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Page: A11

A day in Iraq: Gunner with lipstick, bagpipe serenade

Flew south with the General for a site visit. The General and his PSD (personal security detail) rode in the back while the planner and I rode with two other passengers just behind the door gunners. As soon as the helo touches the ground, these young people unlock their machine guns, swing them to the side, and gracefully half-climb, half-leap through the gunner's hatch or window. Once out, they watch the pilot's blind spots. When it is time to leave, the gunners rapidly climb back through their hatches, lock their machine guns into the mounts, start the ammo belt and prepare to provide security on the flight.

During a typical day, these junior soldiers may climb in and out dozens of times, concentrate on people on the ground who might threaten the helo with gunfire or rocket, carry out the instructions of the pilot, and patiently deal with passengers. During all of this activity, the gunners wear a nomex (fireproof) flightsuit, gloves, and hood, a helmet with attached face shield that covers the upper half of their face and a "maxillofacial shield" that covers the rest. Not an inch of visible skin -- a very warm outfit during normal weather, but with an outside temperature of more than 115 degrees, it must be like jogging in a snowsuit, boots, mittens and hat during a hot August day in Bethlehem. We take off and fly south at over a 100 mph, keeping to a very low altitude. Soon, we are out of the city and flying over an Iraq that, except for a rare highway or power line, appears as it must have 1,000 years before. Mud brick homes, women in full black dresses herding animals, fields green where there is flowing water in the irrigation canals and brown desert where the canals are dry. The adults on the ground take our passage calmly, but the children wave and jump up and down as we flash into and out of sight.

I'm about to return to thoughts of home when I notice that one gunner, while steadying the machine gun with his left hand, with his right is periodically throwing something out of the window. I lean over far enough to see almost straight down. I can see that he's doing this when the helo passes almost directly over a waving child. At first, I can't see what is being thrown, but finally, I notice that between his knees, the gunner has a box of "Jeffreys," the Toys-R-Us giraffe mascot. The vigor of his throws is to ensure that each small giraffe doesn't get buffeted by the wash of the helo's props, but rather lands fairly close to a waving child. I tighten my safety harness and daydream the rest of the way south.

The site visit to several of the non-U.S. contingents is interesting, but long. Eleven hours later, we board a helo for the flight back to Camp Victory. It is a different helo then on the trip down and I'm on the port (left) side facing forward. As we leave the ground, the gunner on my side attaches a bungee cord to the machine gun to offset some of the wind pressure on the barrel. It is still very hot and the wind feels like I'm sitting with a hair dryer on "high" aimed straight at my face.

Suddenly, the gunner in front of me leaps up and swings the machine gun to point at something on the ground. Immediately, the helo flips on its side. Nothing but centrifugal force and seatbelts keep me from falling out. The gunner has engaged in seemingly impossible acrobatics to keep the weapon aimed at the same point on the ground even as the pilot makes a violent turn to get us out of danger. Then the helo slows and returns to level flight. Later, they tell my General someone stepped out of a building with a tube on his shoulder. (An insurgent with an anti-air missile? A plumber with a section of pipe?) The young gunner made a snap judgment. The threat was clear enough to shout for the pilot to begin evasive maneuvers, but not clear enough for the gunner to cut the individual in half with a burst of fire. The young gunner only had an instant to make a life-or-death decision. The rest of the trip is, fortunately, quite dull.

When we land, the gunner has to explain how the pilot wishes us to depart the craft. To be heard, the gunner flips up the face shield and pulls aside the "maxillofacial shield" to reveal a pretty face with blue eyes set off by eye liner and lips artificially colored a rare shade of red. When she spoke, I knew for the first time that the gunner was of the female persuasion.

Back at Victory, I make a quick stop at the mess hall. It is lobster night! I return to the office to answer a large quantity of e-mail and review the official trip report. I take the palace route back to my sleeping trailer and am rewarded by the eerie sound of bagpipes in the night. I spot the piper atop one of the palace walls several hundred yards away. I stop to listen. Realizing that he has an audience, the piper faces in my direction and plays a few well known bagpipe tunes. I applaud, he bows and returns to his scales while I walk to my trailer and the redemption of deep sleep after a long day.

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Column: ANOTHER VIEW

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