

# WHAT WAS ASKED *of* US

AN ORAL HISTORY *of the* IRAQ WAR  
*by the* SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT IT

TRISH WOOD

*Introduction by* BOBBY MULLER



"Nothing short of monumental. . . Trish Wood has produced what is perhaps, to date, the only text about Iraq that matters." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

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## COPYRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

## PREFACE

## CHAPTER 1: Winners and Losers

“It went on the whole night”

“How did it come to this madness and chaos?”

“The first suicide bombing”

“Three Kings”

“The Word of the Day”

## CHAPTER 2: Bringing Them America

“They don’t have a security or reconstruction plan to implement”

“Our mission was at odds with itself”

“It was just a dog, another casualty of the war”

“They thought we were bringing them America”

“Just get me out”

“I didn’t pray for the Iraqis”

“Indirect fire is really good at finding me”

“There’s going to be an uprising here soon”

“Someone’s going to fucking pay”

## CHAPTER 3: Don’t Look Away

“Don’t worry about it, we’ve got him”

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“If I died, I died”

“For a split second . . . I thought I understood it”

“It is gruesome to just beyond the realm of a horror film”

“I just had a hatred for the Iraqis”

“They were sending us out there in pieces of crap with no armor”

“Definitely not California”

“In war, the best of you shines”

“Killed in action”

“I was an American soldier”

“Some of these people are the lost generation”

“Shot in the head”

CHAPTER 4: Nor Fear the Dangers of the Day

“Walking through the graves”

“Just a matter of luck”

“You don’t want to look at your friend who has just been shot”

“I am changed”

“This is what happens when people speak to each other with rifles”

“It’s the cold, blunt truth. There was a little girl that died.”

“We just killed a bunch of dudes who were on our side”

“And then I hear the explosion”

“The next generation of insurgents”

“Nor dread the plagues of darkness

“War turns you into what your mother wishes you would never be”

“I didn’t get my happy ass blown up . . . That is what winning is now”

“Hopefully I provided some relief”

“What the fuck is wrong with that guy? . . . He’s an Iraq vet.”

“I’m glad you’re doing it and not me”

GLOSSARY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*For the families of the men and women who served in Iraq  
and for Thomas and Truman . . . my own*

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*“We live in wartime with a permanent discomfort, for in wartime we see things so grotesque and fantastic that they seem beyond human comprehension. War turns human reality into a bizarre carnival that does not seem part of our experience. It knocks us off balance.”*

— CHRIS HEDGES, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*

*“Then he began to cry. He kept looking at us as the tears went down his face. He did not wipe them away, blow his nose or cover his face. He did not seem to know he was crying.”*

— GLORIA EMERSON, describing an encounter with Mr. Joseph Humber, whose son Teddy was catastrophically wounded in Vietnam, in *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses and Ruins from a Long War*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is almost forty years ago now, but 1969 seems like only yesterday. Though I could not have known it that January, 1969 was to be one of the most important years of my life. The Paris Peace Talks were under way. The United States and the former Soviet Union signed a nuclear nonproliferation treaty and for a short time at least, it seemed as if the Cold War would cool off. Mario Puzo's epic, *The Godfather*, was published in 1969 and became a bestseller. The U.S. space program launched *Apollo 10* and then *Apollo 11*—and people watched in awe as men walked on the moon. In 1969, Richard Nixon was inaugurated president, and a music festival called Woodstock was held on Max Yasgur's farm in New York state. And in April 1969, while I was serving as a marine infantry officer, a North Vietnamese bullet went into my chest, forever altering my world.

At the time, my unit had been involved in an intense firefight on a hill in the northern part of South Vietnam. It was to be my final day "on the line," and this was to be my last time in combat. The bullet ripped through my chest, collapsed both of my lungs, and severed my spinal cord. With the best of luck went some good. Indeed, if the tumblers of the universe had not somehow clicked exactly in my place, I would not be here today. Before being shot, I had called for helicopter evacuation for others who had already been wounded, and on that day the hospital ship *USS Repose* just happened to be offshore. Within an hour, I was receiving the best trauma care in the world.

The first sensation I had after being hit was that of falling through a kaleidoscope world. I felt that my body had shattered into a thousand pieces, much like the windshield of a car in an accident. Then I realized I was lying on my back, looking up at the sky. There was no pain; instead, I felt calm and relaxed, as if surrounded by a warm glow. Then I realized I was about to die. I cannot really describe what it feels like to experience dying. My last thoughts were about the finality of it, the aloneness of it, and the absolute helplessness to stop what was happening. The calm was there, but so too was a sense of things slipping away, of a curtain going down. As I felt myself losing consciousness, I was convinced it was the end of my life.

Thanks to the heroism of other soldiers, the navy corpsmen, the medevac crews, the nurses, and the doctors who operated on me for hours, I survived. When I woke up, I was disbelieving. I was ecstatic. I know I should have died on that hilltop, but I didn't. I was given a second chance at life.

In May 1969, I arrived outside of New York City aboard a military transport plane and was transferred to an ambulance. I was taken to the Long Island Naval Hospital in the dead of night. The first time I would be outside the walls of that institution was weeks later when I was transferred to the VA Medical Center where I would spend the next year in physical rehabilitation. I was not far from where I grew up.

June is beautiful in New York, and the day was bright and sunny, and millions of people were on the highways, going to and from work. I watched them, cocooned in their own worlds, listening

their radios, crawling at a snail's pace along the Long Island Expressway. It was another world for me and I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. At that moment in Vietnam, ambushes were being triggered, patrols were engaging in firefights, and young men were dying. Just weeks before, I had been there, heading into battle. Now I was here. And people were leading normal lives, as if nothing else mattered.

