

CALLSIGN “DEADLY” – SNAKES IN THE ATTACK*
A Personal Account of an AH-1W Pilot During the War with Iraq

Author’s Note – This personal account of the war in Iraq was written to convey to my family and friends just what I went through during the war. Therefore, it is not an official history of what my unit accomplished or participated in, but rather a “Rated PG-13” and unclassified version of what I experienced. My concern is that this journal is forwarded in e-mails to others outside of my circle... and I want to ensure that when this falls into a stranger’s hands, that what I’ve written is taken in context with the how and why I composed this piece. These observations and opinions are mine alone. They don’t represent my command, or the United States Marine Corps. JLC

INTRODUCTION

As I reflect back on the past month that I spent in Iraq fighting the war, I’m amazed at what we accomplished. On a personal level, I’m astonished I’m alive. On the micro level, I’m truly overwhelmed at what my squadron achieved. We flew nearly 3,000 combat hours with 27 helicopters and we did not lose a single Marine to an accident or to the Iraqis. On the macro level, I’m astounded at the intensity with which the Marine Corps fought the entire war.The Marines’ tenacity won the war. Through pure luck, I was fortunate enough to be part of this team.

I kept a small journal during the course of the war. It’s not all that organized. Sometimes I didn’t write for days on end because of the tempo of operations. Other times, I didn’t write for days because of the severe boredom (mostly after the hostilities stopped). Some of the events that I wrote about rated one or two words in the journal... enough to jog my memory. Other events were captured in a paragraph, because I wanted to graphically encapsulate a moment that I had witnessed or taken part in. My methodology of making entries into the journal was haphazard at best. I never logged entries by date. Events were simply entered with a bullet at the front, followed by my thoughts. Some entries were late and out of order. So if actions appear to be out of order, it’s not intentional. My goal here is to capture my exact mindset so that I can relate them to you. Besides, once the war started, every day was a blur.

This series of recollections is based solely on my perspective. My point of view was that of a Marine, a squadron operations officer... and a flight leader and pilot flying AH-1W Super Cobras. Depending on your physical location, your experience level, and your ability to process incoming information, will determine how closely your perception mirrors reality. In aviation, we call it “situational awareness”. It’s human nature to expect differing perceptions by different people viewing the same event. For example, my co-pilot/gunner throughout the entire war was “Kujo”. Although he only sat 3 feet in front of me in the cockpit, Kujo’s recollection of a particular event may not exactly match mine, because at a given moment, we may have not had the same level of situational awareness. I know that General Franks, the theater commander, had a different point of view than me... just like I had a different perspective than what the Lance Corporal driving an M-1 Abrams tank into Baghdad had.

I apologize for the length of this document in advance. It’s going to be rather long because I’m going to do my best to portray to you not only situations, but my thoughts and emotions, too. I’ve pared this down a couple of times through some revisions... so hopefully I’ve kept this relatively pertinent to the highlights of my experience.

This is my best recollection of what happened.

THE LEAD UP TO DAY ONE

Two days prior to the war officially beginning, a good portion of my squadron’s aircraft and aircrew departed the ship to move to an austere dirt airfield in Kuwait. This facilitated our ability to get to our assigned targets quickly, as opposed to trying to launch off the ship, which would add to the distance to the target. Typically, shipboard launch cycles are more complicated than those launched from ashore. I was lucky enough to be designated the division lead for a flight of four Cobras that were tasked to destroy Iraqi border posts that could send a warning to other Iraqi military units of our pending invasion. The mission was to be executed at night.

The day that we flew off the boat, my CO had asked the ship's Catholic chaplain if he would offer each of us general absolution prior to our departure. Just prior to the flight briefing, the priest entered the ready room. After saying a short prayer, he absolved us of our sins, and I was able to take communion for the first time in many years. Mind you, I'm not your model Catholic. I can tell you that I was clutching the crucifix that I had received from the chaplain that morning... and had a lump in my throat. Remember the old cliché that "there are no atheists in foxholes"? It's true.

For the former-athlete in each of us, do you recall the feeling you had before the big game? We called that light-headed, queasy-stomach, feeling "butterflies". As I flew off the boat that day, war hadn't even been declared. We were still in the last minute diplomacy stage. Nonetheless, I was more nervous than I have ever been before. I felt like I was launching into Hell. It's humorous to me now, in hindsight, that if I only knew then what I know now, I would have saved my butterflies for a few other missions I flew in the war. I mean, for God's sake, all I was doing this day was repositioning my aircraft from the ship to a dirt airfield to prepare for the war. But I knew at that moment that I was heading toward a fight... and that was a bit unsettling. During these times, you think about your family. I thought about my wife, my kids, my parents, and my brother and two sisters. You beg God for strength.

At the clandestine airfield that we parked our aircraft, we were sleeping in tents, eating Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs), and going through our final mission details by studying target photos. We rehearsed each phase of the mission. I can recall sitting on my cot, watching Kujo, who had his eyes closed, mimicking the hand and finger movements that he would have to do, in order to fire the missiles at our assigned targets. Identified as aviators at this airfield camp simply by the fact that we're wearing flight suits, we're not identifiable as officers because we've removed all our patches from our flight suits. About half way through the day, the Gunnery Sergeant who ran the camp came into our tent and informed us that as members of the camp, we'd be put to work. For two hours, the Gunny had us working like an awkward construction crew... building tent frames with two by fours, and then stretching the canvas over the frame. Looking back, it made for a nice break in the mind-numbing mission planning. And the Gunny was a pretty memorable character.

Living in the sand for the first time, we realized that even the lightest of winds caused quite a bit of the sand to turn into dust in the air. With ten knots of wind or more, visibility could quickly be reduced to next-to-nothing. Something that would definitely affect us later.

Back home in the States... and even on the ship... we all are accustomed to getting the latest news and developments at a moment's notice. FoxNews, CNN and all the other cable networks bring it to you live, twenty-four hours a day. But at this austere airfield, like most places we go to fight, there's no news service. We had received snippets of information that the war had started with some Tomahawk missile strikes through military radio and e-mail traffic. Reality hit quickly when I was walking from the command post tent back to my living tent. Hearing a loud whining/screaming noise in the sky, my eyes turned up to see who was flying over the camp. I was expecting to see one of the jet boys zipping overhead, showing off. But as the noise got louder, I saw a missile flash over the camp. It's on its way from Iraq toward Kuwait City. That's when the air raid sirens began to growl. That whole damned day, we were busy running into the cement pipe bunkers they had put in place to protect us, wearing our chemical suits and gas masks. The first time was tense. By the fifth time, the amusement factor was low. I remember hearing the air raid siren once, and then hearing a loud BOOM. Looking up, we saw that a Patriot missile battery had intercepted an Iraqi SCUD missile right over our tents. Because we were scared to death of the chemical threat, the gas masks immediately went back on... and we ran for the bunkers... again.

