Psychiatrists in Combat

Mental Health Clinicians' Experiences in the War Zone

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ISBN 978-3-319-44116-0 ISBN 978-3-319-44118-4 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-44118-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016958621

Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword

The small room that had been set aside in the convention center was filled with people, many in uniform. They were telling stories. At the front of the hall, a man in double-breasted blazer and gold buttons of Navy Dress addressed the crowd, and there were tears in his eyes. Flanking him were those in crisp Army Class A's, a smaller number in Air Force Blue.

Those versed in this sort of detail might have noticed that both the speakers and the crowd contained an abnormally high concentration of officers, most with insignia that designated medical backgrounds. Many had ribbons that designated service in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both. It was not entirely a military crowd, however. At the speaker's table was also a young woman in an elegant green dress and a civilian dressed in a brown tweed jacket and bow tie that reflected an academic rather than military fashion. Each patiently awaited their turn, and a few wept along with the Navy Officer.

The leader of this group, the woman directing the discussion, was dressed in civilian clothes. Her bearing, a formality and comfort with command, still said "military" even while dressed in a pants suit. This was Elspeth Ritchie, Cam to most friends now, but still, in perpetuity, Colonel Ritchie to those who knew her story.

Colonel Ritchie had culminated her military career as the specialty leader for Army Psychiatry. Retired from military life, but still caring very much about the mental health of Service Members, Cam organized a series of talks and panels at the conference of the American Psychiatric Association. Most of these concerned the typical topics of post-traumatic stress disorder and preventing military suicide. Others were talks by prominent figures, generals, admirals, and senators. But she had also set aside this room for us to talk to each other, about each other, and about ourselves and what we had seen and learned during the longest war in US history.

Military mental health providers have a terrible privilege. We are told the secrets of the warrior's mind. We hear these stories, these secrets both magnificent and horrific, and we must keep them. The privacy and the trust of our warriors depend on it. But the listeners carry their own loads. We go into the battlefield or wait in the hospital for the wounded to roll in. The stories themselves can weigh upon the mind. There are things that we also have to say, lessons that need to be taught, and experiences that must not be lost in the silence.

"A psychiatrist can only tell his own psychiatrist," is the old cliché. That psychiatrist presumably would tell his own psychiatrist and so on up the pyramid until the person at the top is bursting with the pressure of knowledge.

But the cliché doesn't really work. First of all, it's not just psychiatrists, but a whole cadre of mental health professionals—psychologists, social workers, technicians, occupational therapists, and more—who share these experiences. Many of the storytellers are female, each telling her story to her psychiatrist. The stories are diverse, and we need to share.

We knew that there were ways to tell our stories, to disguise the identity of our patients but still impart what they had taught us. If you hadn't figured it out already, I was the Navy guy at the front at the workshop bawling my eyes out in very unmilitary fashion. I had written a book called *At War With PTSD*, about what I'd learned as a military psychiatrist and researcher.

Others such as Heidi Kraft, who contributes a chapter here, had done so in much more eloquent fashion in her book *Rule Number Two.* Scientists like Carl Castro had gathered up the larger numbers and given us a picture of what the average soldier or Marine had experienced. Cam Ritchie herself had organized numerous case conferences, in which groups of doctors discussed the best possible treatment for a patient, without ever knowing that warrior's identity.

What was missing in our individual stories was the larger narrative that we shared in this room. Here we were not just getting the Army perspective, or the Navy perspective, the experiences of a psychiatrist or psychologist, the tribulations of an Air Force wife whose husband left for Iraq, or a Marine Corp husband whose wife deployed to Afghanistan.

Here we were seeing the big picture. Here was the psychological history of the war on terror, from the attacks on 11 September 2001 to the last American psychiatrist in Afghanistan.

