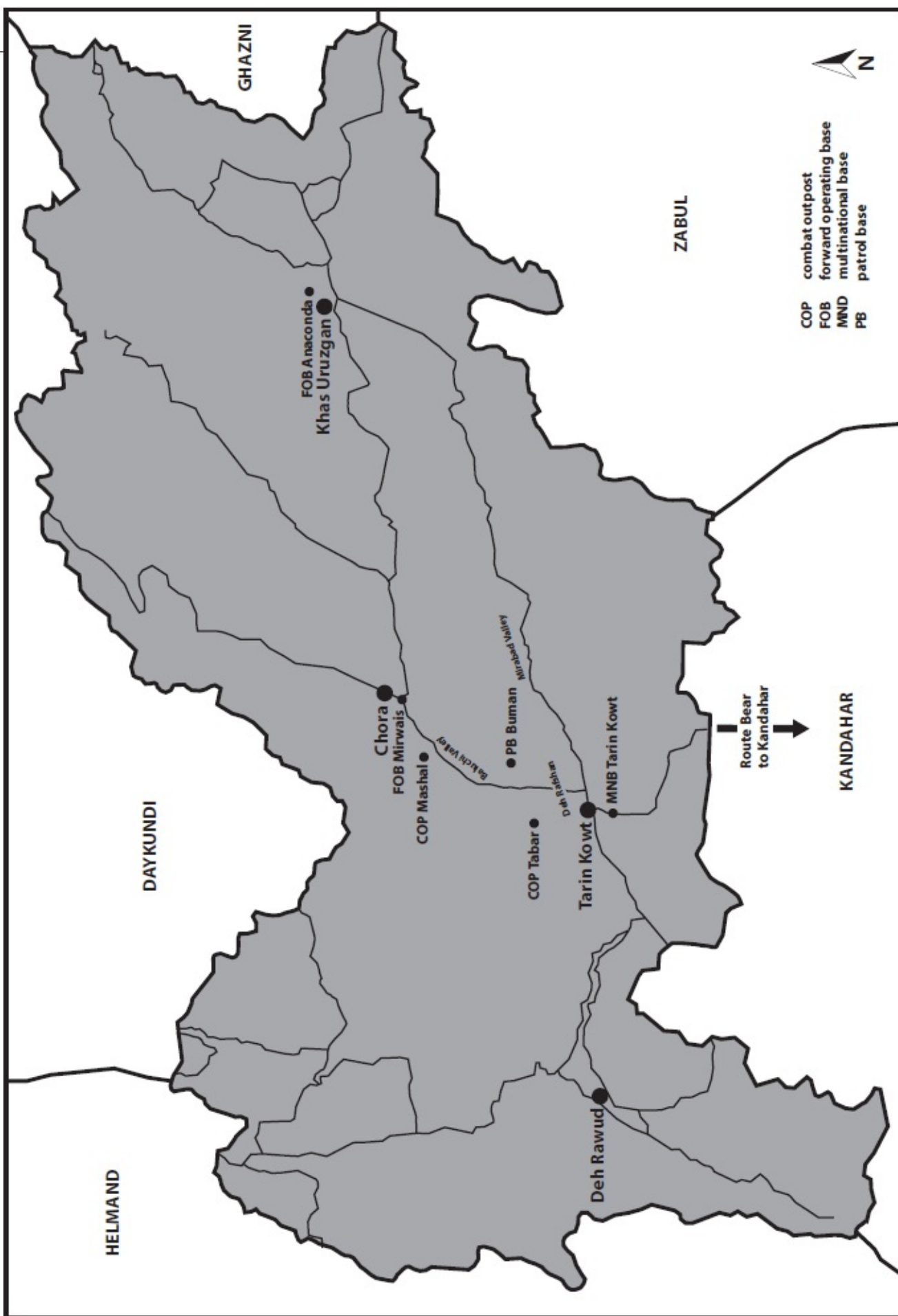
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Map A: Iraq



Map B: Baghdad, 2004



Map C: Uruzgan province, Afghanistan

PROLOGUE

THE BLAST

25 OCTOBER 2004

WE CAME OUT OF THE ROUNDABOUT AND accelerated hard on the road leading north to the checkpoint into the International Zone. I was in the second of two armoured vehicles in convoy, standing up in the turret. The buildings to our right had been noted several times by our intelligence guys as a trouble spot. This morning nothing seemed out of the ordinary. We had no indication that some time earlier an insurgent had parked a car with a cargo of artillery rounds wired to a remote control. There was no sign that, as my vehicle passed it, the device would be triggered by someone overlooking the road.

Of the explosion I remember nothing. I have no recollection of the blast that tore off my helmet and goggles – nothing of how my vehicle lost control and careered into, and uprooted, a tree in the median strip.

I must have been unconscious for only a few seconds. I came to with the thought that I had been shot in the head ... I was confused, and pissed off, and everything hurt.

I instinctively reached for my head. Although alarmed to find no helmet, I was a little comforted by the fact that I didn't find the gaping hole I'd expected. But I knew I was in trouble, as I couldn't breathe or see and had a terrible pain in my legs. I couldn't get any air into my lungs, and I tried to yell. Nothing came out.