I wanted to scream: *Don't you people know there's a war on?*

War is a unique human experience. For those involved in the business of killing or in witnessing it, the experience is life altering. In my work with veterans, hundreds of them over the course of the last thirty-five years, I have come to appreciate these transformations. There is a certain numbness of mind that occurs in war. One of the doctors who attended me on the *Repose* was a psychiatrist. One day he asked if I wanted to talk about what had happened. He was concerned that I was wondering how I would live my life as a paraplegic. Instead, I asked him about my reactions to what I had seen in combat. Why, I asked him, wasn't I more upset about what I had seen and done? The doctor explained that the human mind contains defense mechanisms that protect us in extreme circumstances, altering our feelings and allowing us to endure the horrific. After I had spent some time at home, he said, those protective mechanisms would melt away. I would react in just the same way as regular civilians do to life's traumas.

When you read the stories told by the soldiers in this book, you'll read about veterans who went through what I went through, and who are still trying to comprehend what they did and saw, and what it means. While Vietnam and Iraq are different wars, in a fundamental sense all wars are the same. We go to war for one purpose—to kill other human beings. So for the soldier, there is always an attempt to understand and give meaning to that experience. Everyone in this book, and everyone who has seen combat in Iraq, will need more time to sort through and understand their experiences. Many will do so successfully, but others will not.

This is not an antiwar book or a prowar book. It is a book of stories about people who have been in combat, who have served their country. Some of those here are confident that the war they fought was just. Others are not. But these accounts are not about the politics of this war; instead they are a simple recounting of experiences that are very personal. That is the way it should be. In all of my time in Vietnam, I don't remember having one conversation about whether we were right or wrong to be fighting in Southeast Asia. It simply didn't matter. Young men fight because they're ordered to fight because they believe it's their duty to fight, and because they are committed to those they are with. This isn't about politics; this is *personal*.

It's a slow process sorting through the experiences of war. It takes time to leave the mind-set of a combat zone and a military way of life. It takes time to clear your head, to take in the views of the society about the war, and to learn more about what you were a part of—and why it happened the way that it did. Most of all, it takes time to “communalize” the experience of war, to end the isolation that so many feel when they return to civilian life. There is no representative story of what it means to go to war, no monopoly on the truth. Learning to respect the experiences of others is a lesson many from my war have yet to learn. Each soldier's account is like a single frame of a feature-length movie.

Still, in reading these stories, I have an overwhelming sense that the veterans in these pages experienced what I experienced. I am not talking about just the direct participation in war, the being wounded, or coping with the brutality of combat. There is also the challenge of separating from the battlefield, the sense of disconnectedness that occurs to all of those who return from war. When we remember that all of those who serve our country in Iraq represent less than 1 percent of our population, it becomes easier to understand this disconnection—and the deep bitterness that ca

result. The wars our country fights are our wars. We, as a people, are responsible for them. The failure of many Americans to appreciate what's involved in fighting a war is a source of frustration and alienation for those who have served—a frustration and alienation that cannot be salved by yellow ribbons.

Veterans are famous for not opening up when asked about their war experience. This is partly because they learn quickly that folks really don't *want* to hear the whole gruesome, depressing, and complicated truth—they can't handle it. For most veterans, it's a lot simpler to give a short dismissive answer than to try to bring someone into an alien realm that needs so much explaining. When I came to Washington, DC, to start Vietnam Veterans of America, I was shocked to learn that the overwhelming majority of Vietnam veterans never talked about their war experiences at all. What makes this book so important is that it breaks that isolation: it tells those who fought that others feel as they do, and it tells those who didn't fight what their returning family member feels, the personal toll war takes.

We all know that going to war is hell, but if a fight is what is needed to preserve our freedom, our values, and our way of life, then citizens of this country will always sign up and endure the hardships of war. A grateful society will provide a form of healing to the returning veterans by acknowledging their service and their sacrifices with heartfelt welcomes home and generous assistance to help them return to civilian life. The gratitude shown to veterans by our country after World War I demonstrated that America understood and appreciated their sacrifice. But when America fails to acknowledge and respect the sacrifice made by its veterans, the consequences are devastating.

As America comes to understand the tremendous price paid by the brave men and women who have spent time in Iraq, the magnitude of sorrow for and the tragedy of what they did and saw will become apparent. Vietnam veterans understand what it means to fight in a war that divided the country back home. Our experiences will help guide and support this new generation of veterans dealing with the ebb and flow of popularity attending this conflict. I am proud that our nation learned to differentiate the war from the warrior as a result of the Vietnam experience. But we can, and we must, do more.

The men and women who fought and are fighting the war in Iraq have gone through and are still experiencing an extraordinary episode in our history. They have an important story to tell. That story is in these pages. We must be aware that as we live in our own individual cocoons, as we watch the news or see a play or read a book or sit idling in a traffic jam, in Baghdad and Samarra and Mosul and Basra, in the hundreds of tiny villages whose names we do not know, there's a war on, it's happening now. And it's not just happening to them—it's happening to us. We must have the courage to listen. It's part of honoring their sacrifices, and it's part of what we owe them.

Bobby Muller  
August 2006

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## PREFACE

The words in this book are those of twenty-nine Iraq war veterans who served their country in a dangerous place and lived to tell about it. Most of these stories were told to me in long, emotional interviews. We sat side by side on a couch or across from each other at a kitchen table or at a cramped workstation in the corner of a forgettable hotel room somewhere in America. In Oceanside, California, where I spoke mostly to marines from Camp Pendleton, the travel gods smiled on me, and I lucked into a lovely little cottage in a compound by the beach. More than any of the other interviews, those highlighted for me the inequities of the Iraq war: young marine grunts vividly described their hellish tours of the Sunni Triangle while their surfer-dude peers hung out on the beach just outside my window.

