

Independence Day in Iraq

July 25, 2003

Hello family,

I promised a story about how I came to spend my 4th of July on the ground in Iraq but was waiting on some digital pictures from one of the others on the trip to offer a pictorial account of our journey. I now have those photos. The tale begins in mid-June...

Every military theater of operations has a headquarters known as either the Joint- or, as is the case here, Combined Air Operations Center. The CAOC (“kay-ock”) is where all theater airborne assets are managed—from tasking, to real-time monitoring, to post-mission report collection.

Each aviation unit in theater sends one or more representatives to the CAOC to help manage their particular piece of the air pie. Folks from Air Force wings, Marine units, Navy aircraft carriers, and foreign services are all there rubbing elbows.

The USS Nimitz rotates a couple experienced aviators through the liaison role roughly every three weeks—any less and you’d have a revolving door at our CAOC desk / any longer would create currency and proficiency issues when aircrew return to carrier flight operations. On June 22, my name was selected (...well, I volunteered, I needed a change of pace and thought the experience might be interesting). Two days later I packed a few necessities and departed the ocean for the desert.

The coalition air base at Al Udeid, Qatar is not much to look at. The CAOC is in a large, no-frills hangar. Bathrooms are in outhouses or temporary trailers. Service members live in several hundred 12-man green or tan canvas tents in “Camp Andy.” Fortunately, the tents have wonderful AC and are plenty dark inside, but in all other regards it is akin to primitive camping.



The average daily summer temperature in Al Udeid is about 108°F with winds frequently up to 25 knots. Walking the quarter mile from Camp Andy to the CAOC is like traversing a sand-blowing hair dryer set on *high*.

Working at the CAOC was a no-brainer. With the focus of Operation Iraqi Freedom shifting to the unconventional ground war, the air piece was relatively quiet. My role was mainly coordinating daily operations and resolving the occasional minor issue (aka, whack-a-mole). But the best part: when the ship isn’t flying, we don’t work, since we only liaise for our own unit.

On Wednesday night, July 2nd, we were monitoring the few remaining OIF flights making their way back to the ship, looking forward to several quiet days while the Nimitz was in-port Dubai for the American Holiday. Just as we were about to wrap up for the night, word came down that one of our jets in the very last flight experienced a problem while aerial refueling and diverted to Tallil—a captured Iraqi airfield being used for logistics and basing. To make matters worse, one of the aircraft's tires, highly pressurized for carrier operations, burst while braking on landing rollout. The jet and pilot were stuck.

It took most of the evening and the next morning to coordinate the rescue effort. Tallil supports transient aircraft and an Air Force A-10 *Thunderbolt* squadron but their personnel are not trained to work on our carrier's Hornets—even if they had the necessary replacement tire (which they did not). So we needed to transport our own personnel and equipment to repair the jet. One of my duties was to arrange the transportation for the two enlisted maintenance personnel and their tools. Shortly before their helicopter landed I had a brilliant idea.

"Hey XO," I said to our senior liaison present from the ship, "why don't I escort these guys to Tallil? I know the transportation specifics and can work that to let them concentrate on fixing the jet. Plus, as an officer, I'll have a little more horsepower should they need something."

The XO agreed and just like that I was again off to a combat zone. But this time, on the ground.

Now, for aviators, "combat" over Iraq is pretty sterile at the moment, thanks in part to a speed and altitude sanctuary. Furthermore, when we return to the ship, we have hot food and hot showers (most of the time) and safe, reasonably comfortable racks to sleep in. Foot soldiers don't enjoy such luxuries; they are constantly exposed to the heat, the dirt, the smell, and of course, the enemy.

Call me crazy but I thought it would be exciting to be on the ground in Iraq, when else would I have this opportunity? So, without even grabbing a toothbrush or change of skivvies (this was to be a simple overnight affair), I met the two maintenance troopers at the helicopter and moved them and their equipment to the awaiting C-130 Hercules that would take us in-country.

Remember that 108° temperature mentioned earlier? Yeah, that's when you're *not* standing on an asphalt tarmac with a C-130 APU exhaust blowing even hotter air directly on you. It had to be 120° or more as we humped the gear from the truck to the plane. The three of us were drenched in sweat.



We finished up and clambered aboard for what we thought would be a short flight when we learned Tallil was the Herc's second stop. First stop? Baghdad.

We mostly slept during the two-and-a-half-hour flight to Baghdad but came to as the engines changed pitch and we began descending. Unlike the other passengers, I did not bother pressing my nose up against the small windows since I had flown over this area dozens of times before—and with a much better view, frankly. We touched down at “BIAP” (Baghdad International Airport) and parked on a transient ramp where a bus whisked us away to a holding area while the C-130 refueled and offloaded cargo.

Apparently, the local troops knew to keep transients like us corralled so we wouldn't wander around in harm's way, which was a bummer because I wanted see all I could. But even from there, small black helicopters could be seen buzzing back and forth about the airfield like angry bees. Humvees and other military vehicles sped by with serious-looking soldiers manning all sorts of weaponry: .50 caliber and smaller bore machine guns, grenade launchers, and TOW missile launchers, to name a few. We snapped a few pictures and, lacking any other brilliant ideas, I stooped over and picked up a few stones and put them in my pocket as mementos. They are now here on the ship with me in an envelope labeled *Rocks from Baghdad* but, truth is, they look like they could be from about anywhere.