On the second attempt, I managed to let out a whimper, and, though very winded, managed to keep drawing painful breaths after that. I fumbled through the blood and damaged flesh that constituted my eyebrows and the bridge of my nose, and for a second managed to prise open my eyes and look down at the dusty floor of the turret ...

**PART I:
IRAQ
2004**

WAITING TO DEPLOY

IN MY LAST SIX MONTHS AT MILITARY COLLEGE, planes hit the World Trade Center towers.

A year and a half later, with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, the job of protecting the Australian embassy in Iraq fell to the Australian army. As a new troop leader in the 2nd Cavalry Regiment based in Darwin, I looked on with envy as the first troop to deploy packed and left in a flurry of activity and repressed excitement. While most of us knew what was going on, there was a security requirement to keep our mouths shut, so the troop left under a cover of quasi-secrecy.

Seventeen months later I would get my chance to deploy.

*

Even though I had served for almost eight years, my military career up until deployment had been unexceptional. I had joined as a directionless nineteen-year-old looking for adventure. The boy who had joined in 1996 as an infantry rifleman never expected to end up in Iraq or Afghanistan as an officer.

I joined a peacetime army where the opportunities for real operational experience were extremely rare. A few years after joining, I somehow impressed my commanding officer during a field training exercise and was recommended for officer training at the Royal Military College, Duntroon.

I started at Duntroon with the naive belief that I could live the same lifestyle I had as a soldier and somehow coast through the eighteen-month course. So the only really exceptional thing about my early career was the extensive conduct record I accumulated during officer training. Drinking when on the dry, sleeping through parade, turning in work that wasn't my own – ten charges in total. These charges saw me spend far too much of my time marching around the parade ground on misty mornings and bitter, cold Canberra evenings. With the later offences, the prosecutor would make a point of dropping my conduct record on the desk of the officer hearing the charge so that the house-brick thud of the document would make a dramatic thud as it landed.

Luckily, I got serious about my career about the same time the world got serious for my generation. It wasn't just 9/11; a lot of things focused and shaped my new attitude. I applied to be allocated to armoured corps, specifically cavalry, as I had a gut feeling I could achieve the most by commanding a troop of vehicles and soldiers. Such teams had, by that time, already done well in East Timor, and had a proud history, from the Boer War through to Vietnam. So, with new-found drive and motivation, I focused on military studies at the college and ended up graduating in the top 15 per cent of the class, and was given my preference of corps and posting.

After graduating from Duntroon as a young lieutenant, I was posted to the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, then the only unit that had ASLAVs (Australian Light Armoured Vehicles). I spent my first year bouncing around the country completing courses so I could do my job commanding thirty soldiers and six vehicles: six months vehicle training in Puckapunyal, Victoria, and range qualifications in Singleton, New South Wales. This was followed by numerous field-training exercises throughout the Northern Territory and Queensland to further learn all I could about the very technically and tactical

challenging job of being a cavalry troop leader.

~~In the middle of it all I almost got sent to sea for four months to help the navy with illegal immigrant ships – luckily I was saved at the last minute by my commanding officer, who thought I could be better employed.~~

*

My first deployment to Baghdad was with the fifth rotation of the Australian Security Detachment in Iraq. Colloquially known as SECDET V, it was a group of about 110 soldiers commanded by an infantry major. We would leave Australia in early September 2004 for a four-month rotation. In the first two months we would protect the embassy, so that the staff there could carry out their diplomatic work as safely as possible. We would spend the second two months in northern Iraq, providing protection to Australians who were helping train an Iraqi army brigade.

We trained specifically for Iraq for four months, all through the Darwin wet season. Four months of training for a four-month deployment – there was something a little ‘over-cooked’ about our approach.

Training for Baghdad in northern Australia was problematic. We drove armoured vehicles far around the barracks in the middle of the night, practising our formations and trying to replicate scenarios we might encounter; we sat on rooftops in the rain to replicate what it might be like if an angry mob attacked us; we got sprayed with capsicum spray so we would understand its effect if we ever needed to use it; we watched videos of insurgents beheading kidnap victims in an effort to understand the environment and the people; we turned Darwin into Baghdad and trained like we were there.

The rest of the army did a lot to support us. During parts of the training, hundreds of soldiers roleplayed local Iraqis, foreign military and embassy officials. Occasionally you’d get a wink from a ‘local Iraqi’ truck driver you recognised.

The army bought new equipment, including spending millions of dollars on remote-controlled machine-gun mounts. These mounts had a thumb-operated controller, just like on a video-game console. From the crew commander’s cupola (the small hatch that opens next to the engine deck), you watched a screen at thigh level as you spun the gun quickly onto targets. These mounts were highly accurate, but very difficult to master. They had been purchased after the blokes already in Iraq complained the vehicle set-up had the crew commander standing behind the .50 calibre machine gun while the vehicle was in motion. This meant he was driving through the streets of Baghdad almost totally exposed – ‘balls up’.

