

Baghdad Babble

—Deb Hamilton

While deployed to Baghdad during the summer of 2006, I found solace at “The Oasis,” a serve-it-yourself, plywood coffee bar located on a concrete patio outside the base chapel. I stopped at the java sanctuary each morning before 0600, sat at a table with a cup of joe, and wrote in my journal before trudging on to a twelve-hour shift in Supply. What follows are a few choice excerpts from my journal.

24 JUN 06, Saturday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq

Since arriving in Iraq, this is the first moment I’ve had when time, energy and mental focus have intersected, allowing me to write. Before I begin discussing life at this installation, let me first talk about my first morning encounter at Al Udeid. I wrote a note to myself not to forget mentioning it, so I’d best do it now—before I forget...

Okay, so when we arrived at “The Deid” it was pitch dark, sometime in the early morning hours. I recall hitting my bunk around 0300 or so. At close to 0500, I awoke with the need to pee. When I stepped outside the tent—which, by the way, is pitch dark inside 24/7—the sun was just starting to illuminate the atmosphere. The dome-topped tents appeared as perfectly baked loaves of some lightly colored bread, evenly spaced down long rows atop white powder-coated rocks. The temperature was modest; it was not too warm, but certainly not cool in any sense. I crunched my tennis-shoed feet across the gravel to the white trailer labeled “women,” did my business, and returned to my own “loaf,” to my bunk, and then back to sleep.

A few hours later—sometime between 0900 and 1000 hours—I woke up startled. Even with the air conditioner blowing, the once cool tent felt like the

oven instead of the bread. I kicked off my sheet and blanket and tried to determine if it was truly *that* hot or if I was having some sort of hormonal malfunction. For several minutes, I laid there looking up at the mattress, trying to relax and acclimate to the new and sudden change in temperature.

The barracks at Al Udeid are unlike any I've ever stayed in. For one thing, we are in a tent. It is a very long, half-rounded structure containing nothing but two rows of bunk beds with an isle down the middle. I am on the bottom bunk, a bed numbered "thirty." It sucks because I can't really sit up on my bed to go through my stuff. Plus, it is always "twenty-four hour quiet time" to accommodate the sleeping needs of the various, traveling personnel. Eventually, I decide to take another jaunt to the latrine, this time to brush my teeth and wash up a bit before starting my day. Little do I know, a new and painful environment waits just outside my tent door.

I make my way down the dark isle of the tent using my miniature flashlight. It does not cross my mind to grab my sunglasses while gathering my towel and toothbrush. When I push open the tent door, it is like witnessing a nuclear flash. My senses are so overly stimulated that I don't know whether to step out or rush back in. I hesitate but decide to go for it. "My eyes will adjust. It's just the stark contrast of going from dark to light that's hurting my eyes," I tell myself. But after about six or seven steps, I realize a need for retreat.

It is freakishly bright outside! In full sun, the previously innocent, powdered rocks become intense reflectors of sunlight. The light which colors all the structures and concrete barriers only adds to the brightness. The sight is like a scene from a sci-fi movie. Imagine an astronaut emerging from her spacecraft on some uncharted sun-planet and you will have a pretty accurate picture.

Needless to say, when I go back to retrieve my sunglasses from my darkened bunk area I can't see a thing. Not even my little flashlight giving all it has helps. It is like a million flash bulbs going off simultaneously, leaving millions of undistinguishable blobs in my path. Several minutes later, with dark lenses firmly

across my eyes, I again cross planet “Gleamula” with my fluoride equipment and complete my morning mission.

25 JUN 06, Sunday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq

Today makes my fifth day here at Camp Sather, but it feels as though I’ve already been here a month. Working twelve-hour shifts seems to stretch one day into two. The drudgery of carrying body armor and a skull bucket everywhere not only adds to the blurring of time, it tires your body to the point where you feel as if you never get any rest. Maybe it’s the endless stream of helicopter flights and the “pop-pop-pop-pop” of weapon fire outside my tent all night that keeps me from feeling rested after I sleep. Either way, I feel old and tired this morning at “The Oasis” with coffee in hand, jotting down these few lines of thoughts and experiences.

Chances are that a few more days of this life will cure my feelings. Most of the folks here arrived over a month ago and appear to have adjusted to the gritty lifestyle. With less than five days under my belt, I am reluctant to complain. And, when I do complain, it is only on paper. Complaining verbally is something I’ve vowed not to do out of respect for my fellow soldiers. Most will spend no less than four months in Iraq and some will spend far longer, especially the Army troops. The Air Force currently limits troops to four-month rotations, replacing entire squadrons every four months. Thank God the Air National Guard divides its four-month slots even further, allowing us guardsmen (and women) to deploy for much shorter durations. My time in country should end after forty-one days. Mind you, that does not count the time it takes to get there and the time it takes to get home. Almost everyone gets held up a few days in Al Udeid. I was stuck there for two days coming over, and I can pretty much bank on an equal or longer stay on the way home. The return visit will probably serve to depressurize me from the harsh routine of Baghdad.

