

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM TWO: MARCH 2004 TO MARCH 2005

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by

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“I read your entire collection and I was so touched by your words that I wanted to be sure that I took the proper time to reflect and give you a response that you deserve for sharing your stories. The truth is; your stories are our stories, the story of Aco 2-8 CAV, 1CD. Your collections of accounts and experiences capture what we all shared with you and, I'm certain, at one time or another we all felt, endured and thought the same as you. Your words also forced me to confront my own memories that have, for so long, been suppressed and stored away behind the invisible walls that I built around them. Visible to everyone who knows me but did not experience what you and I shared. They can see it, but, they don't understand what it is. I confess; your project made me a little emotional. May our stories be heard, felt, and never forgotten. My hope is that our stories continue for decades to come”

-Harley Ramirez (former M1A2sep. Gunner in 2/8 Stallions, Aces Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, United States Army.)

Special thanks to Harley Ramirez and all my other Aces brothers

## **Introduction**

I would love to tell you that I'm a good writer. I do not personally feel like I write well, but that said, it is my hope that I at least have the ability to tell you my story. My name is Victor Templer, I was born in the city of White Horse, in the territory called Yukon, Canada. I was considered a dual citizen of America and Canada since birth. Growing up poor in Northern Canada, I mostly spent my days wandering the forests, hunting pheasants, snaring rabbits, just exploring really. My life in Canada seemed to mirror what growing up poor in Texas would be like, maybe a wee bit colder in the winters, granted, but the culture of individualism, mixed with a deep sense of loyalty to community and family is almost identical. This may have developed a natural disposition that inclines me to choose fight instead of flight when faced with the defense of my family and myself. Being the oldest brother in a single parent family of four, forced me into the role of a man at the age of six. That might be one reason I was always fascinated with armored knights and armored vehicles, often imagining charging in on my horse to save the day. When I was old enough to build plastic models, I began a tank building program that would last until I actually joined the military, resulting in hundreds of detail painted 1/72 scale model tanks, that I have been packing around with me ever since. At school, I was always playing hockey, always defensemen or goalie, and always taking advantage of the hockey loop-hole that allowed two boys to punch each other in the face until one fell down. A five minute penalty of "roughing" for physical assault seemed pretty fair to me. I've fought my whole life; whether on the streets, or on the hockey rink, there was really no choice for me but to fight.

At 28 I enlisted in the United States Army from my brother Jeremiah's house on

the Big Island of Hawaii. Having no residence in the United States at the time, and having two brothers in Hawaii, I found out what living on the “dry” side of the Big Island was like. It is hot, bread and milk cost more than double the price, and the bugs are large and hungry. My soon to be wife, Stephanie, a tall elegant Scottish girl, called Hawaii the “asshole of the world.” When she swore, she made it count. If only we had a better understanding of the world, we may not have called Hawaii such terrible names, as years later I would live in much worse places. Of the three choices of military jobs offered by the army recruiter, I chose: tank, tank, tank. I really wanted to be a tanker. After three months of stupidity in basic training, as a 19K (Armored Crewman) on Fort Knox, Kentucky, I was assigned to 2-8 Stallions, 1st Cavalry Division in Fort Hood, Texas. It was there in Alpha Company “Aces” that I would end up meeting some of the finest human-beings that walk this planet, and as I stand Knighted into the Noble Order Of The Spur, I'm also a little biased.

As I tell my story, I can't use real names, except for my own of course, and certain journalists; but as all events are directly from actual experiences of mine, names matter very little. The owners of the real names will know exactly where they fit in. The pictures within the stories do not always in fact represent the actual story being told, they very well could be from the days before, or the days after and are from a somewhat communal 2/8 group of photos. The photos within are not intended to “gorify” or romanticize violence, nor are they designed as an enhancement to my personal notoriety; photos of that nature would only be viewed by people with an intimate connection to the experience, often with a great deal of remorse.

After training for 16 months with an intensity that was almost more difficult than

actual combat, I was chosen to become an Armored Crewman on an M1A2sep Abrams tank during 1st Cavalry Division's one year deployment to Baghdad, Iraq from March 2004 to March 2005, designated O.I.F.2, or the second American rotation in Operation Iraqi Freedom. What follows is a series of short stories where I attempt to paint a realistic picture of my experiences as a front-line combat tanker. I make no apologies for my bluntness, for as Tim O'Brien says in *The Things They Carried*, in war there is "no redemption."

*Templer wearing non-regulation shorts*

### **30 minutes of one sunny afternoon in Baghdad, Iraq, 2004**

I was walking through Sadr City following Captain Jones on foot patrol as his bodyguard. I was chosen for this role by showing my unflinching commitment to kill anyone who attacked us as best as I was able, and for some odd reason, he just really liked me. Captain Jones seemed to have so much confidence in himself and my ability to protect him, he would trot-off ahead of me with his little M-4 carbine, a more compact variant of the traditional M-16 rifle. I on the other hand, was armed with an M-249 Machine-gun, an 18 pound, 800 round per minute fully automatic machine-gun; this was d-ringed to my body armor with six 200 round boxes of belted 5.56mm ammunition in my assault-pack on my back, and one full box clipped to the weapon. It was over 120 degrees Fahrenheit. I would take a breath, suck water from my camel-back, then take another breath. I had stopped sweating a while ago, but if I showed signs of heat-

exhaustion I would be called a *pussy* and could kiss having this position good-bye, so I “sucked it up” and kept moving. Captain Jones walked right up to random street venders, selling things like electrical-wire and switches, most likely stolen right off power poles. He called my lumbering, weighed-down ass over to his position. I was always trying to catch up to him. He said: “Hey Templer, this guy's a fucking terrorist.” I walked over, pulled out a disposable camera, long since out of film, but the flash still worked. Taking the vender's “picture,” I used my thumb to mimic cutting a throat, telling him in English: “You're dead tonight.” The chances of us actually killing him were really slim, but we would, if we saw him out after dark shooting at us. Leaving the man visibly shaking, we continued deeper into the market.

We entered the “fish market,” which was about a half-football field of asphalt, the edges of which had fish stalls all around them. The area was covered with tarps for shade and the center was filled with a shallow fecal-matter “lake” that was a sickly green metallic color. The flies were so thick that they were on your eye-balls and in your mouth. Captain Jones decided to walk through it, so we walked through the lake to get our feet nice and wet. It was not my job to question; discipline allowed us to survive and kill, making personal discomfort something we had no choice but to ignore. All the same, it was hard to see why we had to walk through the fecal matter. In the center was a small “hill” of asphalt. A little girl of around five years old was sitting there abandoned, just above the “shit-line.” Surrounded by fish stalls, she was in the last stages of starvation. Covered in flies, her belly was bloated with worms and her eyeballs were sunk into her head. She looked up at me as I walked by and I felt a tiny spark of what might have been pity, or remorse. As I slowly walked by sucking on my camel-back, my mind tried to

figure out something I could do, I looked her over and realized the only thing to do was shoot her in the head. I did not squeeze the trigger my finger had wrapped around. I just walked away. But I was shaken at some deep level by the realization I had begun to be habitually *unwhole*, or evil, if only for small periods of time. As distressing as that was, one must embrace the strength of that state of mind, or be torn apart by it. The problem is, one time is too many, which makes a thousand times not enough. I was getting dizzy from the heat, progressing into a worse physical state.

As we continued through the market, I began waiting for my physical collapse to happen at any moment. I couldn't really worry too much about the little girl, or the obscene reaction I had to her plight. I felt my whole body begin to move past heat-exhaustion, and begin to transition into heat-stroke. I had to choose between freaking out over the realization of the monster I seemed to have become, and my imminent collapse from the heat. Crazy thing is, I had never stopped drinking between breaths; even the Iraqi's were not stupid enough to walk around in the afternoon sun, and with all the gear we wore made walking that much harder. I decided at that moment, and not for the first time, that I was willing to die before I would quit. I was not going to die in this shit-hole. After another 30 minutes of patrol, lights began swimming in front of my face, I knew I was no longer any good to anyone, and if my Captain was attacked I would most likely be a liability at this moment. Just as I felt that my legs were totally gone we reached our HMMWV (High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, also called Humvee).

