

Satirical tale of Army Reserve soldiers in Iraq War.

One Weekend A Month

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# **One Weekend A Month**

**Craig Trebilcock**

## AUTHOR'S FOREWARD

One Weekend a Month is a thinly fictionalized account of America's invasion of Iraq and the first year of occupation under Operation Iraqi Freedom. It depicts a year in the lives of an Army Reserve Civil Affairs unit thrust from the fast-moving, instant gratification culture of the West into the unyielding Oriental culture of the Middle East. All of the characters are fictional, although many of the events depicted are not.

In the wake of the Coalition battlefield victory in Spring, 2003, the Media, often isolated in their Baghdad hotels, has largely misunderstood the military reconstruction mission – relying on reporting body counts and broadcasting cliché footage of burning HMWWVs as a substitute for meaningful analysis. The Bush Administration, in turn, has likewise miscast the events in Iraq as primarily one of “Terror” versus freedom, rather than a clash of cultural values. This has left a concerned American public caught in the middle and desperately wondering, “What is *really* going on over there?” This book seeks to answer that question from the perspective of the soldiers who spend every day out among the Iraqis trying to improve their lot.

The one thing all of the self-proclaimed experts did get right after Baghdad fell was the belated realization that there was no plan for what was to happen once the shooting stopped. The failure of the US to have such a postwar plan, or to even understand the players in the game, is a miscalculation that will have ripple effects for the American people and the entire Middle East far into the Twenty First Century.

The key fallacy underlying the political decision to invade Iraq had nothing to do with the presence or absence of weapons of mass destruction. The fundamental misstep was the presumption that democracy would spring forth wherever the American liberty template was slapped down by the wise and benevolent USA. This naive belief had originally sprouted in the minds of US politicians in the 1990's, arising from successful populist uprisings within the Soviet Union and Serbia. Those revolutions, sparked by their citizens' desire for greater freedom, had radically shifted the international balance of power in favor of the West. Iraq is not Eastern Europe, however, and the idea that democracy is valued and sought by persons everywhere if only given a

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

chance, does not apply in the tribal-dominated and submission-to-authority oriented culture of Iraq.

Left as the sole superpower by the fall of the Soviet Union, America appeared to have an uncontested position from which to export its values and culture to a world it perceived as starving for its guidance. The “experts” in their think tanks and offices in Washington, D.C. did not envision that an underdeveloped desert society, based upon complete personal submission to the will of Allah and communal submission to the plenary will of tribal sheiks, might not be ready to embrace Jeffersonian ideals such as individual liberty, personal determination, and equality among men (and women).

For Iraqis, democracy is something that is embraced only while the Americans are in the room. When those unwelcome guests depart, the struggle for power and position returns to its essential Bedouin roots, wherein he who controls the resources lives and he who does not dies. Accordingly, those who advocate that the US military should remain in Iraq until meaningful democracy is established better strap in for a long, long ride.

War changes the people and societies it touches in ways that cannot be anticipated when conflict begins. One could not have predicted in September 1939 that the German invasion of Poland would ultimately thrust the USA and Soviet Union into a half-decade of military superpower status. One could not have predicted that an obscure naval skirmish in the Gulf of Tonkin in the mid-1960s would prove the spark for a social revolution in the United States and the hollowing out of the US military in the 1970s.

The Iraq War, known as Gulf War II by those who fought in it, is now changing our society and our military as well, in ways we cannot yet recognize. It was the first war of our modern era fought extensively by Reserve and National Guard troops. This is the story of a small group of well-intentioned Army Reservists from hometown America, caught up in that struggle, and forever changed by trying to deliver a gift that no one wanted.

ONE WEEKEND A MONTH



Figure 1 – Kuwait and Southern Iraq

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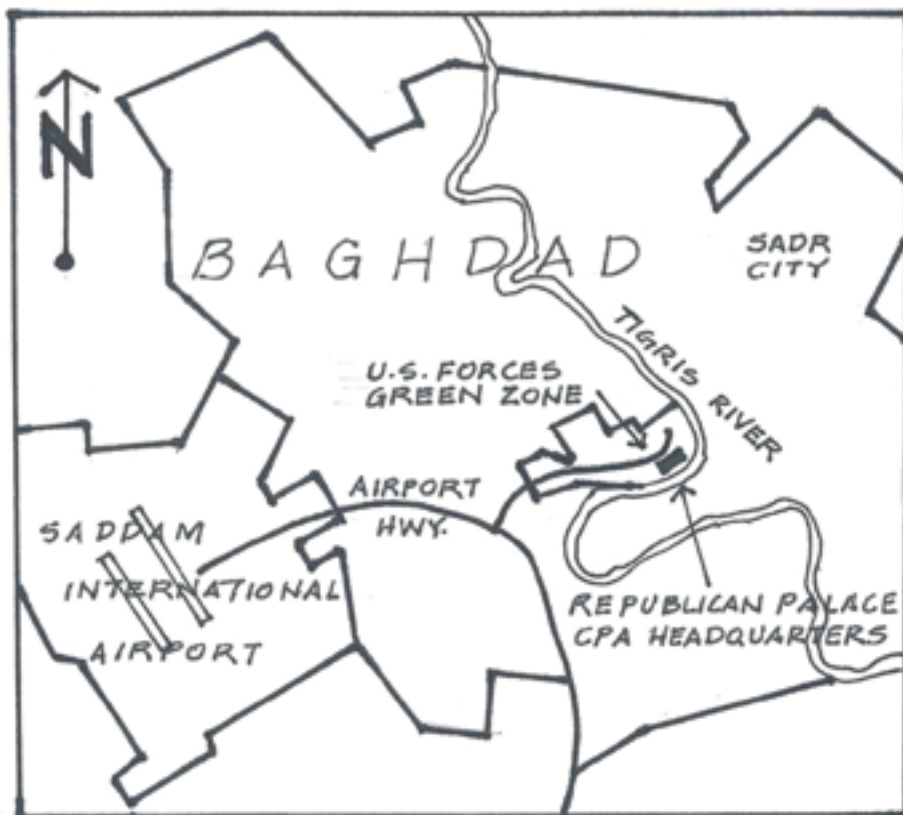