The C-130 was ready in short order so we re-boarded for the hop to Tallil. We landed an hour later and were met planeside by “Potsie,” the stranded pilot and a good friend and former squadron mate from a previous tour (in fact, this was our third deployment together). The maintainers wasted no time getting to work on the disabled jet as Potsie regaled me with the story of how he came to be in Tallil.

“Uh, sir, you may want to come take a look at this...” the lead mechanic called shortly into his repairs. Turns out spinning pieces of the blown tire had damaged the trailing edge flap and two hydraulic fittings on the wheel's axle. *“We didn't bring any of those,”* he said glumly.

Potsie and the mechanic walked to the transient aircraft hut to contact the ship while the other sailor and I watched the sun set across the ramp, which—for the moment—was tranquil. As complicated as it had been to get the three of us and their tools to that point, and with the ship now in Dubai for R&R, no one was surprised when they came back out with the news: now we were all stuck.



With little more to do on the flight line then, we turned our attention to the next pressing issues: where we would spend the night and what was for dinner. The former was easy since Potsie had already spent the

previous evening in an otherwise empty transient tent. The latter proved more difficult, however, as the one and only chow hall had already closed for the evening. Since ordering a pizza wasn't an option we had to settle for the one thing available in abundance: MREs.

Meals Ready to Eat are modern day GI rations sealed in non-descript brown plastic with official and unexciting labels like "Chicken Patty," "Meatloaf," or "Pasta." Everything you need comes in that one brown package and, truth be told, they're actually not half bad. Of course, flavor and hunger are directly correlated—I imagine the novelty quickly wears off. The best part about an MRE, though, is the surprise inside. Only the main course is printed on the packaging so you never know if your "Lasagna" will come with, say, crackers or bread. Cheese spread or jelly are common accoutrements (I heard the coveted jalapeno cheese became a currency of sorts among soldiers), and there's usually some small sweet for dessert. The junior sailor with us, who was maybe all of 20 years old, was delighted to find a bag of Skittles in his MRE. Simple pleasures.

After dinner we wandered around camp to see just how bad our sister service members had it. Turns out there was a tent with rudimentary exercise equipment and another, aptly named the "Morale Tent," which featured computers with internet access, telephones to call home (and a long line of soldiers waiting for them), video games, and books, magazines, and puzzles. Just outside the Morale Tent flap was a Red Cross distribution box full of salvation in the form of small bags stuffed with basic toiletries.

The four of us made our way back to the transient tent and sat around BS'ing for another hour or so. As midnight approached the conversation died down so someone cut the lights and it took no time for someone to start snoring. My last cognitive thought before drifting off was, "wow, I'm in Iraq. And tomorrow is the 4th of July..."

We awoke the following morning in time for a proper meal at the mess tent and then moseyed over to the A-10 squadron to make friends (you know, "birds of a feather..."). They took pity on our plight and loaned us a small pickup truck to tour around Tallil. Seeing as it was Independence Day, our first stop was to the makeshift post exchange to buy American flags.

Tallil had not served the Iraqi Air Force since the first Persian Gulf war in 1991, and it showed. Dilapidated reinforced bunkers, metal hangars, and other structures clearly showed where bombs once impacted. Damaged tanks, aircraft, and other military



equipment littered the airfield. It was a pungent reminder of the ugliness of war that most aviators never see. Like conquering heroes, we took pictures proudly displaying



our flags on old tanks and in front of bullet-hole-ridden Saddam murals. It was surreal, to say the least.

That evening, the A-10 guys invited us to join their holiday BBQ and bon fire. We feasted on steak and chicken while comparing notes on our aircraft and flight operations over Iraq. Any inter-service rivalry that existed between the Air Force and Navy back home was long forgotten as we were all brothers-in-arms there in Tallil, especially on the 4th of July.



On the 5th of July it became clear there would be no salvation until the ship returned to sea, so we spent the day becoming better acquainted with the Morale tent and generally eating too much, for lack of anything else to do. The liaison XO, realizing I was not serving much purpose there but exposed to unnecessary risk, directed me to return to Al Udeid. On the 6th, I bade farewell to Potsie, the two squadron maintainers, and our newfound Air Force friends and hopped a C-130 for the flight back.



The ship finally departed Dubai on July 7th but it took two more days to get the necessary parts all the way to Tallil. The jet was fixed late on the 9th and Potsie finally returned to the ship on the 10th after eight days in Tallil. The maintainers left shortly after Potsie, spent one night with us in Camp Andy, and returned to the ship on the 11th. My time in Al Udeid wrapped up a little over a week later.

I am thankful for the experience—it's one thing to celebrate our independence and freedoms every summer, but quite another to do so in a combat zone where the costs are so graphically demonstrated all around. (Talk about a lesson in 'perspective.')

For me, no 4th of July will ever be quite the same again. I only wish others could have the same epiphany....

