

The Contractor Experience: Iraq

The personal experiences of contractors in Iraq from 2003-2008 are as diverse as those of their grandfathers who served in the Second World War. For every year since the invasion both the intensity and location of fighting has varied. Fallujah in 2004 was a death trap for contractors. Three years and two massive attacks later, it was one of the most peaceful locations in the country. Men serving in convoy escort roles began their service in soft skin, unarmored trucks armed with a pair of cast off AK-47's. As the insurgency intensified the same gunner would have transitioned through perhaps three different series of escort vehicles, each one more heavily armored than the last.

A contractor could deploy for a year and never hear a shot fired in anger. The next man could expend hundreds of rounds of ammunition on a daily basis and consider it completely routine to be shot up 4 or 5 times a week. Any given day in any location could be blissfully calm or deadly violent or both.

The contractor war is different from that fought by the military though equally lethal. Although contractor casualties can not be accurately compiled without federal assistance, all individuals well connected to the industry agree that employment as a Private Security Contractor is one of the most dangerous jobs in theatre with casualty rates higher than that of the regular Armed Forces.

Human conflict is a difficult enterprise to document, for every person observes the conflict through the filter of his own observations, past experiences, and thought processes. A relatively minor skirmish to one experienced veteran may seem utterly terrifying to a newcomer. It is only by documenting the furnace of combat through the eyes of many that any sort of collective experience begins to emerge. The accounts that

follow are diverse enough to underscore the individual, but similar enough in nature to enable the reader to discern the collective whole. It may come as a surprise to many that these anecdotes lend credence to the Bush administration's initial statements that Iraq was ripe for liberation. The truth is that Iraqi people secretly longed for freedom from tyranny just like any other enslaved nation. The personal narratives of those who arrived early in the occupation, during 2003 and early 2004, do not paint pictures of growing insurgencies and violence but rather of a populace delighted to be delivered from the evil caprices of Saddam Hussein.

Intelligent interpretation of these personal case histories points not to a flawed invasion, regardless of the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction, but to an utterly botched plan for the rebuilding of national infrastructure. Had the Bush White House paid as much attention to the rebuilding of post war Iraq as to the military plan to conquer it, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Middle East would be radically different than what it is today. Bush's plan for a placid democracy in the Middle East may have been much closer to fruition than his detractors will ever give him credit for. His Achilles' heel proved to be the lack of wherewithal to implement assertive nation building immediately upon the cessation of hostilities. All of the accounts encapsulated here suggest that for up to a year, from April 2003 to April of 2004, there existed a golden "window of opportunity" for the Americans to peacefully reconstruct vital services.

Many of the personnel interviewed for this book consider the insurgency was a natural reaction to two events that transpired during those first invaluable 12 months. The first was the chronically lethargic pace of American based reconstruction. Most Iraqis were worse off a year after the invasion in regards to basic water and electrical power

than they were under Saddam. This was not what had been promised and stirred considerable resentment resulting in violence. Over promise and under delivery is a poor format for nation building.

The second was the appalling conduct of Private Security Contractors who left a huge swathe of dead civilians behind them every time they drove out of their heavily armed compounds. It is true that the American Military also played a heavy hand at times. But the Army were nowhere near as trigger happy as their civilian contractor counterparts who seemed to feel a compulsive need to pull the trigger at every opportunity. The first security contractors to arrive were extremely professional but overnight expansion, especially in 2004, resulted in a draconian decline in quality and respect for human life. For every Iraqi civilian who was needlessly killed a family unit of insurgents was instantly born. How many opted to pick up arms against the occupiers after burying an immediate family member will never be known but the numbers must certainly be in the thousands.

This situation was exacerbated by granting immunity from prosecution to security contractors. The Coalition Provisional Authority was in essence creating a two tiered social and legal structure. Iraqis were on the bottom in their own country and lacked legal recourse against those who profligately violated every human right imaginable. Such activities had never been tolerated in a beaten Germany or Japan, lending credence to the belief of many Arabs that the Americans were secretly engaged in a crusade bordering on genocide. Sadly, there is a quantifiable logic to this hypothesis if it has been your family that has been shot up in their vehicle for driving too close behind a contractor SUV.

However, the insurgency was still in its infancy back in 2003 when the first contractors arrived at the heels of the victorious American Army. Baghdad was a lot different then, as these narratives display.

In the beginning, during the late spring and summer of 2003, private contractors were a rare breed and nearly invisible on the landscape. Small in numbers and highly professional in quality, the early stories are a far cry from the disaster that was to befall the country in the months to come.

One man, a former American Special Forces soldier, recounts the very earliest days, only weeks after the regime was toppled. It provides a very different view from what is seen today.

“For me, the whole thing kicked off on August 4th, 2003 when I arrived in Jordan. So it was still less than six months after Saddam had fallen. From Amman, we traveled in soft skinned “Dolfeens” (Chevy Caprices) from Jordan to the Baghdad Sheraton Hotel. For the entire move we carried neither weapons nor body armor. We had no protective gear of any kind. We didn’t need it.

Within three weeks of arrival, my company was moved to the Al Safeer Hotel, about a mile from the Sheraton and outside the official green zone. That was before it was known as the Red zone. It was actually just another neighborhood in Baghdad and lacked any formal security measures. At the time, this was not a problem. Those who stayed there were mostly Iraqis, a few Kurds or Turks now and again, and a westerner or

two. We would all meet in the dinning room for dinner and talk about the current info within Iraq. It was quite the eclectic and opinionated group. As I got to be friends with them, I started to receive better and better inside info on whether or not an attack was going to happen that day or the next. I stayed at the Al Safeer for about four months. One of these gentlemen, Iraqi born, is still a friend of mine. In fact, with my wife, we have traveled throughout Europe together on vacations. Of course, I can no longer admit to knowing him as now I would be considered fraternizing with the enemy and my security clearance would be subject to review. But back then we did everything possible to integrate with the locals.

Eventually, as the security situation began to deteriorate, I would stay away from the hotels and live on the economy in homes with local staff. I did this for ten months. During this entire time we were completely at the mercy of the locals should they have harbored any ill intent towards us. I was never attacked, never accosted, and generally treated with the utmost courtesy for that period. Every now and then they would whisper to us that we should avoid such and such a place tomorrow. More often than not, like clockwork, there was an attack or a bomb where they predicted.

During my year living on the local economy, usually between six to seven o'clock every evening, all of the private security contractors would get together in the Sheraton near the pool to share Intel. I had a Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) card so I could also go into the green zone and get the military's Intel. Our Intel was usually more accurate and up-to-date than the military's. However, I would share it back and forth between the PSDs and the military head of security. We were all working for the same

side in those days and the level of co-operation between the military and private contractors was still very high.”

Another American recounts the history of his Iraqi staff in 2003.

“My staff consisted of two former Generals of Saddam's military. The first, Aziz, had fled Iraq after the first Gulf War and ended up advising the British during the current invasion. Fateh, the other, had his men surrender to the first US troop they saw and he then served as an advisor to the US Military as they advanced. I had forty other Iraqis working for me. Twenty five were utilized as stationary guards for our client, and fifteen were used as escort security for the client when they moved around. One of the escort team members, a sharp looking Iraqi called Ramsi, was a former bodyguard to Saddam. We used to joke about it together in front of a client or someone like that. I would say “Ramsi, what would you have done if someone had shot at Saddam while you were protecting him?”

He would turn away and step to the side like he was getting out of the way of the bullet and letting it hit Saddam. My clients loved it and would just end up in tears laughing so hard. “

This former Special Operations soldier, arriving in 2003, had similar, positive impressions of the locals.

“I trained all my locals in security, ate with them, and became friends with them. The highest compliment they can pay you is to go to their house for dinner. I went

several times to the homes of my employees to meet their families and have dinner with them. Unfortunately, I ended up sick each time due to the water and how the food is prepared. Afterwards I would have to be on Antibiotics and Imodium for a week due to evil diarrhea. Of course, as soon as I was better, another would invite me to dinner. I went as it was an honor, so I could not possibly say no. However, my abdominal tract paid the price for about a month until I had visited everybody at least once.”