THE FIRST MISSION OF THE WAR

Back when I was growing up, I loved to read books about the World War Two era. One of the phrases that stuck in my mind from reading those books, that the GIs used when things weren't going just right, was SNAFU (Situation Normal, All F*@ked Up). My God did that apply the first day of the war. Now remember, we were planning on executing our first mission at night. That's key for a couple of different reasons. First, you can take advantage of the cover of darkness: the Iraqis wouldn't be able to see us. Second, the squadron's schedule is set by the launch time of the aircraft. Maintenance crews need to have advance notice to prepare the aircraft for flight. Pilots have to get the required amount of rest, and

then prepare for the mission. On this day, no less than five times, the word changed on what time they wanted us to launch. It ranged from, "GO RIGHT NOW!" to "Go 8 hours from now". It was a mental rollercoaster. My stomach was going from knots to somersaults all day long.

Around dinnertime, the word to launch finally comes, and of course, it's GO RIGHT NOW! My flight of four is supposed to be the lead flight out of the airfield, but our timing is all screwed up. The winds have picked back up, and visibility is less than a mile. In the confusion, another flight of Cobras departs the airfield ahead of us. Oops. Lots of talking on the radios to sort it out. For those of you who haven't looked through a pair of NVGs (Night Vision Goggles), they are built for use in darkness. If there is too much light, then they don't work correctly. The worst time to fly on the goggles is right after sunset. And of course, that's when we had launched. The sand in the air is something that we hadn't dealt with too much in training. In accordance with our peacetime training rules, if visibility is poor, you don't fly. Common sense – safety. But in war... when American lives are at stake, sometimes you have to push the edge of the envelope and deal with conditions that you're not normally accustomed to. With the reduced visibility and lack of moon that night, I can say that that was the darkest night I've ever flown in my life. Now mind you, I've been a Marine for almost 15 years. I've been flying Cobras since 1990. I've got a fair amount of experience. But this was dark. Seat-cushion-clenched-in-your-butt dark. Not only did the sand hang in the air to minimize horizontal visibility, but also the desert that we were flying over was completely smooth and lacked any detail. You couldn't tell, from two hundred feet above ground level (AGL), how high you were. No depth perception. You couldn't see obstacles until you were right on top of them. That's a bit nerve-wracking.

Our flight of four flew north and reached the release point. The four-ship split up into two 2 aircraft elements (a flight of two is called a section... two sections makes a division). My section went to the right. My CO's section went to the left. We proceed to our firing points. Upon arrival, Kujo is working the FLIR (Forward Looking InfraRed) sensor to find our assigned targets. Unfortunately, the target area photos didn't quite display all the surrounding terrain features that were in the FLIR's field of view. What seemed like hours for Kujo to pick out the right targets, actually only took about a minute or two. As I'm sitting in this hover, waiting for Kujo to find the targets, I look down to my right side. On my NVGs, I can see a Kuwaiti family outside their house, looking up into the sky, and watching the "fireworks" show. Kujo locates the targets... three missiles away. Border post destroyed. Thank God that's over with.

After the initial border post strikes, my section proceeds to a FARP (Forward Arming and Refueling Point) that had been set up only hours prior near the Iraq/Kuwait border. None of us had been there before. The FARP was located on an asphalt road... but there were power lines and sand all over the place. Just to land for gas took me four attempts. I kept having to wave off because of the lack of visibility. Not being able to land because of visibility had never happened to me before. I'm fighting panic and despair. We're just about out of gas. Finally with Kujo's help, we make it safe on deck. After refueling, we shut down and assumed a strip alert. In this alert status, we'd get a launch order when the Marines on the ground needed CAS (Close Air Support). In the mean time, my CO's section gets gas at the FARP, and proceeds back out for a CAS mission. Thirty minutes later, he returns, and says that visibility where they wanted him to go was horrid. Now about my CO... a tough man. One of the best "sticks" in the squadron. And if he's telling me that it's bad, then you know it's bad. I get a launch order. Great.

On my second flight of the war, the fear factor is pretty high. Not because of the Iraqis... it's the lack of visibility. We can't see in front of us. I can only see a road underneath us, so Kujo navigates us down the roads, making turns at intersections... and we pick our way back up to the front. Once there, the Grunts are starting to push across the border. They're taking sporadic mortar fire. Because of the reduced visibility, we couldn't find the enemy for them. Low on gas. Time to head home. As we travel back toward our original sand-and-tent base, I can no longer keep tabs on where the ground is. There are tall radio towers and power lines everywhere that we can't see. I jerk back on the stick once, when I saw that a radio tower that was less than fifty feet from our aircraft. I'm starting to get vertigo. Kujo bails me out. Flying right down the highways and roads, we pick our way back to our base. Aeronautical navigation charts were worthless that night. We needed a Rand McNally roadmap.

After landing, I remember my knees knocking. I thought it was just me... until I saw the rest of the pilots who had flown that night. To a man, each was ghost white with near-death stories to tell. We dragged ourselves back to our tents to get some rest. But from that point on, we were woken up every thirty to forty-five minutes because the Iraqis had launched another damned SCUD missile that was heading in our direction. We didn't sleep a wink. Every time you just approached falling back asleep, the air raid siren would growl. You'd throw on your gas mask, and then trudge (not willingly) back to the bunkers. Some guys decided to forego the bunkers, and just slept on their cot wearing their gas mask. I tried that... felt like I was suffocating. Some guys just slept in the bunker.

