

Iraq – From the Eyes of an RNR Wren Officer

The telephone call asking if I could mobilise for Iraq came in mid April 2006. I was to take a job out of my branch, which until now had only been filled by the Regular Services, and I was to relieve an RAF officer. The job - the UK's senior military media officer in Baghdad. The pressure was definitely on.

Geography told me I was miles from the sea. I felt it in my bones - another crocodile job - in at the swampy deep end. Looking back, I had absolutely no idea how many crocodiles I'd confront.

Getting prepared. Within the space of a few weeks I had to extricate myself from my job with the courts, handover the RNR employer Support job, do a week's media course, and complete 3 weeks of predeployment training which was understandably land/soldier focused; for example I did vehicle ambush drills. Throughout my entire RNR service I'd never had a requirement to handle a weapon - now I was being expected to master a pistol and an SA80 semi automatic rifle, in double-quick time. I don't mind admitting I found the entire experience extremely difficult. I'd never seen so much kit - thank goodness Frank, my husband, was there to offer advice, keep carrying it into the house, and assist with the last minute preparations.

I had to make personal adjustments too. Frank had just retired, and I'm sure he'd envisaged a quiet holiday, rather than me preparing for duties in Iraq. As we said our farewells on a Sunday morning at Brize Norton neither of us was under any illusions as to what I was getting involved in.

Environment I was going to. Iraq was taking its first faltering steps in democracy. Nouri al Maliki had been Prime Minister for 3 months, but was struggling with resistance to his fledgling government. Insurgency was rife, particularly in the seat of government capital. US Forces who had responsibility for Baghdad were suffering terrible losses, and I arrived as sectarian violence was reaching a crescendo.

In that July alone 500 people were killed. A typical day in Baghdad was:

- Suicide bomber kills 38 and wounds a further 108
- 15 bodies found in various parts of the City - all shot in head and chest, bearing signs of torture
- 12 unidentified bodies located in the River Tigris, blindfolded, shot and tortured
- Highway patrol finds 3 heads displayed outside a petrol station
- Attack on restaurant leaves 6 dead & 3 wounded
- US forces attacked on roadside patrol - 2 killed & further 2 lost when helicopter shot down
- 9 Iraqi Police killed when attending an incident

This was Baghdad.

Getting there. My journey to Iraq was very hot, tiring and extended - I eventually got there late Thursday after 5 days of travel, thus reducing my handover to less than 2 days.

Iraq has 18 provinces (counties), 4 of which, in the south, the UK had been assigned responsibility for (Basra, Maysan, Dni Qar and Al Muthanna). There were 7,000 Brits attached to Basra, working mainly with Italians, Japanese, Australians and Danes. A further 200 Brits were based in, and around Baghdad. I was one of those. My boss the most senior Brit officer in Iraq (Vice Admiral Equivalent) was 2IC to all the Coalition troops in Iraq and he too was based in Baghdad .

My Puma helo flight into the International/Fortified Green Zone of Baghdad gave me a bird's eye view of my new home. Ahead I could see Saddam's old Palace, now the US Embassy - this was to be my place of work, and just north across the River Tigris lay the forbidding Red Zone. The gardens were full of palm trees and steel cargo containers, affectionately known as hooches. Other Brits were accommodated at the nearby fortified British Support Unit, but because I was working very closely with the US Military, and the American State Department (civil servants) I was given a US steel cargo container - all of my very own to live in!

Adjustment. I learnt quickly. The first time the Duck & Cover alarm went off I was in my hooch. The drill was to put on helmet and body armour, before crawling under the bed. The only difficulty was - my bed was too low! I knuckled down to a completely alien environment, and experienced a severe pang of homesickness. Unlike all my annual RNR training sessions when you could go home after 2 weeks, this time I knew I was here for the long haul - 6 months.

The Job. It soon became apparent that if the Iraqi Government had any chance of surviving it needed help from the Coalition – but military might alone was not enough. I worked with senior figures from the UK Embassy, Ministry of Interior, and the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, trying to assist with their media plans. I also had to think of the UK market - No 10 Downing Street and the MOD Press Office, as well as keeping in close touch with my opposite number down south in Basra.