Some of the other guests at the complex wanted to know what the marines were telling me about the war. What was really happening in Iraq? Sometimes when a young veteran walked through the parking lot to meet me, the other cottagers would cast discreet little glances but hang back as if I were somehow breakable or contagious. Perhaps they were being polite. Maybe they didn't know what to say.

On the Fourth of July, everyone lined up along the boardwalk to watch the fireworks. I wondered what the young men I had interviewed would be thinking about the noises in the sky, if they would ever be able to enjoy the clap of fireworks again, or if they were running for cover from what sounded like incoming rocket-propelled grenades.

The sheer violence that some of these young people witnessed was, as described by one of them, "beyond the realm of a horror film," and I will always be haunted by what they told me. Sometimes they cried. Sometimes I cried. Sometimes we just sat together in silence for a while. I was told stories of unfathomable courage against terrible odds. Several Bronze Stars for Valor and a Navy Cross have been awarded to the veterans I spoke with. But I think there is also heroism in telling the unvarnished truth about war, and if there were an award for that, I would bestow it on every person in this book.

These veterans do not share a single view of the war they fought. They have different opinions about the wisdom of the initial invasion and about the grievous errors made once Baghdad fell. A surprisingly small number expressed anger over the not-found weapons of mass destruction, perhaps because, as war correspondent Evan Wright wrote, this is a cynical generation that believes that "the Big Lie is as central to American governance as taxation." More than a few veterans focused on the good works they did personally for poverty-stricken Iraqis. I also heard over and over that beyond the patriotic slogans used by politicians, what a GI really fights for is the lives of other GIs, his brethren "on the line." Again and again, soldiers of varied services and ranks told me about heading boldly in harm's way, not for the sake of Iraqi democracy or Middle Eastern stability or any of the other reasons touted for the invasion, but for their brothers and sisters in uniform.

Above all, these are cautionary stories that remind us that war is a human endeavor, fraught with error, heartbreak, and accidental carnage. I heard about many civilians being shot during confusion at roadside checkpoints. These and other regrettable civilian killings will haunt some of the soldiers for a very long time. A few of them may have crossed a line, but I think these incidents reflect the moral ambiguity that attends insurgency war fighting.

Several veterans talked about their distrust of all Iraqis because some, for a variety of reasons including fear, enabled the insurgency. From the troops' perspective it's hard to understand why virtually no one ever sees the planting of the deadly roadside bombs that have killed or injured thousands of Americans. Their stories show what an effective weapon the IED has been, not just physically but also psychologically—by driving a wedge between American GIs and Iraqi civilians.

Jason Smithers is a pseudonym for a veteran who reports that during some very scary times on patrol in the Sunni triangle, PUCs, or persons under control, were mistreated. He did not ask me for this protection, but I confer it on him because he told his story of the war, as best he could, without thinking of the consequences.

These accounts represent the best recollections of men and women just back from war, and I have taken great care to fact-check events through print research, the reviewing of military records, and second sourcing. However, given both the trauma and bravado that shape memories of conflict and the recounting of “war stories,” some details might be disputed.

Most of the veterans in this book will say they were changed in some way by their war experience. More than a few are struggling with posttraumatic stress disorder. None of them asks for recognition but rather just to be understood a little better by the nation that sent them off to fight. I think all Americans have an obligation to hear them.

In Oceanside one night, after the barbecue grills had been extinguished, one of the guests, a man I hadn't spoken to before, offered to walk me out through the darkness to the edge of the Pacific to see the red tide. He was a big man—I heard later that when he was younger, he'd been in the military—and he said he'd been told that I was writing a book about the war. I knew then that he had maneuvered me out there because he had something to say. “I hope you're going to write something good about it, not like all the others,” he said, without ever looking at me. It was awkward. I didn't know what to say, so I told him I would try.

Trish Wood

July 2006



# Winners *and* Losers

If you ask people when the American military campaign in Iraq ran into trouble, chances are most would point to the looting and lawlessness that happened right after the fall of Baghdad. Indeed, the conventional wisdom is that the actual push to Baghdad was a huge success, the product of brilliant planning by the finest military strategists in the world. According to this interpretation, nothing went seriously wrong until after Saddam Hussein's regime toppled and there were not enough boots on the ground to maintain law and order. President George W. Bush pushed that theme even further when he suggested, incongruously, that the problems besetting the ongoing Iraq campaign were the result of phase one being *too* successful—"catastrophic success" was the phrase the president used.

As a result, specific battles on the way to Baghdad—some particularly intense and deadly—were either largely unknown by the general public or gravely misunderstood. Nasiriya is best remembered as the place where Jessica Lynch, the most famous army private in America, was taken prisoner by Iraqi forces after her 507th Maintenance Company made a wrong turn—a common confusion during the invasion. However, the marines of Task Force Tarawa remember it as the place where they first ran into heavy and somewhat unexpected resistance on a meat-grinder urban battlefield. It is the place where a brave marine plunged directly into the maw of hell to rescue fallen comrades. (If life were fair, Justin LeHew would also be a household name.) Later in the day, that same gunnery sergeant would have to console the young survivors of a "friendly fire" aerial bombardment that wiped out still more marines. And it was in Nasiriya that it first became clear that the enemy in Iraq would frequently look more like a civilian than a combatant.