Just after first light, we launched back to the ship to get our aircraft back for routine maintenance. I was working on zero sleep in the past 24 hours. As I made my approach to the ship, I was cleared for the landing spot just abeam the bridge. I looked up to the Flag Bridge once I was on deck and saw some of the MAG (Marine Air Group) staff looking down at us... giving us thumbs up, and big smiles. I was emotionally spent. The plane captain had to help me out of the aircraft. My legs felt like they were going to give out on me. Down into the ready room, our MAG commander, "Boomer", was standing at the front of the room. I've known this man for five years now. He's a good man. A family man. Almost fatherly to the officers. As I set my gear down in one of the chairs, Boomer walked up to me. As the tears welled up in my eyes, he put his hand on my cheek and told me how proud he was of all of us. All I could manage to say with a huge lump in my throat and tears about to stream down my face was, "Skipper, it was so goddamned dark out there." I thought that if the rest of the war were like that, I wouldn't survive. That was my first mission.

NOT FINDING THE FIGHT AND THE WEATHER

My next flight in the war was in the vicinity of Basrah. We launched off the ship and proceeded to the FARP for gas about an hour prior to sunset. We pushed up north to work with the British. In the dwindling daylight, I came to realize that although the Brits and I are both speaking English, we aren't speaking the same version of the language. I just can't figure out what they want me to do... and where they want me to go. Just after sunset, I had flipped down my NVGs, which have two independent battery packs for power. Battery set one dies immediately. No problem, switching to number two. Dies. Great. I can't see anything. My dash two that night, "Murph" and "Kramer", make a desperate call on the radio to avoid traffic. In the haze and darkness, another section of Cobras had some how intermingled with my section. One of the Cobras passed right in between my aircraft and Murph's. Near mid-air collision. Great. Spent the whole night searching for work. Frustrating. The oil fields in Rumaliyah that the Iraqis set on fire light up the sky. You couldn't even look in that direction with your NVGs because the intensity of the light degraded the abilities of the NVGs to the point where they were basically useless. Sent to search for Iraqi troop movements to the north of a river. Can see some Iraqis on the FLIR, but cannot tell if they are soldiers or not. Can't engage them. Felt like we were missing out on the action. We recovered back aboard the ship after first light, having not fired a single round.

The weather turned bad. Sandstorms throughout the entire region clobbered the skies. Even at sea, visibility was reduced down to less than a hundred yards or so. It continued for three days. During that time, frustration grew amongst the aviators. A portion of our squadron had made it ashore before the weather had completely closed in, and was able to do some limited flying. But for us, we were relegated to watching CNN and FoxNews on the television. Watching your brother Marines in combat, and being unable to go out and provide support for them, was one of the most exasperating things I've ever had to deal with. Finally, the weather cleared. We get another chance to help out with the effort.

AN NASARIYAH

We launch off the ship and head up to a FARP about one hundred miles deep into Iraq. From there, we launch up north to the city of An Nasariyah. While we were on the ship during the bad weather, we had seen on TV the intense action going on in that city. This was my first real flight during the daylight hours. Approaching the city, I felt completely naked. At night, the darkness hides you from the Iraqis, but in the daytime, you're there for everyone to see. Really makes you feel vulnerable. We make our way around the west side of the city, avoiding the built up areas. On the north side, a Marine unit has just crossed the river, and is waiting to continue up the road. Approaching their location, we get directed to engage an enemy mortar position that is located on the river's bank. We roll in with rockets and guns. Holding back

over friendlies (where it is relatively safe), Kujo spots enemy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and regular artillery just to the Marine unit's west. After receiving clearance from the FAC (Forward Air Controller), we engage. Back over friendlies again. Looking down, we notice that there are two Marine LAVs (Light Armored Vehicles) that had been hit prior to our arrival. We had heard on the news that some of our Marines had died in that ambush. Sobering. Out of gas. We race back to the FARP for reloads and more gas. Back to the fight. The Marines have resumed their movement up the road to the north. Now we're escorting their convoy along the roads. Military gear and trucks all along the roads. We engage a truck with ammunition in the back. Secondary explosions. Cool. A few kilometers to the north, we spot some Iraqi soldiers in a ditch waiting to ambush our vehicles when they get close. Huddled in the trench, they began to move, undetected by the Marine convoy, toward the road with their weapons. Up to this point, we had destroyed a lot of military equipment, and smashed military buildings. This was the first time we'd be specifically rolling in against another human. This attack definitely had a different feel to it. I put the aircraft into a dive and strafed the trench with the cannon. We continued escorting and shooting as the Marines marched to the north. We race back to the FARP for more gas and reloads.

That night, we returned to where the Grunts were located when we had left them to go get gas. It's dark now. The Marine vehicles are parked in a coiled formation... so that each individual vehicle can fire in a specific direction to protect the rest of the vehicles in the coil. Each tank and LAV is assigned a particular sector of fire. As we approached, we could see that they were in a pretty decent firefight. As we moved to get over their position, fire is going out in every direction from the coil. TOW missiles, 25mm chain gun, M-1 tank main gun, and heavy machine gun fire. We were so low over them that the firing of the machine guns made your teeth rattle. Every couple of minutes, a FAC would give me a rollout heading, and I'd either ripple a pod of rockets, or blast away with the cannon. Everything was danger close.

When you're a brand-new Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps, you begin your career by going to The Basic School (TBS) at Quantico. During your six-month tenure at TBS, one thing they demonstrate to you is called the "Mad Moment". In this demonstration, they essentially show you what it looks like with machine guns shooting, artillery shooting, tanks shooting, and aircraft shooting, all at the same time. The demonstration lasts about 5 minutes. Up north in Nasariyah that night, the mad moment lasted for hours. Except now there were bullets flying in all directions.

The tactics that the Iraqis used this night were a sign of the times to come. Using the cover of darkness and small guerilla-type teams, they'd attempt to sneak up within RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) range of the Marines. Often, they'd drive vehicles with their headlights off at a high rate of speed right into the Marines' position, with the hopes of killing as many Americans as possible. This particular night, I saw the Iraqis drive a Greyhound-style bus at full speed with its lights off right at the Marines. An M-1 tank main gun round slammed into the bus just as it reached the Marines' perimeter.