Peter Armanas and Jesse Locke, two of the authors, are about the closest thing we have to telling the final chapter of the history of psychiatrists deployed in the war on terror. There are still almost 10,000 American troops in Afghanistan, about 5000 in Iraq, but these doctors were among those present when, on 28 December 2014, NATO officially ended combat operations in a ceremony held in Kabul. Dr. Armanas was with the US Army in Bagram. Dr. Locke was stationed around the country imbedded with a unit of Marines.

That was one of the things we learned as the war went on, to keep the providers with the troops they serve. Over 13 years since 9/11, and over a decade since Armannas had served as an artilleryman in the invasion of Iraq, Drs. Armanas and Locke were the instrument to apply all we knew and had learned about mental health in the war on terror.

How did we get to them, having these doctors in Afghanistan? Most people remember where we were on September 11, but how about 7 October 2001? That was the day the USA officially launched Operation Enduring Freedom, better known in civilian circles as the war in Afghanistan. At that point, there weren't any psychiatrists at the front lines.

As the USA prepared for the invasion of Iraq, Dr. Kris Peterson already knew that if there was another front of the war, he would be going in with the invasion. That invasion occurred on 20 March 2003, and with that invasion they trucked in psychiatrists like Robert Forsten and Kevin Moore. After all, as Dr. Forsten explains later in this book, this was one of "only two ways to get troops to Baghdad." The other way was by plane, but the shrinks weren't yet considered important enough for air freight.

These mental health providers had to deal with complex issues in war; when to keep a stressed soldier with his unit, when to send a Marine who is suicidal home, etc. Dr. Moore had to be more than a psychiatrist, serving as the doctor in charge of other doctors and being assigned to a team who had to investigate any incident that might be considered a war crime.

In 2004, Dr. Milligan went to Iraq as a general physician just out of internship, trying to keep Marines alive after wounds from "mortars, direct fire, IEDs, and ambushes." He also discovered that being a doctor is no protection from being a target, as did Kenneth Richter, one of our psychiatrists who wears a purple heart on his uniform today.

It is a surreal experience to go from healer to patient. As an occupational therapist for the Army, Shannon Merkle had evaluated countless soldiers with traumatic brain injury, but would suffering such a concussion make her a better provider or only prove the adage that doctors make the worst patients?

War is a fine, if ruthless, teacher. Providers both in the war zone and at home were learning how to better manage casualties, both physical and mental. We were gaining the wisdom to improve ourselves. As Heidi Craft explains of her experiences in Iraq in 2004, we learned to be "more empathic, more flexible—and more thankful." But we also had to learn to deal with our own darkness.

Elspeth Ritchie (Cam) was tasked with investigating the events at the Abu Ghraib prison. Christopher Warner would note that the same police officers he had just trained in lifesaving skills were, in fact, secretly members of Al Qaeda.

The lessons were not all learned on the battlefront. Service members were coming home alive, thanks to improvements both in combat arms and in medical technology. But we were doing things we had never done before. The military was sending people to war, then home again, and then back to war. We were sending sailors to be soldiers and soldiers to be prison guards and using our reserves as frontline forces.

Captain Robert Koffman reviewed the hard numbers and had to tell those at the top that our service members were burning out. Rohul Amin treated these warriors one on one in Walter Reed Hospital as they returned from war. Kaustubh Joshi had to deal with his own frustrations when he was deployed just after his father died. We've always asked who watches the watchmen before, but did we know who would help the helpers?

Not all was bleak. As the war progressed, we learned about post-traumatic growth as well as post-traumatic stress. While deployed, Dr. Vincent Cambell noted: "[I] completed my Lean Six Sigma Greenbelt, and taught introduction to biology course to deployed service members. I also learned how to drive a manual shift." This was in addition to treating 800 patients.

Growth was a common theme among all of the providers. We all learned something. We all had tales to tell.

The room where we were brought together was small. We were, as the Marines would style it, among the few and proud. But we served something larger. By coming together, we educated ourselves about the psychology of war and healing and, perhaps, about our own nature. We learned lessons that were bigger than that room and bigger than ourselves. This book is a way to make that room expand. I am grateful that you, the reader, are taking time to join us now. I hope that it will be helpful.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, nor the US Government.