*Typical neighborhood in Sadr City*



Slightly shaking, I stood holding the mirror of the first vehicle like a drowning man holds a life-preserver, my Captain was already gone, discussing the mission with the other officers, and had never noticed my weakness. To notice my pain was to have to kick me out of front-line service, so we didn't talk much about personal weakness. One of the soldiers noticed my body shaking and asked me if I was okay. Standing still seemed to give me something to focus on besides all the heat related agonies, so without looking at him I said "no man, I'm totally fine, just have to really take a shit." Which was true, a symptom of heat stroke is diarrhea. I quietly took my place as gunner on the HMMWV's crew-serve M240, a larger type of weapon but similar to the one I had been carrying, and prepared for the immense suffering of my body that resulted from slowly regaining normal functions, while riding back to base. The mission wasn't over until my weapons were clean and I was walking toward the showers. I am eternally glad that I never let Captain Jones down on that mission; failure meant being ostracized from my military family, shamed and dishonored. I would have rather died than have failed my brothers. When I left the military he had my picture in his office and he flipped out on a new lieutenant who interrupted me while I was saying goodbye to him.

## **RPG**

It was as hot as the surface of Hell; we smelled like cooked chicken mixed with ammonia. We'd been sitting in our tanks for hours under the hot Iraqi sun. Driving our enemies before us, we'd pushed as far as they'd let us. Now we had to wait for the

infantry to catch-up, and that involved clearing houses, something we could do nothing about except to over-watch the surrounding area. So we waited, looking down an avenue in the middle of Sadr City, Baghdad. An avenue that stretched literally almost a mile, running finally into a large imposing looking building, which was hard to see clearly from so far away. Open-hatched, we were watching our immediate surroundings like hawks with weapons ready looking for anything that meant an attack. The urban jungle is a shitty place for a tank. Two women, covered in the traditional burqa body wrap, walked by my side of the tank, carrying groceries in bags on their heads.

It was then that the gunner (using the main-gun sights) casually informed us that two men at the large distant imposing building, had just stepped into view, and one was about to fire a rocket propelled grenade at us. It is stupid to fire an RPG at an M1A2 (sep) Abrams battle tank, but from beyond the weapon-system's effective range, and especially when you haven't even armed it, is very stupid. Although I suppose, relatively speaking, what would you do to defend the women and children in your neighborhood? The foolishly brave man fired. To his credit, it almost made it to the tank, but with a dramatic “poof” of smoke, the rocket ran out of fuel. Skipping off the ground it literally ripped the leg off one of the women carrying groceries. As the RPG was out of range, so was our 7.62mm co-ax machine gun, called an M240. Our main-gun (120mm) was out of the question at the moment, so the tank did nothing.

I was mesmerized by the injured lady. The arteries in her leg had temporarily closed, stopping any visible bleeding. With her hands raised, she called up to me in her strange language, plainly begging me to help her. In *my mind*, I immediately jumped off the tank, taking off my belt as I ran in order to secure it tightly at least two inches above

the wound. Using the water-proof pen in the breast-pocket of my nomex cover-alls I wrote the time, date, and a big capital “T” on her forehead, signifying “tourniquet.” Next, I “pat-tested” her to see if she was bleeding anywhere else. Theoretically, I suppose I might have even comforted her, telling her gentle lies about her condition until someone better at treating injuries of this nature would arrive to take-over.

I didn't realize that the Tank Commander's hand was on my shoulder, coldly comforting me, while gently holding me down. A slight convulsion, and her arteries opened-up again, pumping blood out from under her robe. With her eyes locked to mine, the pool of blood grew while she kept calling to me, until her voice faded, and her eyes glazed-over. She was clearly dead. As the TC and I sat there, wondering what and the hell to do next, an unarmed man walked out of a side street toward us, so we trained our weapons on him. Never looking directly at us, he scooped her up over his shoulder and walked back the way he had come from. Moments later my TC turned to me and asked: “you OK, Templer?” To which I replied: “I really don't give a fuck right now, Sergeant.”

### **The Little Patriot**

There are a lot of orphans in Iraq; we should know, America made thousands of them. I mostly regarded them as plant-life, skimming over each of their plights during my constant missions. It was better that way I think, they would stab you in the back and steal your shit the moment you showed any kindness. Yes they suffered, and in a large part, because of me and my brothers-in-arms actions, but what could I do besides watch the carnival of horror float by me? The realization of the futility of trying to subdue the Mahdi Militia inside of residential neighborhoods was bad enough to contemplate. I was

nice to some, and I paid others to beat the shit out of the ones that threw rocks at me. My heart was stone. In this occupational war, things got ugly. Kindness is twisted beyond all recognition in Iraq, it becomes something to fear. Something that in the name of all that is Just and Right should be, but never will. Humanity becomes unrecognizable and alien in its sudden repugnance.

My tank at the time was A34, as in “A” company, 3rd platoon, 4th tank (the platoon sergeant's). Our AO, or Area of Operations, was Sadr City, a slum of about 2 million people within the larger city of Baghdad, Iraq. Along the outskirts of Sadr City, we took over a compound to meet with local leaders, but it was really just a strike-base that allowed us rapid insertion into the nearby neighborhoods. We called the compound the DAC, or Development Assistance Committee, which sounded more in-line with something helpful. The DAC had ten foot brick walls surrounding a two-story building where we slept, ate, and organized between missions. A unit of ING, or Iraqi National Guard were stationed on the roof with an American soldier from our unit to control them (we rotated guard duty). We had to guard them since we couldn't trust any locals from Baghdad. This forced us to import Kurds, and they would shoot at anyone walking by, hating both Sunni and Shiite. Recently we had been withholding ammunition from them for shooting up a boy and his donkey a couple of days before. We would park our tanks in a line out in front of the stone wall facing an open field with two men on, and two men off. A crazy fact of our parking spot was that the Kurdish ING's would shoot right over our heads, and we didn't appreciate that at all. A stone-age, mud-hut village was on our left (Mortar Central), and a busy traffic circle (IED Central) to our right.

The next time we received a sustained mortar attack one of the tanks was hit in the rear turret external storage with a lot of oil and hydraulic fluid in it. It caught fire, but was not really in any danger, as that could burn for hours without seriously harming the tank's ability to kill people. It must have been funny to see a bunch of tankers chasing a burning tank around with fire extinguishers, while the crew, locked inside, is speeding away performing evasive maneuvers in the open field. After the attack we noticed that one of the mortar rounds had landed right next to the front left track of our tank. Apparently it never detonated, so from that day onward we used the mortar round as our parking spot.

We liked the helpful parking marker, using it for days, until our captain finally noticed it. He got really upset and told us to get rid of it. When we asked how, his reply was: "I don't give a shit, just make it gone!" As there was always little kids hanging around, I told the nearest eight or nine year old looking boy to come over to me. I held out five dollars and pointed at the mortar, then pointed far away. He took the five bucks and scooped up the mortar before running off into an alleyway.

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### *Iraqi Boys*

The next time we rolled in from mission, there he was, smiling away at me and our tank crew. As I walked by him, he gave me the American "thumbs-up" and I smiled and waved. Then a man walked up to him and kicked him full in the stomach as hard as I have ever kicked a man. The boy's blood drained out of his skin making him white as a ghost in an instant. He didn't cry out (not sure if he could), he just tried to crawl away, but the man kicked him again, really hard, this time in the ass, sending him flying. I could

do nothing, as there was no way of knowing if that boy belonged to that man in some way. If that was his father or uncle, and they felt it was necessary, they had every legal right in Iraq to kill him. I would actually get in trouble for stopping him, *of all the things I did that I could get in trouble for*. The child was as hard as any man I have ever met. If he is still alive he'd be about sixteen now. With the hate he's swimming in, I wonder what he's up to.

