

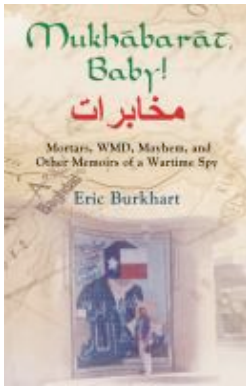
Mukhābarāt, Baby!

مخابرات بببي!

My Life as a Wartime Spy
for the CIA

Eric Burkhart





My name is Eric Burkhart. I recently retired after a successful career as a CIA Case Officer. Poisoned while working in Kosovo in 2001, I continued my career into Iraq and beyond. I always seemed to be living out of a suitcase. From a post-college job in African townships, to a stint as an Immigration Agent on a Texas Border Bridge, ending up in the CIA seemed pre-ordained. This is my story.

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**My Life as a
Wartime CIA Spy**

Eric Burkhart

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First Edition

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Stinky Feet

I've never met a well-traveled person who didn't enjoy discussing airlines and airports. And among the well-traveled, certain experiences are respected more than others. I truly appreciate a good international airline, but when people discover that I have traveled extensively in Africa, no one wants to hear about Air France or Qantas. All people want is a nightmare story from deep Africa. Oh yes, I have a few tucked away, but all in all, African airlines are just fine, and a few—like South African Airways (SAA), Kenya Airways, and Ethiopian Airlines—are included among the world's best. It's true that in some places international safety rules are not always in effect, but I don't recall aviation accidents being any more frequent in Africa than they are in South America or Central Asia. Getting from place to place is just as important in the third world as it is in New York City and Tokyo. Airline travel in Africa will expand. It will lead to more airports, greater accessibility, greater safety, and the wider use of business and first class in Africa.

My mother always tells me that flying anything other than economy class is a shameful waste of money. "In a few hours you're back on the ground and your bank account is smaller. Why not put up with the smaller seats and close quarters? It's over before you know it. And you might just make a new friend."

Where do I start?

First and foremost, if I have the option, I will always choose to fly first, then business class. I'm not ashamed to say that I enjoy being pampered. But for one reason or another, if I'm on a domestic flight I'm usually flying economy. Short flights are normally not a problem for me,

and the business class section is really not that much different, except for the cost. If you worked for Uncle Sam in 2005, the government paid for a business-class fare only if the flight was going to be longer than eight and a half hours.

During my career, most of my overseas flights broke up in Europe, where I would switch planes for onward travel. But some flights from Atlanta or Dulles took about eighteen hours. This long haul included a refueling stop in some exotic, unheard of place. A number of times when checking in for a flight, I was upgraded from the authorized business class to first class. My conscience has been known to start barking at the most inopportune moments, but I have never felt guilty about receiving the occasional upgrade. It should go without saying that travel for fun and travel for work are two dissimilar activities. And eighteen hours stuck in a long metal tube, breathing recycled air and sharing toilets can raise blood pressures.

But I had no problems on an eighteen-hour flight as long as I was melting in the lap of SAA first class luxury. I realize that behind the curtain on the other side of business class is another part of the plane. In fact, I recall the scowls I always received from economy-class passengers as they made their way to the back of the plane. I felt bad for those folks, especially for nine or more hours on a full flight. But life is all about choices, as the old cliché goes. If I'm on personal business, I will travel to Europe in economy, but I refuse to consider eighteen hours in third class.

As you can see, I have very strong emotions about air travel, which are likely a result of a few particular experiences.

I started flying in Africa in 1989, when I was in my early twenties and by 1990, I felt like I was seventy years old. A few scary experiences can achieve that affect. The African airlines that existed in 1990 normally didn't offer classes, although I think Air Sudan may have had a "people class" and "goats and chickens class" partition. SAA, which continued to fly and offer outstanding service even under the weight of international sanctions, considered the entire passenger list to be first class.

At the time I was working in the private sector and living in South Africa, and my job occasionally required that I fly to other countries. I wasn't able to fly SAA, because they were forbidden to land anywhere on the continent of Africa except Southwest Africa (Namibia), Cote d'Ivoire, and Kenya (in Kenya, passengers were not allowed to disembark, regardless of the length of layover). I became a regular customer of Zimbabwe Airlines, called *Zim Air*, which would pick me up at Jan Smuts Airport in Johannesburg and take me anywhere in Southern Africa. I didn't like flying *Zim Air*, because the pilots always seemed to be in a hurry.

