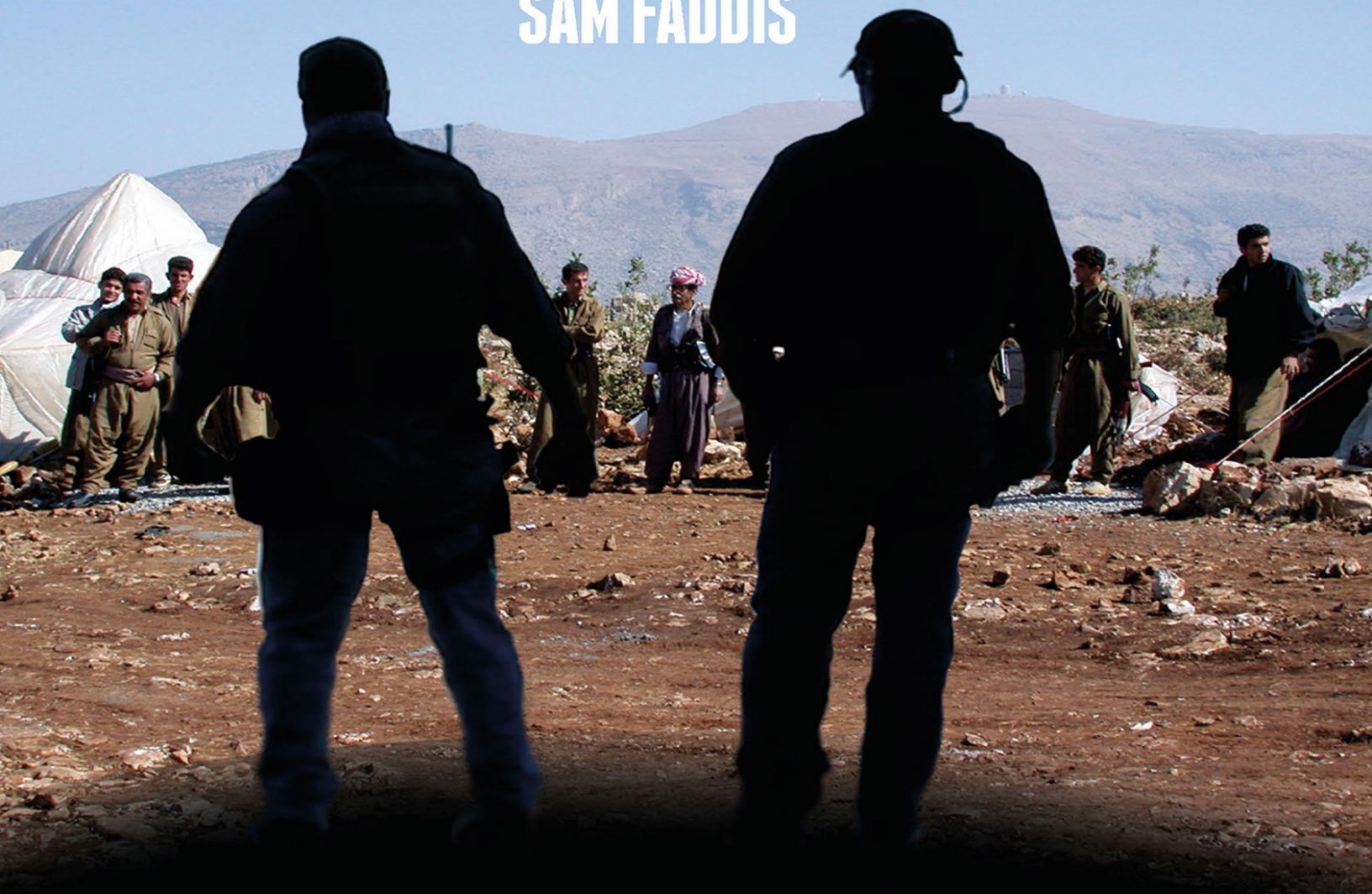


"...a stark warning to Washington policy and strategy makers that they should understand their enemies and friends alike before they send their sons and daughters off to war."

THE CIA WAR IN KURDISTAN

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE NORTHERN FRONT IN THE IRAQ WAR

SAM FADDIS



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The Untold Story of the Northern Front in the Iraq
War

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ISBN:

Casemate Publishing
1950 Lawrence Road,
Havertown, PA 19083, USA
www.casematepublishing.com

This edition distributed by Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.
180 Maiden Lane
New York, NY 10038
www.openroadmedia.com



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“Remember the lessons of history. Remember how often whole peoples have allowed themselves to be persuaded to go to war by ‘wise’ men—and then been utterly destroyed by the very enemy they agreed to attack! Remember how many statesmen have helped raise new leadership to power—and then been overthrown by their own protégés! Remember how often leaders have chosen to treat their friends like slaves—and then perished in the revolutions caused by their idiotic methods! How many powerful men have craved to dominate the world—and by overreaching have lost everything they once possessed!”

Xenophon—Commander of the Ten Thousand, a group of Greek mercenaries forced to retreat from Iraq through Kurdistan to the Black Sea in 401 BC. The Ten Thousand were stranded near contemporary Baghdad when the military invasion in which they were engaged fell apart, and they were abandoned to their fate. On their own, without outside assistance, and against a host of foes arrayed against them, the Ten Thousand succeeded in fighting their way out and returning to Greece.

To Hans, Happy, Angry, Sphinx, Rabbit, Snake, Socrates, HHH, Vinny, Indy, Radar, Blondie, Lobo, Boomerang, Winston, Guido, Spock, White Rabbit, Magnum, Doc, Evil Doc, Sunshine, Dakota, Tim, Sea God, Jungle, Seamus, Paddy, Bird, Shaggy, Fury, Gabe, T Rex, Citizen, Bullwinkle, Blue Falcon, Mom, Sasquatch, Doogie, Gadget, Uncle, Bones, Pops and Sunshine. Brothers and sisters all.

And to Sultana, who never forgot her lost boys.

And to little Gina, wherever she is, because in the end, this was all about her.

Preface

On my wall hangs a photo. In it are three people standing on the banks of the Tigris: Citizen, my senior reports officer; me; and Hans, my deputy. We are all wearing bullet-resistant vests. We are all carrying weapons. We are all standing in the middle of a city disintegrating into chaos.

In 2004 I went to Headquarters for an awards ceremony. Everyone who had been in Kurdistan during the period of 2002–2003 was to be recognized. With my colleague Tim, who commanded one of the CIA teams in Northern Iraq, I had put together the list of officers in our bases who should be decorated and what decorations they should receive. We agreed that everyone who had been in country should be decorated and also chose two officers from each base to be singled out for special recognition above everyone else.

Standing in line at that awards ceremony, I noticed a couple of things. First, there were at least a hundred people being given medals who had never spent a day in country. Second, there were people who were not being recognized at all—Citizen was not present.

After the ceremony I asked about Citizen and some other officers. Eventually, reluctantly, I was advised that the list I had provided had been lost, so Headquarters had built a new list including those names that they could recall from the teams in Iraq. Some people were left off the list inadvertently. For some time thereafter, I corresponded with Headquarters from my new station in the Middle East, attempting to get them to rectify their error and recognize those officers who had been inadvertently omitted from the list of honorees. Eventually, I received a not particularly subtle message from the Chief of the Near East and South Asia Division telling

me the matter was closed, and that I should discontinue my efforts to have someone address the situation.

Shut up. Move on.

The issue was no longer open for discussion. Iraq was in flames. The US's legacy, the direct result of the Coalition Provisional Authority's bad decision making, had been civil war. Headquarters had no interest now in talking about our operations in Iraq in 2002–2003, or in the men and women who so bravely and exceptionally carried them out. They wanted to put it all in the rearview mirror and forget about it.

This book is my effort to make sure that never happens.

Introduction

On December 30, 2006, Saddam Hussein, onetime ruler of Iraq, was hanged by the neck until dead on the orders of an Iraqi tribunal. The specific crime for which he was executed was the mass murder of 148 Shia men and boys in the village of Dujail in retaliation for the attempted assassination of Saddam in 1982.

In the larger context of what Saddam did throughout his reign, the Dujail murders were hardly of note. No one knows how many people had been killed under Saddam's regime, but estimates run as high as half a million. One mass grave alone is estimated to hold the remains of 15,000 people.

No one paid a higher price under Saddam or more completely refused to abandon the fight to depose him than the Kurdish people.

The origins of the Kurds are not completely clear, but they have inhabited the area of Northern Iraq for a very long time. When Xenophon, the Greek general, made his famous fighting retreat out of what is now Iraq and back to Greece, he had to cut his way through the Kurds to do so. His account of that march leaves no doubt as to the ferocity of the warriors he faced.

