

GI SPECIAL REPORT:



BRING THEM ALL HOME NOW

Iraq & Viet Nam

(Especially for Joshua)

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I was a member of a small delegation that went to Iraq in December 2003. My purpose was to see, hear and feel for myself.

I have been greatly surprised by the effect the trip has had on me. I still can't get a grip on all the shocks to my senses. I never thought I would say such, but now I feel that Iraq is worse than Viet Nam. Both for the Iraqis and for our GIs.

One question continues to trouble my every waking hour, "Why are we punishing the Iraqi people so harshly?"

I am now in Viet Nam where I spend a few months each year. I try to help out as best I can cleaning up the mess we made from our last, great debacle. I am not sure I accomplish much. At least, I am no longer the 'ugly' American.

But I feel I should, and I know I will, go back to Iraq. I hate to stand by and watch as others get 'beat-up'. I feel an obligation to take the punches with them. Figuratively, one would hope.

Don Quixote?

One shudders at the clean-up job that will be left in Iraq once the 'dogs of war' have had enough and move on to another locale.

Some memories of the trip and my time in Viet Nam follow.

"We had to destroy the village in order to save it".
(1968, Viet Nam, during the Tet Offensive)

"With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them".
(Colonel Sassaman, US Army, December 2003, Iraq)

"Iraq is like Viet Nam on crack cocaine"
(Marilyn Young; Professor of History NYU)

Analogies, like war, can be dangerous but to the eye of this Viet Nam combat veteran there are many striking similarities.

In 1968, I arrived in Viet Nam where I joined an infantry unit in the province of Quang Ngai as a platoon leader. I was young, curious and thought war would be a great adventure to be experienced fully. The foolish pride and machismo of youth.

Soon I faced reality. I was an alien creature to the Vietnamese. I spoke funny; I ate funny; I dressed funny; I looked funny; and, I probably smelled funny. But the kicker was the fact that I carried a weapon and was an instrument of my nation's wish to impose its will upon another.

Well intentioned or not, I was an aggressive invader occupying someone else's land. I sensed this; the Viets knew it.

Early on, I made two promises. First; that I would endeavor to get myself and my men home in one piece. Second; that I would do as little damage as possible to the Vietnamese people and land.

I kept the first promise and it is the proudest accomplishment of my brief military career. I did not lose one man under my direct command.

As for the second, I was not as successful. I could not always avoid my opponent. On six separate occasions I killed a young Vietnamese soldier. Very close and very personal. I myself was nicked on several occasions. Nothing serious. But, if an inch or two either way.....

I completed my tour and returned to the US. I was welcomed home by my family and friends. I was accepted into society but never truly felt a part of it. I was told it was time to get on with my life. No one seemed to be interested in my story.

My confusion and anger festered. The confusion stemmed from my inability to ascertain why exactly I was sent to Viet Nam and why did I have to kill other young men. Not one day has passed when I do not think of those men.

The stated reasons never panned out. They sounded well-intentioned but, as time passed, they were proven to be false. Unfortunately for Viet Nam and the Vietnamese, as well as for us GI's, we were participants in that grand chess game known as the Cold War. The *realpolitik* of Kissinger and his ilk.

My anger could be explained more simply. I, a 'street-wise' New Yorker, felt like I had been conned by my government.

On 20 March 2003, I was in Ha Noi, the beautiful, densely populated capital of Viet Nam. It was eerie to be apprised by the ubiquitous CNN of the opening salvos, a 'de-capitation' strike, of our 'shock and awe' campaign to unseat the infamous dictator Saddam.

Eerie because of the ghostly, green-tinged film resulting from shooting at night.

Eerie, also, because I was walking through a city that had endured many a bombing raid during the 60's and 70's. I wondered what it might feel like to be on the receiving end of such lethal weaponry.

We have been told, and have been offered images, of the new technological wonders of war making from on high. Smart bombs and such. Do they ever go astray? Are the targets ever based on faulty intelligence? How might it feel to be living in Baghdad, a city the size of New York with a population of 5 or 6 million, while bombs and missiles come screeching in?

When I returned home to NYC last summer, I was obsessed by the desire to understand what was really happening. Most Americans have been sheltered from the 'real' reality of warfare.

I would hazard a guess that the number might be close to 5% in the know. That is comprised of combat soldiers, aid-workers, war correspondents, and such. If true, that means that something like 95% of our fellow citizens know nothing of war.