Preface

Over the nearly 30 years that passed between the end of the Vietnam War and the initiation of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, significant changes occurred in both the military and in the field of behavioral health. For the military, Vietnam brought the end of a very unpopular war in which returning service members were not viewed as heroes, but rather treated very poorly. Indeed, many service members themselves were ashamed of their service.

The military at that time dominantly consisted of draftees who served 1 year tours in Vietnam and subsequently left the service. Reports throughout the conflict were rampant with allegations of maladaptive behaviors to stress to include drug and alcohol abuse, fratricide, unethical battlefield behaviors, and numerous unprofessional behaviors within the local village communities.

Since that time, the military made significant transitions to an all-volunteer force, which also focused on combating those maladaptive behaviors by instituting ethical principles and values expected of all soldiers. As time progressed though, the perceived need by the American public and Congress for the military declined, especially after rapid and successful military actions such as Grenada, Panama, and the stunning success against the Iraqi Army in Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield. These swift and decisive victories, coupled with the fall of the Soviet Union and victory in the Cold War, left the USA as the sole super power in the world.

There was a corresponding belief that we no longer required a large standing military force. Over the decade of the 1990s, the military was significantly downsized, as the thinking was that we would no longer engage in a large-scale war but rather smaller regional issues. The USA also thought that with our technological superiority of our equipment, we would not be challenged by large state actors. This led to limited involvement in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, operations other than war, that never carried a large military footprint.

The military medical system was initially spared from this reduction in force. However, many felt that much of the military healthcare system could be contracted or privatized and/or questioned the need for a uniformed military medical force.

Military psychiatry during this time saw a significant reduction with the closure of teaching programs and hospitals and a reduction in the overall force strength. By the time Operation Enduring Freedom kicked off in 2001, less than 10 % of the military mental health force had any deployment experience.

Meanwhile little changed in the training, preparation for war, and the initial tactics and procedures that deployed mental health providers used in treatment. Despite the fact that the prior twenty years had seen the introduction of much safer medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and atypical antipsychotics, the military still focused on treatment principles from World War II.

These principles known as Forward Psychiatry, including Proximity, Immediacy, Expectancy, and Simplicity, taught to generations of psychiatry residents as PIES or BICEPS (when Brevity was added), are focused on returning service members to the battlefield after the acute exposure. However, little consideration was given to how to treat service members returning to combat on multiple tours, treating depression, PTSD or suicidality in a combat environment, or the impact that resiliency and/or stress inoculation might have on stress responses.

In contrast, advances were made in awareness of and screening for behavioral health disorders. After the Gulf War, it was clear that there was not a good system identifying which exposures military service members had suffered. This came to the forefront when veterans began presenting with medically unexplainable illnesses, frequently referred to as the Persian Gulf Syndrome. This led to the Department of Defense initiating post-deployment screening which included environmental exposures, medical symptoms, and mental health screenings including post-traumatic stress disorder, a mental health term that did not exist until after Vietnam. The screenings were adapted over the years to include modifying the questions, screening tools, screening intervals, and timing.

With the initiation of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, conditions changed significantly. The volunteer soldiers were asked to deploy multiple times back into a combat zone to fight a nonuniformed, faceless, enemy, that frequently hid among civilians and on an asymmetric battlefield. The technological advances were countered with guerilla warfare tactics and roadside bombs which exploited limitations in the vehicles of support and sustainment units. Additionally, unlike Vietnam, service members were not permitted open access to the community but rather lived in small, walled off bases (Forward Operating Bases or FOBs) with strict rules and limitations to both avoid offending the local nationals and to protect the soldiers.

Over the coming years, behavioral health personnel were challenged with how to identify and treat post-traumatic stress disorder in an environment where they were continuously at risk and on edge. They were challenged in helping grow a force in a time when the majority of Americans were not volunteering to serve. It also became evident that their roles as providers were just as busy—or maybe busier—at the home station as they were on deployment.