The early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom saw the first suicide bombing by an Iraqi against American forces, a phenomenon that still unsettles Americans fighting in Iraq. On March 29, 2003, just over a week into the war, four young men from the 3rd Infantry Division were killed when an Iraqi officer in a taxicab blew himself up at a checkpoint they were manning near Najaf. It was unexpected, shocking even, and news of the deaths spread quickly among the troops. The Iraqi officer's commitment to "martyrdom" suggested that, far from capitulating, some Iraqis were prepared to turn themselves into deadly weapons to keep the Americans out. In that instant, the message became clear: the liberation of Iraq was not going to run as smoothly as its planners had suggested it would.

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## “It went on the whole night”

**THOMAS SMITH**  
NAVY HOSPITAL CORPSMAN  
2ND TANK BATTALION  
2ND MARINE DIVISION  
MARCH-JULY 2003  
INVASION FORCE  
BRONZE STAR (FOR VALOR)

I joined straight out of high school. My neighborhood wasn't the best, so I wanted to get away from there. I figured if I stayed and went to college close by home, I'd probably get into more trouble. It was a pretty bad neighborhood. My friends were into drugs and stuff like that, so I tried to stay away from that. I mean, I would do things with my friends. I never really got in trouble. I guess you could say I was never caught doing things.

It wasn't definite until the day I left for boot camp because I wasn't really sure if that's what I wanted, if it was the right thing to do. I guess everyone feels that way, being nervous about boot camp.

If you join the military, sooner or later, if you stay in long enough, you're going to be in some kind of conflict. So I figured, you know, whether we're going there for the wrong reasons or the right reasons, we got to go. This is what we joined for, and this is what they pay all the money to train us for. So might as well go do what we have to do.

When I got to the unit, I was there for about six months. And then they let us know that there was a chance that they would send the whole battalion over to Kuwait to be there for the war. They started telling us this about November '02, that there was a chance. They started hinting at it. And then we got the word that we were going to go to Kuwait right after we got back from Christmas leave, and that was in the beginning of January.

Kuwait was pretty stressful. People started getting impatient. A month went by, and people were wondering what was going to happen. There was a lot of arguing and cursing at each other, and there was people taking people's stuff because people would run out of things.

I hung out with a couple of the guys, just the three of us usually all together, all the time. We would sneak around playing practical jokes, but no one would ever catch us doing it. Some people didn't really take going to war seriously, so they brought air mattresses out there to lie on and do different things. So we'd go and pop their air mattress or let the air out while they were sleeping. There were spiders running around—

we'd throw spiders on people's faces. We'd steal people's candy and just kick people's gear around and throw gear on them and hide stuff on them. There was a couple of nights where we'd have practical jokes on pretty much the whole tent we were living in. It made us feel good because it gave

us a laugh, and it kind of kept our minds off of things. The higher-ranking guys didn't really like because it bothered them, and they wanted us to act professional and stuff, but it's going to happen anyway. They could never stop it.

They didn't tell us a name of the operation, they just told us—I think it was about March 18th or 17th—they told us we were going to go. It was the middle of the night when they woke us up. We packed all our stuff up, and then right as we're getting ready to leave, someone had a radio to listen to the BBC, so we actually heard Bush talking about the forty-eight hours and what was going to happen. Then they just moved us out toward a strategic place in the desert that was a little bit closer to the border. Everyone drove in a long single-file column, and we did it at night. We were actually early, I think, about four or five hours earlier than everyone else. Our mission was to go and secure the oil fields in the south, so I think we actually went over the border first.

A lot of guys didn't have night vision goggles, so they couldn't see. They would get lost, so we were constantly going around in circles, picking people up, and it took a lot longer than it should have.

You could see the explosions. It looked like a big thunderstorm without the clouds. You just see the flashes like that. You just kept seeing that and seeing it, and we just got closer and closer to it, and for the first couple of hours was more or less trying to get organized because people were getting lost and we were picking people up, and it got kind of frustrating. I wanted to get in there and do what we had to do, and I didn't want to keep going around and finding people. And I think it was frustrating for everyone else that not everyone had the gear they should have had. We weren't on roads at the time, and you really couldn't see. You would hear the call come over the radio that we lost a column; we don't know where the column is. Then we'd have to tell the guys not to move, and we'd go back. We'd look on the maps and see where their last position was and go around that area.

The tanks were just going through and annihilating everything. We were behind them, but by the time we got to where the tanks had gone through, there wasn't really much going on. It wasn't until we got closer to Baghdad that they got smart and let the tanks go through, and then they would hit the Humvees, knowing that they can do more damage to the Humvees than they could to the tanks.

Then the guy in charge of the logistics of the battalion decided he was going to bring the doctor up with the tanks, right behind the tanks and everything that was happening, because he figured if things were going to get hairy, at least the doctor would be right there to take care of people. You have the doctor and me, and then there was another corpsman mixed in with the tanks and stuff. I didn't have a really good feeling about what was going on. You've got all these armored vehicles, and then you've got a Humvee that technically is not supposed to shoot at anyone until we get fired at.

When you've got tanks, I mean, they don't move that fast to begin with, and they're big machines. And when you've got these big things having to double back on themselves, it's a good opportunity for the enemy to really take advantage of them. Anyway, we just filed behind the tanks, and then about ten minutes into it, we got a call over the radio that one of our lieutenants was down. Now you've got tanks on both sides of the road, and they're shooting at the enemy, and they've got their turrets swerving, and you don't want to crash into a turret because it will take out the whole top of the ambulance. We're swerving in and out of that. We're following the logistics officer in front of us. He would escort us to where we had to go and let us know what was going on.

About halfway into the call, the word came over that the lieutenant was KIA and that there was a captain that was shot in the face a little bit behind where we had already drove past, so we went back to get him. We pulled up to him, and people were yelling and screaming, telling me, "The fucking captain's down. You gotta get him. He's down. What do we do?" Guys were cursing at me and yelling at me and stuff.