26 JUN 06, Monday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq (Laundry Tents)

Yesterday (Sunday) was supposed to have been my day off. I planned on using the time to catch up on my laundry. All of my uniforms were dirty. Plus, I had added items to clean from my journey over here: civvies (civilian clothes), towels, etc. However, I was notified that no one gets a day off until they've been here at least a week. That meant no free time for Deb to clean out her laundry bag. So, I made a game plan. I decided to put my clothes in the wash and then go back to my dust-cubicle inside the tent and exercise.

After about thirty-five or forty minutes, I went and placed the wet clothes into dryers before going to take a shower. After the shower, I returned to the laundry tent, folded things up, loaded my bags with clean laundry, and headed back to the tent. The entire process of doing laundry and showering took from 1930 to 2130 hours. Two hours is a lot of time when you're working twelve-hour days. Needless to say, I am sitting at my morning patio table in a slightly crumpled—but clean—uniform.

Some might ask why laundry arrangements are such a big deal. Well, besides the time factor, there's the sweat factor. Taking a shower between the washing-phase and drying-phase is less than desirable, considering that any amount of time spent exerting yourself generates more sweat. The laundry tent, of all places, is almost hot enough to make flesh melt.

Last night was my first laundry experience. I wasn't sure how difficult it would be to find open washers and dryers. I found out fast that Sunday evening is a bad time. There are three laundry tents here in Tent City and each houses around ten washers and dryers, including the broken ones. I had to go to all three tents before finding an empty drum and, as Murphy's Law would have it, it was the furthest facility from my dwelling.

Open at each end, the laundry tents are lined down the left side with washers. Dryers occupy the right side. Down the center are three or four tables that laundry gets folded on. There are a few seats, as well. The underside of the

canvas is coated with desert grit and the floor is dirty concrete. You certainly don't want to drop a wet article on that floor during the washer-to-dryer transfer. It would mean instant mud contamination!

When I first walked into the tent, there were piles of clean laundry atop the folding tables. The clothes were placed there by launderers in need of the dryers' (previously launderers') loads. Rather quickly, I located two empty washers separated by one broken one. I started the water and found out that temperature selection was of no use. The water was hot from the sun-baked storage bladders that held it all day. "Oh well, my t-shirts needed a little shrinking anyway," I think. Once my laundering experience was over, I vowed never to wash in the evenings again. I will forever more wash my clothes in the morning.

There is something I almost forgot to mention: the water used on base is non-potable, meaning it is not suitable for drinking or preparing food (they ship in bottled water for that). As I was folding my laundry and putting it away, I noticed that all my whites were now a nice shade of beige. I'm not sure if bleach will help; but I might pick some up at the BX (Base Exchange) and try it. At least, I'm glad we're not drinking from those storage bladders!

27 JUN 06, Tuesday, Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq

A funny thing happens here at Camp Sather concerning the days: I have almost a week's worth of mornings under my belt, but I've already stopped trying to count the exact number of days I've been here. It is rather easy to keep track of the date, but difficult to know which day of the week it is. Others claim that they share in this same phenomenon. We attribute it to the long work shifts blanketing the six work days. I've not much time to write this morning.

I arrived at "The Oasis" about a half-hour later than normal. The reason is because I was cleaning my dusty, blanket-draped quarters. Today is inspection day. Last week, we received emails that tent inspections were the first Tuesday of each month. Since it is still June, I'm not sure of their logic, but I guess it's the

first Tuesday of a week that starts a new month. Who cares? It's just one of those necessary nuisances.

I'll be curious to see the outcome of today's inspection. Several days ago, the Services Squadron received over three hundred sets of flame retardant privacy curtains. They are the type designed for our rounded dwellings. A lot of folks already have the proper curtains in their tents and we are probably one of only a few who don't. My guess is that after the inspectors come through and we take a fire hazard write-up, we'll be issued the correct curtains.

I can hardly wait for that to happen because I am tired of looking at sloppy layers of mismatched blankets, sheets, and sleeping bags surrounding me on three sides (the fourth side is the tent wall). My little section of tent should do well. If I take any personal hits, it will probably be for the large door mat on my floor. It's the kind you'd expect at the entrance of an industrial plant or other commercial location. It has a heavy black rubber backing with a green outdoor carpeting type of surface.

I took the mat outside and tried to shake some of the dirt and lint free to no avail. I have already tried sweeping it with the over-sized broom in our tent. That only succeeded at injecting broom straws into the mat's fibrous top. My last resort was to stoop down and hand-pluck the most contrasting debris. It was sort of like picking tiny cotton balls from a sheet of Velcro, if you can imagine that. When I was finished with the mat, I scanned my area one last time. Yep! Everything is straight and as dusted as it can get!