

## T W O

The night before leaving for the Middle East, our company had a lay-out gear inspection conducted by our company commander, Captain Warfel. The captain was a tall, slim man in his late thirties; his light brown hair, intense blue eyes, and impeccable desert uniform made him look straight out of a GI Joe box. As he walked past my gear I asked him if I could bring my Bible with me. The request was granted, but I had to leave behind my laptop computer, which I had intended to use for writing; several books I had wanted to read also had to be left behind.

In lay-out inspections, soldiers have to spread their gear in a designated area—on their bunks or the floor—in a predetermined order. Such inspections are common, particularly when a unit is about to be mobilized, but the inspection that night was mostly due to an order from battalion to strictly limit the amount of personal belongings we could bring. We had to carry our own unit supplies, including food, water, weapons, and ammunition, and with all the cargo we had, plus the weight of the fuel, there was concern that the plane would be way too heavy for the long trip.

But even after the severe weight restrictions, the plane

could still not fly the whole distance on a full tank, and we had to stop for fuel in New York, Canada, Scotland, and Italy before arriving in Jordan, our final destination. In spite of the long flight and the many stops, the large chartered plane was comfortable enough for the more than one hundred and thirty soldiers traveling in it, and most of us slept throughout the flight.

It was night when we arrived at the Jordanian border with Iraq. Upon exiting the plane I saw only a big airstrip hangar in a desolate military airport in the middle of the dark desert. Inside the hangar, which some of us visited soon after arriving, we encountered the first major cultural difference: the design of the latrines. They consisted of openings in the floor with water faucets next to them. Some within the platoon looked down on these new Arab-style toilets, and complained that from then on we would be “shitting like dogs.” This racist attitude toward cultural differences was common throughout our deployment in the Middle East.

I felt a sense of alertness and caution immediately after our arrival. We had traveled halfway across the world knowing that an invasion of Iraq was a distinct possibility. My first impression of our new environment was of a desolate, unwelcoming place. Perhaps I was just psyching myself up for the military action to follow, but it occurred to me that we might already be under the prying eye of our enemy. I profoundly hoped that there would be no war, but I also knew that I had to mentally prepare for the possibility of being part of one.

This initial impression lifted quickly the following morning when the rising sun opened a window to the modern face of imperial war in the new century. When I awakened, I saw that the tents we stumbled in the night before were mounted on wooden bases and were equipped with electricity and air-conditioning. We were in the middle of a colossal military tent city that included two large dining facilities serving everything from bread and butter to ice cream and fresh tropical

fruit, and a PX, or post exchange store, with a wide range of merchandise including snacks and tobacco, CDs and DVDs, clothing, even folding beach chairs. The base, known as H-5, also had a Morale-Welfare-Recreation (MWR) facility, with ping-pong tables, books, and a big-screen TV for movies. Plentiful phones were located just outside the midnight mess hall so that we could drop in for a late-night snack after speaking with our families back home.

Considering we were right next to Iraq, with war drums beating insistently in the background, it was a pleasant place to be. But our standard of living improved further after we relocated to a U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery base in the mist-shrouded mountains that surrounded Amman, Jordan's capital. Our mission was to guard the perimeter of the base, which sat on top of a hill that overlooked the city. The Islamic call to prayer, a moving and mystical recitation that summons Muslims to worship, echoed throughout Amman five times a day, giving the place an air of ancient holiness, especially during the early morning hours, when the fog slowly uncovered the city before our eyes.

At the base, which was surrounded by all kinds of Jordanian army units, Patriot missile launchers stood ready to intercept Scud missiles. The widespread belief was that we were the king's guests and that we were there to protect Amman from Saddam's near misses on bordering Israel. It was said that during the first Gulf War, Saddam launched Scud missiles at Israel hoping it would retaliate and that other Arab nations would join the fight. Several of these Scud missiles fell short of their targets in Israel and hit Amman instead. In exchange for letting the U.S. military use H-5 to launch an offensive against Iraq, the United States set up air defense bases to protect Jordan.

Being guests of the king of Jordan had its rewards. A catering service delivered breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day; a dry-cleaning service operated on Tuesdays and Thursdays;

toilets, though portable, were of the Western sit-down variety and there were ample showers with running water. There was also an MWR tent with two TV sets, each with a hundred channels; we also had a beach volleyball court.