A Brit GR-1 Tornado jet checks in with the FAC, and is going to work in conjunction with my flight to protect the coil. Much like my first encounter with the Brits, the FAC was having a difficult time describing to the jet crew exactly where the Iraqi targets were. After talking the pilot onto the target by using a large fire as a checkpoint, the Tornado begins his target run. As the jet passes over the city of Nasariyah, all hell breaks loose. Large caliber AAA and SAMs (Surface to Air Missiles) begin to race through the sky in every direction. 100-millimeter AAA rounds looked as though they were in slow motion as they arced up into the sky and exploded. Low trajectory shots angled through the darkness around us. This was the first time we'd been shot at. It was absolutely terrifying... and nearly made me freeze on the controls. I don't think I've ever been so scared in my whole life... it was petrifying. Out of gas. Avoid the city. Make our way back to the FARP. Launch one more time to the coil. It's no better than earlier that evening. After shooting again, we proceed back to the FARP. We shutdown the aircraft and sleep for 2 hours. It was freezing cold. No cots or tents; no sleeping bags. We slept on the ground next to the aircraft. Long transit back out to the ship at first light.

AL BASRAH

Tasked with supporting the British forces around Basrah again, my section launches off the ship in the mid-afternoon and proceeds to the British headquarters, which is outside the city. Arriving at their location, we shut down our aircraft in order to conduct a face-to-face briefing with them. After having

some difficulty communicating with them earlier in the war, I want to ensure that we're on the same sheet of music. Talking to their U.S. air liaison team on the ground, "Howdy", who's my wingman, and I are tasked to screen north of the city to check out suspected sites where the Iraqis are waiting to ambush British ground forces. We depart the Brit headquarters and fly to the north side of the city, where we begin conducting armed reconnaissance. As soon as we began our search, Kujo locates military equipment bunkers where the Iraqis had stockpiled ammunitions and weapons for their troops. The bunkers are everywhere. To describe the bunkers, they are basically about the size of a two-car garage. There is no roof. And the walls are large dirt berms that a bulldozer has made. They are good to protect against ground fire, but essentially worthless against aircraft. As we size up the weapons cache, Kujo spots an AAA piece with large stashes of ammunition at the ready near it. Kujo engages with a TOW missile. Rolling off target, I spot Iraqi tanks in bunkers. They're T-62 tanks, which are exports from the Former Soviet Union. One by one, we begin to pick off the tanks with our TOWs and Hellfires. Finally running out of missiles, we race back to the FARP for reloads. As we arrive at the FARP, I spot a Marine truck convoy departing the airstrip. Our ordnance team had gotten word to leave the FARP and proceed up to the north to the next base. Without the ordnancemen, we won't get any reloads. Trying to flag them down from the air, I finally decide that the only way to get them to stop is to land on the road in front of them. Once I landed the aircraft, Kujo jumped out and ran over to tell the convoy commander that we need them to go back to the airfield. Thankfully, they complied. We race back up to the north. Approaching the site where we had last attacked, we discover more Iraqi tanks. One by one, the tanks explode. Iraqi soldiers were diving into bunkers and shooting back. Setting up from the west, Howdy and I roll in to attack the bunkers with flechette and high explosive rockets. Done with that area, we resume our search. Just to the north of the tanks, we locate some military trucks with military supplies and ammunition in the back. We destroy 5 of them. Confident that we've hit everything that was a threat, we head back to the Brits' location to shut down and get some food. It's funny... the Brits were having trouble getting air support because they weren't in extremis like a lot of the other coalition forces... so we were the only air support for them that whole day. When we asked for some food, we were expecting a full British MRE, which we had heard great things about. Instead, all they gave us was one packet of a heated meal. Nevertheless, it was pretty good.

Launching out again that evening in support of the Brits, they had tasked us to attack a suspected covert meeting site that the Fedeyeen forces had been using. Following that, we were to attack the Ba'ath Party headquarters in Basrah. Lastly, we would fly up and conduct visual reconnaissance for some of the Brit infantry units. Upon launching, we realized that the Iraqis had started some oil fires in the outskirts of Basrah. What they would do is dig a large trench with a bulldozer, and then fill the trench with oil. To obscure visibility for aircraft, they'd light the trenches on fire, which would put up a thick black smoke into the air. That night, the smoke was hanging in the air from 350 feet to about 1,000 feet. Working our way around the southern side of Basrah, so that we can find the Fedeyeen meeting site, we begin to take a heavy amount of small arms fire. We could see the muzzle flashes on the ground as the Iraqis were trying to shoot us. The volume of fire is enough that we have to turn around and move back to the western side of the city. From there, we move to the firing position we had selected to engage the Ba'ath Party headquarters. Finding the three buildings on the FLIR, Kujo begins to pump Hellfire missiles into the buildings. "Mookster", who is Howdy's copilot, begins to shoot TOW missiles at maximum range into the buildings. It was quite a sight watching all these missiles going down range. After hitting the buildings, we proceed up north to meet up with the infantry unit. They had taken fire recently from a village to the north of their position. We couldn't find anything. We took gas, and then proceeded 60 miles to our new home ashore in Jalibah.

THE ROAD TO AL KUT

The next mission cycle I flew in was to support the Marines as they moved up the highways between An Nasariyah and Al Kut. We launched in the early afternoon to head up north. Upon reaching the front lines, the FAC that we were to support had his unit stopped along a road while they reconnoitered a small village up ahead. On arrival, we were tasked to check out the village. Not fully aware of the threat, we pushed north along the highway to check out the village. As we moved around the western side of the small town, large black puffs started appearing around our aircraft. After a pregnant pause, loud booms were heard. Someone in the village was firing large caliber AAA at us. Screaming to break left into the radio, our flight turned hard and moved back to friendlies. Kujo, ever the wizard, lased the AAA battery

and got a location. Passing that location to the FAC, Marine artillery put salvo after salvo of high explosives on the enemy site, which was most impressive. Would hate to be on the receiving end of that. We return to a FARP for gas, and then back up to the fight. That evening, the Marines had once again gone into the defense for the night. Iraqis were still using unconventional tactics... guerilla type movements. They'd attack our boys in small groups and set up roadblocks using telephone poles along the roads.

Pushing toward Al Kut and Baghdad, the next mission cycle was supporting the Marines as they blocked the Republican Guard from retreating from Al Kut to Baghdad. Meeting up with the Grunts near a river, we began to conduct reconnaissance forward of the friendly lines. To their north, we located an Iraqi artillery position. At the same time, the FAC wanted us to return to their position to engage some Iraqis that had camouflaged themselves near a large ditch embankment. Racing back to the Marines, we engaged the Iraqis with rockets and guns. Hit the trench line and a truck. Back up at the artillery site, Kujo begins to shoot the missiles at the artillery tubes. We destroyed 5 guns and 2 trucks. One of the trucks was carrying fuel and when hit by Kujo's missile, disappeared in a high order explosion.

