

Paper: Morning Call, The (Allentown, PA)
Title: Long day's journey in Iraq ends in exhausted sleep
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Date: July 4, 2005
Section: OPINION
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Long day's journey in Iraq ends in exhausted sleep

I thought I would describe part of a typical day (Wednesday, May 4) at Camp Victory, Iraq. For security reasons, I deleted every mention of a specific person, place or event. As a result, this note is like a steak without taste or texture, but maybe you can still detect the aroma. Alarm at 0530. My housing is half of a billeting trailer with one bunk bed, one chair, one lamp, and one wall locker. I pull on my sneakers; grab a towel, shaving kit, and my flashlight and head out into the cool dark to the toilet trailer and then to the shower trailer. Back to the billeting trailer to pull on my tan digital camouflage uniform and boots. Then put a green notebook in my right thigh pocket and a paperback mystery novel in the left thigh pocket. I strap on the holster holding my 9 mm pistol and two magazines (15 rounds) and head for the mess hall.

The General allows the military and contractors to wear any type of holster. Most of the younger soldiers and Marines, both male and female, have obviously watched too much television. They go for the smooth brown leather shoulder holster of a big city detective, (Think "NYPD Blue") or the SWAT team look with a black ballistic nylon holster strapped to the thigh. I've gone retro with a 1940s web-belt and green holster (Think "Saving Private Ryan"). It's understated. Old school. Professional.

The mess hall is the second-most carefully guarded building in the camp. No signs outside, huge blast barriers, and a large number of military (not contract) guards in full battle gear at every entrance. To enter you need to be in uniform, can't carry any packs or packages, and must be carrying a weapon. But, the selection of food is fantastic. For breakfast, eggs to order, including an extensive omelet bar, something that looks strangely like an Egg McMuffin, French toast, waffles, a dozen types of cereal, a cornucopia of fruits, a wide choice of fresh-baked bread, donuts, croissants. There is every possible hot and cold beverage and you are encouraged to fill your pockets with fruit and cans or bottles of soda, juice, or Gatorade.

Today, my general is flying to the capital and I'm going along to establish some face-to-face contact with people that I only know from e-mails. Before I go outside to jump in the SUV for the trip to the helo pad, I put on my flak vest with its two life-saving SAPI plates, and my lightweight Kevlar Fritz helmet. Of course, I'm still armed. Everybody is always armed, except in the shower. Everyone except my general who sometimes doesn't wear his pistol. Nobody bothers him about it because he is a general, and he is accompanied by two extremely tough-looking paratroopers whenever he leaves his office.

It is turning into a hot day, but despite the vest and helmet, I'm comfortable. The air is dry enough that sweat immediately evaporates. My general and I talk military history and Italian cooking while waiting for the bird. Suddenly, it comes in, fast and low. With the prop still turning, the passengers disembark and my general and party board. In a few minutes, we are in the air, flying low toward the capital. Because of the speed combined with the low altitude, impressions come fast and furious.

Cars fill some streets, while others seem to be restricted to pedestrians. An open air market flashes by, maybe fruits and vegetables. Lots of new construction, including one extremely large mosque. Roofs are flat and some are landscaped and appear to be a prime location for families to relax. And every roof has one or more satellite dishes, sometimes a dozen.

Ten minutes later, we arrive. I won't tell you with whom I spoke or the topics, but it was interesting to see the mental adjustment in almost everyone that I met. They were all "type A" personalities. One doesn't become an O-6 in any service without being a results-oriented, somewhat aggressive individual. Yet, most of these men and women have reconciled themselves to the idea that it is better that their Iraqi counterparts do a decent job on security and reconstruction while they advise, than for members of the U.S. military to push Iraqi counter-parts aside and do the job perfectly. It is quite a leap for someone brought up to say, "Damn it, if you can't do the job, then I'll replace you with someone who can!" to instead try to be a good teacher and mentor. Will it work? Too early to tell. I think that it will take 20 years before we will be able to judge. And, I'm an optimist.

After our flight back, and a quick stop at the mess hall for a Burger King Whopper clone, I once again go back to bailing out the rapidly raising lake of e-mail dripping from my three machines. By 2230, I think that I've done enough damage for one 24-hour period. I shut down my machines, say goodnight to the sergeant with the automatic rifle, and walk back to my trailer. I hang up my pistol and uniform, read a page or two, then lights out. Sleep comes immediately, with exhaustion effectively substituting for a clear conscience.

Frank M. Gunter, a colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps. Reserves, is at Camp Victory, outside Baghdad, in Iraq. Gunter, 55, is an associate professor in the economics department at Lehigh University in Bethlehem.

Caption:
PHOTO by Frank M. Gunter

Caption:
Marine Col. Frank Gunter of Bethlehem poses in front of Saddam Hussein's Al Faw palace.

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