Figure 2 – Baghdad and Environs

ONE WEEKEND A MONTH

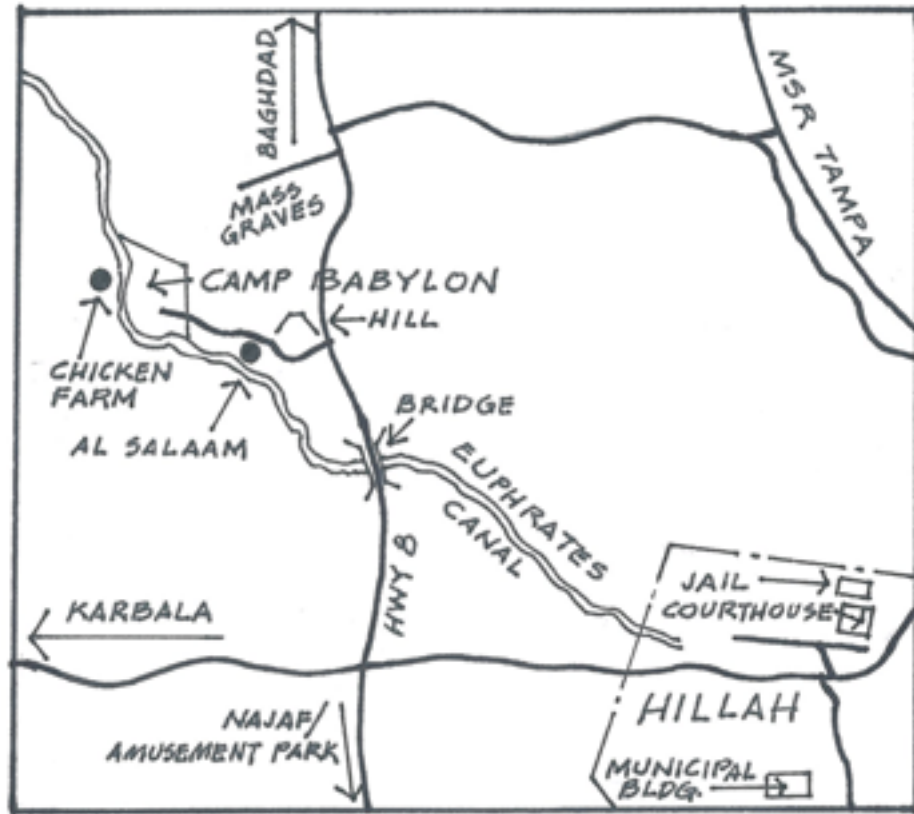


Figure 3 – Camp Babylon and Hillah

# Chapter 1

## The Heritage

When the 538<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Brigade was notified to prepare for possible deployment to Iraq in the fall of 2002, everyone in the unit was quite certain that a mistake had been made. The 538th was a one hundred forty man Army Reserve unit based in Baltimore, Maryland, whose mission was to provide support to the US Army Southern Command in Miami, Florida. Although called a *brigade*, the unit was really only a brigade headquarters unit that was in fact the size of a small company. During the average training year this placed members of the 538<sup>th</sup> in Central America or the Caribbean, where they lived in three-star hotels, caught the local tourist sights, and coordinated civic construction projects sponsored by Uncle Sam with local foreign officials. Dig a well; build a school; shake some hands. It was all good and helped parade America's benevolence to the Western Hemisphere's underdeveloped counties, where the US might need friends someday.

The one-weekend-a-month drills for the 538<sup>th</sup> were hardly challenging and a provided a nice source of extra income for unit members, who had car payments and mortgages to worry about. Drill consisted largely of generating reports, going to meetings and attending a parade of mind-numbing briefings that the Army Reserve Command in Atlanta, Georgia, considered essential to honing its fighting force to a razor's edge – "consideration of others" training; homosexuality in the military (another tolerance class, not a how-to course); and equal-opportunity awareness. Mix in a summer picnic and the annual Christmas party among the 24 training days per year and any training relevant to the traditional Army mission to kill and defeat its nation's enemies in combat was almost an afterthought.

Due to the nature of its mission, 97 percent of the Army's Civil Affairs (CA) branch troops are reserve soldiers. The Army learned in WWII that having soldiers dedicated solely to the mission of interacting with civilians and civilian government officials was a valuable asset in time of war. The presence of reserve civil affairs soldiers on the battlefield enabled the Army to reduce civilian casualties by directing them out of harm's way, and promoted



*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

civilian cooperation in areas that came under the occupation of US combat forces. As reservists, who spend most of their time away from the rigid Army social structure, civil affairs soldiers still possess the interpersonal skills to build relationships and rapport with foreign government officials and civilians that full-time infantry or tank commanders might lack. A decade of peacekeeping activities in the Balkans and Haiti had confirmed the need for these citizen soldiers in order for the US to accomplish its military/political goals overseas.

As with most CA units, the 538th had a strong linguist section, concentrating in the languages of the geographic area in which the unit was intended to serve in time of war. For the 538<sup>th</sup>, the concentration was Spanish and Portuguese, to help unit members communicate with the locals they encountered in Central and South America. In view of their regional expertise and training, therefore, it was virtually inevitable under the military decision-making process that the 538th would be one of the first units called to deploy to the Middle East for the invasion of Iraq.

Prior to their mobilization, those unit members who could tolerate the plethora of mandatory briefings – referred to by the troops as “Death by Powerpoint” – found duty in the 538<sup>th</sup> comfortable. Unit members habitually brought their civilian work in over a drill weekend to catch up from their busy civilian careers. Once every six months the troops proved their physical fitness by performing a certain number of push-ups, sit-ups, and a two mile run within Army time standards: the test was administered by the unit First Sergeant, a former boxer. Depending on his mood and the need for certain higher ranking officers to pass for promotion-eligibility reasons, the two mile run typically averaged somewhere between one-and-a-half to one-and-three-quarter miles. Fifty-ish colonels regularly recorded physical fitness scores that would be the envy of a high school football team. Life was good.

The most strenuous military training of the year occurred due to the necessity for each unit member to pass the annual Special Operations Command swim test. This event required each soldier to demonstrate his ability to stay afloat in deep water for two minutes while wearing their full uniform and holding a rubber rifle. This is a very useful military skill in case one is ever shot down over water while holding a rubber rifle. In preparing for war, the 538<sup>th</sup> excelled at rubber rifle aquatics.