FROM AL KUT TO BAGHDAD

One evening, we were launched to a FARP to stand strip alert. We were prepared to support any Marine units through the night. No launch order was received. At approximately four in the morning, we were preparing to launch back down to our base at Jalibah when a launch order was given for us to support Fifth Marines as they began their push up the highway toward Baghdad. Tired, but excited at the prospect of seeing some action after a long night of waiting, we raced toward the contact point. As we approached their position in the predawn light, we could see bombs from our jets going off in the distance. Arriving at Fifth Marines' location, we contacted the FAC. Our assignment was to screen forward of their nightly position, in anticipation of the massive movement toward the capital. Looking forward of our friendly lines, we spotted an Iraqi unit that had dug in around a mosque. All around the yard surrounding the religious facility, the Iraqis had put their military trucks, command and control vans, and weapons in the tree line surrounding the mosque, thinking that we wouldn't be able to engage them for fear of hitting the church. Kujo and I opened up with Hellfire missiles. "Wally" and "Tinkle", my wingmen, engaged the targets as well. Looking down at Fifth Marines, all the Marines were out for their morning coffee... and watching the show. I spotted a fuel truck in the tree line. Hit it with a rocket from 3 kilometers. Massive explosion. And not a scratch of damage to the mosque.

The night portion of one mission was supporting one of my old friends, "Sideshow", who is a Cobra pilot assigned to a Marine Grunt unit as their FAC. Salman Pak is a small town located about 30 miles or so from Baghdad, along the banks of the Tigris River. That night, I was flying overhead cover for Sideshow's unit. His armored vehicles were moving toward Salman Pak, which had a large contingent of Iraqi army troops. The night prior, a West Coast Cobra had crashed in this area. It had apparently hit a set of large power lines. Around Baghdad, the power lines were about 350 feet high. The wires and the stanchions are tan in color... so they are next to impossible to see during the day... and you almost never see them at night. About 11:00 p.m., we were orbiting just to the west of Salman Pak, looking into the city with our infrared sensors and our night vision goggles. After several reconnaissance sweeps, we detected an Iraqi military compound in the center of the town, and it contained a surface to air missile battery and other military hardware that the Iraqis were using to defend the town.

I maneuvered the flight to the west, and I rolled my aircraft in to the target so that we could shoot the missile battery with one of our missiles. As Kujo was lining up the shot, I noticed two flashes from my right side. Looking over, I saw two heat-seeking missiles racing up toward our aircraft. Rolling the aircraft into a violent nose-down maneuver and expending decoy flares, we screamed for the ground to break the lock that the missiles had on our aircraft. We had started out at 800 feet or so above the ground, and I pulled the nose up around 100 feet. After bottoming out of the dive, we had descended all the way down to 50 feet, and had successfully broke lock with the missiles. As we recovered back up to a higher altitude, we realized that high power tension lines surrounded us. Two miracles occurred that night. First, we managed to not get hit by the missiles; and second, we somehow managed not to hit these large power lines, which were like spaghetti all over the ground in that area. I remember screaming into the radio at my wingman, "MISSILES, RIGHT TWO O'CLOCK, BREAK!" My copilot was busy screaming

"WIRES, WIRES, WIRES!" The whole event happened in slow motion. Seemed like an eternity. But in reality, the whole engagement was over in about 4 seconds or so. Those heat-seeking missiles travel at about Mach 2.5 (about 1,700 MPH). Not a lot of time to react... and not enough time to be scared. I saw Sideshow up in Tikrit toward the end of the war. He told me those missiles had missed me by about 50 feet. We laugh about it now... kind of.

On another day mission, we're working the highway that connects Al Kut to Baghdad. To the north of that highway, a Marine unit is screening into the countryside. Iraqi tanks are located in that vicinity. Talking to the FAC, he cannot observe the Iraqis from his position, so he delegates the clearance to fire to me. Checking in on station at the same time is a section of Air Force A-10s with the callsign Eager 31 and 32. Giving them my coordinates, I directed the A-10s to my position. Simultaneously, I cleared Wally, who was my wingman, to start engaging the Iraqi tanks. With the A-10s overhead, I began to talk their eyes onto the various tank targets. Clearing them to use their 30-millimeter cannon, they roll in from above and begin to strafe the tanks. Their cannon is so loud that I can hear it from 2 miles away in my aircraft. It was quite an awesome sight. That day, we destroyed eight T-72 tanks.

As the battle for Baghdad was in full swing, one early morning, we were just about complete with our strip alert and on the verge of taking off and heading back down to Jalibah to get some sleep. We receive a launch order to proceed to Baghdad. Evidently, there was a large fight building in the downtown area of the city. Arriving at the suburbs of the city at first light, we begin to hold in an area that we felt was relatively safe. Down on the ground, urban Iraqis were outside of their houses watching us flying around. It made you nervous – you couldn't tell who was friendly, and who wanted to harm you. Something as simple as watching men looking up at you while talking on a cell phone made you wonder just who they were talking to on the other end of the phone. Traveling as a light division (3 AH-1Ws), we continue to hold and try to sort out what is going on in the city before we stick our noses in. Howdy is one of my wingmen. He takes a small caliber round into his engine door. The fight in the city was too hot. Without the specific approval of the commanding general, we can't go in to provide fire support. Frustration mounts because the FAC wants us to come into the city to conduct reconnaissance; but the volume of fire coming up out of the city is too high. Out of gas, we start our trek back to Jalibah.

BAGHDAD TO TIKRIT

As the fight for Baghdad concluded, the Iraqi forces that still wanted to resist moved up north to Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. Needing to relocate to be closer to the fight, a portion of the MAG moved up to an abandoned airstrip outside of Salman Pak.

