

Highway to Hell

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So we were sitting outside the TOC, on call to take officers from the Puzzle Palace to wherever they needed to go in the mean streets of Baghdad to help us win hearts and minds. We were in high spirits

because we were short: a week and a wake up or so until we were on the long road back down to Kuwait. A year is a long time. Me and Burt, my gunner, were smoking nasty local Royales and D, my driver, was trying to piss me off by playing Backstreet Boys out loud on his MP3 player.

That's when the Sergeant Major's gunner came out of the head shed, looking both sad and pissed off. "Y'all ain't heard?" he asked.

"Heard what?"

"Man," he said. "I ain't gonna be the one to say."

Our Captain came out of the frat boys' lounge and saw the looks on our faces and came over.

"Suppose you guys've heard the news by now."

"No, sir."

"They're saying we're being extended. It's on CNN. But I don't think so. I still give us 50-50. Think they'd have given us orders first. What do you guys think?"

"CNN? I think we are fucked, sir."

And we were, stuck in Iraq for three more months. It was almost as if the gods of war were trying to see how hard they could push us, how far we could go, how many obstacles they could throw up in our path before we would crack.

I had shied away from the Iraqi bathtub gin that could be had because my crew and I were on 24-hour call, but I decided I really needed a drink. I hadn't had a drop since my R&R back to Germany in February, some five months before. The cooks were shooting dice for cash and drinking cherry MRE Kool-Aid with Iraqi moonshine and listening to a mixture of Jimi Hendrix and Young Jeezy. I sat in on the

session for quite a while until well after midnight, whereupon I discreetly vomited behind the building and then watched the omnipresent red tracers shoot across the night sky while I smoked Marlboros.

I had been asleep on my cot in my roofless broom closet for an hour when Burt came and shook me awake. We had to take the K9 team back to Brigade because their mission got scrubbed. It was 0200. We were loaded up and parked in front of the Puzzle Palace in less than ten minutes. I was still feeling the drink. We lined up in the middle of our four-Hummer convoy, called up the report, and rolled out.

At night, the city of Baghdad can be a strangely quiet and beautiful place. Old men in white dishdashas habitually finger their prayer beads and patiently lead donkey carts along the street. Women in black Abayas shuffle quietly down alleyways with their groceries. The fishermen sleep in the cool open air along the banks of the Tigris in the hot summer. Kids prod sheep down the city streets. Other times it turns into some sort of loud and hellish cartoon episode, with fingerless, toothless beggars affected by a tropical disease from a medieval triptych and reaching out to you like lunatics. Gunfire comes from out of nowhere, sending red or green tracers ricocheting off into the night sky. The loud whoosh of an RPG becomes familiar and explosions erupt spontaneously and aimlessly.

A ride to Brigade promised to be short and sweet along the outskirts of the Green Zone and through Al Kindi to the checkpoint. We did it almost every day. At 2 a.m. the traffic was sparse and we drove as fast as our built-by-the-lowest-bidder war-wagons could

carry us. I stuck my head out the window like a dog to get the fresh air and sober up.

Burt put on “Don’t Fear the Reaper” by Blue Öyster Cult, and we roared down the empty highway, this small section now blocked off by huge concrete barriers—the U.S. military’s own personal highway. We turned onto the streets of Al Kindi, neon lights from the hookah bars and late chai cafés and kebab restaurants blurring along. We shouted and waved at passing Iraqis on the sidewalks with laughs and smiles on our faces and they waved and smiled gladly, more used to us tearing-ass around in the daylight wearing sunglasses and ugly expressions. Everyone was in a good mood.

When we got to Brigade, they had another job for us. We had to get up to the Baghdad International Airport—BIAP—and bring back a truck of new arrivals and a couple guys coming off R&R. The party atmosphere vanished. This was a more serious proposition. The road to BIAP from downtown Baghdad was the most dangerous in the world at the time. It was bad in the daylight, but just plain spooky at night. There were lots of high windows and rooftops along the way. There were stretches where the streets were well lit, which made it easier for the bad guys to see us and harder for us to see them. Other stretches would be pitch dark except for our headlights, which meant the Jihadis would have plenty of notice we were coming along in our loud diesels. We all put on our game faces and geared up again. There was no music this time.