Maybe that can account for our nation's proclivity to go to war. It has always taken place on the land of another.

Our citizens, ensconced in their living rooms, receive news that has been sanitized beyond recognition. Particularly on TV, where war is now depicted in a manner akin to a

video-game. No blood; no guts; no severed limbs; no headless bodies. And, in no form can our media replicate 'that' smell. No one ever forgets the rancidness of rotting corpses left in a harsh sun?

This latest 'war', surprising no one, was declared over in a matter of weeks. Now the occupation. Similar to Viet Nam, the reasons given for this war have proven to be false.

However, the universally despised tyrant had been removed and, under international law, America is the occupier and *de facto* ruler of Iraq.

A nation of 25 million people that had experienced decades of brutality was now in our hands. A recent article by James Fallows in *the Atlantic* called Iraq 'our 51st State'.

I did my reading and homework to the best of my ability. The reportage from Iraq and the rhetoric emanating from DC and the Pentagon had the analogous ring to that which I remembered during the Viet Nam era. I wanted to experience with my own senses the reality on the ground.

I managed to wrangle a last minute spot on a delegation going to Iraq. It consisted of a few veterans and some parents of soldiers serving in the occupied territory.

The trip was long and tiring and, mostly, uneventful. The last leg, from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad, must be made overland and takes roughly 12 hours. (At this time, due to the fear of civilian airliners being shot down, one cannot fly to Baghdad.)

The highway is superb, thank God, for the drivers never allow the speedometer to dip under 100 MPH. We made a few stops for food, for bathroom necessities, for gas at improvised stations. And, of course, an obligatory stop at the border between Jordan and Iraq.

All had been apprised of the security situation and were expecting a rigorous drill. Getting in, it took about 2 hours. There were 4 or 5 checkpoints on either side of the border. Our passports were collected and shuffled from clerk to clerk. Not one face was compared to the photo in the passport. Not one car or its contents was inspected. This applied to all the vehicles we could see. And some of these vehicles were oil-tankers, cargo trucks, etc. No soldiers, Iraqi or American.

So much for security!

The landscape is unremittingly bleak and barren. Desert. And not the white sand dunes we see in the movies. This is a brown and bleak desert.

Suddenly, we were all awakened from a semi-somnolent state by the noise of brakes being applied. We now are part of a boxed-in 'convoy' of about 100 vehicles of every description. To our front an Abrams tank with a coterie of Humvees in support. And, after racing along the shoulder of the highway, a similar contingent forms at our rear. An Iraqi city, Falluja, is to our right. Maybe 200 yards distant.

We, the Americans, curious as always, dismounted and made our way to the front of our 'column'. The soldiers were certainly surprised to see us and hear some English. They told us there was an intense firefight the previous day at this spot. The soldiers manning

the guns seemed tense and wary. The big barrels of the 50's continuously swiveled in an arc covering the nearby city.

Realizing where we were, we, also, became nervous. One sniper round from the city and all hell might break loose. And we're stuck in the middle! The fear on the Iraqi's faces as they sat within their vehicles was palpable.

After 15 minutes or so, the commander gave a signal, the engines revved up and they were off. Again, as at the border, no inspection and no explanation.

Without further incident, we reached our destination in Baghdad. The Hotel Aghadeer. After 36 hours of arduous travel, we were relishing the thought of a shower and a nap. No such luck. Two shocks ensued.

First being greeted by representatives of about 10 media outlets. Print and TV. I thought it must be a slow news day to warrant such attention. Soon we would learn that this attention would grow day by day.

One reason was the uniqueness of our delegation. Veterans and parents of soldiers serving in a combat zone. However, one of our members, Fernando Suarez Del Solar, proved to be the draw. He was the heart and soul of our group. A US citizen of Mexican descent, he had lost his son, Jesus, on 27 March 2003 as the Marines made their dash to Baghdad.

His son's unit had an embedded reporter along and Jesus had been interviewed for national TV the night before his death. Fernando wanted to visit the site where he died and managed to make contact with the reporter, Bob Woodruff of ABC News. Woodruff knew the exact spot and ABC sent him and a full film crew to follow Fernando during our stay. A most compelling human interest story.

Our second surprise was the fact that we had only a few minutes to drop our luggage and switch vehicles. Our new cars blended in well with what we would soon discover to be the condition of all Baghdad. Everything is drab and dusty and showing signs of battle fatigue. There is a dire need for a good wash, some touch-up painting and a complete maintenance check.