## **Itchy**

Life can be cruel; in Iraq, the lives that need mercy the most suffered the most exquisitely. I remember walking back from my tank towards the entrance to our DAC with our gunner, when some kids ran by us dragging something small that they had wrapped in binding-wire. They were kicking it and yanking on the wire when we noticed that it was alive. So we unkindly tossed the kids aside and unwrapped a small puppy. It had lost a lot of skin and was so full of worms it couldn't eat. We brought it inside the compound and tried to give it some water, but it could barely stand up. None of us thought the puppy would make it, and besides we were hungry ourselves, so we left it in the care of the general population of American soldiers. The Charley ("C") company's captain decided we needed to take the pup to the vet, so we rolled over to a veterinarian's

shop and made him de-worm and treat the little guy's injuries as best as he could. For at least a week we were all sure that he would die at any moment, as he sat shaking and itching himself in the middle of a tank company with two dragoon companies, constantly under mortar attack, rushing back and forth from mission to mission.

Itchy lived at our compound mingling with soldiers coming and going from missions in Sadr City for about two months. It was always nice to see something happy to have you back alive, being constantly surrounded by people that hated you. Eventually he was brought back to our barracks on Camp Cuervo, our main base of operations, a massive concrete walled compound with guard towers (manned by the cooks), with gates and a mall with a hospital. We had acquired the barracks of the formerly much feared Iraqi Republican Guard, famous for folding like lawn-chairs under American combined-arms strikes. Nice place when we actually got to see it. We seemed to like long stays at the DAC in those days. Once at our barracks Itchy ran the place, got himself a girlfriend and everything. He was the happiest dog you could ever meet, unless that is, you were not an American. If you were an Iraqi worker, or a Pakistani KBR (Kellogg, Brown, and Root) truck-driver, Itchy would attempt to bite the jugular out of your throat, literally. The little scamp (he quickly grew to three feet tall at his shoulder), almost killed a couple of workers. I had to snatch him off an Iraqi worker we brought in that I was assigned to guard, throwing Itchy against a wall (accidentally), he turned around wagging his tail smiling at me with pure love. I had to have a medic patch-up the terrified Iraqi. Charley Company Captain Smith ended up taking Itchy back to Texas with our unit when we left. Itchy now lives on a ranch just east of Copperas Cove, Texas, luckiest dog in Iraq.

## **IED**

I stared out my vision-block from the loader's hatch as we crawled slowly down the street. Too fast for any sort of warning, 70 tons of our tank is instantly married to the type of explosion with the offensive suddenness that makes one's life flash before their eyes, no matter how many times it is experienced. Inside the turret, life stood momentarily vacuum-like still, as the concussion swept over me, and in the next moment I could hear again. All I could hear was the gunner screaming to me that the coaxial machine-gun was jammed, interspersed with the Tank Commander shouting we'd lost all turret power. So I started screaming my own tune, along the lines of: "max elevated the fucking gun! Make sure you lock it Rodgers, don't fucking crush me!" Leaning over the breech-block was a very dangerous endeavor, as with a twist of the gunner's wrists he could lower the gun to the ground, and this action would lift the solid steel breech, crushing me to death between it and the turret roof. As I struggled to get the belt-fed 7.62mm rounds unstuck from their guide, I could hear the TC yelling that we were getting hit by RPG rounds. Luckily they had not penetrated our armor, yet. Another sudden flash of violence, and when I came to, I had been blown off the breech-block and onto the turret floor. Somehow the blast had restored turret power, and with a violent jerk the main-gun came to life. Thank God I had fallen off in the subsequent explosion, it had saved me from being crushed to death by the movement of the massive main-gun.

The TC then orders the driver to maneuver on the sidewalks as the road had obviously been thoroughly daisy-chained with many more IED bombs planted under the asphalt. Another sudden blast underneath us on the side-walk demonstrates there is



literally no surface left to drive on that isn't similarly mined, and we again lost turret power. It was almost too much for the human mind to cope with, one violating explosion after the next going off underneath us. But like a prize fighter who has just run out of wind, our enemies began swarming out of the nearby alleyways firing blindly in a desperate state of courage, born from having nothing left to lose. I flipped up my hatch, extending my arms upward to grab my crew-serve machine-gun without exposing my face to the incoming green tracer rounds. Depressing the butter-fly trigger I began sending my own red tracers rounds directly into the muzzle-flashes of the enemy, directing my weapon by peeking out from under it, and following my tracers into the targets. People began to fall under withering fire from several tank's crew-serve weapon systems. My adrenalin had been coursing through my veins for so long, it began to cause me physical pain, and the drain on my system, this being the third straight week of this happening every single day and night, caused me to be unable to sleep when I actually got down-time. My body felt badly abused, wronged repeatedly, and my mental state swung from unbridled homicidal rage, to suicidal depression, depending on the tempo of combat. To ponder this sad state of affairs was pointless; all I needed to do is get through the next couple of seconds, over and over again.

IEDs, or Improvised Explosive Devices, were made from old American made 155mm howitzer rounds given to Saddam decades earlier, the kind of rounds the artillery uses to hit targets 20 miles away. When the first wave of Americans rolled over the Iraqi army in 2003, it was so rapid that piles of 155mm rounds were left in the middle of the streets. The locals had no problem carting them away for later use. Since the streets were also livestock pathways and sewage canals, the insurgents had no problem digging up

some asphalt, planting a 155mm attached to a cell phone, making the entire thing look like just another shitty part of the street. They planted up to ten IED's per city block. They would then look for a marker, or make one, by tying a plastic bag to a street post or some random bush across from their bomb. This way the insurgent could sit two blocks away at an angle, peeking out of a window, with another cell phone on re-dial. He could line up the “marker” with the side of a vehicle as it rolled by, dialing the cell phone wired to the blasting cap of the artillery round, causing it to detonate.

### *Disabled Tank*

On missions we would roll our tanks over them getting hit hard. Getting hit by an IED while inside of the turret happens faster than the word “abrupt,” or “instantaneous” can adequately describe. No matter how hard the soldier, he never gets used to the sudden violence of an IED. Most times, we could handle a single 155mm, something that would turn an up-armored HMMWV into a burnt soda can. Ever resourceful, those persistent Iraqis would go back to the blast hole after we had left, and plant two of them. Two 155mm howitzer rounds would throw everyone around in the tank, very often blowing road wheels off (no big deal really, tanks are serious machines). However when those bastards went back and planted three 155mm howitzer rounds in the same hole, things could get very bad for us. Wheels would fly off, the track would break, and often the turret would separate from the hull of the tank, dead-lining the vehicle making it unfixable. The anger I felt when I would get hit was unbalancing. I would have killed anyone just to make that stop. It violated any sense of human decency, but that variety of IED, as violently horrific as they were, did not even come close to the worst kinds.

The enemy began planting them suspended in the air in order to harm at least the loaders and tanks commanders. They would strap them under bridges and over-passes. This is one of the reasons veterans get freaked out every time they drive under over-passes back home. Our tank had one detonate in a palm tree we happened to pass by. I was the loader, but for some reason after the explosion, although I had pock-

### *Improvised Explosive Device*

marks all around me and my M16 rifle was blown out of my hands, I never broke a nail. My tank commander was down, bleeding from the shoulder, so I quickly put a compound bandage on his wound, and told the driver to haul-ass back to base. We rolled our tank right up to the hospital doors where we used the built-in straps on his fire-retardant nomex cover-alls to somehow lift his 230 pound ass out of the turret. He ended up with three Purple Hearts.