I was the first one to get to the captain. There was so much blood on his face, I wasn't really sure where he was hit, so I was asking him if he could talk. I was like, if you can talk, sir, tell me where you're hit. And he couldn't really say anything, so I knew from him not being able to talk that he was either shot in his face or probably his throat. It turns out he was shot in his cheek, and it went out the back behind his ear somewhere, if I remember right.

Right as I started talking with him, the doctor came over. The doctor started treating him, and you can hear the *ching, ching, ching* of the rounds coming in all around us. So the captain I was with called over the radio for them to come and give us some security. Another truck pulled up, and some guys got out, and they were surrounding us in a three sixty, and they were shooting wherever the enemy fire was coming from.

We were in the middle of a street in a residential area. There were buildings and warehouses all around us, so you really couldn't see where things were coming from, because these guys would shoot through little holes in fences and stuff, or the metal gates that were down, or they would make holes and shoot through them. You'd just see little muzzle flashes and stuff. Or they'd be hiding in ditches. A lot of them—they would pour oil in a ditch and light it on fire, and they'd shoot from behind the smoke so you couldn't see them. They were kind of smart on concealing themselves, so you really couldn't see where it was coming from. You just had to shoot where you thought—where you heard the pings coming from.

We were taking care of the captain, loading him into the ambulance, and just as I was jumping in a round came through the window and shot my driver. He was shot in his hand, and all this blood had spattered on his face and mine, and he got a little woozy, so I jumped out and pulled him out of the driver's seat, and I started driving. I was trying to drive out of the chaos. There were rounds coming in. They were bouncing off the front of the truck. There were RPGs flying over our head, over the tanks, into buildings. It was just . . . All hell broke loose.

We were getting calls over the radio: "We have guys down here, guys down here." I was getting out of the truck, and I'd shoot my way to where I'd think things were coming from and get to a truck or a Humvee where someone was down and speak with them. If they needed to come into the ambulance, I'd pull them into the ambulance, and we ended up filling the whole thing up. We had one, two, three, four—we had six guys in the ambulance at one time. I couldn't even fit in the back of the ambulance to help anybody. So I just stayed outside and was security for the ambulance, and I was just shooting everywhere.

As I was shooting, I took a round to my flak jacket, and it knocked me to the ground. I thought, *You gotta be kidding me!* It feels like you're hit all over. So I kind of was freaking out about that. I was kind of knocked the wind out of me, and then right as I was getting up they called in a helicopter, and the helicopter just came and annihilated the building that we were taking heavy fire from. Just blew it into pieces with missiles and gunfire. I was yelling and screaming. People were saying, "Fuck you! Yeah. This is great. This is great." You know, "Get some. Kill those bastards!" So it was a big morale boost when the helicopter came in and did that. They'd had us pinned down.

I was thinking, *If it's like this now, I can only imagine what it's going to be like when we get into Baghdad, because that was crazy.* It was just nuts the amount of stuff that was happening and people that were getting hurt. It seemed like it lasted forever, but it lasted about a half hour, twenty minutes to a half hour. It wasn't even that long. Of eight guys that we took care of, one of them was killed. Seven had gunshot wounds, and the eighth guy that we took care of, who was a 1st sergeant, was hit with shrapnel. If they were shot in the lungs, you would do what you could to help them breathe. You would patch them up to control the bleeding and just put them in a position that would make the

comfortable. There was one guy that got shot in the ribs, and that was the first time I had ever seen a exposed rib before. I couldn't believe that he was standing there talking to me with his rib hanging out. That was pretty weird. I just remember asking him if he had any more ammo, because at that time I was already outside shooting, and I went in and asked him if he had any more ammo, and I remember him telling me, "Here you go, Doc." And he gave me about three of his magazines and he says, "Go out there and do what you got to do." That kind of . . . That stuck with me because it helped me get a little bit more motivated.

The 1st sergeant being killed was probably the worst thing because he was supposed to retire. His retirement was on hold, and the guy had a family. They called us on the radio and said he was down. At the time we got to him, they called, "Gas, gas, gas," so things just got a little bit nuts because we had to put our gas masks on, and this guy is two hundred fifty pounds. He's a big man. And we had to carry him. I almost passed out picking him up and carrying him into the ambulance, me and a couple of other guys, because once you get that gas mask on, it's hard to breathe. And then you've got to carry this big guy, and it just takes a lot out of you. And it was in the middle of the day. It was hot. It was a long day of shooting, and the doctor is trying to take care of him, and you got a gas mask on now, and it's just nuts. You can barely see what's going on. The doctor was trying to put a tube down his throat to help him breathe, and he can barely do that because he couldn't see the landmarks he needed to see to do it. It was a closed head wound so everything was on the inside. It was really nothing you could see. The only thing you could see was that his pupils were pinpointed, which means they were just small, and they were both fixed. So whether you put light in his eye or not, there was no change in them. So that's when you know he's got a real bad head injury. There was maybe a little bit of blood on his head, but it wasn't much. He was just lifeless, really. He just looked like he was sleeping.

I felt we could have did more if we were in a better situation to help this guy, but—it's just that everything went against him. I knew he was in pretty bad shape. I didn't think he was going to come out of it anytime soon, but I didn't think he was going to die, and he ended up dying. The guy shouldn't even have been there. He was retired, ready to go.

Later on the same night as the big ambush, not too far from where it happened, we set up a little security area where no one can get into where we were. We ended up staying for over twenty-four hours straight, and we had all the major roads blocked off, and we constantly had to deal with vehicles coming in. That was a . . . long night.