*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

Deep in the bowels of the Pentagon in the summer of 2002, however, the fateful course that would disrupt this martial nirvana for the 538<sup>th</sup> had been charted. When the Commandant of the Marine Corps was notified by the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) that the Marines would spearhead a theoretical invasion of Iraq in early 2003, the Commandant had requested that Army civil affairs units be made available to secure and rebuild the theoretical civilian areas theoretically occupied by his Marines. The request was immediately transmitted to the Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where Major General (MG) Oldhaus, commander of all 3,000 civil affairs troops in the Army Reserve, made the selection.

Primping before the full length mirror in the corner of his office, MG Oldhaus addressed his aide, a young and eager Captain from Roanoke, Virginia. “Tim, who hasn’t been in the box for awhile?”

The well-groomed Captain in the sharply pressed Class B uniform responded, “Well, sir, there’s the 565<sup>th</sup> CA Brigade in Seattle. They just completed simulated combat training with the 2d Infantry Division in Korea. They’re probably in the highest state of readiness. But, they were in Bosnia in 2000 – might cause some squawking from family members.”

“Hell, no!” said MG Oldhaus, turning to view his rear reflection. “Last thing I need is a flood of whiny letters from Congressmen. Who else?”

“Well, uh, there’s a brigade in Baltimore, um, let me check here – the 583d. No, no, it’s the 538<sup>th</sup>: has never deployed. They do a lot of touchy-feely missions in the Caribbean and South America, sir.”

“Fine, fine, give the five thirty-whatever to the Marines. Sounds like we won’t miss them much, anyway. Say, what do you think of this belt, Tim?” asked Oldhaus, admiring the new general officer’s belt he had picked up at the military clothing store that morning. “Does it look too tight?”

“It’s terrific, sir,” fawned the aide. “You’ll look very impressive at the officers’ wives’ luncheon.”



*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

When the warning order to prepare for the invasion of Iraq finally reached the 538th in December, 2002, the high-ranking engineers, lawyers, medical professionals, teachers, and bureaucrats who comprised the unit answered their nation's call. The answer was that a third of the unit's officers developed every medical malady known to man and medical science that would prevent their mobilization. Sleep disorders, joint trouble and pregnancy became rampant. Not since a controversial conception in Galilee had so many mysterious pregnancies sprung forth. Maternity uniforms went on backorder. Knees crumbled and backs spontaneously leapt out of joint. Hearts palpitated and blood pressures ran off the charts. The snapping of tendons and the fictitious ripping of ligaments reached such a pitch that neighbors phoned the Reserve Center to complain about the noise

Some found God, suddenly realizing after decades of military service that they could not in good conscience kill their fellow man. Company grade officers, who had snarled and strutted their martial prowess for years in combat training exercises, suddenly found themselves at peace with the universe. Conscientious objector applications flooded the S1 administrative section as unit members fiercely demanded their right to declare pacifism.

Others, who did not want to completely surrender the eventual possibility of military retirement pay, brought forth stories of temporary family crises that would have brought Job to tears. Parents with Alzheimer's, children with learning disabilities, parents with learning disabilities, children with Alzheimer's; no angle to avoid the suddenly inconvenient military service was left unexplored. These soldiers could not possibly deploy, they revealed, without the fabric of their families and society at large crumbling into a ruined heap. When the flash flood of private physician's reports, social worker's commentaries and papal dispensations had been tallied, only 88 members of the unit's 140 were deemed healthy, emotionally secure, and pious enough to fight and die for their country.



At the 42d Civil Affairs Command (CACOM), higher headquarters for the 538<sup>th</sup>, Brigadier General (BG) Joseph Merdier paced anxiously. "That bastard Oldhaus is setting me up," he cried in his plush office at Fort Rucker, Alabama, as he wore a path in the deep shag rug. "He sees this as his chance

ONE WEEKEND A MONTH

to embarrass me. He's intentionally picked the weakest unit I have, so he can ram it up my backside when they fail."

"Well, sir," suggested his well-appointed aide and gal-Friday, First Lieutenant (1LT) Hilton. "Why don't we send some of our better people from the 42d down to strengthen the 538<sup>th</sup>? That would make you look good."

"Hah! Oh, Oldhaus would *love* that. He'd just love that," bellowed Merdier. "Then when I'm understaffed back here in the States, he can give me a flood of new requirements and taskers, and ram it up my backside when I'm unable to complete them."

"No, no, I know how to beat him at his game," he mused, a half-squint passing over his square-jawed features. "Clear the decks and jettison the flotsam and jetsam. That's the answer," Merdier told Hilton.

Hilton, who was known as the "black widow" within the 42d CACOM, had buried two husbands in the past five years – each of whom had taken his own life under unusual circumstances. Rumor was that she was in the market again and the way she eyed Merdier made him nervous. *Like a hound dog looking in a butcher's window*, he worried to himself.

"War presents opportunity for those bold enough to seize it," he continued, pacing back and forth across his wood paneled office, wringing his hands behind his back, "And I'm grabbing this one by the throat. Send them Stoa, Rabbit, and that sneaky bastard, Burr – along with their people. They've been stealing oxygen in this headquarters for years. We'll clear out some of the dead wood and bring the 538<sup>th</sup> up to needed deployment levels. It's a win-win situation and the enemy won't be able to stop it."

"The Iraqis, sir?" asked Hilton.

"No, no – *Oldhaus*. Pay attention! Oldhaus wants to keep me out of this war, because he thinks I'm after his job. He's right, dammit, but he can't keep me from front-loading my excess baggage into the mix. That way I can keep my hands on what the 538<sup>th</sup> is up to without weakening my position back here. I want every one of those SOBs on that plane with the 538<sup>th</sup>."

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

“Sir,” cooed Hilton pleasantly, flexing her back to fix the bun at the back of her head, “Even if we send all three colonels and their people, the 538<sup>th</sup> will still only be up to 105 personnel. We need 140.”

“Dammit! Oldhaus would love to see the Marines ram it up my backside, claiming that I short-changed them. I’d like to shoot all those cold-footed bastards for weaseling out of this deployment. I’d give anything to go and I’m stuck back here – in Alabama for Chrissakes! No awards, no battle streamer, no HMMWV with a white star on the license plate. It’s not fair,” Merdier choked.