The absolute worst IED was the garbage bomb variant. They didn't do any real damage to the vehicle or crew. They just rained trash that was so rotten, the plastic was blackened and brittle. It smelled like sour rotting death. The turret would smell like a carnal-house for days no matter how hard you tried to clean it. We would hang whole packets of air-fresheners throughout the turret, but even 20 of the strongest kind couldn't mask the smell. Going on missions for days at a time while living in that smell, was so absolutely terrible that I still dream of the smell. Whether the enemy knew it or not, they were the most demoralizing thing they could possibly do to us. We may pull out lawn chairs and laugh at people running for shelter during mortar attacks, or purposely roll over bombs planted in the road way, but we feared garbage bomb IED's.

## **Dahr, Amy, and I**

I imagine it's not often one finds themselves in a book, so when I found myself in a book written by American journalist Dahr Jamail, and forwarded by no less than Amy Goodman, host of *Democracy Now!* my jaw dropped. I have always respected Mrs. Goodman; her news channel has great significance in its honesty. I was floored that someone as insignificant as myself would end up in a book written about the Iraqi occupation. In Dahr's book, *Beyond The Green Zone: Dispatches From An Unembedded Journalist In Occupied Iraq*<sup>1</sup>, his good intentions of trying "to challenge the distortions of mainstream media reporting on the [Iraqi] occupation" (Jamail 108), may seem commendable and brave to most civilians who read it. Only a soldier can truly feel Dahr's hate towards them, we know what it is like to be hated. With the subtlety of Fox News, Dahr accuses the American military of all manner of heinous crimes, so outrageous that as someone who has participated in some of the darkest violence that took place in the very time and area he writes about, you'd think I might have heard or seen something. Does anyone think that an American soldier would cut the belly of a pregnant woman open? Or shoot hand-cuffed people face down in the dirt? I participated in many house raids; none ever involved looting and rape, but those are the type of accusations Dahr levels at the American people that served as soldiers in the Iraqi occupation. I can't give the inferences about Dahr's beliefs in the presumptuous way he seems to infer so much about me, but I can tell you what I remember about my experiences in and around our encounter.

We all knew it was a bad idea. Something about a 70 ton tank navigating a narrow

street, bustling with vehicle, and pedestrian traffic, that makes a tank seem particularly out of place. The machines we occupied were designed to kill, and it didn't matter to the tank who it killed. The exposed gears on the inside of the 30 ton turret will dismember you faster than you can scream in pain, never mind the deadly projectile fired from the main-gun. Still, here we were, in a crowded busy residential street, deep inside the notorious slums of Sadr City, home to a population of two million people, inside the larger capital city of Baghdad, Iraq, a crowded, disease ridden, impoverished place, where packs of feral dogs were known to attack and eat little children. Raw sewage ran and pooled down many of the streets helping to hide the multitude of Iraqi made and planted IEDs that were up to ten per block in places. From a compound deep within the slums, the son of the city's name-sake, the infamous Muqtada al-Sadr and his 10,000 man Mahdi Militia army, had declared war on America. This suited our tank company just fine, as war was all we knew how to do anyway. So we decided to open a police station in the center of the city, manned by a company of Iraqi Police commanded by a company of American Military Police, surrounded by my tank company. And so it was, that each night at exactly 5pm, the evening prayers would blare from loud speakers across the city, eerily singing drawn-out alien sounding Muslim prayers. As the singing died down it would always be replaced by crisp commands, punctuated with "Americans" throughout. The moment that the stern voice stopped, AK-47 and RPG fire would erupt from the alleyways surrounding us. It was a turkey-shoot, as ragged half-starved men and boys with two 30 round magazines for their shitty battle-rifles, would charge into our crew-serve heavy machine gun weapon-systems, inevitably getting torn to pieces.

I can't honestly remember the reason we were patrolling that day, it all becomes a

blur after a while, but there we were, in the middle of the day, surrounded by of a crowd of civilians who were glaring with a unified look of hate at us. I really couldn't blame them, I certainly wouldn't want a bunch Abrams tanks rolling around in my neighborhood. Hell, I didn't want to be here either, but seeing as we were the ones with the tanks, the people of Sadr City would just have to deal with it. My platoon had four tanks spaced out down a street a couple of blocks up from the police station. The crowd around the tank was getting close to us, making maneuvering at a crawl dangerous, if we rolled over someone we wouldn't even know it.

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### *Rough Neighborhood*

Somewhere down the street an AK-47 rattled off. The crowd of children around the tank seemed to suddenly grow. Very quickly a brick bounced off the turret roof, as the crowd of kids erupted into throwing bricks, panes of glass, bags of human fecal-matter, and anything else they could get their hands on. Our tank commander, a soon to be replaced 2nd lieutenant, was flustered and offered up charging the crowd of kids with the tank to scare them. None of us thought this was a good plan, as what would we do after that? Back up? If we backed up they won, which would only embolden them further. He ordered the driver to pull forward, and of course the crowd reeled back in horror, then he said “back up.” I tried to reason with him not to, but the driver backed up as ordered. The crowd erupted in a victory snarl that reverberated off the buildings down the narrow street. It rained debris down on us, and by the time we were relieved and had

rolled back to our strike-base, the tank had every vision-block broken out, temporarily dead-lining it from service. We were all struck at the use of little children by the parents of that neighborhood, who willingly put their own children in such danger. Luckily no kids were accidentally killed that day.

That evening, out in front of the strike-base, myself and another soldier were still cleaning off the tank and waiting on the delivery of all the vision blocks that were said to be arriving shortly, mission readiness comes first after all. The sun was starting to get low, but we still had a couple of hours before the commencement of the evening prayers, so as usual, we took care of the tank first so that we could get back into combat as quickly as possible. My fellow crewman was cleaning off the top of the turret when I noticed two Arabic men walking confidently up to us. I was standing on the ground with my M16 slung across my chest as the other soldier handed things down to me. Dahr identified himself as an American journalist and although he had a press-pass, I didn't trust him; his body language and tone seemed "off" somehow. A press-pass is not beneath the fanatical suicide bombers we had already seen in action. He looked us both over and decided to address my relatively unarmed peer atop the turret first, asking him who he was, what he thought about being here.

When Dahr asked me who I was, unlike the other soldier I did not feel he needed to know anything about me, not my rank or position, let alone what I knew or thought about our current situation. I coldly stated my first and last name, all the while wondering if I should just shoot him in the face, and how much trouble that might entail me getting into. His question about whether I knew who al-Sadr was, struck me as condescending, so I lied, saying I had no idea who the guy we had orders to shoot on sight was. His

question about Gaza and the Palestinian people's plight in the context of the current conflict here, seemed as though he was trying to provoke me into saying something stupidly treasonous, obviously thinking he was vastly more intelligent than me. The truth is, I was honestly still somewhat in shock from the combat I had already experienced up to that point, and was in a state of physical and mental survival-mode. I just didn't give a fuck about making those types of comparisons at that moment. So no, "I have no idea what you are talking about," was my general type of reply. Dahr and his friend were not very interested in walking into the strike-base behind us, I can't remember where he ended up going, but I'm pretty sure he didn't stick around too long.

In Dahr's book, he ends our conversation with a cryptic threat to me personally. In response to my statement that "the kids stone us during the day, and then the men attack us with guns at night" (117) Dahr writes, "no more little boys with rocks" (118). Dahr's underlying threat was that once we encountered the mighty Mahdi Militia later that night, we would see what true warriors can do to the evil invaders. First of all, in a similar fashion to what the American army did for me, supplying all the things I needed such as my tank's vision blocks, Dahr was completely dependent on the insurgent and local Iraqi people we fought every night. Without the logistics, security, and intelligence provided by his contacts within the insurgent forces, he'd have never gotten such a powerful story written. It is almost natural (if it wasn't so treasonous) for Dahr to side so heavily with the people providing him with an opportunity for such notoriety. Secondly, Dahr's threatening statement is funny in its hollowness, if he had stuck around to see the destruction we served to his "heroes" over the next several nights, he might not have written that. Mostly, this is just another example of the unabashed display of hate in



Dahr's writing showing how he really feels towards me and my fellow soldiers. Later, maybe that evening or one of the next few nights, we annihilated so many of Dahr's freedom fighting parents in a 12 hour period (126 confirmed) that we received the second Valorous Unit Award for 2-8 Stallions since Vietnam. Confirmed means we have identified the body definitively as an armed opponent that we have killed; sorry Dahr, no civilians. I'm glad there were no "little boys" out that night Dahr; I never wanted to shoot any kids, but if you thought that somehow their AK-47 wielding parents would avenge themselves by slaughtering the evil Americans, whom I might add are your own people, the fact that in 12 months 2-8 Stallions never lost a single man demands mention. Not something Dahr writes about when home in Anchorage Alaska, as he enjoys the freedom of kicking back in the comfort of the culture he so cleverly denounces.