If I were traveling to Kinshasa, Bangui, or Ouagadougou, I would normally have to switch planes. Because of this, I encountered many small, oddly named airlines. At one time or another, I have flown on *Virginity Air*, *Air Pou*, *Scat Air*, *Benson Loves You Airlines*, and I'm sure others that have been blocked from memory.

And I'll let you in on a well-known secret about aviation in Africa: many planes go to Africa to die. They live full lives flying the skies of Europe and North America, then they are sold to a fresh start-up airline in Gabon, and they get to live another twenty or thirty years. The antiques that litter the runways of Africa would make any

enthusiast scream with joy. I won't bother to name all the various models, but I have flown on a number of 707s and DC-8s, DC-9s, 727s, and even a Lockheed L-1011 Tristar. Some of the smaller airports I have visited reminded me of graveyards for old planes and made me a bit melancholy.

On one occasion, the plane on which I was flying was forced to land in Southern Sudan. I was *en route* to Chad from Kenya, and I was obliged to spend the night in an old building that, in the distant past, appeared to have been barracks of some sort. That night I slept on the floor, with my backpack as a pillow, listening to the sandstorm blow outside. As I fell in and out of sleep, I was visited by the most fascinating group of specters imaginable—pilots of a past eras, speaking different languages and wearing handsome uniforms. It's a memory I hold close to my heart.

But one of the best traveling stories I have to offer is the story of the stinky feet. I didn't want to take the Zanzibar trip. Although the name conjures up glorious visions of markets, spices, and harems, Zanzibar City has very little left to offer the romantic. Part of the island has been taken over by large fruit and spice conglomerates, and the residential section is as squalid as can be imagined. Zanzibar is full of mosques. There seems to be a mosque for every *fly*. Many of the mosques are historic and lovely to look at, but the people could have benefited from a clinic or two, and maybe a neighborhood.

I was on a Fokker 27 Turboprop, which normally seats about thirty and was very nearly full. I was flying to Nairobi to make my connection to Johannesburg, but we had a slight delay in a tiny Kisauni Airport on the island. While we were waiting, a peculiar stench wafted its way over to me, grabbing my attention.

It's a common occurrence, really, to become aware of all the horrible smells around me. I'm French; I can't really help it. I can smell things from a mile away. It's a curse really—it's ended multiple relationships. And with battle scars from tough experiences, I have become well-versed on this particular smell—the unmistakable smell of feet.

I understand that when I make the choice to be in public, I need to prepare myself for different perspectives on cleanliness. I, personally, am overly obsessed with hygiene. I *must* shower every day, and you could accuse me of flossing too much. But I know that's not how everyone lives, especially in foreign lands, and I think I have adapted exceptionally well.

However, when dealing with airline travel, I believe everyone should conform to certain simple hygienic principles. Of these, the cardinal rule is that if your feet stink you should keep your shoes on. That way, less funk will be continually recirculated through the plane. If you don't have the courtesy to wash your feet before getting on a plane, then the least you can do is keep your shoes on.

During this particular trip, as we taxied down the runway and lifted off, I was overcome with the nasty stench of cheesy feet coming from the seat behind me. I tried to ignore the distraction, and as soon as I was allowed, I stood up to go to the water closet. This gave me the opportunity to do some recon and observe the target: it was an ethnic Indian man, sitting directly behind me, and he had taken off his shoes, which appeared to be leather. Of course, he was not wearing socks.

I used the facilities, and on the walk back to my seat, I politely asked the man if he would put his shoes back on. The thing is, I asked him in English. I had assumed he could speak English, as most people in India do, but he gestured

that he could not understand what I was asking. In all reality, he probably could understand my request, but he had no desire to talk to me (or to put his shoes back on).

So I decided to use the universal language: I made hand motions, which included pointing to his dogs and pinching my nose. A kind woman sitting across from us translated into some Indian language I didn't recognize, yet he continued to pretend that he didn't understand. I am usually long-suffering in situations like this, but in this instance, for some reason I totally lost control.

I put an air-sickness bag on each of my hands, got up from my seat, kneeled down, and reconnected his feet with his ugly, pointy blue leather shoes. I seem to recall a small cheer and a bit of applause as I sat back down and reattached my seatbelt. Unfortunately, the cat (that smelled as if it had been rolling around in shit) was already out of the bag; his feet had been exposed for long enough to give the passengers the joy of an aroma-filled two-hour flight to Nairobi. If only the experience ended at that point.