But the best thing about our time in Jordan, at least as far as I was concerned, was the fact that we were still at peace. I was pretty well alone among my fellow soldiers in holding such a view. Most of the platoon were gung ho for war and keen to put their fighting skills to the test. My platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Palango, wore all kinds of training tabs and combat awards from his time as a young U.S. ranger in Grenada. One day I heard him jokingly say "Give war a chance." I wondered just how much action he had actually seen in that briefest of invasions.

Back then, without yet having any combat experience, I was aware that combat was not that cleansed, pretty, *Top Gun* picture Hollywood has imprinted on young minds, where bullets fly mostly one way and friendly casualties are clean, whole, few, and heroic. I think one does not need to have actually experienced war firsthand to understand its human cost, and I couldn't possibly wish for a situation in which people I cared about would die. But my aversion to war was also very exclusive to the war in Iraq, and it was an aversion initially grounded in political reasons.

During our stay in Jordan we were able to watch the news, and even the mainstream media was reporting strong opposition to a possible invasion, not just from around the world, but also from home. Some of the biggest antiwar demonstrations ever seen in the United States took place just prior to the invasion, and I couldn't help sympathizing with the demonstrators. I didn't feel our government had made a strong case for military action. I knew that the chief UN weapons inspectors were requesting more time to try to find weapons of mass destruction, and that some of the United States' strongest allies were saying

no to the war. And the fact the most of the September 11 hijackers were Saudi nationals, with no proven connection to Iraq or Saddam Hussein, made me more skeptical still. I felt certain that the motives behind the war had more to do with oil and geopolitical power than with defense of the United States.

Back in the United States, before deployment, I hadn't had the courage or clarity to openly express my doubts about participating in a war that I believed was unjustified. Besides, I didn't want to be labeled a coward. I knew that openly expressing my reservations could be construed as unpatriotic and treasonous, and that I might even be court-martialed and sent to jail.

As the prospect of the invasion became more real, I tried to find comfort in the excuses that soldiers use when fighting wars they don't believe in. I told myself that I was a soldier and it wasn't for me to judge the reasons behind the decisions of those higher up in the chain of command. I had signed a contract, I was wearing a uniform, and I had to do my duty, period. Besides, I was an infantry squad leader and my squad needed me.

But still, I had been deployed to the Middle East in support of a military effort I strongly condemned and considered criminal. I was afraid I would never make it home to tell my daughter that even though I participated in the war, I had been against it. If I died, that was a part of the legacy I wanted to leave behind for her. So, one cold night, feeling that what I was about to do would most definitely be considered disloyal, I secretly wrote a message to my daughter under the dim beam of an army-issued flashlight. On a sheet of paper folded in half I wrote the words: GIVE PEACE A CHANCE.

That night I picked a member of the squad I really trusted to pull guard duty with me. The night was freezing as Specialist Guevara and I stood watch on the tower overlooking the sleeping capital of Jordan. We were wearing our full battle-rattle and our Gore-Tex jackets to stop the cutting winter winds. I took my gloves off and asked my friend to step

away from his machine gun for a minute. I gave him my disposable camera and, as if about to commit a crime of treason, I pulled the subversive sign out of my pocket and unfolded it by my chest. I destroyed the paper right after the picture was taken, but not before asking Guevara, who had taken the picture with a smile on his face, not to comment the incident to anyone in the platoon or even the squad.

My secret opposition to the war was only one of the problems I had with the military. My platoon leader, Lieutenant Dominguez, and I were not getting along too well. He was an insecure person, with little idea how to run an infantry platoon. He hid his lack of self-confidence behind a mask of macho assurance, which in turn manifested itself as inept leadership. On one occasion, during training, he ordered one of my grenade launchers to engage an armored vehicle that was a thousand meters away. I had to gently remind him that the target was way out of range. Another time he almost burned a soldier by firing a flare grenade from what was clearly the wrong position. I generally tried to keep my criticisms to myself but sometimes I couldn't help calling him on his stupidities. This friction between the lieutenant and me manifested itself in a sort of abusive relationship, in which he took advantage of every opportunity to scold me in public.

But if I had difficulties with the leadership of those above me, it was clear that they too had problems with my own leadership. In particular, there were serious concerns about my decision to establish a different type of relationship with the soldiers in my squad than was customary in the army. I wanted them to follow me not because of the consequences that would befall them if they didn't, but because they respected and trusted me. This was not standard practice in the armed forces, where one of the most widely used techniques for getting soldiers to follow orders, especially when there are disciplinary problems, is called "corrective training." Corrective training is

nothing more than physical punishment, which some say is forbidden in the army but which is still widespread. It is colloquially referred to as “smoking.” Its most common form is making a soldier do push-ups. Ordering a soldier to get on the ground to start such punishment is called “dropping,” and the position to be assumed on the ground prior to doing the push-ups is referred to as “front-leaning-rest position.”