The value of endearing yourself to the local population in the early days becomes evident in this anecdote from another early arrival

“Also at this time I was traveling throughout Baghdad meeting potential clients, both westerners and locals, and even the US military. I was in negotiations to provide trained security details for them. I met with the UN (car bombed four days later), Food for Oil, COTECNA Inspection S.A., ABT Associates, Citicorp, the Danish Embassy, the Bank of Baghdad, the Jordanian Embassy (car bombed the next day), the UAE Embassy, etc. I would also try to meet with some of the more important Iraqi leaders in Baghdad. Just trying to foster a good relationship. I let them know who we were and what our client did so they knew we were not here to hurt but help. We ended up with a lot of good warnings to stay out of areas at certain times, which I would pass on to the CPA.”

This American recalls a similar level of professionalism and enthusiasm among fellow contractors in the early days.

“I loved it. I was working with total pros. There were no personality conflicts, everybody worked together, and a lot of things got done. I have no doubt that we would

back each other up. I actually looked forward to getting out of bed everyday. The sense of teamwork and camaraderie was awesome and I have never seen anything like it, before or since, save for combat with a military unit. I had a great time doing something worthwhile. I spent nearly two years there and left only when it was evident we were going to totally screw it up. I have nothing but good things to say about most of the early contractors, the military, and the majority of the Iraqi people. I am proud to have served and if the circumstances were identical would be honored to do it again. I knew what I was getting into and have no regrets.”

In the late spring of 2003, several companies utilized Iraqi staff without any ensuing security problems. This Pole remembers.

“I was also using the escort security teams to run border missions to and from Jordan and Kuwait either bringing people in or taking them back out. At this time there were no passenger flights in or out of Baghdad. So you had to come in through Kuwait or Jordan and drive in. We also ran the odd job for business or Government personnel already in Baghdad. They didn’t have enough people to cover them in all their travel, so I would supply a team or two of Iraqis with vehicles to help escort them throughout Baghdad. The Westerners were always surprised to begin with by the arrival of a crew of armed Iraqis but none ever complained afterwards.”

As the summer of 2003 turned to autumn, a schism slowly developed between security companies who employed local Iraqis and those who did not. It all boiled down

to a matter of trust. These reflections come from two contractors who allied themselves with the Iraqis, trusted them, and used Iraqis for security details as opposed to the ever increasing number of foreigners flooding into the country. Their recollections suggest a different course could have been pursued much earlier in the budding insurgency with very different results.

“It was easier and much more pleasant to visit with the local establishments, and Middle East embassies than with the western ones, even as an American and former serviceman that I am. The Westerners treated us like a nuisance, especially when they found out we used Iraqis, at which point most wouldn’t talk to us at all. In comparison, the local businesses/leaders treated us like friends. It was rough on the health though. Every time we met, first I would have to leave all my weapons and no guards could come with me, only my interpreter. Then we had our formal greetings, and then a cigarette and a cup of tea half filled with sugar would be put in front of me. Normally they smoked hand rolled or Turkish cigarettes, which are very harsh. But for me, they brought out the best, Marlboros. The more affluent Iraqis could afford a few packs on the black market and would produce them on special occasions. I was invariably a special occasion, and they were very proud to be able to do this. We would smoke and drink the tea, then talk about pleasantries, then another cigarette and either more tea or Turkish coffee which is closer to varnish than Starbucks. If they liked you after tea and cigarettes they would set up a second meeting to discuss business. That was fine, but I don’t smoke or like sugar. I would go to two or three of these meetings a day in the middle of Baghdad, no weapons, and smoking and drinking sugary tea. I would feel sick by the end of the day, but that was the way they did business. I learned how to speak all the basic greetings and their replies,

learned their customs, and did things their way. I studied Islam and the Koran. Why? I was in their land, in their homes, and I truly wanted to help and be friends. Also, accordingly to Sun Tzu, and SF doctrine, “the fastest way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend” and this was the fastest way to do precisely that. Back then, though it sounds stupid now, we were winning.”

Another contractor, also an American, had a similar experience.

“I guess it would have been September or October of 2003. I regularly went to local restaurants, and shopping down the streets of Baghdad. I trusted my local employees to advise me and keep me safe. I never stayed longer than thirty minutes, and I never went back to the same area within the same month. The locals at these establishments, and the ones who lived on these streets, loved it. So many people stopped to talk and laugh with me. They welcomed me, said Allah bless the US for saving them, kissed my hands, took pictures of me with their arms around me. They all wanted to know where I was from in the US, and what it was like. Most said that they hoped they would get a chance to visit the US in the future. When I did start having expatriates show up to work for me, or any other westerner I became friends with, I would take them to one of these restaurants. The food was excellent and the people were all very nice. Once I even had an Iraqi family at the restaurant pay for our meals just to say thank you for liberating them.”

As the winter months arrived, the first premonition of the chaos to come slowly began to trickle down to the men in the field. This account describes the confusion between the military and the initial wave of contractors, resulting in the first forays into the black market for the purchase of weapons.

“When private contractors first got to Iraq, the US military didn’t know what to do about them. They wanted to help, but had no guidelines on civilians with weapons and such. However, if you already had it, they didn’t ask you about it. It was so difficult to bring any equipment in that we had to start using the black-market. The only exception was Blackwater but they were with the CPA mafia and could do and get whatever they wanted. Everybody knew they were Bremer’s Praetorian Guard and were first in line for everything, including arrogance, immunity, and ego. Anyway, I used to do deals for trucks, weapons, ammo, and anything else we needed down the backstreets of Baghdad at night. My teams would have to stay several blocks away. I brought an interpreter with me and had large sums of money on my person as everything was cash on the barrelhead. It was a big risk, but it was what I had to do to get the job done. I did not ask who they were, or where they got the weapons. For that night we were friends, dealing with each other as such, and who knew what would happen tomorrow. Maybe they would have to shoot at me, or me at them. It was understood.”

But even with the deteriorating security situation, the early, professional contractors still stood firmly behind the “winning hearts and minds” campaign as this American recalls.

“At one point I was traveling throughout Iraq training locals in security in order to supplement our expats. By this time I had brought two of my own PSD men into Baghdad, and the company brought in a few. The needs of our client changed and required more traveling. So we needed several full expat run Iraqi teams going everyday. Everyone treated everyone else well. No problems. The expats brought in were all professional, ex Special Ops types, or at least extensive military and security backgrounds. They were from New Zealand, France, England, USA, etc. Everybody had the same idea about “hearts and minds.” We considered ourselves in their country as guests, and should act like it. We were all getting paid top dollar. None of us “wanted to”, nor were “itching to” kill Iraqi people. We were there to protect our clients. To prevent something happening. We felt that if we had to shoot it was the last resort. We were not the military, therefore our job was to protect the client by running away and only advance towards the fight when caught in a corner and had no place to go.”

One of the advantages the initial wave of contractors had was their vast experience. Part of that pool of knowledge enabled them to keep things in perspective and to make the best of a bad situation. War is a very wrenching experience emotionally and the ability to crack a smile at the right time can go a long way to maintaining morale as this American recalls. This was a strength where the newcomers were found to be lacking.

“November 21st, 2003. The Baghdad Hotel is hit with a suicide car bomb. It is one street back, and a few blocks over from my hotel. The military shows up and puts razor wire around it, and stations US military guards in vehicles inside the wire. Neal

and I thought we would liven things up for them. So out of the dark, a couple blocks away, here we come holding hands and skipping down the street. At first they looked and loaded, then when they figured out what we were doing they just all busted up laughing. We made their night. Neal would be killed 1 year later in Basrah.”

Times began to change. What was once a closed circle of professionals in a niche industry was rapidly going mainstream with the expansion to match. The days of everybody knowing each other in the tiny contractor community were coming to an end. As the demand for private military contractors increased, so did the need for recruiting fresh personnel. The standards varied widely dependent upon the need and professionalism of the company.

A former Green Beret recalls,

“When I got the call and spoke to the recruiter about Iraq, it was like old home week. I had served with over 50% of the employees when they had been in the military with me. It was the easiest ramp up ever. They said “can you be in Kuwait City in three days ready to go?”