<sup>1</sup>Jamail, Dahr. *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*. Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2007.

## **Asphalt Lumberjacks**

The M1A2 Abrams was the best the military could sustainably offer to American troops during the early 2000s, it had amazing targeting systems that not only took the darkness away from the enemy, it made darkness our best friend. With the 1500 horsepower jet engine, it could creep up on a donkey as close as 50 meters before the animal would feel or hear it. Excluding specific missions, often groups of tanks would go out to problematic areas to sit in silent invisible ambush; waiting for bad people that thought no one knew what they were about, to do something bad. It is difficult to remember

something much more than that about this specific night. Although those details become blurred, the suffering and death seems persistently focused. My tank platoon, along with several other tanks from another platoon, were sitting with engines running, looking down a long straight series of blocks. The urban design of Sadr City was very much a straight-line grid-pattern, and this enabled us to see in total darkness a very significant distance with our computerized thermal-imaging (white hot/dark hot) targeting systems built into the tank. We could hit the enemy without them even hearing us shoot our co-ax machinegun, while simultaneously listening to Metallica through the Bose gel headphones built into our Kevlar helmets.

### *Thermal imaging*

One of the tanks spotted three men walking onto the street a fair distance off, approximately 1500 meters away. Although the three men thought they were in total darkness, their heat signatures on white-hot lit them up like human glow-sticks. Apparently everyone was on missions that night, as each one of the guys walking out onto the street had a specific tool, for a specific task. The first fellow carried a shovel; he was pointing and talking to the other two, maybe he was the guy in charge. The second guy had a 155mm howitzer round, a very large and heavy round weighing about 100 pounds. The last guys had a pick-axe over his shoulder like some kind of asphalt lumberjack. Assholes like these guys were the cause of our new severely injured, multiple amputee, with massive burns category of disabled vets now returning from modern wars who survived such horrific injuries only because of modern medical technology. In previous wars soldiers with such massive trauma would have simply

succumbed to their injuries. Every vehicle below a tank would be in grave danger if an explosive of that force went off under them.

Several minutes passed as the guy with the shovel told the guy with the pick-axe to pick through the soft asphalt. Although we had every right to shoot them all at that moment not a shot was fired. An argument was happening between the different tanks with all the platoons involved over which tanks got to actually shoot them. I suppose this might have been the result of such a long exposure to the constant killing, misery and horror happening all around us every time we left the gates of our Camp, maybe we'd become numb to a brutal eccentricity, a misguided paradigm that had hijacked our everyday lives. A devil of self-evidence, whose irrefutable logic was constantly presented to you every time you went on mission, convincing you beyond any reasonable doubt of the complete worthlessness of human life. Finally one of the tanks let out a very short burst of maybe 5 or so rounds from the co-ax machine gun into the pitch black silence. The weapon system, programmed into the computer of the tank allowed for distance to target, weight and velocity of round, immediate wind around the tank, and the humidity of the air as well. Although the pick-axe guy was almost at maximum effective range for the heavy M240 machine gun, the rounds landed right in the pick-axe guy's chest.

All his two companions saw was the pick-axe fall to the ground closely followed by the corpse who was holding it. We all busted out laughing when the shovel man began what looked like scolding the dead guy for being lazy, waving his hands at the guy laying down on the job in the middle of the road. Another short burst brought the howitzer round carrier down. As the round he carried rolled away from his dead hands, the shovel man had seen enough to know he should run as fast as his dumb-ass could go, but we'd

seen this many times before and although he probably had no idea, he had at least four fully armed battle tanks locked on to him, so he was pretty much preordained to die. He was laid to rest with his friends.

### *Abrams main gun damage*

As we rolled up to the howitzer round and the three corpses, it was decided to leave the bodies there, and detonate the ordinance, thereby preventing it from being used again by some other “late night road crew.” One of the tanks stayed back to destroy it as we rolled past to a safe distance. Once they were clear the co-ax machine gun of the lone tank opened up on the howitzer round. Then they shot it up again, and again, and again. The damn rounds were bullet-proof! In fact, they were originally made in America, given to Saddam for his war with Iran. The even larger 50 caliber machine gun mounted on the cupola of the commander’s hatch might have exposed the operator to shrapnel upon explosion so it was decided to shoot it with a 120mm main gun round. The tank backed off to what it thought was an acceptable distance, while further past we all watched with anticipation of getting to witness a particularly big explosion. The main gun fired, hitting the 155mm howitzer with a 120mm IMPAT round, an older version of the Abrams high explosive round. The explosion rocked the tanks, echoing off the walls of the buildings. The two rounds were so destructive in their detonation that the brick building next to them was demolished as well. Good battles are not even fights, the Iraqi fighters that constantly attacked us were at first extremely unbalanced by the sheer certainty of the massive casualties they would sustain in direct attack against the Abrams. The fact they couldn’t hear or see us was so unsettling they tried all manner of ways to defeat our

tanks; everything from wrapping aluminum plumbing tape around their RPGs so as to defeat our “force-field,” to eventually setting rows of tires on fire in front of them while they maneuvered into place in order to “flood” our thermal imaging systems. This actually worked quite well until our naked eyes, with our training and equipment went up against the Iraqi’s naked eyes, equipment, and training; that usually turned out the same way for them in the end anyway.

### **Dead Right There**

Towards the end of our rotation, we performed a series of coordinated strikes at targets within Sadr City in order to further degrade the Mahdi Militia of its ability to cause us trouble. We would go in at night and attack different locations, and they would either fold or fight. Often they would fight, with the contact and its effects lasting days and nights in a row. By this time most of us were battle hardened to the point of being a slight touch pessimistically reckless; we all knew the tanks capabilities within the urban environment, and knew it was almost unstoppable if used correctly. Myself and the majority of my fellow soldiers had settled into a routine of back to back missions interspersed with different duties back on Camp Cuervo; from tower guard (relieving the cooks) to guarding the local Iraqi restaurant laborers within the base who worked at a place called the Blue Glass Restaurant, named for the large blue tinted windows on three of the four walls. Somehow the satellite channels wired into the place were completely unrestricted. As the round in the chamber of my pistol was my authority, if the local Iraqi workers were good that day, I would hand them the remote and sit back in the corner. The porn was not polite to describe, but they would all crowd around the screen, slack

jawed and eyes wide open. They never got crazy or anything, nor would I recommend it while I was guarding you, but hey they're pretty much fucked anyway, so how much harm could it have done? There is some messed-up shit on late-night satellite channels in Iraq.