I can clearly recall one of the last occasions that I dropped a soldier and I’m not proud of how vindictive I was when I did it. It was at Fort Stewart, Georgia. Private First Class Thomas was a bit overweight, and watching him eat pizza, chips, and chocolate and chew tobacco and drink beer and soda, all while being out of shape and overweight, simply disgusted me. Today I look back at how I used to be and sometimes feel ashamed. But the truth is it really bothered me to see this nineteen-year-old, insecure, out-of-shape, overweight soldier-boy in my squad. Most of the time I tried to help him as much as I could, but every now and then I couldn’t help despising him, and I could be really hard on him.

One afternoon, while the squad was conducting PT, or physical training, I saw that Thomas was falling way behind everyone else during the running part of the exercise, and that the faster soldiers were beginning to pass him for the second and third time. I became furious and decided to cut through the middle of the field to run alongside him. When yelling at him no longer worked, I ordered him to stop and dropped him just off the track. I then proceeded to smoke him until he almost reached muscle failure. He raised his upper body from the front-leaning-rest position and, standing on his knees, he started to cry. His upper lip was topped with tears and snot, which he wiped with his chubby, dust-covered, sweaty right arm.

I’ve never apologized to PFC Thomas for that smoking, though I wish I had. That day at Fort Stewart was the last

time I ever dropped or smoked a soldier. I like to think that abusing lower-ranking soldiers was out of character for me and resulted from the tension between the lieutenant and me. But I also know that my bouts of rage were the result of feeling trapped in a military effort I opposed.

When I told the oldest and most experienced squad leader in the platoon, Staff Sergeant Duckett, about my decision not to drop my soldiers anymore, he told me that such an approach to leadership could bring seriously negative consequences to my standing as a squad leader in the platoon. I told him that dropping soldiers to the level of my feet was degrading and humiliating, and that such treatment, far from achieving respect and discipline, only prompted resentment. I wanted my soldiers to respect and trust me, not fear me. I also told him that I myself would no longer drop for anyone, whatever their rank. I could tell this news surprised him but he responded by simply pressing his lips together and nodding.

Once we were in Jordan, my distinctive approach to leadership really started to raise eyebrows in the chain of command. One afternoon, while we were fortifying the perimeter with concertina wire, my platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Palango, called me aside.

"What's up, sarge?" he asked in his usual happy-go-lucky tone.

"Not much, sergeant," I answered, wondering what he wanted. "What's going on?"

We walked farther away from where the other soldiers were working, which was typical of Palango, who preferred to do only enough physical work to be noticed.

"I've noticed that you don't drop your soldiers," he said.

"Right."

"Yeah, I spoke with Duckett," he went on. "He said that you don't want to drop your men."

"Aha, yes, sergeant."

“Well, you see the other squad leaders, they’re good to their men, but they’re also firm, and they enforce discipline.”

“Yes, sergeant,” I said. “I know, they drop their guys, and they yell at them. But you don’t. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you yelling at anyone, or even dropping anyone. You seem like a pretty calm person to me.”

“Yeah, sarge,” he said. “But you really can’t compare. I’ve been in the military a lot longer, I’ve been to war and have shot at the bad guys, and I’m a sergeant first class. I’ve earned my respect.”

*Bad guys?* I thought. *Where does this guy come from?* I knew I had earned my squad’s respect, but not his.

“I have the respect of my men, sergeant.”

“Well, it’s not just about respect, it’s also about discipline, and being the way an infantry squad leader is supposed to be.”

Now we were getting to the bottom of the matter. It was not a question of my effectiveness as a squad leader, but rather of how I was expected to behave.

“Is there anything the other squads are doing that my squad is not?” I asked, shifting my eyes between him and the ground, where I was kicking little rocks with my boots.

“No, sergeant,” he said, stopping for a moment, which made me look straight at him as he talked. “Your guys are doing fine, and you have two outstanding team leaders. It’s just that I would like you to put a little more testosterone into your leadership style, that’s all.”

“A little more testosterone?” I asked, thinking what a brute I was talking to.

“Well, you know,” he said. “I want to see you more in charge. Yeah, more testosterone, more infantry.”

“Alright, sergeant,” I said looking at him with a forced smile. “I think I know what you mean.”