My first day flying out of Salman Pak, we were directed to escort a Marine ground unit that was working its way north out of Baghdad. Once I contact the FAC, I realize that it's my friend Sideshow, again. Running out of maps, Sideshow asks me to reconnoiter a route for his vehicles to travel safely. He's attempting to get over to one of the major highways without getting decisively engaged with the Iraqis. Talking to the lead vehicle in his large column, we begin to give steering commands to the drivers: turn right... take your next left by the two-story building. Out in front of Sideshow's unit, we located Iraqi artillery waiting for the Marine unit to come within range. Setting up with Wally, we begin to engage the artillery battery. After destroying it, Sideshow's unit proceeds. Running out of gas, we race for Salman Pak, and we meet up with one of our UH-1N Hueys, flown by "Friar". He joins my section. We proceed back up to Sideshow's location and continue escorting his column into the night. Upon our return to Salman Pak for the night, our mechanics discovered bullet holes in one of my rocket pods. Good thing they didn't penetrate and set off the ordnance hanging on my aircraft.

Launching out the next day as a hunter – killer team (2 AH-1Ws and 1 UH-1N), we're directed to a landing zone located in the city of Baghdad. Proceeding to their location, we fly overhead and see that the Marines are located in a soccer stadium in the city. We land at their location. Hundreds of Iraqis are standing out in the streets watching us land. Feel extremely vulnerable... again. Climbing out of the aircraft, I tell Kujo, who is staying in the Cobra, that if he starts taking fire, to take off and get the aircraft to safety. Conducting a face-to-face brief with the FAC, our understanding is that they want to use the Huey as a command and control platform, but they won't need them for another couple of hours. Friar, the Huey pilot, volunteers to stay at the landing zone. I don't want to keep the Cobras there because they

tend to be temperamental when it comes to starting them back up. The Cobras launch and we head up to the north near Samara to get gas and locate the new FARP.

Near sunset, we head back down to Baghdad to join Friar in the landing zone in Baghdad. Landing at night, I leave Kujo in the aircraft with the same instructions: if you start taking fire, get the aircraft out of here. Heading into the command post, we're debating with the FAC on what the proper use of our aircraft is in this situation. As we're walking out of the command post, one of the duty officers calls out that there will be a large explosion in the next few minutes because the Marines are going to demolish a building with explosives.

Walking back out into the night to the aircraft, as I'm climbing into the rear seat, a huge explosion goes off just outside of the soccer stadium complex. I haven't plugged in to the intercom yet, and I can feel Kujo starting to roll the throttles from idle up to the open position. He's starting to pull in power for takeoff and I haven't even gotten all the way in the aircraft yet. Getting on the intercom, I begin to scream that the explosion was friendly fire. It was the demolitions going off that the duty officer had yelled about. Kujo, up to that point had no clue as to what was going on... and was ready to get the hell out of there! Settling him down, he relaxes to the point where we managed to not go blasting into the night with me hanging half out of the aircraft! I chuckle about it now... Kujo doesn't!

We flew more ground escort that evening. Long trains of vehicles pouring out of Baghdad, as the Marines moved up north of the city to pursue the retreating Iraqis.

MY FINAL BATTLE

Launching out of Salman Pak as a hunter – killer team, we proceed toward Tikrit, where the last Iraqi resistance is still standing. One of the Iraqi airfields outside that city was being used as a FARP. Approaching the FARP and contacting them on the radio, we're informed that they are taking artillery fire from the Iraqis. With plenty of gas remaining, my flight begins to conduct reconnaissance to the southeast of the FARP, in hopes of finding the Iraqis who were firing on the Marines at the FARP. Flying over a date tree grove, we find what we're looking for: Iraqi artillery and surface-to-surface rockets. As the sun is setting, we await permission from the command and control system to engage. As the sun sets, we are given approval to attack. Rolling in from the north, we begin to engage the Iraqi artillery. Rockets and 20-millimeter cannon fire hit the tree lines. Setting up for subsequent attacks from the west, my CO's section joins the fight. After multiple passes with our cannons, rockets and missiles, the Iraqi artillery and rockets are destroyed and burning.

After receiving gas and more weapons at the FARP, we launch out to the west, where Howdy is beginning to engage an Iraqi bunker complex. The whole complex was about 500 acres worth of large warehouse buildings and berms containing Iraqi ammunition that was being used to re-supply what remained of Iraq's armed forces. Requesting as much jets with bombs as he can get, Howdy begins to direct the laser guided bombs onto the various targets. My hunter – killer team orients to the north side of the complex and begins to shoot missiles into the multitude of bunkers. The explosions ripping out of the complex go six thousand feet into the air. The night sky is so bright that you can see without NVGs. Sympathetic explosions rip from bunker to bunker. The explosions are so intense that mushroom clouds erupt from the inferno. As Howdy runs out of gas, he hands off the forward air control duties to me. Using our laser, I begin to direct the jets into the target area. Designating targets for laser guided bombs and missiles, I pick up where Howdy left off. The explosions are increasing in intensity. I recall seeing several movies where the explosions and special effects were awe-inspiring... but I never thought that it looked realistic. This night, the explosions from the bunker complex far exceeded anything I had ever seen in a movie theater.

Out of gas, we race back to the Tikrit FARP for gas and more ammunition. Back up at the complex, I begin directing as the forward air controller again. As I was hovering to control the jets, Kujo is pumping more missiles into the unhit bunkers. Wally, in the Cobra next to me, is engaging bunkers with his missiles. Friar, in the Huey, is orbiting behind us to provide security. After lasing for approximately 25 laser guided bombs and missiles, Friar calls out that we're taking fire. In the light provided by the huge explosions, an Iraqi artillery unit had zeroed in on our position, and we began to take fire. Moving away

from the artillery explosions, another Iraqi unit began to fire missiles at us. The enlisted crew chiefs in Friar's Huey return fire. Our flight pushes clear of the area and back to the FARP.

After a short rest at the FARP, we launch to assess the damage to the bunker complex. Circling to the south, we locate another Iraqi storage facility about ten miles to the south of the original. At this location, Iraqi military trucks are pulling into the warehouses and bunkers to load ammunition to take to their units. Getting permission to engage the target, we first begin by directing a jet to drop a laser-guided bomb on a warehouse that munitions were being loaded. The bomb obliterated the building. Requesting as many bomb-laden aircraft as possible, we begin to destroy the storage point, building by building, using only our laser designator. The Iraqis had stored enough munitions in this whole area to supply them in their fight against us for years. Explosions rocked the whole sky. Geysers of fire are still erupting from the bunkers to the north. The whole world appears to be on fire.

After depleting our missiles, rockets, gun ammunition and gas, we head back to the Tikrit FARP... then fly back down to our temporary base at Salman Pak. Although I would fly more security missions in the days and weeks to come, that was my last real fight of the war.