About halfway there the lead vehicle called back about an obstacle, which turned out to be a half-built wall of old tires. We increased our speed and swerved around it. You never know if the bad guys want

you to go to one side or the other or straight through the middle so they can blow you up. You also can't stop to figure it out because they might ambush you, especially at night. There's a way to die no matter what you do. Our tactic was to blow through the area as fast as we could.

We got to Division HQ at BIAP and rounded up all the guys who were coming with us. A couple were coming back off emergency leave and had been hoping they wouldn't have to return, but the game had now gone into OT for us all. Another ten or so of the guys were new in country, mostly Privates, who had also been hoping for a reprieve. Luck didn't go their way. Mac, our convoy leader, decided he was going to have some fun with these guys. The rest of us listened and smoked cigarettes on the other side of the truck and exchanged smiles.

"Welcome to the suck," he said. "If you fuck around out here, you get your face shot off. You do what you're told and don't ask any questions until we get to the FOB. We're going to be driving at a very high rate of speed so keep your asses glued to the floor of the truck with your rifles pointing out so you don't accidentally shoot each other. Don't stand up for nothing. Don't shoot at nothing unless you got something to shoot at. Don't do nothing, don't touch nothing. You just keep your head down and we'll get through this and about fifty percent of you might make it back to the FOB alive."

We had to stifle our laughter at the last part. The faces of the newbies showed no amusement. They got onto the back of the five-ton with their rucks and duffels piled along the edges of the bed. The truck pulled into the middle of the convoy and we left. It was about 0300 now.

The roads had been relatively empty on the way up, but they were dead empty now and that was not a good sign. The convoy leader urged us to pull our heads out of our fourth point of contact, which we had done already. The big five-ton truck, the back open to the sky above, was rolling in front of us as fast as it could go, which is to say not fast at all. It was more like a fat beetle on wheels. In the beam of our headlights I could see the round helmets of the new guys bouncing up and down comically as the truck barreled over huge potholes in the beat-up pavement. And far up the road in front of us, right along our route of travel, a huge shining light came into view. As we got closer it became apparent what it was: a wall of burning tires in the middle of the highway.

The lead-vehicle commander called for us all to punch through like we had on the way in, but the wall was across the entire roadway now and it was on fire. There was no way around as there were thick metal guards along both sides of the road.

It takes a lot to get tires to burn, but once they do they really go, and the smoke was forming into an ominous black thunderhead. The first and second Humvees managed to make a good sized hole through the wall, but whoever built the thing knew what they were doing because much of it was still standing. As we entered the edge of the dark cloud, the five-ton barreled through the wall and cast flaming tires and chunks of rubber and ashes out in all directions. I told Burt to get all the way down out of the gunner's hatch as D mashed the gas pedal and we ploughed through ourselves, having to lean inward and away from the tongues of bright gold flame licking in through the windows. A wave of smoke and fire washed over the truck. I checked

on everybody and watched in the rear-view mirror as the last truck broke through in a shower of burning rubber. Flaming tires rolled into the darkness across the median and down into the drainage culvert along the road.

The adrenaline rush ebbed and we all three began to laugh and yell out the windows. There had been no IED and no ambush. We were sure that the new guys in the back of the five-ton in front of us were shitting themselves. Maybe the wall builders thought we would stop, in which case they were sitting in the dark sorely disappointed, or maybe it was just a prank by some bored Iraqi teenagers. Either way, we cursed them up and down for it now like a high-speed caravan of foul-mouthed stable boys on parade.

As we rolled on through the darkness of the quiet city, somebody started yelling, “Viet-fucking-nam!”