“It’ll be quiet around here, sir, with so many of the others gone,” Hilton smiled, fixing Merdier with a heavy lidded stare.

“I’ve got it,” Merdier exclaimed, continuing to pace as he ignored the suggestive banter from Hilton. “I won’t let these bastards torpedo my career. Get me the commander of the 411<sup>th</sup> in Amarillo. I’ll put the habeas grabbus on enough of his people to staff the 538th back up to its full manning level. We’ll just call it a temporary realignment. No one will ever know the difference.”

“Yes, sir,” Hilton replied smoothly with a huskiness in her voice, as she smoothed her blouse.

Noticing the growing light in Hilton’s eyes, Merdier turned to the window. “You’re going, too. Keep an eye on those misfits and keep me informed. Don’t screw it up.”

## Chapter 14

### The Leopard Man

The Jaguar team was returning from a legal training session with the Iraqi judges in Karbala, another provincial capital west of Hillah. Major Trevanathan's mission had been to teach the judges the new criminal procedural rules published by the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad. The new rules required the appointment of a lawyer for an accused suspect and forbid the use of testimony obtained through torture.

"How'd it go, sir?" asked Warden as the two HMMWVs wound their way back toward Hillah.

"Great, great," replied Trevanathan wearily, as the glaring July sun beat down on his side of the HMMWV. "They'll warmly embrace the idea of a fair trial until about 5 minutes after we pull out of this country. Ya' know, one judge actually asked me what the police were supposed to do from now on to get evidence, if they could not beat a confession out of a suspect. He thought we were being unfair to the police." Trevanathan laughed bitterly.

Warden had noticed that Trevanathan was increasingly frustrated with the Iraqi judges. Over the past several weeks, the judges had repeatedly demonstrated they cared more about their personal status and privileges than in improving their system. Attempts to get the Chief Judge in Hillah to put together an annual budget for courthouse operations had come back laden with requests for Range Rovers, televisions, and satellite phones for the judges. Even after Major Trevanathan had rejected the first budget and directed that it be revised, 'luxuries' such as legal books and paper had been conspicuously absent in the second draft, in favor of air conditioning units for each judge's office.

Warden noted that the Major's optimism for the mission had lessened somewhat after that.

*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

“Sahr, we’re near the amusement park. Do ya’ wanna stop in and see the lil’ terrorist?” Warden knew that the occasional visits to the amusement park to see the boy had a positive effect on his OIC’s outlook.

“Sure, why not?” replied Trevanathan, perking up a bit. “We have a couple extra MREs and bottles of water in the back, don’t we? We can leave ‘em for him and his grandfather.”

Cooper led the two vehicle convoy across the median of Highway 8, through the park’s gateway, and down the now familiar path to the utility shed, where the boy and his grandfather lived. The visits had now become a part of the team’s routine and the boy seemed healthier under the calorie rich diet he was now receiving from the team’s spare MREs.

Today, however, young Saddam was not home. His grandfather had sent him off to the market to buy lamb, from which they would cook kabob for their evening meal. The old man sat alone in the shade outside the front door of the shed, smoking his acrid smelling Iraqi cigarettes. The old man did not move as the desert camouflage painted HMMWVs rolled to their usual parking spot beneath the trees. He sat patiently and continued smoking, as the American troops dismounted and stretched from the long, hot ride from Karbala.

“Salaam Alekim,” greeted the Major, as he walked up to the shed, touching the fingertips on his right hand to his heart.

“Alekim Salaam,” replied the grandfather, returning the gesture and nodding his head in respect. The grandfather smiled and gestured for Trevanathan to sit down on the ground next to him. As Trevanathan lowered himself to the ground in the cool shade, the old man offered him a bent and battered cigarette, which Trevanathan politely refused.

From several prior visits to the park over the past several weeks, Trevanathan had become friendly with the old man. He learned that the grandfather had a strong grasp of English, as he had once been a veterinary school student in London. However, that academic career had come to a rapid close when the then much younger grandfather had returned to Iraq to visit his young wife and infant child.

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

It was the height of the Iran-Iraq war in the early eighties, when Iraq needed every man at the front to resist an Iranian offensive that threatened to wrest Basrah and the southern oil fields from Iraq's control. The grandfather had been walking down the main street of Hillah to the market, when the Iraqi Army truck had pulled up beside him. Soldiers had descended upon him, insisting that he should be serving his country as a soldier. When he sought to explain that he was only a student visiting home, they had cuffed and beaten him, before forcibly loading him onto the truck and delivering him, along with eighteen other reluctant recruits, to the front lines after a miserable ten hour truck ride.

Battered and bruised, the Grandfather had no training and no military equipment, as he was led by a series of winding paths to the trenches. There he was introduced to a large and sadistic sergeant named Hassan, who would own he and the other eighteen impressed recruits. Cuffed and beaten whenever he hesitated, the grandfather had quickly learned that weakness had no place at the front. Wearing only sandals and his dishdasha, a full length shirt-like garment, called a 'man-dress' by US troops, he had been assigned to the ranks of a badly depleted mine-clearing unit.

Most of the men shanghaied with him had died within two weeks, from undetected mines, Iranian snipers, or by the rampant disease in the filthy trenches. Bad food, dirty water, and unsanitary waste disposal quickly took their toll. Committed to seeing his family again, however, the grandfather had learned and adapted, picking up equipment and weapons from the dead, as well as learning survival tricks from Hassan.

Even that knowledge and equipment could not protect him, however, when the Iranians had laid down a dense cloud of blister agent on the Iraqi trenches one morning, in retaliation for a mustard gas attack the Iraqis had launched days before to stop an Iranian offensive. His unit had been caught in the middle of the cloud and the grandfather had suffered massive blisters and weeping sores across 90% of his body. Only his unrelenting commitment to see his wife and child again had kept him from dying at that moment. Medically evacuated in a donkey cart, with the few other survivors of his unit, he had spent an agonizing year in a Basrah military hospital, slowly recovering as he grew new skin.



*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

No longer fit for service, he was released from the Iraqi Army and returned home to Hillah beneath a blanket in the back of a dump truck. His own family did not recognize him when he appeared in their doorway. He was nearly blind, and the skin of his body had yellowed, except where red puckered lesions stood forth. He was nicknamed the “Leopard Man” by the children of Hillah, due to the irregular pattern of blotchy scars across his face and arms.