When I first saw our prospective itinerary, I thought it to be a bit of wishful thinking. But soon I took for granted what had seemed to be a fantasy. Two trips to the fabled 'green-zone'. A veritable self-sufficient city within Baghdad. About the size of Central Park in NY, it is equipped and staffed as if it were planning for the long-haul. Fitness clubs, outdoor cafes, swimming pools, shopping bazaars.

Once inside, there is no reason to leave. And many do not leave. Here are the command centers of the coalition's civilian and military authorities; the Iraqi governing council; and, the headquarters for the civilian contractors charged with the reconstruction of Iraq.

We met with the coalition leader Ambassador Bremer; with commanding generals; with members of the Iraqi council, including the Shiite leader Sheik Al-Hakim (60% of the population); and with workers on contract with Bechtel and Halliburton or one of their many subsidiaries.

One, a shuttle bus driver, was an American. He was transported to Iraq, receives US wages, hostile duty pay, vacations, etc. Odd when Iraq is suffering from a 50% unemployment rate and an Iraqi could perform his duties for a few dollars a day.

All of Saddam's palaces, all the best villas, all the best hotels, etc. have been commandeered by the coalition. They are extremely well protected with huge concrete barriers, encircled with barbed wire and have numerous checkpoints manned by GI's that one must maneuver through before entering.

The irony of this situation is not lost on the average Iraqi. One wit stated "The King is gone! Long live the new King!"

I had the opportunity to visit Sai Gon during my tour in Viet Nam and I saw how isolated and divorced from reality the rear-echelon really was. Infantrymen called them REMF's. RE stood for rear-echelon and you can fill in the MF'er. Now, in Baghdad, the coalition makes Sai Gon appear to be a penny-ante card game. The money stakes are definitely higher. The movers and shakers of this occupation are certainly living large.

Our days were full and long. Breakfast and planning for the day began at 7AM and a return to the hotel came late in the evening. Our breakfast group was always joined by our drivers, translators, interested Iraqis and the ever burgeoning press corps. Radio and TV interviews were on-going.

I once had the pleasure of utilizing my 'pidgin' Portuguese. The next day I received an E-mail from a friend in Brasil who thought she saw me on TV. Small world, indeed!

In no particular order, we visited elementary and secondary schools where we discussed problems with headmasters, teachers and students. Hospitals where we had a chance to visit patients and chat with doctors and staff. Many meetings with Iraqi human rights groups, labor representatives, advocates for the imprisoned, Shiite and Sunni clerics who were recognized leaders of their neighborhoods. We were also afforded the opportunity to visit private homes of Iraqi citizens.

I can make some generalizations. First and foremost, to a man or woman, all were thankful for Saddam's departure and we were thanked effusively for this event. **These words of gratitude were quickly followed by the hope that the occupying troops would soon leave. Sheik Al-Hakim, considered *first* among equals on the governing council, when asked "When?" replied "How about tomorrow."**

Iraqis are also quite knowledgeable of the Orwellian 'double-speak' they are inundated with. One irate Dean of the Political Science University stated rather forcefully, "Don't speak to me of democracy when you have armed soldiers in my streets telling me what to do!"

Most are adept at using their fingers to indicate ironic quotation marks when such terms as 'freedom', 'justice', 'independence', etcetera are used. I can empathize for I, too, have found myself using such when speaking or writing. We seemed to have reached a point where once commonly accepted terms must now be redefined depending on the audience one hopes to reach.

The most egregious use/misuse might be 'terror' and 'terrorism'. What on earth do these words mean? And to whom? Could the billion or so human beings, just like you and me, who go through every waking hour of every day scrounging for something to assuage the screaming hunger in their bellies be considered 'terrorized'? Can we have a 'war' on that?

Are all men really created equal?

All Iraqis wondered where the billions allotted for reconstruction were being spent. We had the same query. Prior to our trip, some members of our group had tried to obtain a contract given to Bechtel calling for the reconstruction of 154 schools and hospitals. This should be a public record but we could not find it. Our purpose was to visit these sites to see what progress had been made. Alas.