Out in sector on mission, often times our movements would unexpectedly take several days; in which case, we would usually take over a walled compound of some sort to bed-down for the night. This particular night was stifling hot, it was not quite 3am. My tank company was part of a group that had been fighting the Mahdi Militia since the evening before. We were all dead tired, beyond tired. My adrenalin had spiked so many times that I was worn thin, past the point of caring anymore. A civilian in a similar situation would have an overwhelming desire to just lay down and quit. Except on top of that exhaustion, people are still actively trying to kill you. Only the most basic necessities caught my attention. Communication consisted of either one or two words, or long streams of curses with information sandwiched in between. As I sat in the turret open-hatched with a smoke burning in my lips holding an 80 pound HEAT (high explosive anti-tank) round in my lap, I was told to put it back in the ammo rack (the honeycomb) and get up on my M240 machine gun, as we were leaving the immediate area for a walled compound close by to bed down for what was left of the night. We had found a school that could accommodate the eight tanks and 32 crewmen. It was about a football field in size with a grass soccer field at one end with a basketball court in front of a two story building at the other end. We parked the tanks in a row and dismounted soldiers from each tank to help set up the school. Although I was to stay back on the tank, I still had to carry some supplies inside. It was so hot out and I'd been sweating for so long, my skin

began to feel foreign and abrasive. Inside the school, it was even hotter, the floors all had cheap gym mats everywhere that were crawling with nasty looking beetles. They had hung up green chem-lights in all the rooms and corridors that added to the hellishness of the heat and the bugs. I was not impressed with our evening accommodations at all.

Walking back outside, I crawled up onto the front slope of the tank hull and laid down on my back. As I tore the Velcro OTV body armor flap open on my chest, a cool breeze picked up. I wasn't sure if I'd ever felt a cool breeze in Iraq ever! Besides smelling like burnt death, it was amazingly refreshing. It felt good to have the armor plates off my chest for a moment. I looked up into the night sky and concluded, hell yeah I'll take guard duty out here tonight. A few moments passed before the first mortar round hit. A huge explosion on the far side of the wall, opposite me, on the far end of the soccer field, maybe 400 meters away. I kind of leaned my head to the side and watched some of the men start to move with a purpose. But it was so hot, and the breeze was still cooling me down. The next mortar hit 20 meters inside the soccer field. Obviously this mortar crew had a spotter on a cell phone who was "walking" the rounds into the row of tanks, where I currently was just trying to fucking relax for the first time in a long time! The next mortar hit at the far end of the basketball courts, I felt the concussion of air move past me; not a cool breeze, but the fetid wind of dust and detonated explosive destruction I knew so well. As the span of time between mortars began again, I thought to myself "fuck it, hit me right in the lips," I couldn't stand this nasty heat any longer anyway. I closed my eyes and tried to relax for a second. A loud, violent explosion ripped me out of my rest as the next mortar detonated on the back-side of the tank. Besides the noise I was perfectly protected on the front slope, but that didn't stop my first chain-of-command

from chewing my ass back into the hot, nasty, bug ridden school with the rest of the chumps. Got no rest that night either.

The next morning, we had already been up for hours. We were rolling to a parking-lot where we were to meet up with the rest of the Stallions task-force to plan our next move against the insurgents. It was a grand gathering of 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry armor, in the middle Dragoons in (somewhat) up-armored HMMWVs, Engineers in M113s, along with Iraqi National Guard (ING) troops in Toyota ¼ ton pick-up trucks with M60 machineguns on bi-pods scraping up the cab roof. HEMTTs (Heavy expanded mobility tactical trucks) with massive cylinder-fuel tanks and our M1A2 Abrams tanks surrounded the gathering. The guy peeking out his window at all the Americans gathered directly around his C-4 ball-bearing shape charged IED must have almost wet himself in joyous celebration.

As we looked into the tightly packed crowd of Task Force Stallions, we watched as all the command elements dismounted their vehicles along with their subordinates, we saw friends of ours from Charlie and Bravo Company that we hadn't seen in a while. They were joking and slapping each other on the backs. In an instant, a terrific explosion hid the entire scene from view as we were rocked back in our tank hatches. No orders were given, and none were needed. All the tank loaders and a few tank commanders instantly dismounted with weapons and first aid ready charging into the cloud of settling dust. As I was a loader at the time, I was one of the soldiers who found themselves without a single American casualty to treat, but there was one ING pick-up truck a few Iraqi soldiers began to wail around while embracing each other or slapping the hood of the truck while crying. Naturally we walked over to get a better look. At first, it seemed



like the guys were mourning over the wrong truck; the vehicle looked fine, the guys seemed ok too; no shredded carnage, no visible blood. The guys sitting in the back had uniforms on with unstrapped helmets still sitting on their heads. As I got right up on it, I noticed that all the Iraqis in the vehicle were slumped over, driver, passenger and three dudes in the back. Amazingly, the whole truck had little holes through it, everywhere, there where clean little ball-bearing sized holes, through the truck and through the people. The ball-bearings were propelled with so much velocity that there were wounds that started in the ass and left through the helmet without knocking it off the soldiers head. If the jerk that detonated that under us ever reads this story, I want him to know that no Americans were seriously injured at all, just those five dudes in the truck were dead right where they were sitting.

A report came to us that a red car was seen speeding away from the area (not surprising really, I'd speed away too), and as we were on the outside of the explosion radius and were fine, we rushed back to our tanks and hauled ass after the bastard to try and get some retribution. Not for the dead Iraqis I suppose, we really didn't give a shit about them. Many-a-times during night patrol, along the different routes we were responsible for, we would see them through our thermal-imaging targeting systems way before we got close enough for them to have any idea we were there. We'd notice they were all kicking-back breathing with steady rhythm, they'd all be sleeping! We'd creep by to let them get their rest. In the morning, more times than once, I would be *shocked* to hear about how most of them were slaughtered in an ambush that caught them off guard. I suppose we just wanted to hurt the people that kept trying to kill us at the most basic level, nothing more. And wouldn't you know it, a red car appeared in the distance,

speeding away down a side street right at that moment. I have no idea what crappy model of worthless car the guy had, but we had a 1500 horsepower jet engine that could propel our 70 ton tank at 55mph. We simply cut across the median and through an empty lot, cutting the guy off. The only reason why he lived was that fact he immediately stopped and put both his hands out of the window.

My tank commander told me to dismount and search him and the vehicle. This was extremely dangerous; if it was a Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) and detonated, I would be turned into burnt stew and scattered across this shit stained street. I hopped down off the turret-roof onto the front-slope of the tank. I became a mini-cloud of dust as I was still covered with the debris from the previous explosion. I turned back and looked up at my TC and asked, "You got me sir?" He pointed the chambered M2 50 caliber machinegun mounted on his commanders-cupola over my head at the guy and his car and said "any funny shit hit the deck and I'll waste him Templer." The problem with that particular situation, is the 50 caliber round is bigger than my thumb, merely clipping you can dismember and kill you. That firing over my head was not the best image, but I suppose I felt as good as I could, given the present circumstances. I walked up to the window of the car peering into the inside as I approached. At the driver's window, a man was looking up at me with a forced smile on his face, desperately trying to preserve some dignity. Looking over his shoulder into the back seat I saw a bunch of boxes all stacked up, big enough for something unpleasant. I unkindly poked him in the forehead with my M16 rifle as my finger wrapped around the trigger and told him to get out of the vehicle, get onto his knees, put his hands on his head, and turn his head to the left. As I counted down for the moment of the surprise I get

each time I fire my weapon, I was fully aware he had no idea what I had just told him in my low hateful voice; it was then he did the most amazing thing. He got out of his car, got on his knees, put his hands on his head, and turned his head to the left while babbling in Arabic. Well shit, I couldn't shoot the guy then! Turned out he just had the nastiest knock-off bottles of perfume I've ever smelt in all those boxes. Hope he's still slinging cheap perfume somewhere in Baghdad.