Civilian vehicles were not seeing the warning shots. We would use tracer rounds so they could see it coming over their cars, but we ended up having to shoot to kill. Those were just by mistake. You know, these people didn't really realize what was happening, and they got nervous and drove right into our roadblock, and we had no choice but to, you know, but to take them out. We had to shoot to kill because we weren't sure if they were suicide bombers or not.

There was other instances where they had maybe a minibus, a military vehicle, or like a pickup truck with guys in it, weapons and stuff, and then another civilian vehicle. They kind of mixed themselves in, so when we shoot and kill that first vehicle, they can come right around, and they're there. They kind of used civilians as shields. We didn't really know it until our translator was talking with the people, and the people said, "Yeah, they made us drive into these checkpoints. We had no choice. It was either we drive into them, or they kill us and they kill our whole family, so they made us do it."

Later on that night, I went from treating all my marines to treating all these civilians. It was just nonstop. Me and the doctor were the only medical personnel that far north with the unit. We were

getting called to all these different checkpoints, and people were dying all night long. It was just night of death, of people just dead everywhere, and we would just leave their bodies where they were at, and then I guess later on in the morning, the civilian ambulances pick up all these bodies. Like a garbage truck—they just come pick them all up and leave.

There was babies that were killed. There was older people that were killed. Entire families wiped out. There was one little kid that was—

his whole family, mother and father, sister—they were all killed, and he was all by himself. It kind of . . . That takes a toll too. Seeing stuff like that, especially little kids, kind of . . . It bothers you. It takes a toll. You don't think about it then, but you kind of think about it more later.

There was an old guy that had drove through the checkpoint, and they shot him all over the place and we were taking care of him. It was me, the doctor, and another corpsman, and we were taking care of him. I was the one trying to get the IV into him. I had some trouble getting it in, and they were talking with him. He was breathing a little bit, and I'm trying to get the IV in. They rolled him on his side to see if he had any wounds, and then they realized he had gunshot right in his spinal cord, and it was all exposed. The spinal cord, the spine, everything was exposed, so I kind of knew then if this guy was going to live, he definitely wasn't going to be walking again.

I remember telling the doctor that I was having trouble getting the IV in, because there's a little thing called flashback. If you hit a vein, there's a little tube in the catheter that fills up with blood, and that's how you know you're in. I wasn't getting anything back, and then we looked at him, and the guy was dead, and that's the reason why—because his heart wasn't pumping, so I wasn't getting anything back. Flashback. We were that close to . . . I don't know if we were going to save him or not, but we were that close to really doing things for this guy, and he just died. And there wasn't really anything we could do to save him. So we just kind of left him there.

That was the first time someone died in my arms, and you know . . . He was an older guy and stuff. I didn't know if this guy was someone's grandfather or father or, you know, how big his family was, and it kind of bothered me. I didn't feel like I failed him. I just felt like this guy was mixed into this situation. He didn't mean to be mixed into it, or who knows what was happening with him. I just felt bad for the situation. Not so much the job we did, because I knew we were doing what we had to do with the resources that we had. If we couldn't save him, it wasn't really our fault. You know, we only had the supplies that we had, and if we couldn't . . . I knew it was out of our control. But just the situation was what really bothered me. You know, these poor people. We're there to help them, and we're killing them.

I had to open fire on the bus to protect the people that we were taking care of, you know, the civilian people in the ambulance. I shot into it. There were civilians in there, and everybody in the whole bus was killed. I don't know if physically any of my rounds hit anybody, but I shot into it and that bothered me.

I went and I spoke with the chaplain about that and let him know what had happened. He talked to me and tried to calm me down a little bit. He just told me that, you know, God knew what we were there for. He knew we were there to do the right thing.

I knew I had to protect the guys around me, my brothers that were there with me.

I kind of put it behind me, but every once in a while I'll think about what happened—you know, *Was it me that killed anybody on that bus?* I didn't physically go on the bus and check. We had other marines that went on, and they came out telling what they seen and stuff. Everyone was dead, so I didn't . . . There was no need for me to go on there. But I remember there was a lieutenant that went on there and came out, and he said, "I'll never forget the way this one girl was laying—she was dead."

with the way her body was positioned.” I’ll never forget that.

~~That was just . . . It was a long night. It was all night long. It went on the whole night.~~

There wasn’t a shot fired from when we left that checkpoint into Baghdad. Not like it is today where you have to be careful. When we hit Baghdad, it felt like we were home. That’s what it felt like to me. Felt like we were home. It actually felt like if we were to come home, and the States had a parade for us. As soon as we hit Baghdad—I mean it got to a point where we could barely even drive because there were so many people coming out into the road. Everyone was cheering. I don’t know what they were saying in their language, but they were cheering.

I thought when we left, that was it. We went in there, did what we had to do, the job was done. I didn’t think it’d still be going on to this day. I thought by now, at least two years later, two or three years later, we’d have bases set up, like real bases set up over there, and things would be calm, and they have a new government going already and all that stuff. But never in a million years did I think this stuff was going to happen. I mean if it ends up being for nothing, then—then we might as well pull them out. But I don’t think . . . I don’t think it’s for no reason. I think we did a good thing.

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## “How did it come to this madness and chaos?”

JUSTIN LEHEW  
1ST BATTALION  
2ND MARINE REGIMENT  
“TASK FORCE TARAWA”  
MARCH-JUNE 2003  
NASIRIYA  
NAVY CROSS

We were part of RCT2, out of Camp Lejeune, and it was tagged Task Force Tarawa. It's from an old battle on November 20th, 1943, during the island-hopping campaign of the marines in World War II making their run to Japan. It was a small island less than a quarter of a mile wide and not very long—just enough to maybe put a small airstrip, and this was one of the first actions that the amphibious assault vehicle was actually put into employment and used for what it was created for. The island was secured at the loss of twenty-five hundred marines. In World War II, those were the type of casualties that were being sent back on a weekly basis, and we were proud to be given this name. *Tarawa* is not considered a bad-luck name, because without securing that island we would never have had the foothold we needed to get to Iwo Jima and to final victory.