One headmaster of an elementary school with 500 students told us he was given \$750 for repairs. To a question as to how much would be needed to get the school fully functional, he mentioned a figure of \$20,000. There are roughly 2,500 elementary and secondary schools in Baghdad. Thus, if the needs were similar, \$50 million would suffice. That sum seems a pittance, 1/400, when we have allotted \$20 billion for Iraq's reconstruction.

To date, our Congress has appropriated approximately 165 billion dollars for the Iraq and Afghan adventures. Afghanistan is still remembered, no? Subtracting a tad for that lost land and divide the remainder by the Iraqi population, one gets roughly \$6,000 dollars per capita. Think of the running start on 'democracy' the Iraqis might have had if that money had been disbursed to them directly.

But, of course, that would yield very little for Halliburton and their cronies.

Speaking of which, shortly after our return to the States, there was a report or two indicating that some Halliburton employees might have been caught with their fingers in the cookie jar. Bush (I still can't manage to utter President in the same breath) warned that, if so, they would have to give the money back.

How about throwing the bastards in jail!

On many stops we were confronted with long lines of aggrieved victims of 'collateral damage'. They certainly knew we had no power to redress the wrongs but appeared to be compelled to have their stories heard by Americans. It must be noted that we were hearing one side. However, the sheer numbers of cases we listened to clearly indicates some basis in fact.

The coalition does have a process for reparations but few seem to know how to file a claim. Most forms are in English in this Arabic speaking nation.

(I had an opportunity to speak with a high ranking General about the language, or lack of such, problem. I know it was a great handicap for our men in Viet Nam. Most knew, at best, a few harsh commands. And those poorly pronounced. I queried the officer as to how and if the military was churning troops out of our language schools. It has been well over a year since the certainty of 'war' was

known. His reply, "Iraqi is a real hard language to learn." I didn't have the heart to tell him it was Arabic.)

As for the anarchy, chaos and bloodbaths envisioned if we were to take our soldiers home, we heard many varying opinions. Most Iraqis questioned responded that it certainly would be a gamble. But a gamble that Iraqis must take by themselves.

One Sunni cleric put it this way; "Think of the problems as bubbles or waves on the surface of a body of water. Deep down, below the surface, there is solidarity and a strong sense of nationalism".

Another sheik, a secular tribal leader, responded that after thirty years of incessant warfare and brutality the Iraqi populace was worn down and just wanted a chance to repair their lives.

All acknowledged that massive help would be needed but warned that the continuing presence of troops in the cities and villages will only exacerbate the problems and lead to more damage to be repaired.

Who can confidently predict the outcome of a US withdrawal? When I posed this question to mid-level military commanders at home in USA, those who had been in the field with troops, their mood constantly switched from optimism to pessimism.

They now realize that those rosy predictions of being greeted like the liberators of Paris were pipe dreams. There is the recognition that a true guerilla war continues and shows no signs of abating.

No one can say with certainty who, what faction or how many are resisting the occupation. At first we were told it was Saddam loyalists looking to get back in power. Those gangsters and thugs seemed unlikely candidates to sacrifice themselves in suicide attacks.

On 13 November, General Abizaid said there were no more than 5,000 guerilla fighters resisting (NY Times). That very day a report attributed to the CIA stated that the new estimate of guerilla strength was near 50,000 (The Guardian). As in all guerilla wars, finding and fixing an opponent can be devilishly difficult to accomplish.

I participated in all the visits and meetings. And I learned much. **However, my true purpose was to gauge the mood of the average Iraqi citizen and the average soldier on the line. There is no point in saying 'front-line' for no lines exist. Like Viet Nam, an attack can come from anyone, from any direction and at any time. This makes for a full-time stressful situation which must of necessity grind down the soldier.**

There is very little opportunity for our soldiers to make any normal human contact with Iraqis. The GIs are mostly hunkered down in their armored vehicles with weapons at the ready. An Iraqi can see nothing of them. They all are wearing body armor and helmets and most utilize sand goggles or sunglasses. The appearance is truly of some alien creature driving about town willy-nilly. Of course very few speak Arabic and very little is known of the culture that our soldiers find themselves in.

One can sense a growing anger at the occupation troops. Still contained but possible to explode at a moment's notice. On countless occasions we were told that life under the occupation has been more difficult than under Saddam and the UN/US sanctions.

After 10 months of this occupation, the queue of vehicles at gas stations begins at 2AM. This happens in a country sitting on an ocean of oil. Electricity is still erratic. There appears to be no working land-line telephones. The city is awash in trash and litter. Street crime is rampant.