### **Little American Flags**

Things started to fall apart for many of us at around halfway through our deployment. The things we were doing out in sector each night started to catch up with all of us. It was like there was some kind of invisible average limit to unwholesomeness the ethically enculturated brains of American men could take. The terrible things we did every now and then could be glossed-over, in a way, by reaching out as much as possible to the people that loved us. They would tell you how much you meant to them and how much they missed you, even though they had no idea you had just watched a bunch of little kids get shot up that had decided to play war in a real war, or that you had just seen IEDs detonate in crowds of civilians; somebody out there loved you, so it couldn't be that bad right? As long as that person or people loved you, it allowed you to, a degree, put the unwholesomeness of the occupational war you were participating in deep down inside, at least enough to continue functioning. It wasn't the perfect solution, it was the only solution; if you're drowning, and it floats, you grab on to it. If you stopped to think about the bigger picture, it made absolutely so little sense you'd end up tearing yourself apart inside, so you walked around feeling hollow, filled with evil little lies. Calling the

destruction we wrought many a night *justified* only made sense on the most basic level, that of killing those who were trying to kill you. But let's be real with each other: the justification ended a little further down the thought process when one became aware of the pointless terror and oppression we inflicted upon people, the majority of whom we were also well aware did not deserve it. Many soldiers may argue differently; they may have seen a very different war, or a mild enough one to not question the lie, but I doubt any of them would believe a five year old girl should starve to death, or a little boy holding onto a post on a roof-top should be cut in half with heavy machine gun fire, or a single American soldier should die for no better reasons than Chevron's bottom line. My world was full of slap you in the face, blaring contradictions. I don't know how many times I've gotten into arguments with other veterans that were never combat arms frontline soldiers. When they hear my dark views they get all indignant saying stupid shit like: "we were there to help the Iraqis" or even better, "those people are better off now." It's like they have never even turned on any news besides American vertically integrated corporate media. I personally did not make a single Iraqi "better off." My attempts at kindness were never intended to be kind. I have spoken with many veteran soldiers of the Iraq occupation, more often than not it's soldier's with roles such as the medics (who truly helped everyone), or some supply guy that fell in love with the under-developed 12 year old outside of the gate he was guarding that get all upset when I mention the scale of the man-made disaster we inflicted upon the Iraqi people. Many combat soldiers around me, including myself, quietly and invisibly broke down and continue to be broken in our own way. The weight of the *manner* of killing was just too much, too dirty, too unjust. It never affected our mission readiness, we were far too disciplined for that, but we knew,

our loved ones knew, something in our reasoning had taken an abrupt left turn into a world of extraordinary rationalization. You don't see anything from the paradigm you're used to. When whole families are going up in flames around you, your wife or girlfriends problems seem pretty insignificant.

When it was my time to break, it was after several days and nights of constant fighting, conducting a particularly terrible mission where kids died. The blood, dust and sweat of that horror was still on me when I dismounted my tank and began hauling every weapon system that could be carried back to my room, one by one stacking them against the wall to await cleaning. I would split weapon-cleaning duty up with my tank driver and roommate, a 120 pound violent little guy from Tennessee. For his privacy's sake (and just to piss him off) we'll call him Specialist Wilber. I was not in a good mental state, and neither was Wilber. Spending so much time together (missions and down time) we had developed some disturbing habits in our forced coexistence. Often, while sitting on opposite sides of the room, doing our own separate activities, we'd catch each other glancing at one another; in an instant, we'd both draw loaded 9mm pistols on each other, screaming "what the fuck are you looking at!" We'd seriously have to talk each other down. How close we came to pulling the trigger on each other is disturbing to think about. But, under it all, we had a lot of love for each other when the chips were all down. After we both knocked out the weapon cleaning, neither of us had slept in three days, and although we both had dark black rings under our eyes, neither of us could sleep. Wilber mumbled that he was going to take a shower and shuffled out of the room. All I could think about was reading an email from my then wife about how awesome I was, and how much she loved me. Maybe I could actually go to sleep for a few hours. My nerves were

frayed from lack of sleep; I was jumpy and seeing little tracers out of the corner of my eyes. My body needed sleep so badly, but my internal engine was still red-lining in my mind. My captain had even noticed the change in my demeanor and within a few days would call me to his room and tell me I had a choice between three days at the Green Zone with the First Sergeant, or a psychological evaluation that we both knew I would fail. I was a very good soldier, so obviously I would choose the Green Zone.

As I entered the camp's Internet center and waited in line to use a computer, for some inexplicable reason I started to cry, not blubbing, just tears. I pretended I was yawning, quickly wiping them away shaking my head in wonder. My eyes lit up when I saw I had an email from my wife, it was a long one too. I am positive no one was more surprised than me to get the email I received. At least it wasn't the typical sordid "I'm cheating on you" crap, she was not that type. Although, she was the type to come out with the "I love you, but I'm not in love with you" sort of thing. I was in shock. I knew she had no idea how much I needed her at that very moment, but I couldn't face all the bad things I saw and did out on mission; I needed the love to counter-balance it all. It was the kids really, their senseless deaths disturbed me on such a deep level that I will never be able to breathe and read this story aloud. But do not sympathize with me; my internal turmoil does not deserve your pity. The emotional survival strategy I had adopted, while allowing me to deal with children dying, required me to let go of the most fundamental of human instincts. To be okay with harming anything, including children, one has to on some level hate what one is harming. I had developed a ferocious hatred for Iraqi children, justifying their petty thefts and broken insults into open hunting season on all of them. Of course somewhere deep down inside I knew very well how wrong this was,

which was exactly what was tearing me apart inside; my soon to be ex-wife's "go fuck yourself" letter was just the cherry on the fecal-matter cake. Without the invisible wall of the out of context unconditional love of my wife, I began to find myself repugnant, this beginning intensely the moment I walked out of the Internet café. I was so tired when I stumbled into my room. My roommate still in the shower, and I collapsed into my foldout lawn chair. I drew my 9mm pistol out, racked a round, put my finger on the trigger, and pointed it at my head. In my sleep deprived delirium, the slight easing of pressure off of my neck as my head rested on the barrel, put me instantly into a deep sleep. I awoke with Wilber gently pulling the pistol away from my temple. Snapping instantly awake all I could blurt out was "don't tell anyone about this!" He never said a word to me or anyone about it again; I suppose he knew it was so out of character for me that we could just chalk it up to a momentary lapse in judgment due to extreme lack of sleep. But I was forever changed by the trauma that resulted in that experience. I started volunteering for every mission. Be it foot-patrol, HUMVVEE, or tank, I didn't give a fuck about dying and I would unflinchingly engage the enemy at each opportunity; my TC had to yank me down into the hatch more than once saying, "I ain't writing that letter home to your wife Templer, keep your head down!" To which I would often reply, "I can't kill them if I can't see them Sargent." However, I did end up spending three relaxing days bonding with the First Sargent in the Green Zone, which was much better than a failed psychological evaluation.

I guess in retrospect, I may have gotten more withdrawn and quiet as my 12-month deployment went along. After the email from my wife it was like fighting a two-front war within yourself, which is untenable. Still, I never could emotionally break; all

the male childhood and adolescent time training to not show emotion paid off I suppose. Plus, it's hard to blame anyone but yourself for the shitty side of the things one has personally done. I felt like I had lost everything. I know I had lost the ability to honestly love, but not the ability to keep it from causing me hurt through a deep sense of shame. I couldn't see a future for me, beyond commencing ETS (Enlisted Termination of Service) out-processing of the military. I didn't even want to reenlist; even though I was proud of being able to share such an awesome experience with such outstanding men, in the end, it was all for some multinational corporations. Such bullshit. No Iraqi received any "freedom" from Operation Iraqi Freedom, except for maybe Itchy, a freedom that particular *canine* paid dearly for. Without a doubt many an Iraqi still suffers to this day because of the American led occupation. This all only made me more hateful, as only participants in atrocities tend to get. I must have outwardly been showing this, although I sure didn't know it at the time. The hate kept me nice and warm inside, deep down I now *knew* what I was capable of, and it was so much more than what I had always been led to believe. I felt utterly worthless, and this made me invincible. I could calmly face death and kill, and I hated myself; which is a frightening combination for someone getting reinserted back into American civilian society.