With the new remote system, the commander could crouch in his cupola and operate the gun. But what the new design and technology didn’t take into account was that a lot of the time you really needed to be standing out the top of the vehicle – directing traffic out of the way, or showing your pistol to stop drivers cutting you off. You couldn’t do that from within the vehicle. We did scratch our heads a little as to why the government insisted on spending millions on these systems, but it was new shiny technology, and we were happy to accept it.

We were also trained to use automatic grenade launchers, until then only used by Special Forces. These fit on the remote system and were thought to be useful as counter-ambush weapons in the open areas up in northern Iraq. A Special Air Service Regiment warrant officer instructed us on how to operate them: how to reload, how to fix stoppages, and how to use the tool for getting out a grenade wedged in the barrel after firing too many rounds. We learnt all this without knowing whether we

could actually fire the weapon, as the only ammunition we could get was 'environmentally stressed' apparently it had been sitting in a shipping container in the Kuwaiti sun for a year.

The Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, had to sign off personally before we could fire these rounds. He came to view our training just after we had been through a particularly rigorous period, during which I had slept a handful of hours over a few days. I was tired and pissed off as he instructed me on the precautions my troop needed to take before we could fire the ammunition. He directed that everyone had to wear body armour and ballistic goggles, and everyone not firing should be behind cover in an armoured vehicle or in a bunker. He started lecturing me, quite rightly, on all of this.

When he started talking about the danger of a grenade being caught in the barrel, I disagreed with him on some point and said something arrogant like, 'No, sir, that is a known design feature of the weapon and we have been trained how to fix the stoppage.'

I saw my commanding officer behind him grimace.

General Leahy looked at me and said, 'If you don't follow all these safety precautions, firstly I'll sack you' – he turned to point at my brigade commander, John Cantwell, standing just to his right 'and then I'll sack him.'

I was shocked. I suddenly realised how concerned General Leahy was about using this stressed ammunition and that I should shut my mouth. I politely agreed to do everything he said, then left, resolving not to upset generals and jeopardise brigadiers' careers.

Through these months of training, we were also trying to spend time with our families and lead normal lives. I was in charge of twenty-seven blokes, which generated a lot of administrative deployment order details, wills in case the worst occurred, power-of-attorney forms, official passport applications, immunisations, dog tags – all needed to be checked and re-checked.

I attended my sergeant's wedding, held social functions with my troop, said goodbye to family who visited me in Darwin before I left, wrote letters to my troop's next of kin telling them as much as I could, and made a clumsy proposal to my girlfriend. By the time we were ready to go, I was tired from training, happy to be engaged and ready to get on with the job.

*

Crystal and I had been together only a year when I left for Baghdad the first time.

We had a classic romance. Love at first sight. She moved from the Gold Coast to Darwin after knowing me for only a matter of weeks. We just knew it was right, from the first night we met. Her bubbly, giggly way added a vibrancy to my life I had never known.

We loved spending all our free time together. We'd go out dancing in the bars on Mitchell Street or talk till all hours of the night, or just lie on the couch watching movies. I loved everything about her. She had a way of disarming people and getting them to like her. Under an unassuming demeanour she was a talented theatre nurse who received praise from even the most indifferent surgeons. She vacuumed the house in a bikini, laughed at all my stupid jokes, and, to my surprise and good fortune, was just as in love with me as I was with her.

During our first year together, we watched other lieutenants deploy to Iraq, and Crystal knew she would probably go too at some stage. She also knew how much I wanted to go. Maybe I was naive, but like all my peers I was desperate to do the job for real. She knew how much it meant to me.

Crystal did a good job of keeping it together, but when I left her at the airport she went home miserable. She planned to stay at home for a few weeks before travelling to London to see friends.

This holiday would be her way of passing time while we were apart. I was travelling and having adventures, so why shouldn't she? Friends were coming to mind the house and look after my dog while we were away.

The day I left, Crystal sat on the steps of our house in Darwin crying, worried about my safety and uncertain how she would cope with our being apart for four months. It was then that my old dog Girlie, a Labrador-Kelpie cross, did something strange.

I had had Girlie since I was in high school. She had followed me around the country and had witnessed so much of my life. She must have moved house twenty times or more throughout her life. As Crystal sat on the stairs, Girlie sat next to her and leaned back on her hind legs, putting both paws up on Crystal's shoulders, something I had never known her to do before. It was as if she were giving Crystal a hug.

I had always felt that Girlie was very in tune with people's emotions, but perhaps this was more than that. Some might claim that Girlie had a sixth sense. Perhaps she knew something was going to happen. Perhaps she was trying to tell Crystal that I was going to get hurt, but not to worry because in the end it would be OK.

Or maybe Girlie just hadn't been walked in a few days. Poor neglected mutt.

TO IRAQ

WE WENT TO WAR LIKE SO MANY SOLDIERS of my generation – by commercial air travel.

My introduction to the Middle East was a ten-hour stopover in the Emirates business lounge at Dubai International. Nervous about what lay ahead, I passed the hours on the leather couches in glass smoking rooms, puffing through an endless chain of cigarettes and watching the waves of travellers go by.