The aim of my job was for the Coalition Forces media messages to be coordinated, in tune with their own national Governments, and always supportive and in sympathy with the Iraqi messages: the latter were not always apparent as the Iraqi Government was having to deal with so many unexpected problems. The media (Iraqi and Western) loved the information vacuum, and this made the job more fraught because without facts, they could make it up.

The UK was very keen to be first to hand a province back to Iraqi control, so within 48 hrs of my arrival I attended a meeting at the UK Embassy in order to discuss the mix of media that should be transported to the Province of Al Muthanna. With at least 5 different countries represented, a smattering of interpreters, and everyone pushing their own country's agenda, rather than considering the Iraqis - it proved to be a fascinating, and not untypical introduction to my job.

Barely 2 weeks later I accompanied the media to the handover ceremony - bumping along for many hours in a helicopter - and on landing I had my first encounter with Iraqi men and boys who insisted on taking constant photos of me, following my every move - even to the smelly portaloo. An armed, fair skinned female in combats was certainly something they found intriguing. The province was handed back to the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al Maliki on 13 July, and the event made world headlines.

My life was a whirl of '*making things happen*' for the media, and the Command. Such as:

- Getting BBC vehicles and satellite dishes moved to Basra for the football World Cup
- **Overseeing the arrival** of the Band of the Royal Marines who gave a formidable performance in the Embassy Grounds on American Independence Day
- **Taking Iraqi media** out to their economic lifeline – the Oil Platforms south of Umm Qasr
- **Embarking Iraqi media** on board HMS Echo so they could see the Ops Commander of the Iraqi Navy receive new charts of the North Arabian Gulf and Umm Qasr port area
- Arranging for my boss to be interviewed by video-link with the Pentagon Press Corps in the US
- **Attending the commissioning** ceremony of a brave new batch of Iraqi 2nd Lieutenants at Iraq's equivalent of Sandhurst
- **Taking media** to the September handover of Dhi Qar, the second province to be passed back to Iraqi control

And on the 5th November every TV channel, even those that were pro Saddam, waited to learn of the trial verdict - Saddam Hussein was to be executed. The celebratory fireworks lasted a good 2 hours; everyone stayed inside to avoid being hit by a stray bullet.

Meanwhile, American forces continued to suffer lots of fatalities. In the month of October they exceeded another 100 personnel killed so it seemed only appropriate that a group of American soldiers be asked to participate in the Australian's Armistice Day ceremony, and the UK's separate Service within the British Compound on Remembrance Sunday. Baghdad's time zone (3 hours ahead) meant that our Remembrance Service had finished, just as the London Cenotaph ceremony commenced, so I was able to settle down to watch the event over satellite. Tragically, near the end of the UK ceremony news came through from Basra that we had suffered 4 fatalities, and more had been very seriously injured: a patrol boat on the Shatt al-Arab waterway in Basra had hit an improvised explosive device. Amongst those killed was the second British servicewoman to die in action in Iraq, and although I didn't know it at the time, one of the seriously injured was a member of the RNR. It is a Remembrance Day I'll never forget.

My December release date got put back as I'd negotiated for a group of 9 key Iraqi communicators to visit London. Being so close to the end of my tour the challenge was immense, but I was determined that they go. I travelled over to the UK, and was there to meet them on their arrival at Gatwick. Thereafter I escorted them during their stay, which included visits to various government departments, such as No 10, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the MOD Press Office. On completion, I zoomed back to Baghdad to prepare for my relief - an Army officer. My final flight home from Iraq was as long as the outward journey; thick fog entailed a diversion to Manchester, before an onward coach transfer back to Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. While waiting for the coach in the Arrivals Hall at Manchester airport dressed only in my desert combats, I was surrounded by Christmas partygoers wearing ridiculous Santa Claus hats, and was struck by the bizarre contrast of it all. I was exhausted, and just wanted to get home for a rest.

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