The major issues of the smaller behavioral health force included: (1) numerous behavioral health personnel deploying multiple times to combat zones, (2) being asked to tackle new issues such as a rising suicide rate, and (3) how to manage deploying service members who were taking psychotropic medications.

As the war progressed, the behavioral health community found itself under fire and criticism with allegations of separating service members administratively to deny their medical benefits, sending unfit service members off to war, and not identifying a terrorist within their own ranks (Major Nidal Hasan).

However, over the course of over 15 years now at war, the longest sustained war in the history of the USA, psychiatrists and other mental health clinicians have contributed to a growing understanding of the needs of service members in combat. New initiatives were developed. Proving once again that war is a genesis for advancement, we have seen more advances made in military behavioral health in the past 15 years than in the prior 100 years.

The intent of this book is to highlight the brave individuals who volunteered for this combat service, to hear their stories of how they went through the crucible of a deployment, came out a more resilient provider, and contributed to an enhanced system of care. This book highlights behavioral health providers from all phases of the war to include those who were there through the initial invasions all the way through the recent retrograde from Iraq and downsizing in Afghanistan. It will display a comparison and contrast of both the growth and transformation of the mental health system of care during this period but also shows a change in expectations and resiliency among the providers.

This volume should serve as a guide to future deploying mental health providers on expectations and challenges. It will also serve a broader audience by giving insight about the experiences of soldiers and other military service members. It should provide leadership lessons on transforming systems in high-intensity environments.

We hope it will give civilian and military providers, veterans, and other citizens an understanding of the unique experiences that this particular group of service members face. We also hope you enjoy reading about it, as we definitely enjoyed (or hated) living it.

Bethesda, MD, USA

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The Road to Iraq

1

Kris Peterson

Between the acting of a dreadful thing and the first motion, all the interim is like a phantasma, or a hideous dream.

William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 1

1.1 The Beginning

In December 2002, with war looming, I learned I would be called up to the 98th Combat Stress Control (CSC) to deploy to Iraq. Several others had been ahead of me in the Professional Officer Filler System (PROFIS) position slated for deployment. One by one they dropped out. My anxiety increased as I moved up the priority list to become one of the remaining names able to deploy. My supervisor at Madigan Army Medical Center, near Seattle, was looking for another psychiatrist, and with his list growing short he informed me that I would be going.

I was not looking forward to this deployment and leaving family and home but was willing to do my duty. My anxiety was increasing. I was lamenting leaving family and was increasingly scared about going into combat.

I was not alone in terms of working my way up the list to deploy; CPT Mike Cole, a young Army psychiatrist, was moved to the 98th as well. Mike and I headed dutifully off to the 98th and 62nd Medical Detachment Conference in January, 2003.

Our mission was briefed to us: land in Turkey, convoy to a rally point near the port, drive 4 days across country to an assembly area, and then follow the 4th Infantry Division (4ID) across the border into Iraq. Our entry point was to be just east of Syria. We were to follow the 4th Infantry Division across the Euphrates, and

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E.C. Ritchie et al. (eds.), *Psychiatrists in Combat*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-44118-4_1

then move southwest to Tal Afar. That city is just 30–40 km west of Mosul. Here we would be based at a secure airfield doing combat stress operations and other medical support.

We were told to have a duffel bag packed within 24 h. I had little idea about what to pack, but in hindsight did not do too bad a job. Uniforms, wet wipes, medical books, batteries, nets for holding things, a small fan, a head lamp, some snack bars, and pictures of family were packed. All were helpful. Especially the wet wipes.

Days went by. Turkey refused to let our troops into the country. Diplomatically it was a nightmare. Offers of billions of dollars in aid were made but refused. Debates on the TV raged on, with the outcome declared by three votes of the Turkish government. They refused to let the United States and the 4ID go through the country.

The news made us think we might not deploy. Unfortunately instead it resulted in a much more arduous and dangerous journey.