During the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the mountains of Northern Iraq allied itself with Iran in the hope that it could leverage Iranian support to achieve independence and form a free Kurdish nation. The Barzani clan, which under Masoud Barzani formed the bulk of the leadership of the KDP, paid dearly for this betrayal. In 1983 Iraqi forces acting under the direct orders of Saddam Hussein rounded up more than 8,000 Barzani males—many just boys—executed

them, and bulldozed them into mass graves. The first of their bodies were not found until 2005. Most remain unaccounted for to this day.

In the face of this atrocity, the world did nothing.

Far worse was yet to come. In 1988 Saddam launched what was called the Anfal campaign. Between February and September of 1988 Iraqi forces conducted a systematic genocidal campaign against the Kurds in Northern Iraq involving sustained aerial bombardment and the widespread use of chemical weapons. Under the command of Saddam's cousin, General Ali Hassan al-Majid, "Chemical Ali," 100,000 Kurdish men, women, and children were killed. This included the slaughter of over 5,000 people in the town of Halabja in a single day with a combination of nerve agents and mustard gas.

Survivors of the widespread chemical attacks during the Anfal campaign were captured and interrogated. Males between 15 and 70 were then shot and dumped into mass graves. By the time the campaign ended in fall 1988, 90 percent of Kurdish towns and villages had been wiped from the face of the earth.

The United States, more fixated on the threat posed by Iran than Saddam, took no action to stop the slaughter.

In 1991 Saddam invaded Kuwait, which he considered to be a historical part of Iraq. His army quickly overran that small nation but was subsequently crushed by a coalition consisting largely of American military forces. Encouraged by the defeat, and by the rhetoric of President George H. W. Bush, who seemed to be calling for Saddam's ousting, the Kurds once again rose in rebellion.

Once again the Kurds were crushed, along with Shia forces which similarly rose against Saddam in the south. Twenty thousand more Kurds died as Iraqi artillery, armor, and helicopters slaughtered those seeking Saddam's ouster. Two million Kurds fled into the mountains to escape certain death. The US and its coalition allies stood by and watched.

Then, in mid-April 1991, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, appalled by the slaughter, imposed a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq. Buoyed by the knowledge that Iraqi air power could no longer be brought to bear against their forces, the Kurds stabilized the battlefield and

imposed a de facto border between what was now for all intents and purposes an independent Kurdistan and Saddam's Iraq. The so-called Green Line ran generally southeast, from a point near Zakho in the northwest to the Iranian border. Irbil, the largest city in Kurdistan, lay just north of the line. Kirkuk, a city with a mixed Kurdish and Arab population, lay just below it within the area under Saddam's control.

And so the situation stood until 2002.

CHAPTER 1

9/11

I found out about the 9/11 terrorist attacks the way everyone else did: I watched it on TV.

I was sitting in my office at CIA Headquarters in Langley riding a desk and hating life. I had been back in country for 60 days, and already I couldn't wait to go overseas again. No real case officer wants to be stateside. He wants to be in the field where the ops are.

It was morning. I was reading traffic coming in from field stations around the world. Outside my office at the entrance to our group area there was a television mounted on the wall. I heard a number of people crowding around the television. I heard them say something about a plane striking the World Trade Center in New York. I got up and walked out of my office to see what was going on, and just as I did so I saw on the television screen a second aircraft hit the World Trade Center.

It was instantaneously clear to me, as it was to everyone else watching the broadcast around the world, that what we were seeing was not an accident but a deliberate act of terror. It felt like I had been punched in the gut, not just because of the loss of life and the brutality of the act, but because I knew it was all so preventable.

I had been working for CIA for 13 years by the time 9/11 happened. I had spent all of that time as a case officer. From day one I had spent the overwhelming majority of my time working counterterrorism and weapons of mass destruction. I had—like everybody else that I knew who was working the problem—by the late 1990s an overwhelming sense that the

terrorist threat to the United States was increasing daily, and we were doing virtually nothing to combat it.

One case will illustrate precisely what I mean.

Three years before 9/11 I was assigned to a Middle Eastern station. “Station” is the CIA office in a particular country. That’s old terminology borrowed from the British, like virtually everything else that pertains to our human intelligence collection apparatus. I was a case officer in the station. That meant it was my job to handle assets and produce intelligence. But it also meant, more than anything else, that it was my job to hunt for new sources. Case officers are like sharks; they have to swim and hunt continuously. In the trade everybody knows how to write an intel report and securely handle an asset. If you don’t know how to do those kind of baseline things you get sent home.

What defines case officers is their ability to bring on new blood. In the trade they say, “ten percent of the officers recruit ninety percent of the sources.” Some people can do it. Many can’t. Some can but don’t, because the ethical baggage is too heavy. Sometimes sources you recruit end up dead. Sometimes they end up in jail. If you can’t handle that fact, you need to find another line of work. Bottom line: if you want to be a case officer and get promoted, you hunt.

I made contact one day with an individual who was an Islamic extremist and who was heavily involved with ongoing Al Qaeda activity and terrorism. I won’t go into the details here of exactly how I made contact with this individual. That’s the kind of stuff that, no matter how you spin it, comes down to sources and methods that can’t be talked about. In any event I was successful in making contact with this individual. He had by this point been involved in Islamic terrorist activity for many years. He had attained a relatively senior position wherein his primary function was moving money and support to those individuals actually doing the fighting.

His next assignment was to go to Africa and work on establishing infrastructure there. This was less than a year before the 1998 embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

My contact was ferociously anti-American. He was absolutely convinced that Western materialistic influence was destroying the Islamic

world. He had, however, by this point begun to have some serious misgivings about the amount of blood that was being spilled, the justification for violence, and the taking of innocent life. His experience had led him to believe that Al Qaeda's methodology could not be justified under the teachings of Islam. He was torn. He was willing to talk. He was not sure what he needed or wanted to do now.

He and I spent many days together. We debated. We philosophized. I worked overtime to help him reach the point at which he could accept that cooperating with CIA was justifiable and that it would mean saving lives. In the end he remained in many ways an enemy of the United States, but he agreed to a clandestine relationship with CIA and became an asset of ours. He agreed to provide us information on the plans and intentions of the group to which he belonged. He agreed to work with us against his former associates.

I set up follow-on meetings with him outside the country in which he had been recruited. It was, I thought, an extremely important case. I had barely finished the write-up on the recruitment, however, when I received a devastating series of messages from Washington. They had reviewed the case. They had decided that since this individual was technically a citizen of an allied nation they did not believe we should continue the relationship with him. They had made the determination that it was more important to avoid offending this Middle Eastern government than it was to have a spy inside Al Qaeda.

Those messages almost floored me. They weren't completely out of character with what I knew already about Headquarters and our counterterrorism efforts; nonetheless, to have brought on a source with that degree of access and then be told to cut him away was completely demoralizing.

Just to complete the picture, a few days after 9/11 an officer from CIA Counterterrorism Center (CTC) came to find me at Headquarters. We were now in a desperate rush to recruit penetrations of Al Qaeda. Somebody had done a file search and tripped across my case. The officer from CTC wanted to know if I knew where my old source was now and whether I could help them make contact with him.

It was one of those moments when you don't know whether to laugh or to cry. I reminded the officer from CTC that the source in question was a highly dangerous, anti-American Islamic extremist. I reminded him that I had met with the source, always under a false name and only in very carefully controlled meetings. In short, I reminded him that we had not kept in touch, that we did not exchange Christmas cards, and that I did not have him over for family barbecues. I had no idea where he was, although I was very confident that having been cut loose from us, by us, he was still out there working to our detriment.

After 9/11 CTC went into overdrive. Nobody in Washington had a plan for what to do next. The Department of Defense locked up.

The bureaucracy spun in circles, useless. It fell to a handful of individuals in CIA, like Hank Crumpton and Cofer Black (true names), to craft a strategy, sell the White House on it, and start deploying teams.

At Headquarters I was still going crazy. I was pushing paper and attending meetings and working issues nobody cared about. Meanwhile my fellow case officers, my peers, began choppering into Afghanistan, organizing native forces, and taking the fight to the enemy. I was in agony.

Then the rumors started. This would have been around January 2002. We were going into Iraq. The decision had been made by the White House that we were going to do what we had threatened to do for years: we were going to take out Saddam. Step one in that plan was for CIA to put a team into Northern Iraq to work with the Kurds and prepare the battlefield for the subsequent deployment of American military forces.

I went upstairs to the floor where Iraqi Operations Group was located. I walked into the office of the chief of operations, who was a friend. I didn't volunteer for the job of leading the team that would go into Iraq—I demanded it.

I had by this time in my career more experience in Kurdistan than virtually any other officer in CIA. I can't and won't go into all the details of how I acquired that experience. Many of those are operations we still can't talk about, even in general terms. Suffice it to say that I knew the area and the people well.

I had led a number of different small teams on operations in the area over the course of several years. I had spent significant time in the mountains and villages of the area. I had worked with and knew the Kurdish people.