Unable to tolerate direct sunlight upon his tortured skin any longer, and unable to work, the Leopard Man’s family had survived on the modest Army pension he received each month – the equivalent of \$25 (US) per month. When his son, Ahmed, had reached the age to enter the university, he had passed the necessary exams to be accepted to medical school. Ahmed’s lovely wife Fatime, had died in childbirth bringing forth young Saddam, shortly after Ahmed completed his studies. From that day forward, the grandfather acted as the primary caretaker for the boy in their modest three room home, adjacent to the local military base.

In March 2003, the whoosh-roar of cruise missile engines launched from US Navy cruisers in the Arabian Gulf signaled the end of young Ahmed’s medical career. When the neighboring Iraqi Army base had been struck by the precision ordnance, Ahmed had entered the torn base, responding to the screams of the wounded, many of them burned beyond recognition. His compassionate intervention coincided with the follow-on attack by US Marine F-18’s that wiped the rest of the base, Ahmed, and their house, from the map.

Young Saddam had pulled his grandfather from the rubble of their home. The two of them lived on the streets of Hillah, until the boy had come upon the empty utility shed two months before, during a trip to scavenge food.



Trevanathan had discussed the old man’s story with him before and knew he must have conflicting emotions regarding their presence. The Americans had taken his son from him, but were now providing assistance to his grandson that might mean the difference between life and death for the boy.

CRAIG TREBILCOCK

Warden walked up with an armload of MRE's, as Trevanathan and the Leopard Man chatted. "Where do you want *these*, sir?" he asked the Major, ignoring the old man.

"Just set 'em here, Sergeant Warden. Thanks."

"Sergeant," the old man inquired, without preamble, "I sense you do not like our people. Is that true?"

Warden looked at Trevanathan, seeking a signal, but received nothing.

"Come sergeant, sit and talk to me," continued the grandfather without judgment. "I am interested in your views."

"Sahr, I don't have nuthin' to say," replied Warden, turning away to end this line of discussion.

"Why did you come here, sergeant?" asked the old man as Warden began to step away, "You Americans go all over the world. You bring blue jeans and Britney Spears. You expect things to be like America and then are upset when they are not. Is that not true? Your Major is too polite to mention such things, but I sense your anger."

"I go where the Army tells me to, sahr. That's all there is to it," Warden said over his shoulder.

"Yes, I understand. I was a soldier too. But why the anger? Why do I see such hatred in your eyes?"

"Look sahr, we came to help you people," replied Warden turning back toward the old man in an uncharacteristic angry tone of voice. "We came to make your lives better. So maybe your grandson can grow up without fear. Now your people still try to kill us. I've been though this same bullshit in Somalia – you people bitin' the hand that feeds you."

"Is that really why you came, sergeant? So that there will be no fear?" The old man smiled, exposing brown, stained teeth. "There is no life in Iraq without fear. Fear is our natural state," he said in a whimsical manner. He paused as the NCO silently watched him.

ONE WEEKEND A MONTH

“We fear our neighbors in Iran,” the grandfather continued, drawing a crude map of Iraq in the sand with a stick. He stabbed at the rough location of Iran on the border. “In Iran - in Turkey, in Syria, in Saudi Arabia,” he recited, as he sketched each country on his crude map, stabbing them in turn with his stick for emphasis. “We fear them all.”

Warden looked again to Trevanathan for direction, but the Major continued to look at the map in the dirt.

”We fear the Government,” the old man continued. “We fear each other. The Kurds fear the Turks. The Shiites fear the Sunnis. The Sunnis fear everyone as they have more to lose. We fear those who will hurt us and we fear those who say they will help - for no one helps without a price,” he added.

“Do you fear the USA?” Warden asked.

“We do not fear America,” the Leopard Man replied without hesitation. “We fear your weapons, but we do not fear your soldiers. You do not have the darkness and the strength of purpose needed to control Iraq - to control the *fear*. You have the weapons, but not the will. All the people know this.”

The old man scratched out his map with the stick. “You do not have the heart of a conqueror,” he continued evenly. “You destroy our army and then give candy to our children. You capture those who would kill you and then worry that you are too harsh to them. Your enemies here would cut your throat in your sleep, but you still want to be their friend. You want our gratitude. You seek our respect. Your newspapers cry out at mistreatment of men that would destroy your way of life. No,” emphasized the Leopard Man gazing calmly at Warden, “there is no reason to fear you, because you will not stay. You will not be able to stay without becoming something you loath and so you will leave and things will return to the way they were.”

“Don’t you people give a damn that we’re trying to help you have a better life?” asked Warden sharply, feeling irritated at the old man’s resigned attitude.

“Let me tell you how Iraq views the man who comes to the door to bring help, sergeant,” the old man smiled, his yellow eyes fixed upon the NCO’s face. “Iraqis are the most charming people in the world - one at a time. We will

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

invite you into our homes. We will feed you and entertain you, even if we must do without ourselves. It is a matter of honor. We will ask after your family and sincerely want to know all of the details about your children. Iraqis love children and love their families. We are a warm and friendly people – one at a time.”

The Leopard Man now drew three stick figures in the dirt, scratching a circle about them. “Put two Iraqis in a room together and they will both seek to curry your friendship,” he continued. “They will feed you and entertain you. They will give you the choicest cuts of the lamb. But they will quickly grow jealous of each other. Every favor that one does for you will be viewed jealously by the other. The first will accuse the second of seeking to embarrass him before the honored guest. The second will accuse the first of lying and seeking to alienate you from him by those lies. They will call each others’ lineage, faith, and family history into question, forgetting their guest, and roll on the floor seeking to slit each others’ throat.”

Warden relaxed his posture slightly, listening with interest to the old man’s words.

“Put three Iraqis in a room together with a guest,” continued the old man, scratching a fourth figure within the circle in the soil. “Two of them will accuse the third of secretly trying to conspire with you, for your favor, to the detriment of the other two. The third will whisper in your ear that the first two are plotting against you and cannot be trusted. No rumor or falsehood is so extreme that it will not be repeated with the greatest sincerity and passion. The first two will declare the third a Zionist spy. The third will accuse the first two of being agents of Iran. The two will plot for the death of the third, and even while doing so, each of them will keep a wary eye on each other out of their mutual distrust. They will spend all of their time searching for treachery, conspiracy, and deceit until the guest dies of starvation or throws up his hands and leaves in disgust.”