The days wore on, and each weekend was sought after like a life preserver and then held on to with the same fervor. Every Sunday night, putting my one and three year old boys to bed and hearing their prayers was painful. Nights were spent looking out at Mount Rainier in the moonlight. My head did not seem to be on right. I would be wrecked on the occasion of my 3-year-old saying "I don't want you to leave," or "I'll miss you."

In mid March the president gave a speech to the UN. One more time Saddam was given "one last chance." That chance came and went. On March 19, 2003, the B-1 Bombers and Stealth fighters began the attack.

1.2 Hitting the Road

On April 1, the Turkish Parliament again rejected the US request to open its ports to the 4ID and Task Force Iron Horse. This now meant that there would be no northern front. Task Force Iron Horse would be rerouted through Kuwait with the same objectives: Mosul and Northern Iraq. It was a "much longer drive" as it was put by one of the members of the 98th after being briefed.

On April 10 we had definitive word that we would be sent to Kuwait and then be traveling North. Our weekends and time at home came to an end. Our flights were readied at McChord Air Force Base. We made our way to Fort Lewis, with family in tow, our gear dropped off at a collection point, and buses ready to take us away.

However, the vans to collect our gear "could not be moved" because the keys were lost. My family and friends visiting helped reload my gear, rucksacks, and duffels out of the vehicles that were keyless and drove the ¼ mile to the trucks that would take them to the aircraft. I held my boys, my wife, hugged my dad and my uncle, and then got on the big blue bus to McChord.

The bus driver honked as we passed the detachment as a last good by. He had been deployed twice to Vietnam. We drove under a freeway overpass. "We support the troops" signs and US flags were waved. We pulled into McChord AFB and were escorted into a hanger, and sat on benches with way too much gear.

The time there passed very slowly. It was a relief though to be finally underway and to really have said goodbye. No more life preserver weekends or roller coaster emotions -we were now committed. Everyone felt relief to hear the final farewell from General Dunn and then walk out on the tarmac to the plane.

Prior to boarding the plane I had prescribed sleep aids for those who wanted them for the flight. Most of our team did. The team climbed up the steps and made their way on board sitting in the first seats available. The flight attendants wore Uncle Sam hats and indicated that they could not care less if we buckled up or left the seat back up. Most of us made ourselves as comfortable as possible, took a pill and fell asleep.

1.3 Kuwait

In Kuwait we disembarked, walked about a quarter mile, to buses lined up and waiting for us. It seemed a long ride to our first stop, Camp Wolf. We were exhausted even though we had slept on the plane. The emotional toll and intermittent excitement had us all soon laying atop our gear and sleeping on the floor.

We did not exactly know what to expect, what awaited us or exactly where we were going. We received news that the war was going well: moving quickly through to objectives and "clean up operations." After hoping so long that we weren't going to deploy, we now hoped that we would end up staying in Kuwait or being sent home. However the 47th Combat Support Hospital Commander was working to find us a mission, and a place to go.

Our vehicles and equipment had been shipped to the Middle East; first it was headed to Turkey, then rerouted to Kuwait. We headed to a port there to pick up our gear. It took hours to find all of the vehicles and containers (called CONEXs) in the hot Middle Eastern sun.

As we drove I looked at the sun setting; same sun, just a different world, one that was incredibly unknown to me and those around me. Hot, dusty and sandy. Local people looked at us curiously as we traveled. We headed down a dirt road following the vehicles in front of us and turned onto a paved highway.

It was dusk when we were well underway. Visibility was further reduced by the sand being kicked up by the numerous vehicles in front of us. We skirted along the border with Iraq and now moved through open desert in the dark with sand flying.

For minutes we drove blindly, only picking up a taillight at the last second, narrowly avoiding a collision. Hitting the brakes, we froze, fearing being rammed in the rear by the vehicle behind us.