We arrived in Nairobi without further incident and made our way to the tarmac. As I was walking along, minding my own business, I suddenly heard the pitter-patter of someone running behind me. Before I had a chance to turn around, I was attacked from behind. When I turned to face my attacker, I discovered that it was none other than the man with the stinky feet. And he was armed with a deadly weapon... one of his shoes.

For the first time, I observed that he was traveling with two other men, and luckily they were able to quickly get him under control. But not before he gave me a parting gift that lasted for a few days—a half-moon shaped mark from his heel right to the center of my forehead.

On another occasion, on a flight from Johannesburg to Harare, I sat next to an "inyanga," a witch doctor. He spoke perfect English and beautiful French, and he was dressed in jeans and a comfortable cotton shirt very similar to mine. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with the Zulu gentleman and his stories were the stuff of tribal legend.

He had this notion in his head that many years in the past, the Zulu nation had colonized some place in the western world called "Texas." He explained to me that when he was a child, he would visit the Catholic Mission in Eshowe, Zululand, which had a priest in residency who was from Texas. While the two worked in the field together, the Father would tell great stories of Texas, constantly remarking on the similarities between his home and Zululand. My new friend explained to me that in tribal oral tradition, once upon a time a group of brave Zulu warriors sailed in a giant canoe for many days, until they came upon a land as fruitful and as beautiful as their home. This chap had gotten it into his head that this place that was as beautiful as Zululand, with so many wild animals and a night sky just as big and bright, must have been the same place that the Father spoke about.

He asked me many questions about Texas, and after each of my answers he exclaimed, "I knew it! It's the same exactly in Hluhluwe!" or "The elephant are there; they are hiding. They are masters of hiding. One day you will see." I was broken-hearted when our flight landed in Harare and I had to say goodbye to my new friend. I can't remember what his business in Zimbabwe was that day. Hell, I don't remember what my business was that day. But I remember his stories. And I admit it: he nearly converted me. Who is to say that Zulus didn't visit the shores of the great Lone Star State many years ago? Not me. To this day, it still

makes me chuckle to think of seeing an elephant alongside the white tailed deer on my Texas Hill Country property.

The Zulu man wasn't my only unique travel companion. On a flight from Gaborone to Lusaka, Zambia, I sat next to a sheep. Actually, I sat next to an old woman who was carrying a sheep. She was only carrying one sheep, probably due to some Zambian prohibition regarding the number of sheep per seat. The flight was less than an hour, and since I didn't consider it to be my business, I tried to ignore the sheep. I'm sure he had a ticket, and we made it to Lusaka without any crap being dumped on the floor... at least not by the sheep. I can't be sure about the really old man sitting in the row behind me.

It was during this trip, but on a different flight, that the attendant—thank goodness it was a man; it's rare in Africa for a flight attendant to be male—had to physically stop someone from trying to start a fire in the middle of the walkway. In Europe the guilty party would have been met at the airport by the police. But this was just a simple misunderstanding. All the guy was trying to do was cook his food. Once the situation was adequately explained, no discipline was necessary. If I had a nickel for every time a situation that would have ended with fists in the U.S. was resolved with a simple, short explanation in Africa...

And finally, I remember sitting on the runway at Entebbe Airport in Uganda, in a small, older-than-dirt crop duster, waiting for a change in pilots for an onward flight to Lubumbashi, Zaire—it was Zaire then; currently it's the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC). If my memory serves me correctly, I was one of maybe fifteen passengers that day. The pilot finally arrived, and he and the copilot scooted onto the plane, both wearing parachutes. I seemed to be the only one who noticed, but none of us seemed to

care. I had started to live my life a bit like a local. “If the pilot is fated to use that parachute today, then so be it. Who am I to mess with fate?” I didn't have a parachute, and neither did anyone else on board. Normally, I would have been freaked out by this: “Should I have a parachute, too?” But I never considered leaving the flight. Maybe it was just the pilot's lucky parachute. At this point, I don't really care. I lived to see another day, and that's what matters.

So, Africa provided me with a few epiphanies and experiences that truly helped to shape me into the person I am today—although not all of them were quite so serious. I did eventually make it to Cape Town. I left South Africa in 1992, intending to complete my master's degree and return. But my life moved in a different direction.

Yonan Brothers

Toward the tail end of Baghdad Station's translator shortage, three Agency-trained linguists arrived from HQS. They were brothers and native Arabic speakers. They ranged in age from seventy-two (Hiram) to sixty-five (Alexander) to fifty-nine (Sammy, the youngster). The Yonan brothers were ethnic Assyrians, a minority with its own language and culture in this part of the world. The Assyrian story is very familiar; just replace Assyrian with Kurd or Armenian. These minority groups have been abused to the point of near extermination at many different times. But they always manage to persevere. My interaction with the Yonan brothers introduced me not only to the Assyrian culture but also to some living historical relics, and I came away with a bit of understanding as to how these fine people have managed to stick around so long.