I said “yes” and stepped off into theatre that very weekend. That move was smoother than any I had done with the Special Forces.”

Others placed on a standby basis found the waiting to be frustrating. One slated for Baghdad remembers.

“I was told to plan on deploying the following Friday, twelve days hence. So I quit my job, spent over three thousand dollars on extra personal items I thought I would

need, and waited. No airline ticket and no call. I phoned them and they told me to standby as it could be delayed. I waited for nearly six weeks, being informed each Friday that it was sure to be the next. By then I was fed up and finally went with another company who seemed to be better organized.”

Another, interviewed and hired over the phone by an individual he never met, had to turn down a contract because he was unable to deploy the *very next day*.

Very few companies provided packing lists. Most flew by the seat of their pants and simply stated, “bring what you think you will need.”

The old hares, men with decades of military service and years spent on deployments, arrived in country with exactly what was expected of them. Others, especially those with Police or civilian backgrounds, lugged in an amazing collection of personal articles totally unrelated to operations in a war zone. If nothing else, this mass of material underscored how completely ill prepared some of the civilian contractors were for Iraq. One attempted to bring in golf clubs, hoping to knock out a few holes in war ravaged Baghdad. Another, a self proclaimed red neck from the South, fought a losing battle in an attempt to fly over his favorite hunting dog so it could “get” some Iraqis.

A British contractor already with a year in country explains the arrival of a civilian recruit in the summer of 2004.

“He arrived with an awkward suitcase inside of which was a Stetson Cowboy hat. He had no neutral colored clothing in tans or browns. But the best was when we discovered a set of really expensive fishing tackle. He had been planning to spend the evening hours fishing from the bridge over the Euphrates. Doubtless he would have been killed in minutes, but I was gobsmacked by the level of unpreparedness displayed by so many individuals who only had to watch the news to understand what exactly they were getting into. It never ceased to amaze me.”

The means of arrival into theatre were limited. One went overland from either Kuwait or Jordan or one flew into Baghdad on a charter flight.

An excerpt from a personal diary of a Canadian provides vivid insight of the transition to war. This man had arrived in Kuwait City the evening before and was departing for convoy escort duties to Baghdad.

“Just like many millions of Americans, we began to prepare for the morning commute. The gun trucks, in this case radically modified and armored Chevrolet Tahoes, rolled up to the front of the hotel with military precision at 4:30am. All black, with massively reinforced chassis complete with armor and turret, each displayed the warning sign in large red letters. “Danger, stay back 100 meters!” in Arabic and English.

With a last sip of stout Arabic coffee, I settled my bill at the hotel in Kuwait City and we rolled North to the frontier, averaging about ninety mph.

The American checkpoint was brisk efficient, and polite. We were soon marshaled and in less than an hour were guided over the border into Iraq.

A short 400 meter drive took us to our own compound, in this case a couple of metal sheds and a pair of mobile home type trailers.

Inside could be found the usual array of lockers, beds, and a washroom familiar to all whose jobs require transient quarters in remote environs.

The supervisor, after introducing himself to me, pointed to a locker and indicated it was mine. I pulled out body armor, radios, medical kits, and all the other paraphernalia of war.

Following him to another trailer, he opened the door and simply stated, "Help yourself. "

The trailer was literally stuffed to the ceiling with AK-47's, rocket launchers, western assault rifles, sub machine guns, hand grenades and other assorted sundry which specialized in going "Boom" on command. In the corner were propped a pair of 20mm cannon, no less. I settled for a Belgian FN heavy assault rifle, a smoke grenade, and a fragmentation grenade as I had the responsibility for manning the belt fed machine gun on the Tahoe. There was no point in carrying too much.

I asked him if I had to sign for anything.

"No" was all he said in response. "There is no accountability required here."

Another inbound American, a former Marine, spoke of the airplane flight. It was a newly established Royal Jordanian Airlines Charter into Baghdad from Amman, Jordan.

"As I strolled towards the gate it was not difficult to identity those on my flight. There was an over abundance of clothing in tans and grays, mostly with labels like North Face, Columbia and Marmot. Nearly all wore some type of desert boot. Few were clean

shaven, most sporting a few days stubble while several cultivated the Fu Manchu goatee so popular with contractors at the time. Every form of English accent imaginable could be heard. English, American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, Swedish, Norwegian, Fijian, Nepalese, and even a Ugandan. I remember they kept to themselves and other passengers in the terminal avoided them like the plague.

The flight itself was on a small Jordanian charter with perhaps 50 seats. There were no women passengers. There wasn't any service either. There was a marked difference in the demeanor of those flying into the city. The veterans spoke of this and that and were very nonchalant. The fresh meat inbound for the first time were as silent as the grave some of them would eventually find.

The plane maintained a high altitude until we were directly over Baghdad International Airport. (BIAP). Then, without warning, the pilot pushed the stick over, the nose diving for the ground, and we fell like a stone maintaining tight spirals all the way. The veterans laughed and the newcomers looked just plain terrified. Of course we were descending rapidly to present the least possible amount of time as a target. More than one newcomer thought the plane had been shot down. This acrobatic descent continued until we were only a thousand feet or so off the ground. The only time I ever got slightly queasy was the last five hundred feet with wheels down and flaps deployed. We were banking onto final approach near a few buildings and a competent insurgent with an RPG could probably nail us with a lucky shot. Perhaps that is why the Americans always had attack helicopters patrolling the sky when civilian aircraft arrived.

The only other thing worthy of mention I recall was there was no type of taxiing to speak of. Our plane made a beeline for the terminal and the bags were unloaded with

the utmost haste. The engines never stopped for if mortars started dropping bombs the plane could depart instantly. No sooner had the last inbound backpack came off than the first outbound one replaced it. The aircraft would reload for the flight out in minutes. Fifteen minutes after touchdown it was taxiing out at a speed which would send the pilot to jail in America. It reached the end of the runway, applied full power and was aloft again within twenty minutes of having landed. Those lucky souls heading for Amman held their breath for the first five thousand feet or so and then sighed with relief for they were out of gunfire range. That was Baghdad in 2004.”

Upon arrival in the terminal the inbound contractor would be theoretically met by his company representative though it didn't always work this way. There were delayed flights, unexpected arrivals, etc. in a country where communications were still very primitive. There were cases of individuals stranded at the airport for a day or two, unable to get word out of their arrival. They were reduced to sleeping on the floor by the luggage belts and scribbling notes to passerbys asking for them to be delivered to the company they were to work for.

For a few, their first intimation of the magnitude of violence which awaited them proved more than they could bear.

A highly experienced American operator who had been there since the first days of the invasion provides this revealing anecdote.

“We were waiting on the tarmac for a group of a half dozen new personnel. The head office had warned us that one of the new hires was a point of concern as he seemed overly blood thirsty. This was always an issue for us as we had found that those who had really been in the shit up to their ears rarely spoke of it.

We needn't have worried in this case. The aircraft arrived and the new men offloaded. The individual in question, a young man in his early twenties, seemed very agitated.

It was just then that a massive car bomb detonated several miles away. It was a bad one and we could feel the concussion as jet black smoke billowed into the air. I knew instantly that a lot of people had been killed.

The new kid was as white as a sheet. He never said a word but just turned around and got right back on the plane. He had seen enough and wanted nothing to do with it. He flew out ten minutes later, having spent a total of perhaps three minutes on the ground in country. We divided the contents of his luggage amongst us, each man taking whatever he wanted. We knew he wouldn't complain. We never heard from him again.”

This same veteran expressed the feelings of many others who were interviewed when he commented about many of the young men flooding into Baghdad from all over the world in the summer of 2004.

“We had a lot like him, you know. Guys with wild haircuts and “Kill them all” t-shirts, bragging to all within earshot about how many ragheads they would personally dispatch to Allah. It was all bullshit of course, as if they were trying to prove to themselves how brave they were. They were always the first to come unglued when the

bullets started flying. We were to discover that it was the quiet guys, those who most resembled “normal” society, who were the most dependable when the shit hit the fan. Eventually we became very leery of self proclaimed heroes and if one seemed too aggressive or trigger happy during the interview in the United States we made sure he was quietly turned down. Assholes all, and eventually I left the industry because I met too many “cool” people who were proficient at killing civilians but weren’t quite “cool” enough when it came to the heavy lifting like that practiced by the regular military. They were jerk offs and most would be in jail if they stayed at home. I never want to see them again.”