Warden looked in wonder at the old man.

“You are not a guest, however,” continued the grandfather in a friendly tone, looking up from his drawing with deep set eyes. “You are uninvited. You have invited yourselves into our homes, with your destruction and your promises of a better life. And yet, you believe you can bring this land

ONE WEEKEND A MONTH

together, where even an honored guest could not?" The old man tilted his head to one side and smiled. He gestured at the figures in the dirt. "These are the people upon whom you will spread your seeds of democracy, Sergeant. I believe your noble seeds may find the soil too hostile to grow." The old man laughed quietly, reached out with the stick, and scratched the figures out of existence.

"We need to give it a chance," interrupted Trevanathan in a low voice. "That may be your past, but you can have a different future."

"Yes, by all means give it a chance," replied the old man. "But how many bodies will your country give to this chance, before there are no more chances left? Has anyone answered this question for you?"

Trevanathan was silent. This same question had haunted him. *Would all the suffering and death amount to anything when the Iraqis themselves didn't seem to be willing to change?*

"What about four Iraqis?" Warden asked, seeking to test the limits of the old man's analogy.

"Ahhh, four Iraqis," the Leopard Man smiled, revealing uneven, stained teeth behind dark gums. "With four Iraqis you have an army, and Kuwait should not sleep too well," he laughed, his yellow eyes flashing brightly.

On the return trip to Camp Bablyon, Warden leaned forward from the back passenger seat to whisper in his OIC's ear. "Sir, that's the most honest damned terrorist I've ever met."

## Chapter 27

### The Unit of the Damned

“Bill, me and some of the boys are trying to get a volleyball game goin’ - are you interested?” asked Doc, on one of the rare afternoons off the camp had been granted for Labor Day.

“Thanks, Doc,” said Trevanathan reclining in his cot, “but I’m going to take advantage of the down time to write some cards home. You guys go ahead.”

“OK, we’re going to go challenge the chemical unit that’s stationed on the other side of the airfield.”

“Have fun,” replied Trevanathan, settling back to his writing.

Company B of the 673d Chemical Brigade, Arkansas National Guard, had been attached to the Marine Expeditionary Force as additional decontamination capacity, in case the Marines come under chemical attack in their advance on Baghdad. As chemical warfare specialists, they were one of the most intensively trained and highly skilled units in the reserve system. Trained to react to nuclear, biological, or chemical attacks either in the USA or on a foreign battlefield, they deployed to Iraq with high expectations of playing a pivotal role in the seizure and securing of Saddam’s stash of chemical weapons.

However, the chemical attacks did not come, and after the first several weeks of false alarms, a malaise had settled over the unit with no mission to perform. A couple of false alarms, after the high intensity fighting ceased, that a stash of chemical munitions might have been found, also left them despondent. The unit’s presence, which had initially been so vital to the Coalition victory, gradually came to be a continuing reminder that the primary rationale for the invasion of Iraq was a house of cards that had fallen long ago.

Originally the command tent for the 673d had been placed adjacent to the tactical operations center for the 1<sup>st</sup> MARDIV<sup>62</sup> Headquarters, so that precious

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

seconds would be saved in case of a chemical attack. “I want that chemical commander so close I can feel his belt buckle,” intoned the colorful 1<sup>st</sup> MARDIV commander. As that attack failed to develop, however, the unit was moved to the edge of the cluster of tents that comprised the command element of the 1<sup>st</sup> MARDIV. Finally, as new coalition troops from Eastern Europe began to move into the increasingly crowded cluster of command tents between the palace and the mess hall, the 673d was “laterally reallocated” to the east edge of Camp Babylon on the far side of the airfield, out of sight of the busy combat commanders who were recasting Iraq’s future and their own promotion potential.

As Doc and SGT Monkeybusiness walked up to the concertina wire that marked the company area for the 673d, they noted that the little guard shack at the entrance, where one would expect the staff duty NCO or his designee to sit, was empty. In fact, as they looked about the cluster of tents there was no apparent movement whatsoever.

“Are you sure this is their area?” Doc asked the young NCO, looking about doubtfully. Two stray dogs lay flat in the shade of a nearby tent, their tongues hanging out of their mouths as they tried to dissipate the midday heat. “Yassir,” said Monkeybusiness. “They are the only unit on this side of the airfield.”

As the wind shifted from the north, the two could hear the faint sound of a radio playing from beyond a group of tents on the left side of the encampment. “Well, sounds like someone’s home,” said Doc. “Let’s check over here.” As the two soldiers approached the cluster of tents the music grew louder and the sound of voices could now be heard.

Rounding the edge of the near GP medium tent, the two soldiers stopped in their tracks and stared in disbelief at a group of civilians dressed in flowered shirts that would have made a Palm Beach retiree blush. The group was lounging around an impromptu hot tub that had been set up under some camouflage netting. One pretty young blond sat on a stack of HMMWV tires, her hair tied back in a pony tail, as she strummed on an acoustic guitar. A second tanned, blonde young woman in a bikini top and shorts swayed to the music and sang words from some slightly familiar country western tune. Three bushy haired young men, sporting multiple tattoos on their broad arms and shoulders, lolled about in the tub, which had been jury-rigged out of a

*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

giant portable water bladder used for shower units or chemical decontamination units.

“Excuse me,” stammered Doc. “I was looking for the 673d Chemical Company.” SGT Monkeybusiness instantly zeroed in on the two spritely young musicians and flashed his most winning Latino smile at them.

“You found us, sir,” said one of the tub occupants, looking back over his shoulder. “I’m Sergeant Best, and this is the fighting 673d...” he chuckled, “or what’s left of it.”

“Aaahh, well, I’m MAJ Heller, from the 538th CA BDE,” said Doc slowly, still trying to reconcile the scene before him. “We, aahh,, wanted to see if your unit was interested in some volleyball this afternoon.”

“Man, that sounds great, sir, but we’re a little short handed right now. Some of the boys are down at the Haji market outside the wire getting some fixin’s for our, uh, trash can punch, and several others are over at the combat surgical hospital trying to get profiles<sup>63</sup> for one thing or another.”