I had spent years working the Iraqi problem as well. I had run assets cross-border into Saddam's Iraq, collecting on all of the top intelligence priorities. I knew well the history of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) efforts and had personally written hundreds of intelligence reports on the topic. I knew all too well how difficult an environment Kurdistan could be and how formidable the Iraqi security apparatus was. A great number of our Iraqi assets over the years were captured, tortured, and killed. Some of those had been men I recruited and sent into harm's way.

Going into Iraq was not just getting back into the fight; it was personal. If we were finally going to finish Saddam and make him pay for his atrocities, I was not going to watch from the sidelines.

I also knew the Turks and spoke Turkish. I had worked with them in the field closely, often deploying to remote areas for months at a time with Turks and special operations personnel.

Any deployment of personnel into Northern Iraq was going to go through Turkey, and having experience in dealing with that nation would be critical. The Turks can be great people, and they are fierce fighters. They are not always the easiest to deal with. More than once in the field I had butted heads with Turkish commanders who wanted to dictate terms to me rather than work with the men on my team as partners and allies.

I laid all of this and more out for my friend the chief of operations. He confirmed what I had heard. The White House had made the call. We were going to invade Iraq, and we were going to do it soon. It was January 2002. The White House wanted a CIA presence inside Iraq by March. A few officers from Headquarters had already made a quick visit to Iraqi Kurdistan and met with senior members of the Barzani and Talabani clans. The Kurds were generally onboard.

The plan was to arm the Kurdish Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan forces in the north and then bring in Special Forces to work with them and train them. Eventually, conventional US military forces

would flow in as well, but the Kurds would be the force multiplier that, once armed with modern weapons, would tie down the Iraqi military in the north while the American military launched its primary invasion from Kuwait in the south.

My friend the chief of operations said he would talk to his boss, the group chief. A couple of days later we met again. I had the job. I was now the head of the team that would spearhead the invasion of Iraq. The team itself did not exist yet, but it would be formed up as fast as possible. Some of the likely members were already on hand at Headquarters. Some others would be coming in shortly. Members of 10th Special Forces Group from Fort Carson would be included.

I was psyched. I had a real-world mission, and I would be in on the ground floor of a massive, and in my opinion long overdue, military effort to unseat one of the world's most horrible and sadistic rulers.

Only then did I ask what should have been one of my first questions. Since the key to this operation was arming the Kurds, since all arms to the Kurds had to transit Turkey, and since the Turks and the Kurds hated each other—what did Ankara think about our plan to send state-of-the-art weapons into Northern Iraq?

The response was not encouraging.

“We have not told the Turks yet, but we don't think it will be a problem.”

I sat dumbfounded. All I could think was, *Then you don't know anything about the Turks.*

CHAPTER 2

The Plan

Just before my first meeting with the chief of operations of the Iraqi Operations Group, CIA sent a small team, no more than four individuals, into Northern Iraq. They were in country for a matter of days, just long enough to have meetings with senior Kurdish leaders.

These leaders included heads of the two principal Kurdish factions that had control of the Kurdish area in Northern Iraq. These were the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). These two parties had divided Northern Iraq into two roughly equal areas, which operated effectively as independent nations.

In the wake of the First Gulf War (1990–91), the United States imposed a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq, which roughly corresponded to the mountainous northern part of the country historically inhabited by the Kurdish people. With the US flying air cover, the Kurds effectively governed Northern Iraq. On a map it was still Iraq. On the ground it was Kurdistan.

In the simplest possible terms, the KDP was built around the Barzani family, and the PUK was built around the Talabani family. The Barzanis were based in a family compound in the mountains above Irbil. The Talabanis were based in a similar compound in the mountains near Sulymaniah.

Both families prized loyalty. Both families operated every day with the sure knowledge that they had to fight to survive and that, as the saying

goes, their only friends were the mountains. Both families could be decisive and deadly when necessary. It was a tough neighborhood.

When the Headquarters team met with members of the Barzani and Talabani families in Iraq in the winter of 2002, they faced a great deal of skepticism. The United States did not have a great track record with the Kurds. We had on multiple occasions made noises about taking out Saddam and then walked away, leaving them to face the consequences. The Kurdish leaders who met with our team members posed some very direct, and very pointed, questions. They wanted to know if we were serious this time.

To their questions, the Kurds received some very direct responses. Unfortunately, for American foreign policy in general and for me in particular, many of the responses they received were at best misleading. We wrote a great many checks. It would remain to be seen whether or not we could cash all of them.

The most immediate concern of the Kurds was armament. If the United States started making noises about taking out Saddam there was a very real chance Baghdad might preemptively move into Kurdistan. The Iraqi Army was large and heavily armed. The Kurds were a light infantry force. If they had to stand against the Iraqis on their own they were going to have to head for the hills, literally, very quickly.

In short, the Kurds wanted to see something concrete from us. Words were great, but they didn't kill Iraqis.

The Headquarters team assured the Kurds we understood. They told them we would give them all the arms they could handle. In particular, they promised to give them Javelin anti-tank missiles. These were state-of-the-art weapons. Giving them to the Kurds would dramatically enhance their ability to stand up to Iraqi armor and hold their own.

The Kurds asked all the predictable questions. Specifically, they wanted assurances that we would handle the Turks. They were told we would. They were also told that the weapons in question would be coming in very soon. The President wanted to invade Iraq within a few months. CIA wanted a team on the ground by March. That team would then begin right away to bring in weapons in large numbers. The US Army would not be far behind.

Like I said, we wrote a lot of checks. I would be the guy who would be asked to cash them.

When I took over as the team leader for the group that would go into Iraq, and while we were still identifying personnel who would be on the team, I began to try to put my hands around the planning that was underway and take ownership of all activity related to the impending deployment. That was easier said than done. There was no central authority within Iraqi Operations Group then working the problem. There were probably a dozen different people in different capacities in the group making decisions, without any kind of coordination, regarding the impending deployment.

What I found as I began to make the rounds was, therefore, predictable—it was chaos.

One of the first people I went to talk to was the logistics officer who had been on the Headquarters team that went in country to meet the Kurds. If I was going to take a team in country with little or no support infrastructure behind it, I wanted the clearest possible idea of what we should take. What could we get there? What needed to be brought in? Had housing been identified? What about security? Would we be in a secure Kurdish compound or on our own? What vehicles were we going to use? Had they been purchased? If so, where were they?

“Bath mats.” The logs officer was a woman. Those were her first words to me.

“Come again?”

“Bath mats. The Kurds put us up in a very nice guesthouse, but the tile floors in the bathroom were cold in winter. You need bath mats. They did not have any. I ordered them already. They should be on the pallet at the logs center where they are pulling together the gear for your deployment.”

“Thanks.” I started wondering what else might be on that pallet. No one could tell me. I drove to the logs center to take a look.

After a certain amount of confusion, I found the several air transport pallets that were being built at the logs center. By that I mean that our gear was being assembled onto pallets there.

As I had feared, I determined that a whole bunch of people in the Iraqi Operations Group, without any coordination or any kind of organized

thought process, had started ordering gear and having it sent to the logs center where it was all being put on pallets. With some help from some other personnel, I tore it all apart.

We found the bath mats. Suffice it to say they never went to Iraq. There were enough of them for five times as many people as we ever had in country.

We found holsters. There were at least six different types of holsters, all purchased in large quantities. Some were shoulder holsters. Some were drop holsters. Some were ankle holsters. We left the bulk of them on the pallet, but probably should have tossed most of them. In my gear closet in my office today I have three or four holsters from this deployment that were issued to me and are still in their original packaging, unopened.

We found tactical vests of all varieties and pretty much anything and everything you can imagine that was made of black Gore-Tex. If you could order it from a cool guy catalog and it looked high speed, somebody had purchased it with tax dollars and sent it to the logs center.

Most of it never went in country.

I went back to the ops chief. I was now the team leader. All gear going with the team would be chopped on by me. No more shopping sprees. He agreed. We started to get our hands around the problem.

The only answer I could get about housing was that the Kurds would provide it. I was told basically not to worry about security; the Kurds would guarantee it. I knew the Kurds. I didn't doubt their ability. I did have a basic problem with the idea of going to bed every night trusting somebody else made sure I woke up alive.

I determined that a number of vehicles had been purchased for use by the team in country. They had been purchased and were sitting in Turkey waiting for us. I asked what kind of vehicles and could not get an answer. Subsequently, I discovered that they were all Jeeps bought from a dealership in Ankara.

I asked if there were any Jeeps in Kurdistan and suggested that I doubted there were. I asked if anybody had thought to ask the Kurds what kind of vehicles would be best for use in country, both from the standpoint

of blending in and maintaining them. No one had. People were tasked to buy four-wheel drives. They did so. End of story.

We ended up using the Jeeps for our initial deployment and then quickly replaced them with Toyota Land Cruisers, which were everywhere in country—easily acquired and easily maintained. The Jeeps I relegated to using only inside the KDP compound where we were housed. I never saw another Jeep the entire time I was in country; they turned heads everywhere they went. Beautiful vehicles and a complete waste of money. Anybody who had spent 10 minutes in Kurdistan would have known to buy Land Cruisers.