The wide marble halls and cavernous domed ceilings of the airport were not what I had expected. The high-end boutiques, the elegant women in tailored full black-silk niqabs, swaying their hips as they walked to their departure gates, the shiny dark-skinned men with their matching shiny jewellery and sweat-stained shirts – no-one had explained this was part of going to Iraq.

I was in a group of about twenty officers and senior soldiers, an advance party who would commence the handover with our counterparts in Baghdad before our ninety companions arrived. We sat around awkwardly in our shorts and collared shirts, with recently cropped hair, trying to look inconspicuous. Our camouflage backpacks didn't help.

A short flight to Kuwait International and we were getting closer. Sweltering heat and steamy dirty hallways with green lino floors, dotted with surly guards; being herded through baggage claim and immigration with badly photocopied letters of introduction that somehow made our arrival without visas legitimate; the hour-and-a-half wait for lost baggage to be found – it wasn't war, but I was already on edge.

Then followed a few days in the sweltering Kuwaiti heat doing final training before heading into Iraq. We drove in coaches out to rifle ranges pegged out of patches of desert. The heat was intense. One of the older warrant officers passed out, having been off the air-conditioned bus no longer than five minutes. As we helped him back onto the bus, I wondered how we would be able to work in this climate. Our body armour and helmets seemed to trap the heat and keep us constantly moist with sweat.

We were introduced to a new bandage that set hard when it came in contact with blood. It was designed to save your life if your arm or leg was torn off in a bomb blast – they called this explosive amputation. Apparently, since the first improvised explosive devices (IEDs) emerged mid-way through the previous year, it had become a common way for soldiers to die. IEDs had quickly become the insurgents' weapons of choice. So you needed a bandage that would solidify quickly over your bloodied stump before you died of blood loss. We had to sign a consent form, because it was not approved for use in Australia – apparently the doctors had to do a lot of damage to get the solid bandage off once you made it to hospital.

We got our new bandages and confirmed which pocket to put them in so whoever was giving you first aid knew where to look. We were issued with a last round of equipment: new helmets, cold weather gear, including sub-zero puffer jackets (which seemed ridiculous at the time, but we were to be in northern Iraq during winter), a fifth set of fire-retardant gloves.

Finally, the day came when we got on the C-130 Hercules. The flight was painful: we wore all our

protective equipment, and the seating in the plane – aluminium poles slung with fabric straps – were cramped and hot. As we approached Baghdad, the pilot started manoeuvring in a way designed either to piss us off or to avoid surface-to-air fire. Maybe both. Shooting at planes was a regular pastime for the insurgents. They'd sit just off the perimeter of the airfield and take pot shots at the landing aircraft. I swore as sharp pains jabbed through my ears from the changes in air pressure as the aircraft banked, turned and dropped sharply into Baghdad International Airport.

*

Baghdad – flat, hot, congested, a city of seven million situated along a series of bends in the Tigris River. In the region known as the 'cradle of civilisation', it lies just 80 kilometres north of the ancient biblical city of Babylon. But I don't recall the Bible mentioning anything about Australians in armoured vehicles.

On arrival we were picked up from the airport by a patrol of blokes who were about to hand over to us at SECDET.

I quickly learnt about one of the habits you had to adopt when moving through Baghdad with your head up in an armoured vehicle. The leaking sewers that kept the median strips green also left large puddles of shit water across the road. The veteran crew I was with knew to duck their heads, but I wanted to take in as much of this new city as possible from my position in the front crew hatch. I watched the vehicle hit a puddle of raw sewage and, without time to react, was covered in a bow wave that went straight in my mouth and left me dry-retching at regular intervals throughout the day.



Streets of Baghdad with overflowing sewage.

The road from the airport forked as it approached the Tigris. Crossing over the river to the east took you towards the Karadah Peninsula and our accommodation, known as 'the Flats'. Heading north or east led you into the International Zone, or Green Zone as it was sometimes called.

The Flats, a ten-storey building, was an obvious landmark in a city that was relatively low-rise.

was surrounded by dusty weather-beaten hotels and an old hospital. Nearby, on the same long stretch of land, was the University of Baghdad, with a fairly extensive campus that took up several square kilometres.

The Flats was the hub of all our activities – our accommodation, kitchen and dining hall, command post, vehicle parking and servicing area. Most importantly, it was the backbone of the defences, not just for ourselves, but also the Australian embassy, which was next door. For twenty-four hours a day we had infantry manning machine guns at each corner, covering all approaches to our building and the embassy. The snipers sat on the roof, day in, day out, covering our movements and watching for anything out of the ordinary.

My first couple of days at the Flats were a blur of activity. The handover from the outgoing troop leader involved meeting the embassy staff, familiarising myself with the building defence and routine, understanding the condition of the vehicles, and starting to get to know this strange new city we would be working in. Even just finding my way around the Flats at times got me unstuck – there were so many dark corridors that looked the same.



The Flats.

I had a bed allocated in a room with two other officers, but during those first few days I only saw the ceiling for the few seconds before my head, which was spinning, hit the pillow.