“Is your commander around?” asked Doc, as the music drew to an end. “Ahh, yes sir, I believe he is in his tent. It’s the first one on the right side when you come in the gate.”

“Do you know there’s no one at the gate?” asked Doc. “We just walked right in and no one stopped us or asked us our business in here.”

“Hmmm,” said SGT Best, trying to appear concerned. “I guess Private Weatherbee must have snuck off to the Haji market with his friends. I’ll have to have a word with him when he gets back, sir.”

“Ahh, sir,” said Monkeybusiness eagerly, “would you mind if I stayed here a few minutes while you visit with their commander?” The smell of musk filled the air as Monkeybusiness eagerly eyed the two young blondes with his flashing dark eyes.

“Yeah, sure, Sergeant M,” said Doc. “I’ll come back for you in about fifteen minutes.”



*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

Doc walked across the small compound a second time, again encountering no one who appeared to be performing any type of military duties. A giggle and a high pitched whoop came from a tent to his left as he passed it on the way to the commander's tent.

A sign hung near the flap of the GP small tent that stated, "CPT Timothy Blaze, Commander." One of the design flaws of most military tents is there is no way to announce oneself before entering. Lacking a doorbell or place to knock, one can stand outside and yell at the canvas wall or shake the tent flap, hoping someone would notice. Or, as is most often the protocol, one simply enters the tent unannounced, as Doc did in this instance.

The interior of the tent was dark, as the small canvas window flaps had been tied down from the inside. The familiar, slightly moldy smell of tent canvas and stale air met Doc's nostrils, as did the unmistakable smell of cheap alcohol.

"Captain Blaze?" said Doc, looking around as his eyes sought to adjust to the dark interior. "Captain?" he said a little louder.

"MMpphh," came the muffled response from a cot to the left of the door..

"Captain Blaze," Doc said a little louder, "I'm Major Heller."

Catching the mention of a higher rank, the pile of rumpled laundry on the cot slowly swung into an upright position and slurred out, "OOhh, morning shir, do you have a mission for us?"

"Ahh, not exactly, Captain, I was hoping to get your unit to play ours in volleyball this afternoon, but your Sergeant Best said that the unit is short-handed."

"Oh, we're short-handed alright sir. Short-handed..." he repeated again, his voice trailing off.

"Umm, do you mind if I open a tent flap or something, said Doc, stifling in the overpowering smell of tent canvas, dirty laundry, and alcohol.

"No, no, go right ahead, sir - make yourself at home."

*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

Doc turned to the wall of the tent behind him and rolled up the inner window flap that had been secured in place by its velcro fasteners. As he did so, light flooded into the room, causing Blaze to recoil.

Doc turned back to the officer and was met by the vision of a wraithlike creature in a dirty Army brown t-shirt and boxer shorts. Sporting a two day growth of beard and dark purple circles under each eye, Blaze had the look of a man who had been hit by a two by four between the eyes.

“Captain, are you alright?” asked Doc cautiously.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, sir, . . . just waking up kinda’ slow,” Blaze stated as he rubbed the heels of his hands into his bloodshot eyes.

With the light of day flooding into the room, Doc could see that another unoccupied bunk at the far end of the tent had no occupant, but was maintained in an immaculate military manner, with all of the owner’s property stowed beneath the rack or hanging from a makeshift clothes line in the far corner of the tent.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Blaze again slowly, moving his neck around in a slow circle, as he rubbed the back of his neck, “Who are you again?”

“I’m MAJ Heller, 538th CA. Just came by for a social call.” Doc’s eyes dropped to the corner of Blaze’s bunk, where a fifth of the local Hadji whiskey known as ‘Five Dollar Rockgut’ sat, three-quarters empty. Available at most refueling stations along the main supply route, Rockgut was usually hawked by small Iraqi boys who would chase alongside the convoys, as they slowed to turn into the refueling point. Most US troops, even those desperate for a drink, knew better than to tap into Rockgut, which was locally made from a combination rumored to be wood alcohol and rice wine.

“Captain, I’m a nurse by trade. So let’s put rank away for a minute. What the hell is going on around here? There’s no one guarding your compound. The people I could find were having a luau, and you’re sitting in this stinkatorium three sheets to the wind.

“Well, sir,” Blaze paused momentarily to swallow deeply before continuing, “you asked, so I’m gonna’ tell ya’. This here is one of the best chemical

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

warfare companies in the Guard – not that you could tell by looking at us today. The officers and NCOs of this unit have spent years training for the bad day when some bad guy would let loose with a chemical attack and we'd get the call.”

“Well that day has never come yet, thank God, so when Baghdad fell we were shifted over to the search for chemical weapons. It took a couple months to realize there weren't gonna' be any weapons found, but we were told to keep up the search anyways so that the President wouldn't be embarrassed. So, like good soldiers we did. But pretty soon they even stopped sending us out on those missions, because it became a news event that we were still lookin' and coming up empty. So they parked us over here on the far side of this airfield with no mission and forgot 'bout us.”

“So you cashed it in because you didn't have a mission, is that it?” Doc asked with an edge to his voice.

“Ohhh, that it was that simple sir. If that was the case I could just be called a bad commander and that would be a happy ending. But no...” The Captain closed his eyes and sat on the edge of his cot for several minutes as Doc waited.

“Well..?” asked Doc, unsure if Blaze was still awake.

“Well.., after four months of nothin', they told us we were going home. Said to pack up and prepare to return home so we'd be available for the next time, wherever that may be. So we did. But nothin' happened. We sat and waited, and no orders came. Finally I sent a request for information up through my chain of command. It took a week, but then my brigade commander called and said no one is going home. Said the new General in Baghdad had come up with a 365 days boots on the ground policy, which meant no one leaves – whether they're needed or not – whether they have a mission or not. So we were told just to sit here and wait...”

“And that's what you did?”

“No, sir, not even that would have ripped the guts out of this unit. I mean, no one was happy with it, but these are experienced Army NCOs and officers

*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

and are used to getting screwed by Uncle Sam on a semi-regular basis. They had their pride to maintain and would not throw in the towel.”

The Captain looked about as if trying to remember why he was sitting in this tent, before continuing.