Bush wanted us in country within 60 days. Leaving aside the fact that we still didn't have a team, there was one massive impediment to that: we did not have Turkish approval to insert.

At some point this came down to geography. In 2002, Kurdistan, Iraqi Northern Iraq, was landlocked and surrounded on all sides by hostile states. To the south, across what was called the Green Line, was territory under the control of Saddam Hussein. There were roughly 150,000 Iraqi troops lined up on this border. Nobody was getting into Kurdistan that way.

To the east was Iran—enough said. The Iranians were not friends, and they were not going to help.

To the west was Syria. That was as bad as Iran. There was no way Assad was going to help us take down Saddam. He figured he was next on the list.

That left Turkey. If we wanted to get into Northern Iraq and sustain an effort there, we would need the approval of the Turks and their continuing support. Any organized, rational approach to getting this effort off the ground, therefore, would have started with high-level diplomacy between Ankara and Washington. Instead, we went about it in exactly the opposite manner.

We made the decision to invade Iraq. We promised the Kurds everything they could possibly want in the way of arms and support. Then, almost as an afterthought, we went to the Turks to fill them in.

I feel sorry for the people in Embassy Ankara who had to conduct the negotiations that then ensued. They were not pretty. The Turks weren't just

skeptical about the idea of sending heavy weapons, including modern anti-tank missiles to the Kurds; they were livid. They said “NO.”

Then they said it again. And again.

At Headquarters I kept trying to explain, over and over, to anyone who would listen, what we were dealing with. Turkish opposition was not a minor thing; it was a deal breaker. Without the Turks there was no deployment, and we needed to focus the White House on this and get the senior-most levels of the US government engaged to break the logjam.

Most of that was wasted breath. The White House had ordered us in. Planning was to proceed. It was simply assumed that the Turks would change their minds and get on board. That we were asking them to do something that they considered highly detrimental to their national interest did not register. I was told to drive on and be ready to deploy.

I did what you do in that kind of situation. I said, “Yes, sir,” and went about assembling my team.

CHAPTER 3

The Team

The initial idea was for our team to insert into Iraq no later than March 2002. That was critical, because it was the full intention of the White House to launch the invasion of Iraq by April. I did not attend meetings with the President myself. I was, however, briefed repeatedly by the Iraqi Operations Group chief who did.

That meant we needed to get a team assembled and squared away ASAP. Theoretically, I had about 60 days before I was going to be taking these men, and potentially women, into Iraq and into harm's way. That left a lot of work to do.

To understand the magnitude of the task in question, you need to understand something critical about CIA. There is no standard table of organization and equipment. If I ask an Army officer to break down the structure of a mechanized infantry platoon, he can tell me. He can tell me how many men, what ranks, what training they have had, what vehicles they operate and how many, what weapons they use, etc.

There is no such thing in CIA. Every station is different. Every team is different. It means CIA is incredibly flexible. It also means when you tell CIA to pull a team off the shelf and deploy it, you are asking them first to build the team, from the ground up.

I was the team leader. Another experienced officer named Hans was named as my deputy. Unfortunately, Hans was posted to a field station abroad, and he had plenty of work to do there.

Hans would later prove to be one of the most capable officers with whom I ever served. He was not particularly useful in building the team, because he was not at Headquarters most of the time. He would periodically show up for a brief period, and then when it became clear that the Turks were still not on board and more delay was in the offing, he would have to return to his home station and his duties there. That the White House had ordered us in country to prep the way for a planned imminent invasion should have meant Hans would be relieved from his other duties and assigned fulltime to this project. It did not. It fell to me to organize the team.

A number of other individuals began to be identified to deploy into Iraq. I will focus here on those who ended up being the eight who actually crossed into Iraq in the summer of 2002.

BLUE FALCON: Case officer. The youngest of the eight men. Fluent in Arabic and of ethnic Arab descent. He had been a US Marine and had been in Kurdistan before in 1991 after the First Gulf War. Fanatic Kid Rock and Britney Spears fan and “class clown.” Worked in a bar in Georgetown on the weekends. I spent way too much time in a vehicle with Blue Falcon suffering from his horrible taste in music.

SUNSHINE: Paramilitary officer. Big, powerful guy. Former SEAL team operator. Astonishingly competent. Rock solid at all times. He was assigned to the team from Ground Branch, which is CIA’s land warfare paramilitary force. Ground Branch personnel are typically seasoned veterans of US elite special operations units.

UNCLE: Case officer. Another member of Ground Branch. Former Marine officer. Very bright. Very capable. Great sense of humor. The only man I know who actually eats Iranian ice cream and likes it. He did the lion’s share of the work in putting together the plans to wipe out Ansar al-Islam’s compound on the Iranian border in summer 2002. God knows how many Americans would be alive today if those plans had been implemented.

TIM: Case officer. Another former SEAL. Arabic speaker. Very bright and very capable. Like most SEALs a fanatic about physical fitness. He was originally identified to stand up a separate team to work with PUK when

Headquarters began to focus on the fact that we would need more than one team to handle the territory in question. Despite that, when we crossed in the summer of 2002, there were only eight of us, and I was the team leader. In that configuration, Tim was my deputy. When we ultimately increased our numbers in fall 2002 we did split into two teams, and Tim took command of the team working with PUK.

POPS: Our communicator. Probably the most out of place. Pops had been in the Army many years prior. Since then he had worked as a communicator in large field stations in Asia. He had no prior experience working in small teams like the one we were building. He did a creditable job handling our comms but struggled at times to deal with conditions and adapt to an environment that was very different than that to which he was accustomed.

DAKOTA: Case officer. A true western cowboy. Former Marine scout sniper. Not technically a member of Ground Branch but brought a lot of the same skills to the team. Great guy and a great friend. He and I in summer 2002 made one of the most significant recruitments of my career. Had already done time in Afghanistan before he joined my team.

BONES: Our team medic. Technically belonged to CIA medical corps. In reality, he was more like another Ground Branch body. He had already been deployed to Afghanistan.

ME: Case officer. I had spent most of the last 13 years overseas running operations. I spoke Greek, Turkish, just enough Thai to get in trouble in Bangkok, and a little Kurdish. I had been both an Armor officer and a JAG (Judge Advocate General's Corps) officer in the US Army.

In addition to these individuals there were probably another eight who were identified by February 2002 and participated in training for deployment. None of those were included in the first team that crossed the border, however. That was purely a political matter related to how many bodies the Turks ultimately agreed to let us send.

On top of the CIA personnel who would deploy we were told that members of the 10th Special Forces Group would be included. Specifically, we were told that a six-man pilot team would accompany us in preparation for the movement of the entire group in country sometime in spring 2002.

Accordingly, I made a trip out to Fort Carson to meet with group leadership and the members of the pilot team. That team was to be led by Captain Sid Crews (true name). Sid proved to be one of the most capable men with whom I have ever served. Sid and I remain great friends to this day.

As I began to assemble my team, I focused on the next task: organization. Iraqi Operations Group was pulling together bodies. They had no idea what all those bodies should do or how this team should be organized. Neither did I, but I sat down and got to work figuring it out.

I drew up a wiring diagram breaking the larger team into individual sections, organized around tasks. I put in slots for myself as team leader and for a deputy but otherwise kept the setup as flat as possible. We weren't going to Iraq to shuffle paper. We were going to run ops and win a war.

I did not, ultimately, get a chance to fully standup the organizational structure I had created until fall 2002, when we got sufficient personnel in country. In the meantime, though, it provided a framework within which we could manage personnel and train them. People were not any longer simply being told to report to Headquarters and join the team. They were showing up, checking in with me, and then being briefed on what they would do and to whom they would report.

The next step was training. The White House was still talking about deploying any day. The Turks still weren't cooperating. That left a bunch of very aggressive operators sitting around with not much to do and no fixed idea of when we would go live.

I was also focused on the fact that, as experienced as many of the personnel were that we were getting, the CIA in general at the time was doing a poor job of preparing its officers to operate in the kind of area into which we were going. Training did not just mean putting these people through courses. It meant creating the courses first.

Over the long decades of the Cold War, the CIA became very comfortable with conducting operations under cover in the civilized nations of the world. Its officers focused more and more on chasing other targets, also under cover, around the punch bowls of the world. In those kinds of

ops things could still go wrong, but the price the CIA officer paid was typically being sent home early.

I had fought against this culture from the beginning of my career. I had made a profession of proposing ops that my bosses dismissed as being too risky. Sometimes I won the argument and was allowed to proceed. Sometimes I lost the argument and was told to sit down and shut up. In all cases I wondered, *If it's too risky for us, then who's going to do it?*

We were in a different world now. 9/11 had made it impossible for the bureaucracy to continue business as usual. Ops that would have been dismissed as out of hand were now being approved routinely. I was being told to go into a remote, very dangerous part of the world and start a war.