When I had the opportunity to chat with our soldiers (rarely), I could hear the beginnings of a dangerous syndrome. That is the dehumanization of all Iraqis and the imposition of a collective guilt.

We have heard reports of buildings being destroyed if gunfire appears to come from them. Villages being cordoned off for 'search and destroy' (?) missions. Every time these tactics are used there will be engendered a growing hostility to our troops.

Iraqis have lived for decades under the most difficult conditions. We should try to insure that our presence does not heighten the problems.

We should also hearken back to our avowed purpose for launching this war. That was to remove Saddam and his henchmen from power. Our troops accomplished that mission in exemplary fashion. We are *non-pareil* in conventional warfare.

For that very reason only a fool would stand toe-to-toe or, better said, tank-to-tank against our forces. It might be the greatest of ironies if our very strength is used against us. Just as an accomplished judo practitioner will use his opponents force to his own advantage. We are now the sledgehammer that is being used to crack a walnut.

What happened to the Pentagon? Aren't their any Viet Nam guys still around? I would bet the farm on the fact that our present and future opponents are going to school on Viet Nam, Algeria and Afghanistan.

Our pundits and leaders seem to think that this is unsporting of our opponents. To think they might not even wear a readily discernible uniform! Damned terrorists!

Not too long ago, our military was governed by what was termed the 'Powell doctrine'. Identify an objective and an achievable goal; bring overwhelming force to bear upon its accomplishment; leave!

If you decide to stay and occupy, you better be ready to slug it out in the streets. No longer will the *Marquis of Queensberry rules* apply. No more of that Geneva Convention pap. From now on war will be fought as it logically should be. A barroom brawl with any weapon at hand fair game.

I, a proud Veteran For Peace, (anything else would be an oxymoron) would fight to my last breath if I found my freedom challenged. Once you have tasted it you cannot live without it. Thus I don't fear the threats from without.

However, I am becoming very wary of my fellow citizens who are letting their ungrounded fears threaten that which we hold dear.

There must be compromise solutions in Iraq. Certainly none will be perfect now that the hornet's nest has been opened but we must get our kids out of the streets and let the Iraqis work it out and provide their own security. **Our GIs can no longer do any good.**

As an aside, our little group had some great, courageous Iraqis helping us with translation and getting about town. One, Ator, was a sparkling young girl of great humor, intellect and wisdom beyond her years. I kept in touch with her but, after a spell of silence and a few horrific bombings in Baghdad, I asked her for a few words of reassurance. Her reply:

"hey uncle billy,

surprise I am still alive. yes i am ok outside but barley alive inside i have 2 of my friends' brothers killed and 2 of my friends' brothers have their legs and arms cut so how should i feel i feel nothing do you know i know that some thing very bad will happen ... i can not say any more ..

maybe later...

*bye
ator"*

How does one respond to that?

The academic, abstract debates rage on in our society. Much well-meaning pontificating.

But what about Ator?

Should she not have a say in those decisions that affect her so imminently and immediately? Does her 'reality', the constant 'terror' she lives in, ever enter into the minds of our leadership? Do they really give a damn about her?

Who speaks for Ator?

And who spoke for Jesus? Fernando's proud Marine son, who is now dead?

A few years ago, we were informed of the deeds of the 'greatest' generation. Yet, when that generation took its place of leadership, it failed us in Viet Nam.

I am now of the age of leadership and I will be damned if I sit by idly and fail our kids in Iraq.

If not a veteran of war, who else has the moral position to speak out? And with our knowledge of the reality, who else has the greatest duty?

“But success in the mainstream will not come without first building independent strength. Courage, like fear, is contagious, and those who are afraid to be themselves can never persuade others of the justice of their cause.” Jonathan Schell, *The Nation*

Would our ‘leaders’ have heeded that old maxim of the docs, “First, do no harm”.

Two interesting quotes from the NYTimes, Sunday 11 January 2004.

“They don’t want us here, but they don’t want us to leave, either” he (General Sanchez) said of the Iraqis. “That’s our dilemma; that’s the problem we have to solve.” (front page)

“The goal the United States hopes to reach in Iraq—a successful counterinsurgency that does not drag on for years and does not involve a lot of killing--- has never been achieved by any army.” Peter Maass (p.62 Magazine section)

Tam Biet & Beijos e Abracos,

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