As in most parts of the city, the sewage system leaked regularly and the electricity was intermittent due to an over-extended power grid. From the sentry position on the fourth floor, you could hear the air conditioners thump on, then off, as you looked out on the green grassy median strip and trees that lined the roads.

The Flats itself had obviously been designed to be one of the more opulent buildings in Baghdad. At times I would imagine how it would have looked had it ever been completed. From the outside, the building would have oozed wealth, with its sandstone façades and high windows that gave it a classical but also unmistakably Middle Eastern look. The large entranceway that opened onto the four-lane road at the front would have had arched doors of highly polished metal and glass. Entering through these doors, you would have found a large, cool, open expanse. I imagined white tiles across the lobby and a glass elevator that rode up the centre of the cylindrical building, all the way to the tenth floor. The rooms, whether hotel rooms or apartments, would be cool and chic, with the well-

appointed bathrooms and kitchen overdone and tacky in the style of many of Baghdad's high-end buildings.

The tenth floor, I envisaged, would have been either a restaurant or an extremely large penthouse for only the wealthiest visitors or tenants. The large archways on two of the four sides would be set with glass to give one of the best views over Baghdad, a city that I came to find strangely beautiful.

However, construction on the Flats had stopped after the basic structure had been completed. A few rooms had been tiled, but on the whole the building was a shell. There were no windows or doors, only what the Australian occupants had put in place by way of plywood sheets that used a unique self-closing mechanism, fashioned using water-bottle weights and a rudimentary pulley system.

When I first arrived, I couldn't help but think of the movie *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. The interior of the building, an open cylindrical area about 7 metres in diameter, made the rest of the dark, gaping doorway and scaffolding seem to loom over my head. The makeshift elevator that groaned up to the tenth floor only added to the feeling that at any minute two opponents would swing into the open expanse and attempt to sever each other's limbs with chainsaws.

I didn't know for sure why the Flats had not been completed, but the rumour was that during the building process the owner had become aware that one of Saddam's sons was interested in acquiring the building (by dubious, most likely illegal and possibly violent means). To forestall this, the owner had just stopped building. In the long term he may even have done all right from the venture, as the Australian government was paying exorbitant rent for use of the half-completed structure.

The building was poorly lit, and only the first couple of floors were occupied. Many areas were mazes of dusty concrete walls and dark corners. Despite all this, since the arrival of the first security detachment in early 2003, the Australians had done a good job of making it home. They had sandbagged up the open windows for protection and furnished the rooms they were allocated with pictures of home or pages from men's magazines. As time passed, heaters were put in for the cold winters, and air conditioners were fitted to make the scorching summers bearable. Army stretchers were replaced with beds, and deals were struck with the US military to supply bulk rations; a kitchen was opened on the first floor, ending the need to live on ration packs.

The focal point of the building was the Australian flag that flew in the open expanse that ran up through the centre of the building.



Open shaft at the centre of the Flats.

Around us, Baghdad's low-rise central business district slowly melted into urban sprawl, then thinned into rural areas on the outskirts. The Tigris was the lifeblood of the city. Tracks of green palms and grass extended on either side of the river, out as far as the water would reach. After this there was desert: undulating hills of dirt and sand.

The city was scattered with palaces: Saddam's legacy. These were usually poorly built sandstone façades on steel frames. The façades had limited life spans in the harsh conditions. The war had blown many of the sandstone panels off to reveal the frames underneath, like rips and tears in the leather skin of a dead animal left to rot in the desert sun. Rockets had left gaping holes in other buildings.

Several of these large palaces were just to the east of the airport, and about 12 kilometres from the Flats. This whole area had been taken over by the Coalition forces and turned into a set of mini-cities: Camp Victory, Camp Stryker, Camp Liberty and Camp Slayer. Each was a jumble of palace, demountable buildings and tents.

Al-Faw Palace, the largest one of all, situated in Camp Victory, was the headquarters of the occupying forces. Next door, about 300 metres away, was the Australian headquarters, occupying a smaller building, all tacky marble and gold fittings. These palaces had been built on the banks of an artificial lake that Hussein had had excavated and filled with fish. Small hills in nearby Camp Slayer were formed from the spoils of the excavation. The hills made good aiming marks for insurgents firing rockets into the base.

The interior of the palace used by the Australians had been partitioned into office areas, using plywood and folding tables. All Australian operations in the Middle East were run out of here, under the command of a brigadier, or equivalent from the navy or air force. I would come here often in the months ahead.

Large, solid, wooden double doors opened from the Australian headquarters onto a roadway that ran around the lake and joined the maze of roads running through Camp Victory, linking it to the other camps. The way to Camp Slayer was via a tunnel that our armoured vehicles only just fit through. With the antenna folded down, you could drive through it and run your hand along the ceiling.

Near the Slayer tunnel was the main entrance to the whole base complex, a series of chicanes

slow traffic, concrete barriers, machine-gun towers and boom gates that led onto Route Irish. This was, at the time, arguably the most dangerous road in the world, due to the sporadic sniper fire and constant threat of improvised explosive device (IED) or roadside bomb attacks. It was the main route for Coalition forces travelling to and from the airport. For anyone keen to try their hand at attacking a Coalition convoy, it must have been like shooting fish in a barrel.