If so, I was going to make sure we were ready.

The Ground Branch officers were designated to start up a program of regular training in what I considered to be essential skills. Nobody was excused, including me. We weren't going to have a team composed of folks who could handle themselves in an emergency and folks who were dead weight. Everybody was going to be able to take care of themselves.

We began with basics. Personnel were put through map reading and orienteering training. Theoretically, everybody on the team should have been proficient in this. I wasn't taking any chances. We wandered around state parks in Virginia honing our skills.

We did basic handgun and rifle training. We shot a lot of holes in paper targets. Then I put the team on a plane, and we went to a shooting school out west.

As luck would have it, our lead instructor at the school was a legendary figure I will call Gunner. The school did not know who we were. They had been told that we were some sort of security team and had not inquired further.

Gunner and I already knew each other, however. He had run a shooting course I had attended years before. I did not know Gunner was instructing at the shooting school until we arrived, but as soon as I saw him I knew our cover was blown.

I pulled Gunner aside and explained to him that we were a CIA team getting ready to deploy. I did not specify a location. He assumed

Afghanistan. Nobody was even thinking about Iraq at the time. I let Gunner continue to believe that we were going to Afghanistan throughout the training. Only long afterward, when we had returned, did I talk to him about our real destination. He understood why I had kept it from him. He was a pro.

Two of the officers I took to the shooting school were women. One was a logistics officer we called Mom. The other was a reports officer, someone who interfaces between case officers and analysts, we called Blondie.

At the culmination of the training we did at the shooting school we went through some pretty intense live fire training in a shoot house. I had been through similar training before. Neither Mom nor Blondie had.

Gunner came to me on the last day of training, when everyone would have to navigate the shoot house successfully to graduate. He said he did not think it was safe to put either Mom or Blondie through the house. He said they were both unsafe, and that the chances of somebody getting shot and killed were too high.

Both Mom and Blondie believed then, and probably believe now, that Gunner was being sexist. I'm not so sure. I think he was making the call he thought was right based on a lot of years of training people to shoot and having forgotten more about firearms than I will ever know.

In any event, both of these women were vital members of my team. I needed them, and I needed a bunch of disparate people to start being a team. They could fail, and I could still take them in country. That was my call. It would not change the fact that in the eyes of their teammates they would not have pulled their own weight.

I told Gunner I would go through the shoot house with both women, one at a time. I would be the partner for both. That way they would have a chance to complete the training, and the only person they would endanger would be me. He told me pretty clearly I was nuts, but he agreed.

Both Mom and Blondie went through the house. Both of them shot well and graduated the course. I did not get killed. We were a step closer to having a team.

We put the team members through emergency first aid training. We put them in a house at a training facility, filled it with role players with

simulated injuries, cut the power, pumped the place full of chemical smoke, cranked up rock music as loud as we could, and made team members enter the house, find the casualties, render aid, and move them to safety. We weren't going to take anything for granted. We were going to start preparing now for the day when our team house in country might be hit.

We did ambush drills, working from vehicles and coming up with standard operating procedures for how to react. Many people struggled, myself included. We did it again, and again, until we got it right.

Next we moved on to folding these separate skills together and getting ready to operate securely in the field. That meant working on tactics for conducting high-risk meetings in the field. Being able to shoot your way out of a situation is good. Even better is never getting into a situation that requires you to start shooting.

The key to doing that is control. You don't leave anything to chance. You dictate meeting arrangements. You move your asset where you want him. You appear out of the mist. You disappear into the mist. Everything happens on your terms or it doesn't happen at all.

It takes discipline. It takes practice. I learned to do it on the street. A great deal of what I learned was taught to me by terrorist sources whom I recruited. Some of them had the equivalent of PhDs in this kind of thing. Like so many before me I learned the way the enemy fought from the enemy, and then I turned it against him.

Now we were going to teach our team members to do the same thing.

I went down to the Farm, the Agency's primary tradecraft training facility. An old friend of mine was instructing there at the time. We'll call him Jimmy. He and I had worked together in Kurdistan on several occasions. He knew the terrain. He knew the risks. He was also a very good man to have with you in a bad place. Among other things he had been a sergeant-major in an Army special operations unit.

Jimmy was sick that he wasn't coming in country with us. He was a good soldier, though, and he jumped on the task of helping me put together training for team members in how to organize and conduct high-risk meetings. We ran drills and exercises over and over, refining our methodology as we went and driving home this key principle: if the enemy

can fix you in time and space, you are already dead. You may not know it yet, but you are a dead man walking.

We got better at everything. The team was coming together.

Then we started getting ordered to deploy.

The disconnect between Washington and Ankara had not closed. The Turks were still not on board, and there was no indication that they were going to get on board anytime soon. That did not change the fact that the White House was chomping at the bit, no one wanted to tell the President the truth, and we were stuck in the middle.

So, beginning in spring 2002, probably around March, we began to go through a series of evolutions where we, the team, would be told to deploy. Air arrangements would be laid on. I would be given a short list of people who were going to go in the first wave. We would be given a date and time certain and told to load out.

I would ask if we had had Turkish approval to move. I would be told “no” but then also told that such approval would be in hand before we took off. Any and all questions as to how this was going to happen would be met with instructions to focus on my men and get ready to go to war.

So, I would go home, load my gear, kiss my wife and children goodbye, tell them I had no idea when I was coming back, and come into work the next day with all my gear, ready to rock and roll. So would every other guy on the short list of people to make the first hop.

Then, we would sit around all day waiting for word from Ankara, be told eventually that the Turks had not changed their minds, and be told to go home. Sometimes we did this two or three days in a row.

Anybody who has ever had to deploy knows about the impact of this kind of nonsense. When you get to the point where you are about to go wheels up, it’s time to go; it’s time to start the clock running on coming home. Everybody, you and the family, steels themselves, walls off a little bit, and focuses on getting through it.

Doing that over and over, day after day, is torture, particularly for those being left at home. We did this silly exercise at least six times in about a one-month period. Finally, I said, “No.”

The deputy chief of the ops group called me in, told me he believed, again, that approval for deployment by the Turks was imminent, and directed me to have my men come in the next day ready to go. I refused. I told him I wasn't going to do this anymore. I told him that we were going to wait until we had Turkish approval in hand, that we would then set a day for deployment, and that we would then have our men prepare. I told him I wasn't going to put my people and their families through this madness anymore.

The deputy chief could have ordered me to do it anyway. He also could have fired me on the spot. He did neither. He was often quick to make decisions based on what I felt to be an overly optimistic evaluation of the likely results. He was also a very good man who wanted to do the right thing and who had the moral courage to do it when he saw it. He told me I was in charge, and that he would support my decision.

We stopped whirling in circles and settled in to wait for the diplomacy to work.

CHAPTER 4

Getting In

Somewhere between 60 and 90 days went by in this mode. March and April faded away. So did May. Spring was ending. Summer was beginning. We still weren't in Iraq, and the White House was not amused.

Someone in Ankara came up with the idea that we could include Turks on our team, and this would defuse the tension about our contact with the Kurds. A lot of people in Iraqi Ops Group thought this was a great idea. I thought it was madness.

I explained it again and again. The Turks and the Kurds are mortal enemies. This is an old, old conflict, and a lot of blood has been spilled on both sides.

We are going into Kurdistan to convince some very skeptical people, the Kurds, that we actually mean business this time. We are not just going to come and piss off Saddam and then walk away again leaving the men, women, and children of Kurdistan to face the consequences. We're going to end this.

Now imagine having that conversation with a Turkish minder in tow, one who in all likelihood treats all Kurds like second-class citizens and former vassals. How much credibility do you think you'll have left at the end of that conversation? How much chance do you think you'll have of convincing anyone of anything?

I won the day, over and over. The idea did not die, however. It kept resurfacing, until finally one day I was told two things: first, for real this

time, we have Turkish approval to cross into Northern Iraq; second, Turkish Special Forces officers are coming with you as part of your team.

Say what? What part of “this won’t work” was ambiguous?

I reiterated all my objections. I explained, again, that the presence of Turks on our team meant we had virtually no chance of success.

I lost. The game had changed. We were still going to invade Iraq, but a more immediate threat had emerged, one that demanded we get into Iraq and deal with it as rapidly as humanly possible.

Along the Iraqi–Iranian border, inside the area covered by the no-fly zone and, therefore, outside of Saddam’s control, an Islamist extremist group called Ansar al-Islam had carved out its own psychotic little enclave modeled on the Taliban in Afghanistan and based on Sharia law. These guys were busy shutting down secular schools, forcing women to cover themselves, and lopping the heads off anyone who dared to challenge their warped interpretation of Islam.