A former garbage collector from Chicago turned security contractor has a different memory of arrival in Baghdad.

“Our team leader met us in the airport and escorted us to the underground parking garage. In the back door of the crew cab were weapons, helmets if we wanted them, and body armor. We put on the armor, loaded the weapons, and climbed aboard while the bags were tossed in the back. Five minutes later we were gone, headed for our encampment. The driver kept the accelerator floored as we zoomed down the road from BIAP to the Green Zone. The media later called it the most dangerous strip of road in the world. I would agree. About half way there I heard a bang and then everybody started firing towards an apartment on the right. I couldn’t see anything to shoot at but I fired along with everybody else in the same general direction. I assumed we were being shot at. The truth was I didn’t have a clue but just kept pulling the trigger as it seemed to be the right thing to do. I have no idea what I hit. The shooting lasted for maybe fifteen

seconds before we were gone. About twenty minutes later we pulled into camp. I had been shot at on my first trip out from the airport. I realized then that this was going to be one hell of an adventure tour. No regrets though I did lose several friends. But no regrets.”

In 2004 the security situation in Baghdad was beginning to deteriorate. It was also a time when the insurgents were still willing to stand and fight in conventional shoot outs, a far cry from the hidden bombers and snipers of today.

There were times Baghdad itself was more akin to Dodge City than a modern metropolis. The US Army, the only real authority, could not be everywhere at once. The result was frontier justice as this contractor from California recalls.

“It had been a very quiet day and we were in transit home after dropping off our engineers at another location. It was just the two gun trucks. We were driving home minding our own business when from across the open median a couple of insurgents in a beat up, white sedan opened fire on us. It was a single male in the back who gave us a quick burst of AK-47 fire before they sped off. As per usual, they missed.

We had had enough and Chuck the Team Leader yelled, “Turn around and let’s get them!”

Both our vehicles u turned and sped across the dusty median, accessing the other highway maybe two hundred meters behind the sedan. We increased speed, starting to weave in and out of the traffic. We closed the distance to fifty meters and both SUV’s pulled up alongside the other, occupying both lanes. Everybody who had a clear field of fire leaned out of the windows and commenced to engage with rifles. It is hard to fire

from a moving vehicle but we were scoring hits. Of course the civil populace on the road was terrified and cars were smashing up all over the place trying to avoid the gunfight. The insurgents maybe fired a burst or two back but mostly they tried to escape by out driving us. With our big V-8's that wasn't going to work. We were closing and scoring more hits. I could see bits flying off the sedan as our rounds struck home. There was no longer any return fire.

They finally tried to escape by driving the wrong way up an off ramp towards an overpass. That was a bad call on their part because one of our trucks was equipped with a pedestal mounted machine gun which fired to the rear when the gate was open. We hadn't been able to use it till now. It spun a hundred and eighty degrees, stopping on the verge and the former South African Paratrooper manning it opened up.

That sedan looked like it got hit by a five hundred pound bomb. It was all over in instant but the gunner raked it for another ten or fifteen seconds, practically sawing it in half. I have never seen such a mess, before or since, and the results could hardly be identified as human. As there was nothing further for us to do, we left the wreck and bodies where they were and continued on our way still minding our own business. The sedan burned behind us.”

Upon occasion contractors would employ covert tactics in order to move unnoticed. A common trick was to dress like a woman in a full length Burqha, the black robes concealing all but the eyes. This tactic was a dangerous one as it increased the odds of being shot up by American forces. However, by riding in non SUV type vehicles

the contractors could swim in an insurgent sea without undue attention. In this particular instance it probably saved this New Zealander's life. He picks up.

“In this case there were two of us in an old, battered Chevy Caprice which seemed to be every third car in Baghdad. We were poodling along but had weapons pressed against the doors ready to shoot through them if problems developed. A few minutes later a small car pulled up alongside. It was a single male and he seemed wary but at peace. He gave us a long, hard look and for an instant our eyes met before he glanced elsewhere. He slowly pulled forward and slid in the lane ahead of us. It was no major drama and I thought nothing of it.

A few minutes later we could hear the sirens and see the flashing lights in the rear view mirror as another Contractor company approached with a three vehicle convoy. It was one of the firms protecting the State Department. I could tell because nobody else used sirens back then. They roared past us in three black SUV's, guns out the windows and lights flashing. About thirty seconds after they had passed us the same guy from before stepped on the gas and drove into the middle of them

The explosion was huge and I distinctly recall watching a black SUV pull a cartwheel in the air. It wasn't until then that I realized that I had been looking at the suicide bomber. I often wonder if he knew we were infidels and was simply waiting for a juicier target or whether we had actually deceived him. I guess I'll never know. But I still wonder.”

This American recalls another close brush with death at the hands of the American military. No protocols regarding military-contractor interface had yet been developed which sometimes led to fatal confusion.

“It was our first mission at night, in the summer of 2004 and we were returning from BIAP after delivering one of our static guard contractors to the airhead. His father, also a contractor, had just been killed and the son was flying home with the body.

It was maybe one o'clock in the morning. The roads were empty and we were running without lights. You use your headlights only when you have to otherwise it makes it too easy for the insurgents to target you. Anyway, we came barreling off the elevated highway and lo and behold, maybe two hundred meters ahead was an Army checkpoint. The Joes were scrambling into the prone while the barrel of a M1 Abrams locked on to us. It was like staring into the Manhattan tunnel, even at that range. The guy on the Humvee with the .50 cal was also tracking on our windshield. We were about to get blown to kingdom come by our own side. They must have thought we were suicide car bombers.

Our driver saved the day when he flipped on a set of flashing blue and red lights we had purchased for precisely this situation. Both vehicles slowed way down and we crawled up to the checkpoint with windows open but guns in. After conversing for a moment they waved us through. I think they were just as relieved as we were at not having shot up friendlies. Neither side was used to seeing much traffic at night and we were the first contractors they had encountered during the hours of darkness. It was only afterwards that my knees shook for a moment or two as I realized how close I had been to

dying. It was just one of those things and there was nothing you could do about it. But that was the way it was and if you didn't like it you could always go home."

The risk of being shot by your own side was an ever present danger even during the daytime. This Canadian was on a convoy escort mission from the Kuwait border to Abu-Graib which is located in the suburbs of Baghdad. His diary records the approach to Baghdad and the ensuing confusion.

"An hour later we penetrated the environs of southern Baghdad. The evidence of recent fighting was everywhere. The first thing I saw were twisted guardrails, road signs hanging at crazy angles, and a glistening pile of 5.56 mm shell casings. Military presence abounded with the Iraqi Army and police out in force. Bright pennants were flying from their new Humvees and Dodge trucks, courtesy of the American taxpayer. Bradley fighting vehicles and Abrams tanks still occupied the critical intersections, lurking behind concrete barriers with only the gun turrets visible. It sucked for them as the absolute lethality of the vehicles condemned the crews to a year's rotation of total boredom. No insurgent would ever even begin to contemplate anything under the gaze of those far reaching cannon. Off to the right, a pair of Apache helicopters circled like birds of prey, ready to fall upon those who made even the slightest miscalculation. From the center of the city, a lazy pillar of thick black smoke gently boiled up into the light blue sky. I could discern the blare of sirens near the base of it. So it was a Wednesday morning remarkable only in its total anonymity when compared to all other Wednesday mornings in this violent city. It was a cookie cutter copy of the last 2 years of Wednesday mornings and doubtless would remain so for all the Wednesday mornings of the foreseeable future. The

only difference is that there would be fewer and fewer people around to see them as the death tolls continue to climb.