This game of blind mans bluff grew significantly more dangerous minutes later. We were hours into the convoy when we heard the distinct clanking of tracked vehicles nearby. We saw ghostly figures of Abrams tanks from the 4 ID running parallel to us, seemingly only yards away. Minutes later the tanks on our left joined the HEMMITs, long large vehicles hauling ammunition, to our right.

Driving with no visibility, in the desert, in the dust and with tanks driving along side was clear insanity to this psychiatrist.

We were hot, wearing Kevlar flak vests with seatbelts that barely fit around our equipment. The HMMWV (High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) was crammed with equipment, radio, chemical gear, M16 weapons, ammunition rounds, camel packs, food, MREs, my harmonica, notepads, maps, and water bottles, plus a bottle to piss in for the long ride.

The Humvees we rode in had cloth doors. There were cracks in the plastic windows that barely zipped open and shut. Someone had left my name and rank stenciled in the front window as if we were still in garrison. LTC Peterson. Nice target.

We would radio periodically. "Psycho 6, Psycho Sierra we've lost visibility with Psycho Charlie, over," or "Lost sight of convoy, over." The reply was "If you're in the dust cloud, you're going the right way, keep coming." Or "See those red lights, just follow those." Our response: "If we could see the lights we wouldn't be using the radio right now."

Our convoy slowed, the tanks disappeared and the dust began to settle. We saw signs of an encampment. Concertina wire, cement blocks, and floodlights illuminated a fortress in the desert. We moved forward between sand bunkers and turned into a concrete maze.

Guards were manning .50 CAL machine guns. More soldiers directed the floodlights onto our vehicles, as we were each individually checked and cleared to proceed. With more radio traffic it became clear that we were entering into Camp New York, just miles from the Iraq border.

Giant cranes lifted milvans, moving to and fro. Haze from dust and sand kicked up. Fire from burning trash pits cast a hellish glow behind the floodlights. The floodlights and flames cast a shine on the concertina wire.

We pulled to a stop. CSM Yobut, our senior non commissioned officer, was out of his vehicle checking on the soldiers. "How was that for a combat patch ride?" was his comment through the unzipped windows of the HMMWVs as he walked past. Miraculously no one was hurt or lost.

1.4 Camp New York

Quickly our team settled into Camp New York. The heat was intense with dust and sand everywhere. Tracked vehicles and cranes drove the dust into the air causing clouds within the tents. The camp was desolate and faded into a continuous horizon of dunes. Sand rose up in all directions to touch the sky.

The view was broken only by scattered tents a quarter of a mile away. Helicopters flew by in the distance, sun glinting, off their windows. Convoys miles away put up a rooster tail of dust, marking their passage, as they crossed over into Iraq. Our turn for crossing was approaching in a few short days.

We gradually explored the grounds, the hardened bunker, and the tent areas as we settled into our own tent. It was crowded and uncomfortable, but retrospectively was the most luxurious part of our deployment. Community showers and honey bucket bathrooms that we disdained at the time were later seen as a luxury.

Over the next few days of waiting a "battle rhythm" started to develop for us; waking up early at day break, washing, cleaning, reading, writing, working on our area to make personal improvements and accounting for gear. Walking to the mess hall by lunch time was unbearable in the heat. As we prepared to cross into Iraq we unpacked our MILVAN and repacked our vehicles for our drive North. Rumors came and went about the status of the war and the need for mental health support.

A sand storm came through our camp. It was an experience that would be repeated multiple times over the course of our deployment. Despite the danger and discomfort they presented, the sand storms remain natural events beautiful to behold. We were spell-bound to see the sand front move towards us and also frightened as it enveloped the camp.

1.5 Convoy into Iraq

On Easter morning we loaded our vehicles and lined them up. We cleared our weapons and distributed the ammo. I had opted not for an M16 but a 9 mm pistol. I was in the sixth vehicle in our convoy of roughly 60 vehicles. I was the senior officer in our group as a LTC. I was the oldest as well, at the age of 39. My call sign was "Psycho Doc Pappa." I liked it.