Before we went in, we knew that Nasiriya was roughly five-hundred-and-thirty-five thousand people, so it was a substantial-size city, and there were four bridges: two that crossed the Euphrate River and two that crossed the Saddam Canal. Our job was to secure the two bridges on the eastern side, because the battle plan was to skirt the outside of the major cities, and because of shock and awe the 1st Marine Division could make its run to Baghdad. They would be supporting the attack on Baghdad, so ours were the first U.S. Marine actions in this part of Iraq.

Before we went into Nasiriya, we had a general knowledge of what we were supposed to do, but we hadn't rehearsed the takedown of the actual bridges because we didn't know the geography. All we had looked at was a few maps up until that point.

We started rolling on the mission at about three in the morning on March 23rd. There's Alpha, Bravo, and Charley Companies, so that's three amtrack units of twelve apiece, and they are each carrying respective rifle companies. We are moving in a column, and the roads look like any improved roads here in the United States. It is dark, and we were using our NVGs and the ambient light of the moon. We were headed toward what we were calling the southern bridge on the southeastern side of Nasiriya. We do know that there are Iraqi forces there, and the evening prior we had heard over the radio that eight thousand Iraqi forces in and around Nasiriya had capitulated, which mea

surrendered. But it turned out that it wasn't true, and that ended up being very bad for us.

~~My experience as a young marine was in the Gulf War, where I dealt with hundreds of Iraqi prisoners of war. We rarely fired a shot, and whenever you did, most Iraqis threw down their weapons and surrendered. We dealt with an overwhelming amount, thousands upon thousands of Iraqis who just gave up. So now in Iraq, a lot of my guys were saying, "Hey, Gunny, is it going to be like the first time? When we shoot, are they going to throw up their hands?" The report we heard about these Iraqis capitulating kind of gave them the idea that was going to happen again. I had to quell that real quickly because I didn't see it turning out that way. When we assaulted Kuwait, we were pushing Iraqi forces out of a country they had invaded. But now we are invading their country, and so if somebody is coming into my backyard, why should I surrender?~~

So as the mission into Nasiriya gets under way, we're running through farm fields, with sporadic adobe-type farmhouses on the sides of the road, and the people weren't exactly cheering. The local farmers just stood in disbelief at the rows and columns and the firepower that was coming in. The column stretched back as far as the eye could see. For most of these people, it might as well have stretched to Antarctica because that's exactly how far it seemed. We counted four straight hours of vehicles, five miles with no end whatsoever, and it was the most awesome thing I had ever seen.

About three hours into it, at about six-thirty in the morning, we heard there were Iraqi tanks and some small-arms fire up ahead of us, so that was the first enemy contact. We also heard over the radio that there was some U.S. soldiers that our tank unit had thought they had seen off to the side of the road. I was considered a pretty good navigator, and our lieutenant called down with a grid position where they thought these guys had been seen, and I told him I'd take a vehicle and push up north to find out what's going on up there. We pushed forward up to the grid position, but there was absolutely nobody, nothing there. So I decided we should keep going forward until we get to our tank unit because they were the ones that actually saw the soldiers who were in trouble. Eventually, my driver spotted them about two hundred meters off of the side of the road. There were a couple soldiers, and they were waving their hands up in the air, so we pulled over to stop, and as soon as we did, we started receiving small-arms fire from the Iraqis that were out in the fields.

We ran out to the first group of soldiers, a small group that was still combat operational, meaning they could still fight. They had made a small circle in the middle of the field, and in the middle of the circle were two very bad casualties. One of the soldiers had one gunshot wound to his arm, and the other soldier had four gunshot wounds. The one kid who had been shot once was screaming out of his mind, and the kid who had been shot four times was laughing.

I called for my corpsman—Alex Velasquez from Puerto Rico—and it was the first time he had ever seen anything like that. He could barely speak a lick of English, but he was a great kid, and he ran over to the wounded soldiers and his eyes got huge, but he went right to work on them, plugging holes with whatever he had at hand. About five army soldiers had surrounded them and were fighting to keep the Iraqis out in the fields from capturing them.

We found a second group, and they had casualties and were in trouble too. We got there, and a warrant officer walked up and said, "Thank God you guys are here." We asked how many soldiers were out there, and he said, I don't know, but some had been taken. And he pleaded, just pleaded with us, "Please help me find my people. I am missing a lot of soldiers." And that was the column of the army's 507th Maintenance Company with Jessica Lynch in it.

I suppressed the Iraqis with .50 cal. machine gun fire, giving us time to get out of there. We drove about two and a half kilometers back to where the waiting medical forces were, and then we rejoined our company. Within twenty minutes, they gave us the orders we're going to attack the city of

Nasiriya. We are going to take the bridge.

~~My company commander says we're going to roll on our mission, and then there was a little exchange over the radio about which unit was going to take which bridge. Bravo Company had already gone over the southern bridge and had already made a turnoff into Ambush Alley—~~

the mile shot between the northern and southern bridges, a place where you are totally exposed. They have already gone through there, but then they started to get badly bogged down, but we didn't know that yet. There was also a bridge just before southern bridge that was very confusing on the map. It was big enough for maybe a single car to go over. . . . We called it the railroad bridge because the railroad tracks ran right across it.