As we turned off the highway and began the final five mile drive into Abu Ghraib, the turret machine gunners, of whom I was one, become very busy people. We are transiting a residential neighborhood which is a rabbit warren of houses, alleys, and roofs. This is insurgent country. Iraqi military posts dot the area, but they are poorly marked and generally best identified by the gun pits. The Iraqi Army now use Humvees ala Americans, but still ride around in the back of pick up trucks ala insurgents. Insurgents often wear blue shirts ala Iraqi Police. Private Security Companies use Iraqi gunners in the back of pick up trucks ala the Iraqi Police ala the insurgents. Insurgents wear civilian clothes ala civilians, of which 98% of the residents of Baghdad are. A large number of civilians drive pick up trucks, ala Police, ala insurgents, ala everybody. And everybody's greatest terror is the suicide bomber with a car packed with high explosives, randomly cruising the streets figuring out who he is going to take with him when he meets Allah.

And finally, dear Joe, through no fault of his own, tends to shoot at everything which is not obviously American Military. Sometimes it is better to just keep driving when some insurgent takes a couple of pot shots rather than risk unleashing a mini version of World War Three if all the main players are in the neighborhood. We gunners have only a split second to determine friend from foe, and take the appropriate action. I am utterly beggared that the so called "friendly fire" incidents are as rare as they actually are.

He continues his narrative once inside the city.

“We are now in Baghdad proper and as the road becomes more congested with city traffic the gunners have to switch tactics. Leaving the machine guns ready to go, we all reach into the turret box and pull out small arms. My personal choice is a twelve gauge pump action shotgun. Now the problem is that if the insurgents are literally in the car next to us I can not depress the MG quickly enough to engage. Hence the shotgun. The drill remains the same. We scan the rooftops and then peer into cars looking for hands. If I can see their hands it doesn't matter what the rest of the body is doing for I am safe. I continue to curse the idiot who invented window tinting to keep the heat out, for it reduces my ability to see into the back seat. The insurgents know this, of course, and thus keep most of their shooters in exactly that location. They don't care if we shoot civilians by mistake. But we care so must take the extra second or two to confirm before pulling the trigger. Some good people have died trying to make sure it was indeed the bad guys, only to react a hair too late. Of course this results in shorter tempers on our side with a correspondingly higher casualty rate for civilians who didn't react fast enough. There is no workable solution to the problem short of outright peace. Thankfully, tinted windows are still something of a rarity in Iraq.

We grind to a halt at the Ministry of Transport. The place is covered in concrete blast barriers, and the walls are festooned with machine gun positions. The Kurdish guards are happy to see us and we get waves and smiles. Turning in to the approach lane, I wave my hand at all following traffic. To a man, they apply brakes and stop, leaving some two hundred meters between us. Nobody tries to creep forward as to risk doing so is inviting a burst of MG fire through the radiator. The noise diminishes and it gets very,

very quiet as we clear the barriers. I remove the ammunition belt as we pass under the watchful eyes of the sentinels.

For the next two hours we try to stay cool under the blazing sun. It is about one hundred thirty degrees today, nowhere near as bad as next month will be. There is a covered shed with an old billiard table so a few of the boys take turns playing pool. The local Iraqis, all male, sit on each other's lap and hold hands. These gestures are considered far too intimate in the Occidental world but quite the norm here. We are used to it and don't even bat an eyelid. Such is another afternoon in the life of a convoy protection dude."

The Canadian just mentioned was part of a huge logistics effort. The re-supply routes for the military were broken down into a number of selected highways called Main Supply Routes. Each MSR bore a different code name. Most of the fat, slow convoys which kept the massive American presence in Iraq supplied originate from Kuwait. Foreign nationals such as Indians, Pakistanis, and Filipinos, etc constituted the drivers. The American Army lacked the manpower to protect all but the most critical of cargo so Private Military Companies picked up the slack.

The MSR's themselves were advantageous as they provided specific routes with known checkpoints. Quick reaction forces in the form of motorized American infantry were available as were helicopter gun ships if the tactical situation permitted it. The convoy vehicles carried the GPS system and the Security Contractors were linked in with the military's TAPESTRY system. This software marvel, when coupled with GPS, allowed the real time identification and location of every unit on the move. If contact

with insurgents or IED's was made, the Team Leader need only push a panic button and his location and identification would immediately start flashing at the nerve center manned by the military. The appropriate response could then be initiated. A final advantage was that by the use of specific routes Combat Support Centers (CSC) stations were set up to provide overnight laagers for the convoys. A Combat Support Center is similar to an interstate interchange with hotels, restaurants, and gas stations all located in close proximity. The convoy personnel could eat, sleep, re-fuel, re-supply and be provided updated intelligence all at one heavily fortified location.

The sole disadvantage was predictability. By transiting only a few well established Main Supply Lines, the coalition forfeited the element of surprise in favor of efficient response. The insurgents were cognizant of this shortfall and realized that it was only a matter of time until coalition vehicles appeared. Thus all insurgent attacks were focused on what is really a very narrow corridor of road links connecting the country.

Among contractor circles, some of the routes are notorious. Irish was the name given to the Airport – Green Zone run, dubbed the “Highway of Death” and made infamous by the media. MSR Tampa was the big one, linking Kuwait to Baghdad. It was a three day trip and involved stopping overnight at CSC Scania located about ninety minutes South of Baghdad. MSR Tampa supports the highest percentage in terms of total supplies carried to US forces and was therefore the scene of particularly ferocious fighting, especially in the Southern approaches to Baghdad. These overlooked battles were noted for a lack of prisoners taken on either side.

It was only a matter of months after the official war ended before the move-countermove sequence began for the unheralded battle of the re-supply routes.

The insurgents would crawl up to the ditches on both sides of the highway to emplace IED's under the cover of darkness.

The Americans strung razor wire in the ditches in response.

The Iraqis cut the wire and moved into culverts beneath the highways to bury bigger bombs.

The Americans welded the culverts shut and placed tanks on the overpasses which allowed them to utilize thermal technology to detect human activity at great range. Many insurgents died unknowing because an Abrams tank had been tracking them on heat sensors thousands of meters away.

The Iraqis, now wary of tanks, avoided placing bombs near overpasses and focused on the empty areas between them.

The Americans inserted sniper teams armed with .50 cal sniper rifles and night scopes with a range of 2000 meters in every direction. These teams were stationed at intervals covering the dead spaces the tanks could not.

The Iraqis turned to pressure activated devices which exploded when a vehicle rolled over them.

The Americans developed a "sweeping" device, mounted on the front bumper of a Humvee, which prematurely exploded the bombs and minimized damage.

The Iraqis added a time delay to the IED's timing them to explode a second or two *after* the sweeper rolled over them so they were directly beneath the vehicle at time of explosion.

Eventually there were so many bomb craters and pot holes on the road the Iraqis tumbled onto the next trick. They inserted IED's in the bottom of the craters and filled

the holes with oil. Cement dust was applied and mixed until the color of the mixture matched that of the road.

The Private Military Companies responded to these threats with superior armor, additional weapons, and better communications. Machine guns which were originally able to fire only to the rear of the convoy were repositioned in top turrets to achieve a three hundred sixty degree field of fire. The wooden stocks of AK-47's were removed and replaced with folding stocks to allow more maneuverability inside the cramped confines of an SUV. Laser sighting systems with holographic displays were mounted on weapons to support instantaneous target acquisition. This system of punch and counterpunch continues to this day. It is over these highways that Private Military Companies fought a campaign of ruthless skirmishes well away from the public eye which was focused exclusively on official military casualties emanating from Baghdad.

This unknown anecdote from a former Marine aptly details the savagery of these small unit encounters. The convoy is returning from a run into Baghdad and is approaching a notoriously dangerous overpass. However, the American Army began to station tanks there only the day before. It is likely that the insurgents had not yet discovered this new tactic as documented in this example.

“We approached the overpass. The recent sandstorms had deposited large sand dunes on the roads. To the amazement of all, an insurgent, either extremely brave or extremely stupid or both, had just been found digging a hole in the sandbank with a shovel to emplace a bomb. Joe was on the other side of the overpass and had promptly stopped traffic and taken a pot shot at the bad guy with his M-4. The insurgent ran and

was now some two hundred meters away, trying to traverse an open field towards a nearby village. If he made it to the hamlet, we knew he would disappear. Our guys wanted to engage, but Joe told all to hold fire. We understood why seconds later when an Abrams tank rumbled over the embankment. Without further ado, the driver stepped on the gas, the tank lurched forward and rapidly began to close the gap. The Iraqi glanced over his shoulder and must have known he was running for his life. The old man with the reaper was reaching out, and already had the scythe on the back swing.