MINDSET

In e-mail from friends and family, I've been asked many times about fear. I do not recall, throughout my life, being confronted with a situation that combined real physical and emotional fear. I know that there were many times in my life that I was afraid of something... early last year, I almost lost my Dad and I felt completely helpless and childlike because I couldn't make my Dad's health instantly better... and in aviation, I've been in scenarios that have made me physically uncomfortable. But upon reflection, I think this was my first introduction to total fear. Let me tell you, real fear is paralyzing. Real fear has a taste and smell to it... and it's bitter. I chalk up my survival in those situations to training. During those particularly trying times, fear consumes ninety-nine percent of your being. It's that teeny-tiny one percent of your brain and body that defaults back to your training that keeps you from succumbing to the panic... and allows you to take the appropriate actions to survive. Every single one of the pilots in my squadron will admit to a time in this war when they were afraid. It's the ability to control that emotion that counts toward staying alive.

In my occupational field, one thing that we discuss is "compartmentalization", which is the act of putting away all your extraneous thoughts and emotions while you fly. That allows you to focus more on the task at hand. Before many flights, I went through an emotional rollercoaster. I had a lot of apprehension just prior to each flight. It wasn't for questioning whether we were doing the right thing... because I knew that we were. I always took pause because I was afraid of my children growing up without their father. I was scared of my wife living a life without me in it. I wasn't necessarily concerned with my physical safety in combat, but rather the consequences if I were hurt or killed. I remember a particular flight, when I was launching from Jalibah: On this particular day, we had received indications that the Iraqis had used chemical weapons on one of the U.S. Army units near Baghdad. I recall a very sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as I walked to the aircraft. The thought of chemical weapons being used to cause massive casualties was mind numbing. That was one thing that I truly feared. I felt like I had a thousand pound weight on my shoulders as I walked to the aircraft. Thankfully, the report turned out to be false. But fear is the absolute motivator: fear of dying and fear of letting down your fellow Marine.

From my perspective of being an attack helicopter pilot, the war was not something that just took up part of the day... it was a 24/7 mindset. Unlike a jet squadron, whose pilots are only flying for a couple of hours each day, and get to return back to their creature comforts in Kuwait or on the aircraft carrier, a light/attack helicopter squadron is always on the move with the infantry. In order for us to keep up with their movement to the north, we were constantly repositioning our squadron to provide the best fire support available to them. Although jets played a key role in the outcome of the war by bombing strategic and tactical targets before our ground forces arrived, it was the Cobra that the Grunts wanted for close air support. When Marines are in contact on the ground and the enemy is close, a jet just can't hit the target without fear of hitting friendlies... even with all the precision guided munitions that were touted in the news during the war. Close air support is our bread and butter... and that was our motivation and

purpose throughout the war – to provide close in fire support to the ground combat element... whether that be killing the enemy at arms length... or doing it up close and personal.

It's amazing what affect combat has on your senses. Your vision becomes that of an eagle. Your hearing is nearly bionic. Your sense of feel is keen. You can listen to the two radios and the intercom all at the same time and never miss a single word. Even your sense of smell is aroused. Weeks into the war, when we were on the verge of exhaustion, every time I climbed into the cockpit, it was like a jolt of lightening hit me... and the adrenaline rush lasted until I was climbing back out. I think the longest period I flew continuously was for just over fourteen and a half hours straight. On average, I think I was logging about nine and a half hours each time I flew. The fatigue definitely accumulated over time.

I've seen the fragility of life. In this war, I've seen some of my brother Marines die. I've taken lives of men who were either trying to kill me, or one of my fellow Marines. I've witnessed, in a cold-blooded manner, just how quickly a life can end. One second you're alive, and then next, you're dead. There's no fanfare. There's no drama. It's like a light switch... on... then off. It makes you strengthen your convictions with God, and those that you love.

One of the key goals of my squadron was to bring everyone home alive. And unlike any other Cobra/Huey squadron in theater, we accomplished just that.

THE LANDSCAPE AND THE IRAQI PEOPLE

I think from watching CNN at certain points in the war, most people think that Iraq is a vast desert. That's primarily true for the southern third of the country, but not a correct assumption for the entire nation. The southern area that I flew in was a wide-open desert. No hills, mountains, or even real sand dunes to speak of. Flat as a pancake. About 20 miles north of Jalibah, as you near rivers, you began to see farm fields and livestock. Fields were intermingled with sandy areas. Reminded me of the outskirts of Yuma, Arizona, where my family and I lived for three years. Nearing Al Kut, the soil was much more rich, and water plentiful through irrigation ditches. The scenery reminded me of the Midwest... and in particular, the area in northwest Ohio where I grew up. North of Baghdad all the way up to Tikrit, the land was relatively flat, with some waterways cutting through. Near the rivers and streams were farms, and away from those areas was open desert. Between An Nasariyah and Al Kut, there is a large lake. Stuck out like a sore thumb because here you are in the middle of the open desert, and there's a large body of water. There's no towns or villages near it. One day as we were flying over the lake, I looked down and saw some beautiful flamingos flying. They were pink and black. In a world of dull colors with a tan desert and a hazy light blue sky, those birds are still extremely vivid to me.

Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, was a militant society that translated to a military presence nearly everywhere in the country. Almost all the small towns had a military barracks. Spread throughout all the vast deserts was bunkers of ammunition and fighting positions for the Iraqi armed forces. Small military airfields were sporadically located throughout the entire country. It was a martial state. It really caught my eye.

A good portion of my flying experiences in Iraq was at night. But most flights started out in the day, as I would transit up to the front lines in the daylight hours to be in position to fight at night. Likewise, at the end of a long night of fighting, we'd make our transit back to our base after first light. So most of my experiences with seeing the Iraqi people occurred either around dinnertime, or around the time that they were waking to start the day. The Iraqi people varied from locale to locale. In general though, when the fighting was nearby, they would ignore you flying over them. But once the fighting moved north of their location a day or so later, they'd be outside waving to you. Almost all houses and civilian cars had white flags on them to identify to coalition forces that they were not a threat.