FIRST TASK

OUR VEHICLE, THE AUSTRALIAN LIGHT Armoured Vehicle, or ASLAV, was a workhorse, and a real source of pride for the cavalry soldiers. The first ASLAVs were bought in the early 1990s as medium-range reconnaissance vehicles. Some of them carried the formidable 25-mm chain gun in a two-man turret, and there was also a personnel-carrying variant with room in the back for nine at a squeeze.

The ASLAV was the obvious choice for Baghdad. It had eight wheels, all with run-flat tyres – so it was fast. It could sit on 110 kilometres per hour without a problem and keep up with traffic on the highways. The chain gun could elevate to fire at insurgents shooting from high-rises, and the two-man turret could quickly traverse 360° to cover the rear of the vehicle just as well as the front.

The personnel-carrying variant was used for transporting lower-ranking embassy staff or military people, while the ambassador preferred to travel in his armoured BMW. When escorting the ambassador, we usually positioned an ASLAV with a .50 calibre forward. The .50 calibre was a great gun, but quite unwieldy and inaccurate. An ASLAV with the 25-mm chain gun would be at the rear. The ambassador's car would be wedged between the two and driven by the military police close to the personal protection team.

A few months before my arrival in Iraq, the BMW had been crunched by the rear ASLAV in heavy traffic. The ambassador, who had been in the job since the invasion in 2003 and who was not shy about expressing his views, was not happy about this, and the boys heard all about it.

*

The model governing our introduction to Iraq, in fact the whole tour, involved staggering duties as much as possible. New blokes would always be paired with teams who had been there for a while. Individuals would be scattered among experienced crews, or else a new vehicle crew would form part of a patrol with experienced teams. Even SECDET rotations were staggered, with troops rotating in and out every two months. Generally we kept with the teams that we had trained with back in Australia, but some individuals and crews would come earlier or leave later.

This meant that new teams weren't all on their own and in danger of getting lost – Baghdad in 2004 was not a city you wanted to get lost in. Driving the streets in 13-tonne armoured vehicles, we stood out as obvious targets for insurgents. We made a lot of noise: the exhaust fans of the supercharged Detroit diesel engines shrieked as we accelerated, and the Jacobs (engine compressor) brake howled as we braked hard into corners. We sat above the traffic, many of us with our upper bodies exposed, protected only by our gloves, goggles and body armour.

My first proper task was to drive to Balad, about an hour north of Baghdad, to meet the remaining half of my troop. They were flying into Balad direct from Australia with three new vehicles to replace ones that had been in Iraq for a year already and were now in need of a complete overhaul.

Balad, named Logistics Support Area Anaconda by the US military, was the central logistics hub

for the Americans. Everything came and went into the country through it, a city built from tents and demountables around an old Iraqi airfield.

One of the sergeants who had been in the country for four months was put in charge of the patrol at Balad. While I was of a higher rank, he had the experience, and I was happy for him to command the patrol so that I could get my head around this new environment.

In 2004 Baghdad was functioning like any other city. There were traffic jams, pedestrians, red lights, sidewalk restaurants, street vendors, markets and streets of shopfronts. It was a densely populated city, and most of its inhabitants were just trying to get on with life. At the same time, they had to deal with the complexities of life in a war zone. Paul Bremer's 'de-Ba'athification' of the ruling class – the removal of all of Saddam's former Ba'ath Party influences from the new government, which resulted in the dismissal of an estimated 50,000 former regime-affiliated government employees, including military and police – left massive gaps in the country's ability to look after its people. The army and police were left with poor leadership, and many once-prominent officers had turned to the insurgency and were now fighting to destabilise the country and thus prove that they were needed and the Americans were not.

Intelligence reports said Baghdad had up to 40,000 active insurgents. While the Kurds and the armed fighters, the Peshmerga, generally looked after their own, the Sunnis and Shias fought because they saw they had so much to lose; they vied for power and influence in the vacuum left by Saddam's demise. They fought not only against the American-led forces, but also with each other. Kidnapping had become common, followed by reports of headless corpses floating in the Tigris. Bombs were going off in predominantly Shia neighbourhoods, in marketplaces, mosques, outdoor restaurants and cafes. Sunnis would claim responsibility and Shias would retaliate. At any given time, you could stand on the roof of the Flats and watch smoke rise from far-off parts of the city. An explosion might be heard from a leafy neighbourhood not far from the banks of the Tigris; a busy intersection would erupt as a Sunni suicide bomber targeted a busload of Shia schoolchildren or a military patrol; rockets would crack and fizz from Sadr City and thump into the International Zone. There was always something, and anytime you listened it seemed you could pick up the sound of a siren echoing somewhere in the city.

This was the city we snaked our patrol through, along the congested streets to link up with Highway 1, which ran the length of the country from north to south. This road took us to Balad.

The thinking was that you had to make yourself a hard target: make any insurgent think twice about attacking. We drove with safety catches off – the 25-mm chain gun ready to fire, the machine guns cocked and ready to go in the event that we identified a suicide bomber trying to swerve into one of our vehicles.