Not wanting to miss the show, several members of the PSD teams halted by the drama unfolding before their eyes were soon on the roofs of their vehicles cheering like they all were attending a college football game. Only this was much better as for once we had actually found a real living bomber. IED's are cruelly indiscriminate. They kill wantonly. It could as easily be a family of four blown to bits as an American soldier. So the bombers get very short shrift from the security forces. We all hate the invisible enemy and this one was, for once, out in the open.

In a matter of seconds, the tank had closed to barely fifty meters behind the wildly weaving bomber. The coaxial machine gun opened up, ripping huge divots of earth slightly to the left. The cheers increased to a thunder, as if the home team had intercepted the football. The Iraqi had zigged and the gunner had zagged. For his efforts, the bomber had bought himself a few extra seconds of terrified existence. He never tried to surrender and we would never have taken it. He had opted to play a hard game and this time his number was going to come up and there would be no tears from us. The coaxial ripped off another burst of fifteen rounds. Rooster tails of dirt flew up just a hair to the right. The Iraqi, obviously starting to become exhausted, started another zigzag. Only this time the

gunner matched him, fired a long burst, and tore him to shreds, large gobbets of flesh flying off as the rounds hit home, the dismembered carcass collapsing in the field. All those in attendance broke into a huge cheer of approval. The tank returned to rounds of applause, smiles, and plenty of thumbs up signs. Nobody was overly bothered for the death of a human being, myself included. The corpse was left in the field. Perhaps the wild and ever hungry dogs will have a good meal for a switch.”

During the interview I asked this former Marine if he really meant that he wanted the fallen Iraqi to be consumed by feral dogs.

He paused for a moment then replied, “Eat well, my four legged friends.”

An Australian contributed this story of an IED attack on his convoy.

“Not five miles later we hit an IED. This time it was manually detonated, the team observing the fleeing pair of insurgents in the ubiquitous pick up truck. A thunderous report and a billowing mushroom cloud of black smoke from the center of the convoy was how the Team Leader described it. EOD later determined it to be a pair of 105mm howitzer shells wired together so it was a pretty substantial affair. Lead gun truck turned around to count the dead and to assist the still living.

We were lucky. One transport flat bed had been near the detonation. Doubtless our way above average road speed had made the timing of the explosion difficult to gauge. The only damage was a few shell fragments through the front of the cab and a lot of splinter damage to the flat bed itself. Practically all of it was superficial which was amazing. One tiny, jagged fragment had penetrated the rear window of the vehicle and pranged off the helmet of the Indian driver. He didn't even have a headache. The only

damage was a bit of a smelly cab, as the driver, not used to being blown up in his day job as a taxi driver back in Delhi, had promptly shit himself. Not once, but six times he informed us with eyes still wide. Defecation is the body's way of naturally lightening the load prior to flight or flight, and happens far more often in combat than many think. Well, the Indian was most certainly lighter.

The remainder of the trip was completed without further incident.”

A German contractor with no military experience recounts this ambush from the very early days of convoy protection, before the Iraqis had developed the tactical expertise which they display today.

“We were approaching Baghdad from the South. We were also nursing a sick tractor trailer and our speed was vastly reduced. We were averaging twenty five to thirty mph so we were all a bit anxious. IED's weren't all that common yet but there had been some and we didn't wish to add to the list of people blown up by roadside bombs.

From out of nowhere we got ambushed from the right side. It was the most bizarre thing I ever saw. They were maybe fifty meters away and all of a sudden up popped eight or ten guys from shallow slit trenches where they immediately opened fire at us.

Like most Iraqis, their shooting was pathetic. They just go to full automatic and after the first shot the rest go straight up in the air. The AK-47 is a pig of a weapon to control on full automatic and these guys were useless. But the most amazing part is that they stood up, in broad daylight, in full view of our riflemen and machine guns. The truth is that had they remained in their slit trenches and engaged us from behind cover, we would have been in deep shit. There is no doubt we would have had some people hurt.

Our guys returned fire from inside and it only took a couple of seconds for the machine gunner in the rear to swing the belt fed around and open up. It was like knocking over bowling pins. They didn't move, didn't try to take cover, just stood there and slugged it out. Not one of them went for cover, even when the guys on each side were shot to pieces. I do not question their bravery but their stupidity is beyond comprehension. Thank God they were thick as bowling balls otherwise we would have been in serious trouble."

The war continued to degrade, with less and less of the Main Supply Routes considered "safe". Eventually the Southern part of the country, that of the British occupied enclave near Basra, would turn violent. The Shias who inhabited this area were among the most peaceable in the country. That was no longer the case as evidenced by this anecdote, recounted by a former London policeman turned contractor.

"In another completely unrelated incident, another friend in a different company was hit. The driver lost his arm, and the man behind him was killed. Errol had a piece of shrapnel punch through his helmet, leave a bloody furrow across his forehead and tear out a jagged exit hole on the other side of his helmet. The frightening part is that the attacks are now occurring in the South, areas that once were deemed relatively safe. There is no answer to these huge IED's currently being employed. One's only hope is not to get hit. The resources required to effectively defend the highways would require 2/3rds of the Army. Just last week a conventional rocket was fired into a tanker truck at Safwan. Safwan was once as safe as London as it is within spitting distance of the border of Kuwait and is the staging area for a huge cross border re-supply operation.

The first time we got lit up was pretty amateurish. We were just leaving Safwan when we were attacked from the edge of town. Thankfully the towel heads (Iraqis) were first timers as they engaged us from point blank range. The RPG rockets didn't detonate as we were too close. But there was a loud "thud", the truck shook, and you could see a tail fin sticking out of the rear quarter panel which was a pretty hairy occurrence for all concerned. The perpetrators were dispatched to Allah with the utmost haste.

The next lot tried it again about a week later and managed to hit a big fuel tanker. The black billowing smoke was visible for miles. The common consensus was that for them to shoot up a fuel tanker at Safwan is something akin to being robbed at gunpoint directly outside FBI headquarters in Washington. The base of the flagpole is no longer considered safe ground. We knew then that this was going to be a long haul war and all the talk of victory in the near future was rubbish."

The situation around Safwan continued to deteriorate throughout 2005 and into 2006. Much of the fault lay with the various militia groups, mostly Shia, who took to playing both ends against the center. The British military were slowly withdrawing, leaving contractors to fend for themselves. The situation was becoming increasingly ugly. Another British contractor recounts.

"We had two of our Fijian drivers kidnapped a couple of weeks ago. A vehicle with black balaclava hooded men with AK-47's jumped them just outside the compound and bundled them into the back seat. It proved to be a short kidnapping. Our lads weighed about 250 and 280 pounds respectively and both were well over six feet. So they cracked a pair of heads and exited the vehicle at about twenty mph. Both survived the impact with

the gravel and immediately were on their feet moving as quickly as possible. The Iraqi Police were in the area and came across our running pair. They gathered them up and took them to the local station. Problem solved, or so it seemed to us when we were notified. We sent over a vehicle to pick them up.

It was in fact only the beginning. The major in charge, an individual of dubious reputation, refused to release them. Robert, our project manager, was appraised and drove over to speak to said major. The Police were not budging and refused to cut loose the Fijians. They began hinting about the huge amount of paperwork these two had caused which is Iraqi speak for bribe time. Robert asked to see the charge sheet. There wasn't one. It was a shakedown, pure and simple. They spoke for 8 hours and were no closer to resolving the issue than when they started. Robert excused himself and stepped outside. He called the British Special Forces compound in Basrah, explained the situation, and asked for help. It didn't hurt that Robert had spent twenty odd years with Special Forces previously and one of his former soldiers was now in charge of the squadron. Within minutes, a pair of Sea King helicopters stuffed to the gills with Special Forces were en route to the prison with intent to break Iraqi heads.

Back inside the jail, the phones began to ring off the hooks in a matter of minutes. The British Army had liaised with the locals, and kindly informed them that the wrath of God was about to arrive at the Safwan jail via Sea Kings and wished all a pleasant trip to eternity. The major's cronies, anticipating serious depletion of their ranks, were all calling in to urge the major to release the Fijians without further ado.