The hardest of the Iraqi people were the Bedouins. Generally, the Bedouins tended to flocks of livestock, like goats and sheep. They all live in very large tents in the middle of the desert, often a hundred or more miles from even a paved road. They all had large stake-bed trucks, so that they could pickup and move from location to location as required. These gypsy-like people mostly lived in the southern barren desert regions in Iraq. Not overly friendly, most of the time they wouldn't lift their eyes when you would fly over.

The next group of people in Iraq was the rural farmers and town folk. These were probably the friendliest people, at least from my perspective. As long as there wasn't actual fighting going on near them, they were outside their houses waving every single time we'd fly over. Women, children and even the men would wave as we were on our way to rid them of Hussein's regime. Some days, you felt like your arm was going to fall off from waving to all the children as you passed them.

The last group of people was the urbanites and Hussein loyalists. This group was mostly in Baghdad, and up in Tikrit, which was Hussein's hometown. Never waving, they'd scurry into their houses or hide behind walls until you flew past. They made you nervous. Around those areas, you never knew where the next threat would come from. That's probably a touch of paranoia on my part, but large crowds or congested areas where a lot of people lived, made us nervous. You'd avoid them because sooner or later, someone would be taking a shot at you.

That evokes a particular memory: we were shooting in support of one of the Marine units moving up the road toward Al Kut. As we were conducting armed reconnaissance just in front of friendlies, the FAC directed us to take a look at some vehicles just up the road from his position. Approaching the scene, a family had gotten out of their car and was waiting for the U.S. forces to push past them. Sitting in the middle of the family was the father, who was an Iraqi soldier in uniform, just waiting for his chance to surrender so that he could be with his family again full time. In my mind, that man had honor.

The impoverish conditions that most of the Iraqi people live is unfathomable to nearly all Americans. You have to see it to believe it. Most of us cannot comprehend living in a house whose walls are made out of mud, with a dirt floor, and a reed thatched roof. That's just not in the rural areas, but in and around the major cities as well. Most children had no shoes on their feet. Many homes didn't have roofs. My lasting impression was that the people of Iraq were stuck in the nineteenth century, except for the elite.

In Iraq, there are the "Haves" and the "Have Nots". There is no middle class. As poor as the Have Nots were, which were the vast majority of the population, it was ludicrous to see how rich the Haves were. Whether they were Ba'ath Party officials, or members of Hussein's family, the elite in Iraq lived like kings. I got to fly by a few of Hussein's palaces in the country. They were huge. In my mind's eye, they outsized mid-evil European castles. Large and ornate, their design was lavish to the point of absurd, considering how poor the rest of the country is. Most of the people didn't have electricity... yet those privileged few got to live in houses and palaces that must have cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build.

LIVING CONDITIONS

I started the war out living on the boat. I didn't realize just how good life was on a ship until I went ashore! Our main base in Jalibah was an abandoned Iraqi air force base. It didn't look like it had been used since before the Gulf War. There were no buildings... just the runways and the taxiways. The sand at Jalibah was like talcum powder. And the slightest breeze would stir the sand up into the air. It was a miserable place to live. Over the course of the war, the creature comforts at Jalibah improved. After a period of time, we had shower tents and hot meals available. We lived in tents with the sand as the floor. During the day, the temperature reached between ninety and one hundred fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. Thankfully, it was relatively cool at night.

When we moved up to Salman Pak, it was like moving to Heaven. Near farmlands, there wasn't much dust or sand in the air. Temperatures were about 20 degrees cooler than Jalibah. Although we slept on the ground there, it was worth giving up a cot just to have tolerable temperatures.

It's funny to hear the stories from the jet squadrons that were stationed at Al Jabar Air Base in Kuwait, which served both Marine Corps squadrons and Air Force squadrons. There, they had a full time cafeteria, which served ice cream, and had pastries delivered daily from a bakery out in town, air-conditioned tents and ice machines. That wasn't exactly "roughing it". Now mind you, I didn't get to live like a crowned prince like the guys stationed at Al Jabar... but I also didn't have to live like a pauper, which were the infantry guys who were slugging it out on a daily basis.

MY FINAL TAKE-AWAYS

I'm truly humbled by what I witnessed and participated in. This has been an incredible experience for me. This one-month period alone has changed my perspective on life more than any other event could have possibly done. I had a unique opportunity to observe heroes in action, to witness the horrors of death, to help in freeing an enslaved people, and to see the power of the United States in action. Each flight, I got to experience fear, anxiety, anxiousness, and joy. I got to form friendships that will last a lifetime. I got to realize the importance of my family. I got to tell each member of my family how much I love them in e-mail or in a letter. I got to get reacquainted with my Catholic faith.

Make no mistake about it – the individual Marine rifleman won this war. Pundits, armchair quarterbacks, and talking heads on television will plug their special interests for years to come... all in the name of getting a larger slice of the defense budget for their pet project. Air power activists will gloat over precision-guided munitions and tactical jets. Naval aviation will wallow over their role. Armor advocates will flaunt the role of the tank. Even attack helicopter enthusiasts will covet the role that the AH-1W played in the war. All the particular genres of warfare will find a voice in an attempt to convince the public, and hence the Congress, which appropriates the budget, that their particular piece of gear was the reason we won the war. Never overlook that it all boiled down to the Marine rifleman... the man who held the ground, killed the enemy, fed the children, and feared death at every turn. No piece of gear will ever replace him.

For almost fifteen years, I have trained to perfect my trade. This was the ultimate test. The pilots and Marines that I was surrounded by displayed incredible heroism, uncommon courage, and profound compassion to their fellow man, whether that man is American or Iraqi. The Marines that surrounded me are men of steel – from the flight line mechanic, to the administrative clerk, from the nugget pilot, to the seasoned aviator... and especially the Marine rifleman – all heroes. We won with honor and dignity.

I close with a quote from a letter that Major General James Mattis, the Commanding General of First Marine Division, sent to his Marines just prior to the war kicking off. To borrow his words, "While we will move swiftly and aggressively against those who resist, we will treat all others with decency, demonstrating chivalry and soldierly compassion for people who have endured a lifetime under Saddam's oppression... 'No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy' than a U.S. Marine."

God bless America.

Jamie

Major Jamie Cox
Operations Officer
Marine Light/Attack Helicopter Squadron 269
Operation Iraqi Freedom, March - April 2003

** The official callsign of Marine Light/Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 269 is 'Gunrunner'. However, during a majority of the war, HMLA-269 was assigned the callsign 'Deadly'.*