We careered through traffic, driving at more than 100 kilometres an hour through the city streets, trying to minimise the time any insurgent might have to shoot at us or detonate a bomb as we drove past. We ran red lights – straight through. We nudged cars out of the way, even on the highway when they were doing 100 kilometres an hour themselves. If they looked like they might be trying to slow us, we would give them a tap. Sometimes they would be knocked onto the other side of the road, into oncoming traffic, sometimes they would brake hard and spin to face back the way they had come, and sometimes they would swerve off the road and down an embankment in a cloud of dust. We didn't stop – we couldn't. This was how we operated in Baghdad, where patrols and convoys like ours were getting blown up every day.

Did we make the city safer? Did we ever prevent a suicide IED attack? Probably not, but we were there to do a specific job, which was to protect the embassy staff and allow them to do their

diplomatic work. Getting ourselves blown up, or shot, or caught in a complex ambush with insurgents peppering our vehicle with machine-gun fire while IEDs exploded under us wouldn't achieve that. We weren't there to make Iraq safer or to defeat the insurgency.

Was I comfortable with the aggressive way we drove? To be honest, I wasn't. I was really taken aback by those first patrols in Baghdad and Balad. But I was working alongside blokes who had been there for four months, which may not seem like much, but they had been through a lot in that time. Many had witnessed a large truck being driven through the gates of the base up north and detonated in front of the dining hall. The place had been almost levelled by the explosion, and US and Iraqi soldiers, plus contracted workers from the Philippines and Bangladesh, had been killed. It had occurred only forty-five minutes after the Australian commander had been eating in that same mess hall. And that was just one incident.

These blokes had seen a large vehicle-borne IED detonate out the front of the Flats. They had seen the blood smear on the footpath from a young boy who helped his family run the small roadside stall there: it had been obliterated when the IED detonated. From the Flats they had witnessed with their own eyes his father's grief.

They had been involved in a horrific high-speed accident where an ASLAV had flipped end over end after hitting a mound of dirt on the side of the road at speed. A colleague of mine, my own squadron sergeant major back in the cavalry regiment, had been in the back of the vehicle. When the American soldiers came to assist, they opened the back and assumed he was dead, as the large steel fridge had broken free and scalped him as the vehicle flipped. It was only later, when they heard his moaning, that they realised he was still alive. He made a full recovery.

They had been through so many rocket attacks and been roused from their sleep by so many random explosions that they were on edge. I couldn't blame them for driving the way they did. I definitely couldn't get them to slow down, or tone down their aggressive driving, until all the commanders had rotated out. So it was later, when the handover was complete, that I spoke to my blokes and told them that, yes, we were driving too fast, and yes, we were too aggressive. I felt that we were missing the point of what was trying to be achieved in Iraq and that the way we were acting was playing its own small part in adding to the instability of the country. I also felt that we were putting ourselves at far greater risk of injury from high-speed vehicle accidents than from anything the insurgents could do to us.

Later events may have proved this wrong, but I stand by what I said. I even reprimanded a soldier for hitting a civilian vehicle for no obvious good reason and moved him so that he no longer drove an armoured vehicle but was a shooter in the rear hatch. This bloke had been there for two months longer than me and he was pissed off with my decision – but I was comfortable it was right, and my troop sergeant did a good job backing me up.

What so much of this came down to was that there were many people in this country who wanted to kill us – and a far greater number didn't give two shits whether we lived or died. This is something that as Australians we had never been exposed to. In Australia, homicidal people are few and far between, and most are identified and locked away. Not in Baghdad. They lived in huge numbers among the population, actively looking for our vulnerabilities, or rather, for any way at all to attack Coalition forces. If they had their chance, they would drag our bodies through the streets and rejoice in their victory over their country's invaders.

I don't think that I truly understood this in 2004. I also believe that those soldiers who did graduate this were the ones who didn't fare so well when they returned to Australia.

Our route took us through Baghdad, out into the rural area to the north of the city and west of the

Tigris. It seemed the only place you would see women in niqabs was in the rural areas; in Baghdad the women were a lot less traditional in their dress. Many wore jeans and scarves that covered their hair but not their faces. Most younger women were well groomed and used make-up. So I was surprised to see small, dark niqab-clad figures working with the men in the fields in the hot sun: I had assumed that women working the land in scorching heat would be more likely to have a relaxed dress code than the women who lived in the city, but this was not the case.

When we turned off the highway, we were met with a series of signs in both English and Arabic. These were the same signs that you saw all over the country as you approached US military checkpoints.

STOP

Show ID

You are approaching a Military Checkpoint.

And then we saw:

Welcome to LSA Anaconda

Queues of Iraqis in cars were waiting to have their IDs checked so they could enter the base. Thousands of locals came to provide services to the soldiers. They would run small shops, sell trinkets or give haircuts. They would work as cleaners, collect garbage, act as interpreters, or acquire and sell local produce, including vegetables, to bolster the freeze-dried, bulk-packed rations that had come from the US or been flown in from elsewhere in the Middle East. The locals employed on the base all made good money, significantly more than they could make in the local markets. That was why they risked sitting in the queues out the front of the base.