Two minutes later the Fijians walked out, the helicopters about faced and Robert was left with a rather exorbitant bar tab at a Special Forces Mess.

About a week later, while we were all up country in Iraq, a group of policemen overwhelmed our own security at our compound in Safwan. They threatened to kill the families of our guards if they didn't comply. Sadly, when the local constabulary are in bed with the militia and they are leaning on you, most locals don't have much choice. They complied. As a result, many of our remaining weapons to include machine guns were confiscated. The militias also helped themselves to GPS's, portable electronics, and some very non warlike things like Ipods, sat phones, and personal laptops. The official reason was that the documentation from the Interior Ministry was lacking. This was bullshit as the Interior Ministry didn't have any documentation to follow in the first place. So it was a set up.

Around the same time frame, several other Private Security Companies were stopped by the same gang of some forty odd policemen and had weapons, vehicles, and everything else stripped. They were left standing on the side of road, several miles from home, with nothing more than the clothes on their back. It is illegal for any Coalition Elements to fire up the Police, so the militia have flooded them with their own people. The majority of the Police are nothing more than legalized militia gangs. They are effectively exploiting a legal loophole in order to bully and steal outright for their own (and their militia's) personal gain. Protests from the Private Security Companies to Baghdad just enter the black hole of Iraqi government, never to see the light of day again. So one night we all sat down and figured out what we do when our turn came. We didn't have long to find out."

It was less than a week later when the company in question was halted on the highway by the militia. Thankfully, they had rehearsed for precisely this occasion as the continuing narrative demonstrates.

Robert was in charge of our three gun trucks, returning in the early afternoon. As if by magic, a swarm of Iraqi Police, many wearing balaclavas, emerged and blocked the road. Our favorite major was at the head of the mob, smoking a cigarette and doubtless preparing to add to his collection of vehicles and weapons. They were anticipating another bloodless coup and had not really deployed in a tactical formation which was a mistake.

Robert never missed a beat. Speaking rapidly and quietly into the radio, he instructed the other two gun trucks to deploy into an L shaped positions so as to have the Iraqis covered in a lethal crossfire if necessary. The vehicles dispersed accordingly. The militia postured, threatened, and waved weapons, but did not fire.

Robert debussed, I tagged along and we met the Major half way. The conversation went something like this.

Major: You are being detained and as a result of violating Iraqi law must immediately surrender all your weapons and vehicles in accordance with Iraqi law. You lack the necessary paperwork from the Ministry of the Interior to operate legally.

Robert: Our current contract is for the Ministry of the Interior. What is the specific paperwork you wish to press charges against?

Major: Your weapons cards lack the necessary Interior Ministry Stamp.

Robert: No they don't.

Major: Yes they do.

Robert: No they don't. No weapons cards in the Coalition have approval stamps yet as the Interior Ministry have not standardized them.

Major: Enough of talk. You are under arrest. Lay down your weapon immediately.

Silence for about twenty seconds.

Then very precisely, Rob reached up and pushed the transmit button on his radio three or four times. This creates a squelching noise in the earpieces of other listeners. This was the prepare for combat signal. Machine guns were tightened into shoulders, laser sights turned to full illumination, and all the vehicle teams save for the turret Machine Gunners debussed and took up firing positions in the sandy soil. I could hear the safeties being switched to "Fire" and flipped mine at the same time.

The militia became very agitated. Some took cover on the ground, while others ran to the vehicles. There was a lot of screaming. The major was incensed.

Major: I said YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. LAY DOWN YOUR WEAPONS IMMEDIATELY AND MY MEN WILL NOT FIRE.

With that, the major tried to push past Robert and walk back to his semi hysterical Police/militia. Rob followed squarely behind him and intentionally began to step on his heels with every pace. The major was very distraught. This game continued for another twenty meters or so, Rob deliberately stepping on the man's heels harder and harder. Finally the Major had no choice but to do something. He was practically screaming when he turned around.

Major: WHY ARE YOU WALKING RIGHT BEHIND ME AND STEPPING ON ME. I COULD HAVE YOU SHOT!!!!!

Robert: (in a very clear, calm voice) I just want you to understand that at the sound of the first shot, you will never hear the second as it will already be in your head.”

And with that, Robert cleared his Glock 19, and lightning fast, ground it into the Major’s ear before anybody on either side could react.

Had the world ever held a competition for people to act as if frozen in place, this group would have been medalists. The only visual motion during that eternal half minute was the rapidly increasing stain on the Major’s trousers as he urinated all over himself.

By sheer happenstance, at that point in time an American military convoy was beginning to grind by. The lead Humvees, recognizing the Mexican stand off for what it was, rapidly covered the hundred meters of dirt and brought a pair of .50 cal machine guns to the party. They aimed them squarely into the thickest mass of Iraqis and the gunners had their gloved fingers on the butterfly triggers. That scared the shit out of the militia as Joe was much faster to shoot than his British counterpart and was far less concerned about either paperwork or prisoners. An American officer could be seen speaking into a radio through the bullet proof glass and it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out the cavalry, both British and American, would soon arrive at a full gallop. Though the private and military sectors have their squabbles, when the chips are down there is absolutely no question as to who is going to support who. We share the same mess halls and most of us are former Army and we share a common contempt of the corrupt Police. The Iraqi mob were markedly less enthusiastic about the whole thing than they had been just a couple of minutes ago.

The major’s shoulders slumped perceptibly as the pistol continued to reside in his ear.

Robert: Tell your men to move to the Police vehicles, weapons pointed towards the ground.

In return all he got was a stony stare. Rob never said a word, but in response ground the muzzle into the militiaman's ear so deeply it drew blood. The Major turned, barked out a command in Arabic, and the Police began to sullenly withdraw back to their vehicles, the .50 cal heavies of the Americans covering them the whole time.

There we waited. About twenty minutes later several vehicles with British Army markings pulled up. Out popped a pair of Officers, one British and the other a fairly distinguished looking Iraqi light Colonel. It would appear that the Police Major and the Army Colonel had met before as no time was spent in introductions. The Colonel walked up, pistol drawn, grabbed the Police Major by the hair and threw him into the back seat after tossing his pistol into the dust. Just as rapidly as they had arrived, the vehicles pulled away with hardly a word spoken. Our people packed up and pulled in behind Robert. We boarded up and left along with the Americans who also drove off, heavy machine guns covering the Iraqi police until the last. The leaderless Shia mob eventually drifted off, doubtless happy to be alive.

We found out later that the Coalition had been aware of the Major's little racket for some time, and that we were the first ones to have refused to buckle under.

As for the major, his outcome bore grim resemblance to the larger war which swirled around us all. An easy case for prosecution, one mistake was made after another. Some two weeks later, doubtless due to influence, he was back at his post, arrogant as ever, though he rarely meddled with us any more. It was then that I knew the war was lost."

A Polish contractor, working further North in the country, also reflects upon the Iraqi Police. His story reflects a common theme amongst contractors. The Police were corrupt and in league with the various militias.

“We could always tell the legitimacy of any Police checkpoint simply by looking at the Police manning it. If they were dressed in rags, barefoot, and had absolute shit weapons, they were probably real Police. If they were wearing black masks to hide their identities, they were invariably allied with us. They knew that if they were identified their families might very well be murdered.

But if they had fresh uniforms and really good equipment, you had to be careful. The Americans had given them thousands of brand new Dodge extended cab 4x4s complete with Police paint job. If you came across one of these at a checkpoint, manned by healthy, well equipped Iraqis without facemasks you knew you were dealing with the militias. They didn't give a shit who saw them as they were the bad guys to begin with. They had the best of everything whereas no legitimate cop would ever have a truck like that. When we saw the militias at checkpoints we never even slowed down and were ready for a shootout in any given instant. After a bunch of them got pretty shot up they didn't bother us much after the first few attempts. They did their thing and we did ours.”

Not every moment is theater is spiked with adrenalin and the crackle of small arms. Since time immemorial, an excess of time has been spent by all combatants simply waiting. Firefights are still the exception as opposed to the norm and there are interludes of beauty, peace, and humor even in the most desolate corners of the world. This account

by a Canadian who kept a journal exposes a very different side of the contractor experience in Iraq.