In the late 1950s the political situation in Iraq was unpredictable. The economy was stagnant, young people had no jobs, and revolution was in the air. Times like this are usually more dangerous for ethnic minorities. Many Assyrians decided to leave Iraq and start a new life in the United States. This included a few members of the Yonan family, who had been residents of Baghdad for as long as anyone could remember.

The Yonans of Baghdad lived in a congested, primitive section of the al-Doura neighborhood. These brothers and their family emigrated to the U.S., and they did their best to keep in close contact with the family still in Iraq. When their parents decided to emigrate to the U.S., it was with the conviction that the family would always stay in contact. The three Yonan brothers kept that compact, occasionally

sending money and even visiting when possible. Papa Yonan followed the well-worn but always admirable script of being an immigrant who started with nothing, but by doing the jobs no one else wanted and by working harder than anyone else was willing to, made a success for himself and his now-American family. His three sons all had successful careers and retired early.

Following 9/11, the oldest brother, Hiram, volunteered his services to the U.S. government as an Arabic translator. His brothers followed suit. While the primary reason for offering to translate was a definite sense of Patriotism, the Yonans were also under the orders of another government—the government of their father, Papa Yonan, who was still alive and feisty at the age of ninety-eight. The Yonan brothers were instructed to re-establish contact with their family in Baghdad, if at all possible.

The first step was to get hired, and the second was to get stationed in Baghdad. The brothers were successful, although the Agency didn't think it was prudent to have all three in-country at the same time. My recollection is that the Yonans were only in Baghdad together for a few overlapping days here and there. The Agency takes steps to ensure that family members are not normally working on the same high-risk assignment. Having to write "the letter" for the death of one child is difficult enough; for two or more it is unimaginable.

After arriving in Baghdad, the Yonan brothers kept very busy. They hated being inactive and would volunteer for any assignment. All three became very popular and recognized characters in Baghdad Station. They were always extremely polite, pleasant, and deferential. They were also very well read and generous to a fault. My

experiences with the Yonan brothers were memorable, to say the least.

On one occasion I had to pick up a Case Officer at the airport and take her along on an ops meeting before dropping her at the Green Zone. Hiram was my linguist for the meeting. After the routine debriefing, we returned to the Green Zone and Hiram left to meet friends for dinner. Mark and I were heading into the office to write up the meeting when the Case Officer who had ridden along asked to speak to us.

"He did not translate the meeting accurately," she announced.

These were words I did not expect to hear. None of us had known that she could speak Arabic. We soon discovered that all three Yonan brothers had a bad habit of making certain assets appear less than cooperative. Even though the intelligence collection always came off successfully, the Yonan brothers routinely spiced up the responses provided by our contacts, assets, and recruited sources. The various Case Officers had no idea, and just chalked up the attitude exhibited that day as moodiness.

We decided to ask the brothers about it, and when confronted, they freely admitted to occasional embellishment:

"They're all murdering, lying dogs, so you shouldn't believe them anyway," one of them justified.

"We can tell what the Arab is thinking, so even if he doesn't say it, our translating is accurate," said another.

Our personal favorite, though was, "An Arab mouth moves, and a lie is born."

We then learned that the Yonan family had a long history of abuse at the hands of Arabs. The family that had stayed behind in Iraq had been wealthy and successful.

Even though they were Christian, they had learned from the Ottomans, who ruled Iraq when it was Mesopotamia, that "baksheesh" (bribing) was a necessary part of life. The Christian businessmen paid the scheduled amount on time and everyone was happy. This system continued under Faisal I and his son Ghazi, but it started to change after the assassination of Faisal II. Iraq suffered through a number of ineffective governments, which culminated in the victory of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party in 1968. The poor Arab communities were told that the wealthy Christians had stolen money from Arab travelers and mosques. Small pogroms began to target all Christian and Jewish minorities throughout Iraq. By this time the Yonans in America had lost touch with their family in Baghdad.

All this history was interesting, but since we were Case Officers, we had to be sure that our translators were accurate. Once they had been busted, the Yonan brothers agreed to do things by the book. As far as intelligence translation was concerned, I continued to trust them, and so did my colleagues. The truth was that at that time we had so few linguists we didn't have a choice.