Ansar was also offering safe haven to Al Qaeda fighters fleeing from Afghanistan and looking to continue the fight. According to the Kurds there were now significant numbers of these fighters in Ansar territory, where they were regrouping and starting work on plans for future attacks. Some of this work, according to the Kurds, involved the development of chemical and biological weapons at what came to be known as the Khormal complex, although the facility in question was actually closer to the small village of Sargat a short distance away.

Every terrorist group worth its salt has ambitions to develop and use weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons. Most of them never get very far along with their efforts. Al Qaeda was and is different. It was documented fact by 2002 that Al Qaeda had spent a lot of time and money on programs to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities. I had worked on some of the programs that dismantled that capability and are still classified. I knew very well that we needed to take this seriously.

At a national level the information coming out of Iraq about Khormal changed the calculus regarding our entry in country completely. We needed

to have our own people in country right away. We had to find out for ourselves how great the threat was and deal with it.

I reluctantly got on board with the idea. I wasn't happy about taking Turks along with us. I also knew all too well the price we had paid on 9/11 for allowing threats to persist. We needed to get in, and, if we found the intelligence we were getting was accurate, we needed to crush Ansar and their Al Qaeda allies without hesitation.

10th Group was not coming. This would be a purely CIA deployment at the outset. The group would be limited to eight men initially. Those were the eight I mentioned earlier—myself, Tim, Blue, Sunshine, Dakota, Uncle, Pops, and Bones. We would go in, deal with the immediate issue of Ansar, and then, hopefully, additional personnel would join us, and we would move forward with the job of overthrowing Saddam.

I would be in charge of the team. Tim, who by this point had been told he would run the PUK sector of our operations once we were done with Ansar and moved on to work against Saddam, would be my deputy. That introduced a delicate dynamic. The KDP and the PUK were both allies of ours, but they were also often adversaries. I did not want to showcase Tim as my deputy and then have him be later designated as our representative to the PUK. That would suggest to all the Kurds that the PUK was not on an equal footing with the KDP and had somehow been deemed worthy only of a more junior officer to work with them.

Accordingly, I advised Tim that, while I would be in charge and make all final calls on matters of significance, in front of the Kurds, particularly the PUK, we would adopt as much as possible a “Lewis and Clark” type of relationship. We would try to appear to them to be equals and sharing the responsibilities of command. This way when we later split the territory in Northern Iraq between us it would not appear to anyone that there was any favoritism toward either faction.

It was a delicate balance. As I will delineate later, the relationship did not always work flawlessly. Still, on balance we pulled it off, and taking this approach from the outset went a long way toward preventing intra-Kurdish rivalries and conflicts from disrupting our work.

Within a week of the decision to deploy we were outbound on an aircraft. A lot of things were still up in the air, but it felt good to be moving forward at last. We made it to Germany, refueled, and continued onward to Turkey. I stretched out on some gear in the back of the plane and tried to get some sleep.

A couple of hours later, somewhere over the Balkans, I was awakened by the copilot. He informed me that the aircraft had been denied permission to land in Ankara, and we had to return to Germany. Yet another sign of how problematic our relationship with the Turks was and would remain.

We turned around and went back to Germany, where we sat and twiddled our thumbs while the embassy in Ankara tried to run down the exact problem. Eventually, after additional hours of delay we took off again and flew to Turkey. It was early summer. It had taken much longer than anticipated, and the Turks were clearly still not enthusiastic about this whole venture, but we were finally in theater.

CHAPTER 5

Why Are You Here?

“Please do not do anything stupid.” Those were the first words my new Turkish partner said to me.

We were met in Incirlik Airbase on arrival in Turkey by CIA personnel. After an overnight we loaded our gear into the Jeeps that had been purchased for us and headed to Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey where we linked up with the Turkish personnel, two officers and an NCO, who would be coming with us to Kurdistan.

The senior officer was a lieutenant in his early twenties. He was a bright fellow, and he was just following orders, but he had the smug attitude of an individual convinced of the ultimate authority of the Turkish General Staff and the natural superiority of the Turkish people over the Kurds. From his viewpoint he was doing us a great favor by allowing us to proceed with our mission, and he assumed we would behave accordingly.

As noted earlier I had already spent a lot of time in Kurdistan, what the Turks would call either “Northern Iraq” or in more candid moments, the “Mosul Valiyet”—Turkish for the “Province of Mosul”—which it had been called during the days of the Ottoman Empire. I knew Diyarbakir and the area around it like the back of my hand. I wasn’t interested in playing games with some Turkish general’s lackie.

“Let’s go,” I said simply to the lieutenant in response to his comment. I put him and the other officer in my vehicle with Blue. The NCO piled into one of the other Jeeps. We started out of Diyarbakir.

Ten minutes later following the lieutenant's directions, we were lost and headed the wrong way. The lieutenant might be one of the chosen people, but he apparently couldn't find his way out of town and didn't know west from east. I told him to shut up and advised Blue to stop listening to him. I located some landmarks, turned us around, and got us on the right road toward the border.

Sometime later, as we entered the town of Silopi, I and other members of our team started noticing indications that we were being followed. The same vehicles kept turning up behind us. They were too close. They were all filled with young Turkish men with short haircuts. No women. No children. All the vehicles were of similar types. None had any signs of personalization. It was hard to be sure, but it certainly seemed like somebody, likely an official Turkish entity, was monitoring us.

I mentioned this to the lieutenant. He informed me that I must be mistaken and that the Turkish Army controlled this entire portion of the country. I knew that wasn't true from my work in the area with other Turkish entities. I also knew that the myriad of Turkish intelligence and law enforcement organizations working in the area did not share information with each other and operated in their own little stovepipes. I pointed out one of the vehicles to the lieutenant as it closed up on us at a traffic light in downtown Silopi.

The lieutenant reacted exactly as I should have anticipated he would. He told Blue to stop the vehicle, climbed out in traffic, marched back to the car behind us, flashed his credentials, and demanded to know who was in the car. The occupants of the car piled out. Traffic came to a standstill.

A long, confused conversation ensued involving multiple people from multiple cars. The explanation became clear. We were under surveillance by Turkish intelligence. The Turkish General Staff hadn't bothered to tell them about our presence in the country. They had been surveilling the entire movement in an effort to find out what was going on.

The lieutenant told the intelligence guys to get lost. Our tails dropped off. We moved ahead, met the KDP representatives at Khabur Gate, the Turkish-Iraqi border crossing, and pressed on to the KDP leadership's secure compound in the hills overlooking Irbil. We were in Iraq.

Years before, CIA had funded the construction of a base house for our personnel inside the KDP compound. It was complete, but as yet unfurnished. We also did not expect to be staying in KDP territory that long. Ansar's area of control was far to the east, bordering PUK territory. Accordingly, we crashed in a KDP guesthouse a short distance away and left occupation of the base house for a later date.

The next morning, I went to meet Masoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP and, arguably, the single most powerful man in Kurdistan. I was ushered into his presence in a large, ornate office filled with heavy, dark wooden furniture. Masoud was dressed, as he always was when I met him, in peshmerga attire—loose, baggy trousers, a broad sash wrapped around his waist, and a checkered turban on his head.

“Why have you brought Turks with you?” said Masoud. In this part of the world tea drinking and pleasantries preceded any attempt to conduct business. But not here; not now. We weren't going to discuss anything else until we had addressed this key point.

I did my best to finesse the situation. I explained that the Turks were here only for a limited time, that our goal was to show them the truth of the threat posed by Ansar and Al Qaeda, that this changed nothing about our relationship with the Kurds. Nothing I said had any significant impact. I was in an untenable position. The United States of America had been unable to make the government of Turkey allow us to cross the border without bowing to Turkish demands. Masoud let the matter drop ultimately, but I had not yet won his trust. I was, at best, on probation.

We moved on to the promises the survey team that had preceded me had made. According to Masoud, he had been promised all kinds of material aid, including Javelin missiles, and the delivery date for these items had long since passed. He had also been promised a great deal of money, which I did not have with me. It was the first I had heard of a fixed date for the delivery of anything. I promised to find out what was going on and report back to him. Again, he dropped the issue. Again, it was clear that I had not yet won his trust.

None of what transpired in Masoud's office surprised me. It was not comfortable. It also was not unexpected. It was not just that we had brought

the sworn enemies of the Kurdish people, the Turks, with us; it was, more than anything else, that we had not yet proved we could be relied upon. We had not yet demonstrated, in this harsh corner of the world, that we understood what it took to survive, and that we were prepared to do whatever was necessary to do so.

On multiple occasions over the years I had found myself in similar situations, trying desperately to gain the trust and the cooperation of potential allies and having the bureaucracy in Washington, DC, undercut those efforts. People in dangerous situations fighting for survival don't want flowery language, vague promises or excuses; they want results. If you are in a gun fight, you want guns. You don't want rhetoric.

As we say back home, "Talk is cheap."