One of my closest friends, and the one that organized and provided all the pictures (I'd lost mine) wanted me to use his real name after I told him about this memoir writing endeavor of mine. As a precaution (and not a very good one) I've decided to call him Harley. Where Harley would crack jokes trying to make himself and everyone around him feel better as a way of dealing with the many dark-sides of our combat experience, I quietly imploded. When I saw something funny, it was not at all funny to anyone, not



even to my fellow soldiers. My sense of humor was twisted beyond all normal recognition. Having nothing left to lose does not a good paradigm make. As we finally boarded the civilian airliner in Kuwait and were about to take flight, for some reason with a smile on my face I thought it would be funny to tell the guy sitting next to me (one of our mechanics) that I thought we might crash. It was obviously not funny to him as he insisted on sitting next to someone else. It's shit like that I guess, but technically anyone's chances of survival in a plane past 3 feet off the ground plummet, literally. Might as well joke about it right? Wrong. Not at all funny. I didn't want to be touched, I had no desire for any conversation, and God help you if I felt threatened. The civilian world looked pretty grim to me.

One of the stops on our 20 plus hour flight was Newfoundland, Canada. When we arrived the sky was cold and cloudy, but at least not oppressively hot and barren like the Iraqi sky. Everyone rushed to get a cell phone from the little airport store and buy minutes to call home. For some reason beyond my recollection, I unconsciously wandered over to the kiddy section; a little squared off area of cushioned benches with some toys in it. Without a conscious thought, I sat down on one of the benches and started staring at the kids. This must have looked really creepy, as I had forgotten how to appropriately look at children as anything much more than a target. I just sat there and stared at them laughing and playing, fascinated by something I was too tired to realize. Until that is, I noticed the parents looking very concerned in my direction. I looked around at what it could be that would make them look like that, and realized it was me that was causing all the concern. A few visible tears once again crossed my cheeks when I realized my fascination with these particular kids was wrapped up in all the ways in

which they were so different from Iraqi kids to me. These kids were well fed, happy, secure, and most interestingly, I didn't want to kill them. I have no idea what those parents thought, watching me wipe the tears away as I quietly apologized to whoever would listen and went somewhere else until we re-boarded the plane.

### *Templer and Harley departing Iraq*

On arrival to the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, there were lines of old American veterans with their families, from World War 2 era to the first Gulf War, lined up to greet us with hugs and gifts waving little American flags. I felt hostile towards them, like their kindness was somehow because I was such a good liar. I couldn't appreciate the gravity of what they were doing, trying to give us the welcome home they never got, I didn't want to be touched by strangers so I stayed in the middle of the group. Once back at Gray Airfield on Fort Hood, there was a 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry band playing and busses lined up to take us to the parade field where the families of all 2/8 Stallions awaited. A soldier we knew took our weapons, which was a very stressful thing for myself and I think for many of my fellow soldiers. One of the first things many of us did was go to the nearest gun store and rearm ourselves. For Fort Hood soldiers it was Guns Galore in the small city of Killeen, right outside the gates of Fort Hood. Thankfully my buddy Harley had the fore-sense to have a friend of ours whose husband was still overseas pick us up with her little baby. I was horrified when Harley jokingly blamed me for the baby suddenly starting to cry. I still wonder why Harley and so many other people helped me when I was unable to even appreciate it. We had two weeks of half day duty, then 30 days block leave home.

Before I left back to Calgary Alberta, Canada to see my wife for my 30-day block leave, I must have been showing some signs of stress. I didn't think I was, I thought I had it all contained deep down inside, but some outward expression must have been showing as I started to have a particular disturbing repetitive heart-to-heart talk with each one of my immediate chain-of-command. It started with my first-line (the rank immediately in charge of me), he took me aside and said: "Templer, when you go home to see your wife, don't fucking kill her, okay?" Of course I replied that I loved my wife and would never kill her. He gave me a closer look and said, "Okay buddy. Make sure you don't." I walked away shaking my head, and when I mentioned it to Harley he must have heard talk already, brushing it away as no big deal. The next day my Platoon Sergeant took me to the side and said, "Hey Templer, you're going home to see your wife right?" When I began to say I was, he interjected saying "Well don't kill her, alright?" In a stunned calm I assured him I would never kill her. I thought how strange it was that these people that know me so well would ever think I could be capable of killing my wife. A few days before leave, with my plane ticket bought, I was called into my Captain's office. As I stood before him, wondering what I was in trouble for, he asked me how my wife was doing. "Fine, I guess Sir" was my reply. "Well don't fucking kill her Templer, that wouldn't be good" he said. "Sir, I swear I won't kill her; I know that is not good." Unconvinced he said, "Well okay, make sure you don't." My First Sergeant, an overgrown Aztec warrior, was the next one. With a concerned arm around me he said "Templer you love your wife right?" Trying my best to maintain good military mannerism while quietly freaking out, I calmly said "Roger that First Sergeant, I do love her." Looking me right in the eye he asked, "You wouldn't kill her would you?" Looking

straight back into his eyes I held, “No First Sargent, I love my wife.” Sadly shaking his head in obvious disbelief he said “Okay Templer, make sure you don’t.” At this point I couldn’t ignore that I was missing something everyone else could plainly see. In the very least, I was seen to have become someone that was different then the person I was before. Still, it was really weird to have people constantly talking to me about not killing my wife. The cherry on the cake was the Second Platoon, Platoon Sargent. For some reason he couldn’t talk without saying goddamnit or motherfucker every other word. He walked up to me and said “Templer goddamnit, come here goddamnit. Look motherfucker, when you go home don’t kill your goddamn wife, ok motherfucker?” I was floored that this was still a *thing*, assuring him that I wouldn’t he said, “Whatever motherfucker” looking very seriously at me he then said “but if you do, make sure the *whole world feels your motherfucking pain*.” Years later, I see what he was trying to tell me, and no, it was not the mass shooting spree we both at first thought. All of us involved with the occupation’s enforcement felt the same pain, for the same unwholesome reasons; poisoned by our participation, we were the select few to sacrifice so much, for the worst reasons. This we did flawlessly together, disciplined and deadly, we now *knew* the truth, and it burnt each and every one of us forever. I am endlessly proud to have stood next to the men in my unit through our 12 month deployment to Baghdad, Iraq in March 2004 to March 2005. Roger that Sargent, I will do my best, through my writing, to make the whole world feel *our* pain. May understanding flow from it.

*Templer with captured Sterling(?) submachine gun and RPGs*

## **Glossary of terms**

In describing the different stories, readers will encounter many military terms. Below is a brief description of certain terms the reader may find confusing. Please feel free to research the terms independently for further clarification.

19K is the acronym that designates the MOS, or Military Occupation Specialty. As in, 11B is Infantry, 19D is a Scout, and so on.

The M1 Abrams is the main battle tank of the United States Military. It weighs 70

tons, and has a German designed 120mm main gun called a smooth bore Rhine Metal, being a smooth bore as opposed to rifled, the main gun on an Abrams can fire a large variety of 120mm rounds. A 1500 horse power Cobra helicopter jet engine gives it a top speed of about 55mph. It also has several crew-serve heavy machine guns, as well as a coaxial machine gun married to the 120mm main gun's digitally enhanced thermal targeting system. This is the most deadly man-made thing to roll upon the earth's surface.

The Colt M-4 carbine rifle weighs 6.36 pounds, and fires the standard NATO 5.56 mm ammunition, the same as the iconic M-16. It is a smaller, more compact version of the M-16 rifle.

Military designated M-249 is an open-bolt, gas operated machine-gun, made to suppress the enemy by spitting out 200 rounds in a few seconds. Although belt-fed, it uses the same 5.56mm ammunition as the M-4 and the M-16, it is just bigger, and has a much higher rate of fire. It will make you put your head down.

Called the “pig” partly for its large size, the M-240 is considered a heavy machine-gun, firing 950 rounds per minute of big 7.62mm ammunition. Its maximum effective range is 2,800 feet. If Satan peeked his head out of hell, I could make him wish he never left home with this gun. My personal favorite weapon-system.

IED (Improvised Explosive Device). Any bomb that is created from existing explosives used in gorilla-type warfare to harm, kill, and demoralize the recipients.