“We arose at three o’clock in the morning for the drive back to the Kuwaiti border. Normal working hours are meaningless in war. Troops were moving and vehicles were echeloned on the road just as if it was three in the afternoon. We quietly rolled out of bed fully clothed, laced up our desert boots, gathered our packs and strolled to the vehicles. It doesn’t take much. Coffee is brewed over tiny stoves set up abutting the shrapnel barriers. Beside us armored Humvees growl by, returning from another patrol of the highways. The Nepalese prepared the weapons and turrets while we Westerners check the S-2 (intelligence) shop for updated information. Like a good neighbor they are always there, always open, and always do their best to help. We study the map. The route north has a red box beside it. There have been several minor firefights and one suicide car bomber. Now is not the prime time to move through the area. The route south back to the Kuwaiti border and into Shia country has a green square hanging beside it. It is all clear save for the usual sporadic pot shots around Nasiriyah. In short, same old stuff. We filch a cup of real coffee, joke with the staff whom we all know well, and wander back through the blaze of generator driven floodlights where our vehicles await. I hop into the rear and our Nepalese driver shuts the door. I am now effectively trapped in the back. I can only get out by going up through the turret or clambering over to the front seat which is awkward at best. I ensure the belts of machine gun ammunition are correctly coiled. They are. I prepare my swing seat, check radios, turn on the laser sights on my rifle, and settle down to wait. I spend a moment of solitude sipping my purloined coffee.

Ten minutes later our convoy is shepherded and the manifest turned in. The mission briefing is complete, given by a young Scot called Charles. With that, in a last symbolic gesture, the entire team takes a last pee on the rear tires of the gun truck. I am told this is a hangover from the days of World War Two. Apparently bomber crews performed the same load lightening act on the rear wheel of the Lancasters and B-17's before lifting off for the terror filled skies over Germany.

The analogy to aviation is an apt one, for ten minutes later I am in another world. We cleared the checkpoints and the last American sentry wished us Good Luck. Within a minute the glow of floodlit Combat Support Center Scania is gone as if it never existed. I am the rear gunner of the last vehicle and in all directions lay a vast nothingness. There are no lights, not even the flickering, dying embers of a Bedouin campfire. Gazing forward I can just discern the red tail lights of the other thirteen vehicles. These red dots represent the sole sign of man's presence in the great void. I return my attention to the rear and only the empty desert beckons. The night air has cooled and blows over the top of my head. The desert smells clean and the air is pure. Glancing inside, I can see Charles peering out as he takes it in, face bathed in the multi colored reflection of the lights on the instrument panel. I can no longer see the driver as the armor plating prevents it. This is my only connection with the life I know, this small cocoon of humanity and comrades as we hurtle through the night desert at ninety mph.

Above me gazes down every star ever made, accompanied by a crescent moon. There is just sufficient astral illumination to discern the hard shape of the machine gun and the belt hanging from it. Beyond the muzzle, the sky and surface of the earth blend into one varying shade of gray. It is impossible to determine where one ends and the next

begins. It feels more like I am flying than driving. I no longer have any spatial or depth perception and the bumps could equally be air pockets. Raising my head in the open turret, the chilled desert air flows over my bare scalp, furthering the notion that I am indeed well above terra firma. We are but the tiniest of entities, moving infinitesimally slowly against such a massive and impressive landscape. We are alone on God's vast sea, surrounded by only darkness. There is no up or down, backwards or forwards. Only my comrades and the millions of stars gazing down upon my pathetic efforts compared to the overwhelming power of the earth that surrounds us. It is very easy to feel small in the desert as we crawl through the endless spaces. The rhythmical bouncing of the truck, coupled with the darkness and the gently swaying seat, caress my brain into a semi stupor. One is apt to converse with one's maker at such times. What a lucky man I have been to experience moments such as this. I feel very puny and very lucky indeed.

I can not but dwell on a few phrases of a song by Robbie Williams. The first few lines run on continuous play in the shadows of my mind as miles gently unfold through the everlasting night.

I sit and wait

Dozen angels contemplate my fate

And do they know

The places where we go

When we're grey and old

Cause I have been told

That salvation

Lets their wings unfold.....

And so it goes for hour after hour, until finally the heavens begin to lighten ever so imperceptibly. With majestic grandeur, the stars bow out to be replaced by the golden hues of sand and shale as the sky continues to brighten. Far off to starboard, for I still have trouble thinking of us not being at sea or flying, a lone Bedouin emerges from a tent. He stoops over and stirs the embers of last night's fire. He gazes at us from within his black robe, AK-47 by his side. I wave but he fails to reciprocate. Doubtless we are as alien to him as he is to us. We hail from two different planets that for a millisecond in time, crossed paths. Does he know that the person who waved to him will in twenty four hours be in Kuwait City, forty eight will see me in London, and seventy two hours hence will have me partaking of lunch in downtown Toronto? He will still be tending his goats and sheep and brewing his tea over burning camel dung. What a strange world we live in.“

A young Swede, formerly a bank teller, had a similar experience during the terrible first few months of 2006, when it seemed that all Baghdad was burning.

“It was a brilliant morning, absolutely stunning. The sun was slowly coming up in a clear blue sky with temperatures just above freezing. I was standing out in my favorite fleece in the yard sipping coffee to see the teams off. Perhaps I remember it well as I had survived an IED blast the day before and was still rather thankful to be around. The neighborhood was silent save for the muted clinks and clanks as the Fijians rigged the machine guns. The engines were tested while the teams loaded all the impedimenta of

modern conflict into the armored gun trucks. Small vapor trails of condensation from breathing in the chilled air surrounded the head of every man. It was a serenely peaceful moment, a tableau frozen in time. I wished to be nowhere else in the whole world. It was as if this was all we had ever done, and all we would ever do. I was in total bliss, with a grin from ear to ear as I sipped the scalding coffee. Far in the distance, the first car bomb of the day detonated, the only intruder in our peaceful valley. The crews gathered to chatter before departure, radios were checked, and the Fijians partook of Morning Prayer, standing in a circle and holding hands. A final briefing and they were off.”

Regardless of the tranquil interludes, it does not take long for the reality of war to return. A former paratrooper records the arrival of a new man in the harrowing first months of 2007 when death tolls in the capitol city were at their highest.

“We picked him up from BIAP and rolled back to the villa in the Red zone. We were off on a mission the next day while he got himself sorted out. Eight hour jet lag can be tough so he had a light day and would go on a “milk run” escort detail the next day. That night after we got back he said hello and I caught his first name, though I don’t remember it.

That was the only time I saw him. He was blown up the next day and airlifted to Germany for treatment before we all got back from a different mission. He didn’t even have time to put his stuff in his wall locker before he was a casualty. He had been in theatre for less than 24 hours so he had a pretty short war. But I guess that’s the way it goes.”

Graffiti scribbled on an overpass on MSR Tampa:

“Pete’s Mom is HOT!”

The situation would continue to deteriorate as the years flowed by with the nadir coming in 2006-2007.

Another American recalls that particular time, summoning up the feelings of many.

“We had parked our vehicles under the control of a supposedly controlled area. They were under the security of the Iraqi Police who were supposedly not in cahoots with the various militias. When we came back there was human shit on the hood of every truck. Some of our supposed “Allies” had taken a crap on the hood and windshields of our SUV’s. We knew it was them and they knew that we knew it was them but there was nothing we could do to them about it. From that instant on, I knew, regardless of what the politicians proclaimed that it was going to be a long, long war. I was right.”

This is from an American contractor, commenting on the escalating violence in the closing months of 2006. He recalls Christmas time in the Red Zone.

“It got so bad that by Christmas of 2006 I was reduced to filling my morning coffee cup only two thirds full. Every time a car bomb went off within a couple of mile radius I wound up spilling my priceless java brought from home. So in order to facilitate co-habiting in the same city with suicidal fucking lunatics who blow themselves up in vehicles packed with high explosives, I struck a compromise and never carried around a full cup of coffee. Welcome to Baghdad Baby.”