I walked out of Masoud's office knowing we had a lot of work to do before we would have forged the kind of relationship with the KDP we needed. I also understood in a way I had not before that if we were going to create the necessary bonds, we were going to have to do it individually by proving to the Kurds that we were serious; we were here to end Saddam and we weren't going home until we did so. More than once before it was all over, I would have to make exactly that vow and then hope to God I could keep it.

Two days later we headed for PUK territory, making the long drive southeast across the length of Iraqi Kurdistan, moving further and further from Turkey and closer and closer to Iran. We also ran dangerously close to the Green Line, the de facto border between Kurdistan and Saddam's Iraq. At many points we were within artillery and mortar range of the Iraqi military positions on the other side of that line. The Iraqi Army in the north numbered well over 150,000 men armed to the teeth with tanks and other heavy weapons. Anytime they chose they could surge north and shut the door behind us.

We were climbing further and further out on a limb. We had the support of our Kurdish allies. We had no other backup of any kind.

Military units in such situations typically can call on all kinds of assistance. Air assets are dedicated. Search and rescue procedures are in

place. If something goes wrong, even in the most remote of places, some kind of reaction force is prepared to come in if needed.

We had none of that. We were eight Americans and three Turks, jammed into four vehicles. We carried our personal gear, our communications equipment, and our weapons—nothing else. Whatever happened, whichever way this broke, we were on our own.

I have always been a history buff. I was fully conscious of what history said about the perils to be found where we were going. Four hundred years before Christ, the Greek general Xenophon found himself in the middle of what is now Iraq with ten thousand Greek mercenaries fighting to overthrow the Persian emperor Artaxerxes II. Things did not go well for Xenophon and the Ten Thousand, and ultimately they were forced to fight their way out due north, through what is now Turkey and Armenia, to the sea.

It is one of the great stories of the ancient world. I hoped ours would not have a similar ending.

Later the same day we arrived at the PUK compound in Qalah Chulan, in the mountains above the Kurdish city of Sulymaniah. We were welcomed with open arms by the PUK and quartered in a newly constructed cinderblock building not too far from where Jalal Talabani, head of the PUK, and his inner circle lived. The building was barebones, raging hot in the summer heat, and our food was cooked by Kurdish helpers over a fire on the floor, but we lived more or less like the PUK leadership was living.

The sewage from the house drained into an open pond a short distance down the hill. The pond was filled with fish, which fed on our waste. Every few days the Kurds would go fishing in the pond, and we would have fish for dinner. It was the cycle of life in this remote, mountainous, and extremely poor corner of the world.

The KDP, by virtue of their strategic position along the borders with Syria and Turkey, made significant amounts of money from the smuggling and taxation of goods passing through its territory. The PUK, jammed in against Iran and surrounded by openly hostile forces, enjoyed no such benefits. It had a fraction of the resources that the KDP had and felt much

more exposed. They were keenly aware of just how easily they could be crushed by outside forces.

Tim and I met the next day with Jalal Talabani and his key advisors. Jalal was a very different character from Masoud Barzani. Where Masoud always exuded the demeanor and attitude of a traditional Middle Eastern potentate, Talabani came across like an old school union boss. His jacket was off. His sleeves were rolled up. He wanted to be seen as a man of the people.

Still, the meeting with the PUK had all the same undercurrents as had dominated my talk with Masoud. Where were the arms they had been promised? Where was the money? Why would we bring Turks with us? When were we going to attack? Why should they believe us? If Saddam moved right now and attacked, what were we prepared to do about it?

As with Masoud I did my best to provide answers and establish trust. I held my own. I did not win the day or resolve anything. We had gained time, but that time would not be infinite. Tomorrow we would begin work on getting to the bottom of the Ansar and Al Qaeda threat. In the meantime, we needed Washington to get its act together and start making good on the endless promises that had been made.



Typical KDP garrison on the Green Line near Irbil.



KDP peshmerga in the field.

CHAPTER 6

Khurmäl

By the time we arrived in PUK territory, PUK, and to some extent KDP, intelligence had provided to CIA dozens of reports regarding chemical and biological weapons work being done at what was commonly referred to as the Khurmäl facility. As noted earlier, the compound in question was actually further to the east near a village called Sargat, only miles from the Iranian border, but the name “Khurmäl,” once used by analysts back home at Headquarters, stuck and is what appears in most reporting about the topic.

What the Kurds had provided us, while limited, was terrifying. If true, it meant that Ansar and Al Qaeda were well past the aspirational stage and were making and testing real weapons. Our first job was to confirm the accuracy of those reports.

The PUK had captured something like two dozen members of Ansar and Al Qaeda. The borders between Ansar territory and PUK territory were fluid and shifting. The border with Iran, in this isolated, mountainous region, was hard to define. At various points Al Qaeda and Ansar militants had guessed wrong about what road or pass to take and had been grabbed by the PUK. These individuals were in custody a short distance from where we were housed. We began to work through interrogations of all of them.

Some of the guys we met with were nothing more than foot soldiers. They did what they were told. They were true believers. They knew what they needed to know to do their jobs, nothing more. Some of the people the PUK had in custody were something else entirely. They were big fish, and

they knew a lot about what was happening in Ansar territory and about what Al Qaeda's plans for the future were.

We worked our way through everybody the PUK had in custody, two of our officers working on each man. The Turks were cut out. They didn't like it. I didn't care. They swore that Ankara would be furious and that we would regret our actions when we tried to leave Iraq. I told them to do their worst and went back to work. It would be the first of many occasions on which my team would be threatened with dire consequences by the Turks.

A word about our method of interrogation. First, we worked each prisoner without any Kurds present in the room. Our priority was establishing the validity of what the Kurds had told us. The best way to do that was by cutting them out of the equation and pushing ahead independently. If the Kurds' info was accurate it would all pan out, and we would be better positioned to handle charges that the stories of the detainees had somehow been cooked. If not, we would discover that and report accordingly.

Second, we never employed any of what have come to be called "enhanced interrogation techniques." We, in fact, never touched the prisoners we questioned. We weren't nice to them, but we stuck to the techniques I had been taught during my years with CIA, which relied upon proven psychological pressure and not the half-baked theories of some guys from SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) school who had never actually questioned anyone in the field.

As the months went by, and word increasingly filtered back to us about how interrogations were being handled elsewhere, I periodically fielded questions from officers working for me as to why we would not also employ the techniques being used in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. My response was always the same. It was wrong. It didn't work. It was unnecessary. Follow the rules. Do it the way we have always done it. You will get results, and you will be on the right side of a very important line.

Everyone we questioned talked. A number of them flipped and went to work for us against their former colleagues.

I won't go into the fine points of how this is done. The broad strokes are well known. Get the prisoner talking. Begin to establish a baseline for his

behavior. If he is speaking, let him go. Get him to drop his guard. Lower the threshold for what you want. Small steps and incremental movements.

Keep track of everything the prisoner says. No one can sustain a detailed lie for very long. They will inevitably contradict themselves. The more a prisoner talks, the more he is building a trap for himself.

Shift topics suddenly. Drop threads without warning and then return to them without preamble days or weeks later. Make it impossible for a prisoner to speak without tripping over his own fabrications.

Never miss anything. When a guy who has been telling you for two days about how he traveled alone suddenly slips and uses the word “we,” you had better notice it. Whether you call him on it immediately or decide to file the fact away for future use is a matter of tactics. The point is—miss nothing.

Reward good behavior; punish bad. A prisoner who has talked and answered questions goes back to find music playing in his cell, pillows on the bed, and a clock on the wall. A prisoner who won’t cooperate goes back to a cell stripped of everything but a mattress and a blanket—lights on continuously for days—alone except when he is brought meals. He is told nothing about his status, when he will be questioned next, or even if he will ever be questioned again.

Most importantly, before anything else, take away all hope of successfully resisting interrogation. Every jihadist I ever questioned had been trained to resist interrogation through a series of stalling techniques, falling back from one defensive position to another in succession. All this was based on the premise that, ultimately, if they stalled long enough, they would be released by captors unable to prove they were involved in terrorist activity.

Job one, therefore, was to make sure they understood that this premise was flawed. The only route to freedom and release was through cooperation.

Perhaps the most important detainee the Kurds had in custody was a senior member of Al Qaeda whom I will call Yassin. Yassin was an Iraqi, and he had been a member of Al Qaeda for many years, facilitating the movement of men and materiel in and out of Afghanistan. He had fled

Afghanistan after the American invasion and attempted to get home to his family in Iraq. He was almost there when a PUK patrol captured him.

The PUK knew enough about Yassin to consider him Al Qaeda. They knew very little more. He had proved a hard nut to crack. I decided I would question him myself with Dakota as my partner.

Our first meeting with Yassin was in a holding cell at the PUK detention facility. Yassin made a significant immediate impression. He was a dignified man in his forties. He spoke excellent English and had an engineering degree from an Iraqi university.

I introduced myself and Dakota and explained that we were officers with the Central Intelligence Agency. I added that we knew that Yassin was a member of Al Qaeda and that we wanted to talk to him about what he knew of the activities of that organization. I paused to let him respond.