“No, the same military genius who came up with the 365 day policy also now realized he had a lot of unemployed troops sitting out in the desert and a shortage of military police to protect the highways and checkpoints. So, they called us up, told us we were now military police, not chemical warfare experts, and split us up to guard checkpoints. They gave us a three day crash course on anti-terrorist security and put my boys out on the checkpoints on the MSR.”

Blaze shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck as if the memory still pained him. “They took the best chemical warfare experts in the world and turned us into security guards,” he stated bitterly.

“That sucks, Captain, but everyone over here is doing jobs that are new to them...” Doc began.

Continuing as if he had not heard Doc, Captain Blaze continued. “The first day on the job in Najaf, a Haji car bomber drove right through two of my young guys, who were unsure how to react, and blew up six of my men in one blast. Wasn’t hardly ‘nuff of em left to even send home, but the Army put some scraps together in a coffin and shipped ‘em back to their proud hometowns.”

“Well, that was enough for me and for most of my boys. We didn’t mind not bein’ used and we didn’t mind bein’ misused, but when they started setting us up for failure by puttin’ troops with no security or law enforcement experience in that position with bullshit training. I put in a formal protest and requested my unit be reassigned to more appropriate duties.” For just a moment, a flicker of life crept into the Captain’s eyes. “Know what happened?”

“Tell me,” said Doc.

*CRAIG TREBILCOCK*

“Well, first of all, I was admonished for not being a team player and ‘whining’ about a tough mission. That’s what they called it – ‘whining.’” The General said the most important thing to do was to get my boys right back out there – so they wouldn’t lose their nerve. So that’s what they did. Next night my boys were right back out there on the checkpoint, nervous as mother hens, waiting for their turn. I went out with ‘em to try to keep up their spirits, ya’ know?”

“Uh huh, so what happened?”

“Sure enough, another vehicle rolled up on one of our checkpoints and didn’t notice the signal to stop. Our guys were so jacked from the previous incident that they opened up on the car with a 50 cal. and turned the front seat occupants into a bloody pulp. Was like hittin’ watermelons with a jackhammer. So, we stopped that vehicle by God,” Blaze choked, his eyes filling with tears.

Doc sat silently, watching the Captain closely.

“See sir, only problem was the occupants were just a family returning from Karbala. They didn’t understand the signal to stop and one of our guys blew their brains all over the back seat.”

“When we pulled their kids out of the back seat, they couldn’t even talk. Two little girls, maybe 7 and 8, and a little boy, maybe 4 years old. The ‘fifty’ took the arm clear off one of the girls – she didn’t even notice – in shock. The little boy had his parent’s blood and brains splattered all over his face and kept just giving out this little animal whine. Not a scream and not a cry. Just kinda’ like the high pitched sound of an animal in agony when it has its paw caught in a trap and it can’t understand why the pain won’t stop.”

The Captain paused and picked up the bottle of Haji whiskey. He looked at the label for a minute and then gulped a large mouthful before continuing.

“The kid just kept making that noise. I still hear it in my head. I hear it right now. He looked me in the eyes and just kept makin’ that sound. I wanted to shake him to make him stop, but I just had to walk away. I hear it every night when I go to sleep and it’s there when I wake up. Only the Rockgut makes it

*ONE WEEKEND A MONTH*

stop for awhile. It makes me so damn sick that I forget about that sound for awhile.”

“You need to get some help, Captain,” suggested Doc. “There’re people who can help with this sort of thing. Where’s your XO?”

Blaze snorted, and motioned with his thumb at the empty bunk. “First Lieutenant Tripley, is my XO...was my XO,” said Blaze, trailing off. “They say that he ran about 50 yards with his clothes on fire after that car bomb went off before he collapsed. Then he just kind of twitched and rolled around in the dirt as they tried to put him out. He lived a few hours, but then that was it....” Blaze’s voice trailed off.

“I haven’t written home yet. I can’t.” he said, taking a long pull of the amber colored liquid. “Sir, we’re the Arkansas Guard. Most of these boys come from the same twenty square miles round the reserve center. I grew up with them and know their families... and I got ‘em killed. How do I go home now? How do I tell my sister that her husband isn’t coming home because he wasn’t a good enough *MP*? That I let her husband die, because I couldn’t get this unit home when it had no mission?”

“You know it’s not your fault,” said Doc. “Bad shit happens over here. Whether you’re smart or whether you’re unlucky. It just happens. Where’s the First Sergeant?” asked Doc, hoping to find someone in authority who might take this situation in hand.

“Well, that’s the good news in all of this,” laughed Blaze bitterly, taking another pull on the foul liquid. “They say that prosthetics have made a lot of progress since the First Gulf War and that he has a damn fine chance of walking again after his burns heal over....So we have that to look forward to.”

Doc stood there in silence, not knowing what he could say that wouldn’t add to this man’s pain.

“Sir, I’m feeling a mite poorly right now. You wouldn’t be offended if I just laid down for a bit, would you?”

“No, no, you go ahead, Captain. I’ll close this window flap for you.”

CRAIG TREBILCOCK

“Thanksh, sir,” slurred Blaze, as he rolled back into his cot, his face to the wall and his back to Doc.

Doc slid out of the flap of the tent into the blinding Iraqi sun. He stood there lost in thought, marveling at the beating this unit had taken – and for what? They had lost their mission, their purpose, and most of their leadership. Not in any noble or meaningful battle or in accomplishing some vital military objective, but because someone had not had the balls or interest to send them home when they weren’t needed any more. “Set up for failure,” the Captain had said. *There’s a lot of that going on*, thought Doc sourly.

*Christ, where are the bad guys like in those old John Wayne movies*, thought Doc. *Over here all you see are dead soldiers and dead civilians. You never see the bad guys. There aren’t any hills to take or enemy bunkers to knock out. There’s just death, coiled up, waiting to lash out the second your guard is down for a second.*

Movement to his right caught Doc’s attention, as SGT Monkeybusiness exited from one of the GP small tents, adjusting his blouse and catching Doc’s eye with a bright flash of his teeth. “Ready to go, sir?” asked the NCO, as he walked up, beaming his winning smile. Doc looked over SGT M’s shoulder as the guitar strumming blonde exited the same tent, with a quick look around, before she darted back toward the luau.

“Well, I’m glad some things never change SGT M,” said Doc, with a tired shake of his head. “Let’s get out of here and let these people rest in peace.”

Satirical tale of Army Reserve soldiers in Iraq War.

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