I knew exactly what he meant, but I had no intention of changing anything about my leadership style, and I didn’t.

The main problem I had with Palango was not about the way I led my squad; it was about my overall approach to leadership and human relations. I had a hard time dealing with all the hypocrisy and backstabbing that went on within the platoon. For instance, there was a huge power struggle between Palango and Dominguez, one that one day got to an embarrassing point. It happened while we were having a command meeting in the mess hall tent, and the two “big dogs” started yelling at each other.

“You talk so much about war and battle, and all that, sir,” yelled Palango at the lieutenant. “But have you ever seen war?”

Dominguez reacted furiously to Palango’s question. We’d all heard him talk about war as if he and combat were old pals, but we knew that, although he had been in the military for close to twenty years, he had never fired a bullet outside of a shooting range.

“Sergeant Palango,” Dominguez countered, trying to compose himself. “I don’t need to have been to war to be ready for it or talk about it, and I can’t believe you took that cheap shot at me. I am the lieutenant here, I am the platoon leader. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No,” said Palango. “You are the LT, and I respect you, but I have a problem with you always lecturing me about battle when I am the one here who has actually fought. I was there, I was shot at, and I’m the one who shot at the bad guys.”

The loud argument finished shortly after this exchange, but the friction between the sergeant and the lieutenant continued, and they used every opportunity to backstab each other. When it was my turn to go at it with Palango again, the problem, once more, involved the practice of smoking the men.

The origins of the new dispute centered on one PFC Leonard. Leonard and I had been friends for a long time, though I outranked him and we had not been in the same platoon until we were deployed to the Middle East. He was an

intelligent young man, a terrific chess player who was good at math and interested in philosophical questions. But he was impractical, and often found it hard to keep his mouth shut even if it got him in trouble. On top of that, he was untidy and his personal hygiene wasn't the best. This was a combination of qualities that was almost certain to cause problems for him in an infantry unit.

Being more than a little disorganized, Leonard kept personal belongings in the same bag as his chemical protective gear. One such belonging was his CD player. One day while Leonard was pulling guard duty on a watchtower, the platoon's medic, who had the reputation of being a snitch, saw the player inside Leonard's bag while doing his rounds. The medic went straight to Palango and told him that Leonard was listening to music while pulling guard duty. The CD player was subsequently confiscated.

About a week later, Leonard and I were having a casual conversation about the condition of his boots, which at the request of his tent mates he left outside every night before going to bed. He wanted to know if I knew of a way to eliminate their nasty odor. I jokingly told him the only solution was to pour fuel in them and set them on fire, but I was probably right about that.

Suddenly he realized the time and said he had to go. I knew it wasn't his turn for guard duty and asked him where he was going in such a rush.

"I gotta go get smoked," he said with a forced smile.

"What do you mean?" I asked with a frown.

"Every day at twenty hundred hours, Sergeant Iglesias smokes me for an hour."

Leonard wasn't in the same squad as Iglesias but, for the purposes of perimeter security, reported directly to him.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me, man," I said.

"No, I'm serious. But I'm not supposed to say anything. Be-

sides, it's cool; Sergeant Iglesias only smokes me when there are people around. When everyone leaves he tells me to recover."

Recovering means telling a soldier who's being smoked to get up from the front-leaning-rest position.

"It's not cool, man." I said this holding his arm, trying to keep him from leaving. "That shit's fucking illegal. Have you told Ducket about it?"

"No," he said. "But the order came straight from Palango, so I don't think there is anything he can do about it."

Later that night Leonard and I had a long chat. I learned that after Leonard's CD player was confiscated, everyone in his tent was ordered not to share their CD players or Game Boys with him. He was being disciplined for his irresponsible behavior while on guard duty. However, it turned out that Sergeant Iglesias agreed to let Leonard use his player on the condition that if he got caught with it, he would be on his own. One day, someone in the tent heard music coming from Leonard's sleeping bag. They found Iglesias's CD player, which Leonard had forgotten to turn off before going on duty. Instead of giving Iglesias away, Leonard said he had stolen the player. As punishment he was given a one-hour-long smoking every day for two weeks. And even though everyone knew what had really happened, they still labeled Leonard a thief and forced him to dump all of his belongings outside to make sure he hadn't stolen anything else. They also confiscated his knives "for the protection of all," an absurd measure obviously designed only for the purpose of humiliation, given the fact that they let him keep his weapon and ammunition so that he could continue with guard duty.