A checkpoint onto a base was one of the most dangerous places you could ever be. There was a chance you would be shot by a nervous soldier who mistook you reaching for your ID as an attempt to trigger a suicide switch that would blow you both to Allah. Or you might become collateral damage if a real suicide bomber detonated his deadly payload when the guards approached his vehicle.

But we drove past the queue without incident, down the lane marked 'Military Vehicles Only'. A quick flash of an ID and we were through the gate and onto the base.

The size of Balad was astounding, especially as it had only been built in the last twelve months. Now it was home to over 35,000 US soldiers. We heard reports from the Americans that the base had the same social issues you get in any large population centre, particularly one where the vast majority of the population is aged between twenty and thirty-five. There was rape, drug use, murder and gang violence. There were areas where you were advised not to go after dark, bars (with alcohol-free beer) and salsa-dancing nights. And there was also the occasional rocket strike. The farmland that ringed the base made it easy for insurgents to fire rockets and escape before they could be found by an attack helicopter, which would be up and scouring the area within a couple of minutes of each attack.

Because the population of soldiers was so densely packed in such a small area, and because the insurgents would aim for the dining halls at mealtimes, injuries were common. A female soldier had been killed the day before we arrived.

We drove onto the base and went looking for a refuelling station to top up our vehicles. When we rounded the last of a vast row of green and tan air-conditioned tents, the view was awe-inspiring. Helicopters lined the airfield from one end to the other, hundreds of them sitting in the dust.

shimmering heat: Black Hawks, SuperCobras, Apaches and Chinooks. Then behind them were rows of transport planes, the workhorses that flew in and out of the country, bringing supplies from Kuwait, Diego Garcia and mainland USA, and taking casualties out to Germany and body bags back home to the US. The airfield was constantly rumbling with something coming or leaving.

After refuelling we found the garrison commander's office, called the 'sheriff's office', and we allocated our tents. Each one slept about twenty people in bunk beds. We cleaned our guns and checked over the vehicles. We tried to raise headquarters using the satellite radio, but quickly realised that no-one really knew how to use the unit, nor its strange directional antenna that looked like a small upside-down Hills Hoist clothes line. So we just called them on the satellite phone. We found the 'dining facility' and had some dinner. Walking back to the vehicles, the sergeant who was with us would greet passing US soldiers in his broadest Australian drawl: 'G'day, mate. How're ya bur grubs?' They'd reply, 'Yes sir, good, thank you, sir, have a nice day.' Who says Australian isn't a dialect?

We went to the PX (post exchange, the store on US bases) to get some near-beer (non-alcoholic beer) that we jammed into the air-conditioning vent to keep cold. Then we slowly wound down for the evening.

The next day, the new vehicles from Australia arrived with the remainder of my troop. The boys were excited to be in Iraq and, it seemed, just as excited that they had been allowed to smoke in the transport aircraft while it was in the air. It sounded as though they had spent most of their time cracking jokes, smoking and winding each other up during the long flight from Darwin to Diego Garcia, smack-bang in the middle of the Indian Ocean, then through to Balad.

We rolled the new vehicles out through the lifted nose of the plane and drove them to the vehicle park near our tents to prep them for the drive back to Baghdad. Even after all the promises that the vehicles would arrive with ammunition, I wasn't really surprised that they had arrived with none. I left my troop sergeant to look after our vehicles and went in search of some rounds. After wandering through the maze of demountable office buildings, I came across the quartermaster's store and a young corporal. It sounded like getting 7.62 mm and .50 calibre rounds for our machine guns wouldn't be a problem. But I got a quizzical look when I asked about 25-mm ammunition for the chain gun. After explaining that we had the same guns in our vehicles as the 25-mm gun of the US Bradleys, the corporal finally clicked: 'Oh, you need 25 mike mike.'

These 25-mm rounds come in several 'natures', namely high-explosive and armour-piercing. The high-explosive round has a small charge that detonates on impact. The armour-piercing round has a steel dart that, when fired, is carried out of the barrel in a plastic case called a sabot. As it leaves the end of the barrel, the sabot breaks away and the dart, or slug, punches through pretty much anything in its way. The armour-piercing ammunition used by Australia has a tungsten dart, whereas the US equivalent uses a slightly denser, depleted-uranium dart, referred to as 'DU'.

So when this young corporal asked what kind of 25 mike mike rounds I wanted, I thought I would try my luck and replied, 'DU.' At which point he realised he didn't have the authority to issue depleted-uranium rounds, so he went to find his boss to get permission. We had obviously pushed too far, as his boss asked us a hundred questions and we left with nothing, not a single round. It was probably for the better that we didn't get any DU – there would have been questions ... possibly followed by medical testing. There was a lot of controversy around whether the depleted uranium was carcinogenic.

We ended up splitting the ammunition from the older vehicles and returned to Baghdad with only a half ammunition load for each vehicle – more than enough, even if we got into a shitfight.

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