After being chastised, the brothers kept a lower profile. Sammy even tempered his usual commentary on the females of Baghdad Station. Seeing the brothers so quiet was a bit depressing for the station in general, especially with Christmas approaching. Mark and I realized that, surprisingly, all three Yonan brothers were in country for the entire month of December. Remembering Hiram's comments about his obligation as the oldest brother to track down any family still living in Baghdad, Mark and I went on a mission. We decided that not only were we going to search for the family, but if we were successful, we would try and facilitate a reunion.

It all seemed impossible from the get-go, not to mention we would be breaking a few rules, but something unseen was driving us to make this effort. Baghdad had no yellow pages and Google was no help. Mark and I had to make use of the station's assets in order to locate any Assyrian communities in Baghdad. Luckily for us, Hakim, one of our assets, was able to assist. He drove Mark and me to the location in the al-Doura neighborhood that was home to the last functioning Assyrian-Christian Church.

We scouted the location, and geez, was it the pits. Many of the roads had not been widened since horse-and-buggy days, and we were very limited on what we could cover in our SUV. It reminded me of photos I had seen of Ottoman Constantinople. The houses were ramshackle, and it was difficult to determine where one compound ended and the next began. It was obviously one of the poorest parts of the city, and everywhere we turned we could see suspicious eyes peeking out from behind doors and curtains. Hakim assured us that the community surrounding the church was indeed an Assyrian neighborhood.

Mark and I discussed the situation with Wade, who was pleased at our efforts to do something nice for the Yonan boys. I recall that Wade gave us the usual Agency approval: "You have my permission to continue what you are doing until it becomes a goat-rope," which inevitably becomes, "I have no idea what you are up to and how dare you go off without my permission." After some serious discussion, we decided to take the Yonan brothers along and attend Mass at the Assyrian church that Sunday. Our plan was to arrive at ten in the morning and wait until Mass started. Hopefully the Yonan brothers would recognize someone in the congregation. It was a shot in the

dark, but Mark and I were determined to make something happen.

On that day in December, 2003, I believe Mark and I witnessed a miracle. At least a little one.

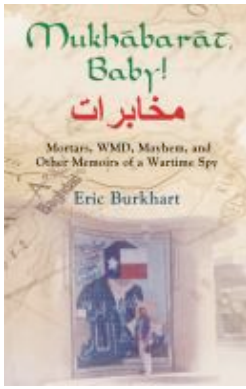
We were obliged to park the SUV at a distance and we had decided that Mark and a colleague would stay behind with the vehicle while I went into the church with the brothers. Fate intervened and changed our plans. As we were getting out of the SUV, which was parked in front of a residential compound of sorts, a family of mostly elderly folks was gathering in front of the home, possibly to attend church as well.

Hiram Yonan recognized his uncle immediately. Almost instantly we were surrounded by people. Alexander and Sammy had also found familiar faces to embrace. I do not speak Assyrian, but Mark and I understood and felt every emotion that was being expressed. By some unlikely chance, we had parked in front of their uncle's house. This compound also served as the home of numerous cousins and other relations. Within a few minutes we were ushered into the compound.

That which looked dismal on the outside blossomed once we were inside the house. Everything was spotless, and the walls were covered with Christian icons and old photographs. Fresh bread was brought out (and was absolutely delicious), as well as, of course, the ubiquitous tea. There was not much room and it seemed more relatives arrived by the minute, so Mark and I made arrangements to come back later to pick up the brothers. All three ended up spending that night outside the Green Zone, which was just one of many rules that were broken.

I will always feel like I was part of something special that day. It was one of the few true Christmases of my life.

The memory still brings tears to my eyes. With the change of government in Iraq, this family was able to establish new lines of communication with the Yonans in the United States. You can rest assured that the wealth accumulated through hard work in the U.S. would bring great comfort through the golden years of many relations in Iraq. Mark and I were invited to Christmas Mass and dinner with the family in al-Doura, but we decided it was not in the best interest of security. When the brothers were told by station management that it was time to curtail their frequent visits to family in al-Doura, they just walked outside of the Green Zone and took a taxi. I believe all three ended their contracts soon after.



My name is Eric Burkhart. I recently retired after a successful career as a CIA Case Officer. Poisoned while working in Kosovo in 2001, I continued my career into Iraq and beyond. I always seemed to be living out of a suitcase. From a post-college job in African townships, to a stint as an Immigration Agent on a Texas Border Bridge, ending up in the CIA seemed pre-ordained. This is my story.

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