On another occasion, after the end of the two weeks of smokings, Leonard and I were talking again. He told me that before agreeing to return his toys to him, Sergeant First Class Palango had told him he had to memorize everything on our

language card, which included some 105 words and phrases in Arabic, in five days. No one in the platoon knew more than five words. Leonard knew more than twenty; I know because I tested him. But because he had been unable to memorize the entire thing he was told by Palango he had to spend the night dumping more than two hundred sandbags on the volleyball court. He wasn't to return to his normal duties until he was done dumping the last bag.

"And no one can help me," he said, evidently distressed. "They're sending the doc," meaning our snitching platoon medic, "to supervise me."

"They're sending the medic to supervise you because they know you can hurt yourself dumping all those bags by yourself at night," I explained to him. "Have you told Ducket?"

"No."

"Okay, you go ahead, man," I said, trying hard to keep my cool. "I'm gonna go tell Ducket about this shit, and if he doesn't do anything about it, I will, because this is just too much."

Leonard thanked me and I went off to find Ducket, who was deep asleep, perhaps getting ready for our guard shift, which started at midnight.

"What's up, Sergeant Mejía?" said Ducket grumpily. When he removed his sleeping mask I could see that he was upset by my waking him hours before his shift.

"What is it now?"

"Leonard."

"Ohhh, come on, sergeant, not everyone is like you, you know?"

"No, man," I said. "This shit's gone way too far already, and if you don't do anything about it, I will."

"What do you mean? What's going on?" He was now getting out of his sleeping bag, which sat on two foam mattresses on top of an army cot. Ducket really liked his beauty sleep.

"I'm about to go tell the battery commander and the first sergeant, because what they're doing to Leonard is clearly wrong, not to mention illegal."

"SERGEANT MEJÍA, STOP!" he yelled. "Now, will you tell me what's going on?"

"They're making Leonard dump *all* the sandbags on the volleyball court at night because he couldn't memorize all the words on the language card."

"Who's doing that?" he asked.

"According to Leonard the order came from Palango, and they even got the medic watching him. They must know he could hurt himself doing that alone, at night. I'm sure the battery commander would not agree with these measures."

"Alright, sergeant, let me go talk to Palango," said Ducket, finally putting on his boots. "I'll see what I can do."

While Ducket went to meet with Palango, I went to the volleyball court to see how Leonard was doing. Before I spotted him I ran into the medic, who had made himself a comfortable sandbag seat from which he could watch Leonard dump the sandbags.

"Hey, what's up Sergeant Mejía?" He spit some sunflower seeds before saying this.

"Not much," I said, cuttingly. "Where's Leonard?"

He pointed in the direction of one of several huge piles of sandbags.

"He's alright," he said.

"Aha."

I walked toward the pile without seeing as much as Leonard's shadow. Once his profile became visible in the darkness, I saw that he had taken off his uniform top, even though it was a pretty cold evening. He was sweating profusely and had a sandbag on each shoulder, which he dropped upon seeing me. He was crying in silence.

"I'm a failure," he said, crying but with a smile on his face.

“No, you’re not, man,” I said, trying not to show how upset I was. They were breaking the kid down. “These people are just a bunch of dickheads,” I continued. “And you’re smarter than all of them.”

“No.” He was looking down and nodding his head, probably talking to himself more than to me. “Look at me,” he insisted. “I can’t do anything right. One simple task after another, and I keep failing.”

“Simple!?” I asked, almost yelling. “You know more Arabic than anyone in the platoon, man; that shit ain’t simple! Anyway, I talked to Duckett; I’m not sure what he’s gonna do, but he said he would do something. You just be careful while you’re here.”

He had stopped crying by the time I started walking away.

“Hey, sergeant,” he said.

I turned back to see him.

“Thank you.”

I forced a smile, waved, and kept walking.

The following day Leonard got all his gear back. He told me Palango had shown up at the volleyball court shortly after I left the night before. He told Leonard he hadn’t meant for him to dump all the bags, and that he just wanted to check that he could follow orders to the best of his ability, a sort of discipline test. That same day Leonard moved to my tent.

Not long after this incident my team leaders started asking me about my impending transfer. I told them, truthfully, that I had no idea what they were talking about. Then, one morning, a soldier in my squad was congratulated on his new position by another squad leader. He was told that I was about to get fired and that he would get to take my spot. The rumors became ever more intense and frequent. At first I thought little of it, but as time went by I realized the rumors were beginning to undermine my authority within the squad. I decided to confront Palango about the matter.

“Hey, what’s up, big sergeant?” he said to me one morning as I approached him after breakfast. “How come you never sit with us?”