Just as we were entering Nasiriya, between these two bridges, RPG trails started flying and exploding into the streets. Now we could see the Iraqis sticking their heads out of the houses in the alleyways. We could see weapons, and then we saw them talking. Through our scopes, we could see a couple of hundred meters down these roads that the Iraqis were getting into vigilante-type swarms. We have also got some artillery coming in, and we don't know where from. We assume these are Iraqi mortar rounds and artillery rounds. All of this was happening at the same time. I realized at this point that we are completely surrounded.

They started coming at us from the other side of the southern bridge and driving into our position and the vehicles were not stopping, so we were shooting at them, and they were using what we found out later were taxicabs, white vehicles with orange-painted panels. We didn't know any of their color schemes or anything, so we assume that these must be attack vehicles, so we started to shoot those vehicles, and they're driving right for us, and as soon as we hit one of these cars, the doors would fly open and out would jump guys with AK-47s. These are not uniformed soldiers. And we're also starting to see soldiers that are dressed in Vietcong-type black pajamas with little red triangles on the sleeves, and that unit was found out to be the Saddam fedayeen.

The guys in the cars weren't civilians, either; they were combatants who weren't wearing uniforms. There were a small number of uniformed soldiers that you could see controlling certain positions, but the majority, 90 percent of the people attacking us with weapons, weren't wearing uniforms, and therefore you couldn't tell if they were civilian. I briefed my guys by saying, "If they have a weapon in their hand, they're fair game." They are attacking our position. They weren't just defending their homes, they were firing at us. This was very confusing to a lot of the young marines because the fighters were using every tactic you could imagine.

A marine ran up to me saying, "Hey, Gunny, check this out." I look down this alleyway and there is a woman that comes out, and she's holding a young child, and when she walks back into the building, we get an RPG shot from that building every time. Was she spotting for her husband, who was shooting an RPG out of the building? We had to start making the decisions real quick, so I talked to another gunnery sergeant who was also a sniper, and I said, "The next time she comes out the door shoot her," and he did exactly that. We couldn't tell if it was a sack of potatoes or a baby that she was holding. He did not harm the child or anything at all because there was other Iraqis in the area that grabbed whatever it was. This sniper dropped her in the street, and we never received another shot from that position again.

The tanks didn't get to our position for at least an hour and a half. They had ate through so much fuel on the march up that they had to pull out of the column to refuel, and it would take hours because they take about five hundred gallons of diesel fuel. While we're surrounded on the bridge and the tanks are gone, all I have got is my thin-skinned amtracks and even thinner-skinned marines that are down on the ground who are holding off all these major assaults. It was very overwhelming. They he

the line as much as they could, but I can still remember looking over the southern bridge and seeing the first two tanks come back and then seeing the smile on my marines' faces. They stood up like something out of an old *Saving Private Ryan*-type movie. They knew that the Iraqis were scared crapless of those vehicles.

So once the tanks got into position, I went over to talk to the tank commander and told him, "You need to fire at this building with these red windows because we're getting a lot of fire out of the building. And watch yourself, because it's right next to a mosque." So they validated everything that they needed to, fired, and blew the second story right off the building. Who knows who was in the back of that building?

People that were carrying children and people that were shuttling from one place to another that were older were not getting mowed down in the streets. But college-age men that were fighting, even though they were in civilian clothes—they got hit. There was no hand-to-hand combat at that point, but they were running in between our position from one side of the road to another. It was so close that the marines were pulling out their personal weapons—their pistols and their knives—getting ready to defend themselves.

Later, when the tide starts to turn in our favor, I went back inside my vehicle to check my battal positions over the radio. And as I turned around, I saw a vehicle that was going the opposite direction and it was an AAV. I assumed it was one of mine, and I said over the radio, "God, don't let that be one of mine," because I didn't tell them to go anywhere, and it looked like they were running. It looked like they were leaving the whole scene and driving back over the southern bridge. It just looked really strange, and my driver, Pfc. Sasser, said, "Hey, Gunny, look at those clowns. They're driving with their ramp dragging on the street." It was the ramp in the back that lowers to let the troops out, and it was dragging and sparking up on the street, and that's very unusual. The next thing that I saw was a vapor trail from an RPG that hit the vehicle. Actually, it was hit by two RPGs, which I knew because I could see the vapor trails.

The AAV belonged to Charley Company and was racing away from their fight at the northern bridge with casualties for medevac. They had been hit hard and had headed through Ambush Alley looking for help from us at our position. We all knew it was very, very serious when a young marine fell out of the back of the vehicle and he was on fire.

The vehicle came to a rolling halt right in front of us, not more than thirty meters away, and I saw the crewmen who were on fire but still moving. They were hanging out of the hatches or maybe trying to climb out, and the men that were in the back were falling out, and they were on fire. There were seven to nine marines in there. The whole thing played out in slow motion, and the weirdest thing was that no one was running toward the vehicle. The scene was just playing out in the midst of this chaos.

Doc and I ran over, and I'll never forget how dumb we were because we didn't have our helmets or flak vests or anything—not even our weapons, just his medical pack.

The first thing I saw was the severed leg of a marine lying on the ramp, so I picked that up, and I handed it to Doc. I said, "Lay this off to the side because we're going to find who that belongs to." I thought that if the marine is still alive, the leg could be reattached.

There was black smoke billowing out, and we could barely see, but we started triage, and I went to pull a marine out of the back, and as I was pulling him, his upper torso separated from his bottom torso, and all I had in my hands was his upper body. I handed Doc half of a marine and said, "Put this in the back of the Humvee because marines don't leave our dead and wounded on the battlefield; everybody comes home. Even if it's a piece of you, I have a responsibility to your mom and dad to bring everything back." So, the marine grabbed it, and his eyes were wide open, but he did exactly

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