We started out with dust everywhere. Amazing to me was its consistency. It was so fine that it behaved like a fluid, as if waves were rippling in front of a boat. Soon however, the characteristic properties of the dust flying in the air turned to grit in my teeth and made me thirsty for water.

We stopped once before the border. Stepping out, stretching my legs and then taking a pee by the side of the vehicle was the necessary routine at stops. We drove for a while across dessert, then turned on to a hardball road. A few miles down there were two large "berms." The second was the border crossing into Iraq.

The border was guarded by two machine gun nests and a Bradley Fighting vehicle, our vehicles passed through a trough between them. I was not sure what I was expecting, but this wasn't it, I was expecting something more impressive.

Unceremoniously something fell from the back of the HMMWV in front of us. SGT Gonzales and I pulled over out of line to recover whatever it was, thinking it might be important. It was laundry detergent. We piled back in and regained our spot in the convoy with the mission vital "TIDE." Puns lightening the mood were thrown across our vehicle marking our entry into the war zone, "we are sure going to clean this place up," "the Tides going to change now," "hope they don't shoot any SUDS missiles at us."

1.6 Iraq

Within a mile of crossing the border again my expectations were not met. What I saw was a mass of impoverished children, shoeless and in rags standing by the roadside. These younger kids were not the "threats" I thought might meet us.

Tentatively they made their way to the road and at some points slowed and stopped our convoy. As we progressed, these younger children were joined by older people; men of military age gathered as we moved past. Many had blank stares and watched motionless, while the younger ones gave thumbs up, and waved, signaling that they wanted food, MREs, or water.

As we progressed it was clear that the security of our convoy was lousy. If we stopped we were mobbed by the civilians who gathered around and in between the vehicles. Our instructions were to "bumper up" putting our vehicles bumpers touching but this was nearly impossible. Even a little space remained a conduit to the child or adolescent to climb between to get to the drivers side of the vehicle and ask for food or water. We "accordioned" along, with spacing between vehicles way too wide.

My anxiety reflected that of many, but there was a component of the medical reserve group we had joined who seemed oblivious to the danger. Many appeared as if out on a Sunday drive in Topeka, Kansas. Some of the soldiers appeared to encourage the chaos and melee of people by throwing out MREs, water, and exchanging some dollars for worthless Iraqi money.

My heart raced during these moments when we came to a stop. Shortly though, we were back to a steady pace making our way northward, with scattered debris at every overpass, empty TOW missiles along the freeway, and burnt out fox holes.

Observing the scenery along our convoy I noted hutments, crude shelters, and adobe homes. None appeared to have running water or inside toilets as outhouses appeared to be the norm. There were small farms near the houses and herds of animals. Larger groups of men were herding sheep and camels.

One snapshot: along the roadside we saw parents with a baby. It was so hot, so desolate in the sand, and in the wreckage of the vehicles I wondered how they were to survive. It seemed naïve to think that there was help out there at all for them. I hoped that they and the baby would be all right. We drove on.

We pulled around a clover-leaf, the convoy slowed and came to its first refueling point. We took on fuel after waiting for a long time for our turn. The fuel was delivered to us from trucks or large rubber and cloth balloon like things called blivets. The term originally was slang for something ugly and unwieldy "ten pounds of manure in a five pound bag" which seemed apt.

After hours of waiting we were told to rest for the night. We ate MREs and made "cat holes" to go to the bathroom. We ended up spending the night there, opening our cots up by the vehicle with the door open protecting one side with a poncho draped over the top.

The dust remained horrible. Wet wipes would serve as our showers for many days; after that a bag filled with water hanging on a nail would do for months. My eyes were heavy, the adrenaline now ebbed. Feeling as if we were safe for the moment, I slept.

1.7 A Few More Convoy Adventures

We woke up early and loaded our equipment into the vehicle. We waited and waited again some more until finally we rolled out. We got on the highway after a short drive through several towns.