I told him I preferred to sit with my squad, which was true, but I usually sat anywhere in the mess tent. In reality I didn’t like sitting with him and the other squad leaders mostly because the conspiracies and hypocrisy at their table were just too much for me to swallow along with my food.

“How do you think my squad is doing?” I asked, knowing the problem had nothing to do with my squad, or even my performance as a squad leader.

“Oh, I think your guys are doing fine,” he said, pausing. The tension was palpable. “Why do you ask, sergeant?”

“Well, it’s just that I’ve been hearing this rumor that I’m about to get fired,” I said, looking at him but without smiling. “And if it’s true, I’d like to know why.”

“No, that’s not true, but I did say I would fire whoever tries to go over my head.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew exactly what he meant.

“Well, somebody said they were going to see the battery commander to complain about my leadership,” he continued, knowing very well that the person he was talking about was standing in front of him. “Why, was that you?”

“If you’re talking about what happened with Leonard, yes, that was me.”

“I’ll send your ass straight back to H-5 if you ever try to go over my head again,” he yelled.

“Well, I never planned to go over your head,” I said, lying. “I went straight to Duckett because he is still Leonard’s squad leader. But I didn’t go over your head, sergeant.”

“Well, do you have a problem with the way I handled Leonard? I even sent the medic, to make sure he didn’t hurt himself. It was all corrective training.”

“Sergeant, I have a problem with the way Leonard’s been handled from the day we got here. I mean, yeah, the guy’s a bit clumsy and all, but the way they’re treating him is not helping him one bit. It’s just breaking the guy’s morale and self-esteem.”

I felt like I was talking in a different tongue to a being from a different world, although in reality, compared to everyone else in the platoon, I was the only alien there.

“Whatever problems you may have, you keep them within the platoon,” he said.

“Roger, sergeant,” I said. “That’s why I went to Sergeant Ducket. I was following the chain of command.”

“And that’s all you have to do, sergeant,” his lips curled upward in a forced smile. “Meanwhile, don’t worry about anything you hear. You’re doing a good job, sergeant.”

We exchanged pleasantries and by the end of the conversation we were patting each other on the shoulder. It seemed like everything was going to be okay. But the rumors about my imminent firing didn’t stop; they just became a bit more discreet.

A few days after my confrontation with Palango, the “shock and awe” bombing of Baghdad started. I was in shock and awe myself, not so much because of the ruthless bombardment, but because of how the U.S. government had ignored international law and forced this war not only on Iraq, but on the entire world.

Some of the soldiers in the platoon expressed regret about missing out on all the action; others channeled their feelings in a more mature but still gung-ho way by saying that as infantrymen we should be fighting alongside our brothers. I, on the other hand, was thinking that sooner or later the trigger-happy wishes of my fellow soldiers would actually come true. Feeling more and more that combat was just around the corner, I started hoping it wouldn’t last long, that it would be a quick invasion, and that we would promptly be home.

The artillery unit we were attached to received redeploy-

ment orders; they were going back to the States. We were told that we had to stay on for a while to provide security for the Kellogg Brown & Root contractors while they tore down our camp.

Just as the artillery unit left the site, Easter rolled around. Lieutenant Dominguez, now supreme chief of the base, decided it would be good for troop morale to have a barbeque. This was to be the whole nine yards—burgers, hot dogs, and even beer.

Dominguez went on a shopping expedition to get supplies for the barbeque. He took a security team with him and, against direct orders, told everyone in the team to wear their full uniforms for their little road trip. They were spotted buying beer in a supermarket by a couple of U.S. citizens wearing civilian clothes, probably diplomats or undercover agents of some kind. The civilians went straight to the general in charge of all U.S. troops in the country and reported what they had seen.

Not long after we left the site days later, once we returned to H-5, Dominguez was relieved of his command as platoon leader. Rumor has it that his shopping trip was the end of his career as an officer. The last I heard, he'd commanded a convoy en route to Iraq, and was sent back to the States soon after. Sergeant First Class Palango became acting platoon leader of third platoon to replace him.

As for me, Palango said that I was to be transferred out of third platoon to become a squad leader in first platoon.

"I hate to see you go," he said with a straight face. "But it's not up to me."

Days after I took my new position as first squad leader in second platoon, and without prior notice, the entire company was woken up at about three in the morning. We were to get all our gear ready to go. The exhilaration of going home lasted only until we learned that we were redeploying not back to the States but to what would become our new home for an indefinite period of time: we were going to Iraq.