Yassin smiled and assured us that there had been a misunderstanding. He began to launch into what was clearly going to be a very long-winded explanation of how he had been falsely accused.

I cut him off. I looked at Dakota and told him I would bet him five bucks that I could tell him what Yassin was going to say next. Yassin looked puzzled and started to talk again. I held up my hand and motioned for him to shut up. Dakota followed my lead. He made the bet 10 bucks.

I told Dakota that Yassin was going to tell us that he was a devout Muslim but that he was not part of Al Qaeda, had never engaged in terrorist activity, never been to Afghanistan, and wished only to live in peace. I added that a few days from now, when we had shown this story to be a lie, Yassin would admit that he had been to Afghanistan but assure us it was a religious pilgrimage of sorts, that a few days after that he would claim he had been a member of the Taliban but never been in combat and, ultimately, would finally concede that he had been a member of Al Qaeda but then swear he had just quit and was on his way home to live the rest of his life in peace.

Dakota laughed. We turned to Yassin. Strangely enough, caught off guard, for a moment he laughed as well, then attempted to glue back on his poker face.

I told Yassin he was wasting my time. I told him I knew his playbook better than he did. I told him he had been lied to by the people who trained him. There was no waiting us out.

I explained the reality of the situation to Yassin. He was in Kurdish custody. No one was coming to save him or release him. If he didn't die here, he would die in a cage in Gitmo (Guantanamo Bay) decades in the future. He would never see his wife again. He would never see his children again. His sons would grow to men never knowing their father, never seeing his face again. Their mother would prostitute herself in desperation to get enough money to keep them alive.

Yassin was, I explained, already dead—already forgotten. We were his last hope, and we would not lift a finger to help him until and unless he gave us a reason to.

We got up and left. Yassin was led away without explanation. We let him sit for a few days wondering if he would ever see us again or if his one and only chance of salvation had passed. He was fed regularly and kept warm and dry. Otherwise he was buried alive.

Then we brought Yassin back to the holding cell and began questioning anew. He talked. He gave us chapter and verse on his old buddies.

From the dozens of other detainees we questioned we began to build a detailed picture of what was going on inside Ansar territory. It was terrifying. Ansar was creating a full-scale Islamic state in the area it controlled along the Iranian border. Within that area dozens of Al Qaeda fighters who had fled Afghanistan were being sheltered and had created their own camps.

At one of the facilities inside Ansar territory extensive work was being done to develop both chemical and biological weapons. What the exact status was of the biological work was not clear: it appeared to be relatively primitive, but sustained progress was being made in work on cyanide-based chemical weapons. Testing was already being done on animals.

Perhaps even more ominously, the detainees we talked to made clear that what was growing inside Ansar territory was a virus of sorts. This contagion was not going to stay confined to this small area. The leaders of this movement, who included Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—who would go on to

found Al Qaeda in Iraq, which ultimately became ISIS—were focused on the radical Islamist takeover not only of Iraq but the entire Levant. Like a cancer, Al Qaeda was replicating itself, spreading from Afghanistan and threatening to set the heart of the Middle East on fire.

One day I went with Dakota to debrief a detainee who had only recently been captured. He was 16 years old. We will call him Dogan. He had been recruited by Ansar, strapped into a bulky suicide vest composed of multiple mortar shells, and then sent into PUK territory to stage a suicide attack on a Kurdish police station.

To conceal his suicide vest Dogan wore a heavy coat. It was a hot summer day when he approached the police station, sweating, with his right hand buried in his pocket. The Kurdish police officer on duty outside the station told the kid to stop and asked him what he had in his pocket.

“The switch for my suicide vest,” replied Dogan.

By all rights the police officer should have responded by shooting Dogan twice in the head. He did not. He told him to take his hand out of his pocket. Dogan did.

The Kurdish cops cut Dogan out of his vest. Then they took him into custody.

The first question I asked Dogan when I questioned him was, “Why didn’t you press the switch?”

“I wasn’t ready to die,” he replied.

“Good decision,” I said.

“Live a little. Drink a beer. Get a girlfriend,” added Dakota.

“I would like to go to a beach,” said Dogan.

We talked to Dogan for a couple of days. He detailed for us how Ansar had taken over his village and those around it, how they had closed the schools, how they had forced the women to cover themselves. He described how he had been recruited to be a suicide bomber. He had no interest in martyrdom, but he knew his family would be paid if he staged a successful attack, that they desperately needed the money to feed his siblings, and that if he became a martyr Ansar would not ask any of his brothers or sisters to do so.

Dogan hated Ansar and everything they stood for. He agreed to become a suicide bomber out of love for his family. He wasn't a monster; he was a victim of a pestilence looking to infect yet another nation.

Having front row seats to this kind of horror movie was terrifying. It was also a tremendous opportunity. After years, if not decades, of running two steps behind as Islamic extremists hit us around the globe, we were finally in the right place at the right time. We were invisible and positioned exactly where we needed to be. If we could get the kind of detailed tactical intel we needed, and Washington would move, we would end this next war before it even had a chance to get started.



CIA officer in peshmerga attire on the front line with Ansar al-Islam, summer 2002.

CHAPTER 7

Missing the Shot

We had started by debriefing the individuals the PUK had in custody. Now we went on offense.

Some of the detainees we recruited, turned to our side, and sent back into Ansar territory. With the help of the PUK we also recruited other sources and ran them into the area as well. In the weird way things like this often work, despite the hostility between Ansar and the PUK, there was still trade between individuals on both sides of the de facto border. Families from Ansar territory even regularly crossed into PUK territory to shop at local markets.

This meant we had the opportunity—if we were careful and exercised good tradecraft—to get eyes and ears into the Ansar enclave and add current detailed reporting to that we had gleaned from the detainees. Gradually, we and the PUK put together a picture of what was happening inside the Ansar enclave with the precision needed to support a surprise attack.

We mapped every camp and every facility. We identified every leader by name and where he lived. We identified every gun position and exactly what kind of weapon was emplaced there. By the time we were done, we could tell you how many rooms were in the building where the chemical weapons work was being done, what work was happening in each room, where the cyanide was stored, how much was on hand, and where it came from.

We were also able to confirm that Ansar had no idea we were in the area. Zarqawi himself was in Baghdad getting medical treatment for an injury. The remaining leaders were all sitting still only miles away and unaware that we had them under a microscope.

All that was great, but the relationship with the Turks was worse than ever. Cut out of our operations, the Turks had nothing to do all day but sit around the house where we were all quartered. To pass the time they often sat outside the house dry firing their weapons at the Kurdish guards and laughing about how many Kurds they would kill before this was all over. The Kurds swallowed it at our request. They were not happy.

The Turks also demanded access to our communications. I laughed. We had all our computers and other gear set up in one room of the house where we were staying. Nobody other than the eight team members went in that room. On multiple occasions the Turks attempted to gain entry. We physically escorted them out of the space on each occasion.

One night the junior Turkish lieutenant burst into the room where we were working. He had gotten ahold of some booze somewhere, and he was trashed. He drew his weapon and began to go systematically through the room, pointing his pistol at us and pretending to “clear” the space. He was very fortunate no one drew on him and killed him. Even here we were armed at all times. Several guys grabbed him and physically ejected him.

Then the senior lieutenant confronted me. The Turks had their own communications and had been reporting to Ankara for some time how they were being “mistreated.” The lieutenant had now been directed by the Turkish General Staff, he reported, to order us out of Northern Iraq. According to him our authorization to be inside Iraq had been revoked and we must depart immediately.

I confirmed with Washington and Ankara that the Turkish General Staff had given the orders in question. Ankara, caught in the middle, suggested we do what the Turks wanted. Washington took the line that it was up to me to make the call and tell them whether or not we could continue work.

I met with the senior lieutenant again. I told him that as a Turkish officer he probably should get out of Iraq or risk being charged with violating a direct order. I reminded him that I wasn’t a Turkish officer, that I

didn't take orders from the Turkish government, and that we weren't in Turkey anymore. My team was staying. We had work to do.

The lieutenant announced he and his men were leaving and that the border crossing would be closed to us once he was out of country. If we stayed, we would be trapped inside Iraq with no reasonable means of escape.

I told him to have nice trip and that we would be fine where we were. I walked away.

The Turkish lieutenant fumed. He sent more nasty messages and told me how badly I was going to be yelled at by the generals in Ankara when we got out. He never went anywhere. He and his guys stayed. We continued collecting intelligence on the threat posed by Ansar and Al Qaeda.

Back home in Washington, the intelligence we were producing was causing quite a stir. We were working 18-hour days, seven days a week, and we had already pumped literally hundreds of reports out. Senior personnel in DOD, CIA, and inside the White House were paying attention.

We began to receive messages suggesting that some of the people reading our reporting were starting to think in terms of trying to tie what Ansar and Al Qaeda were doing to Saddam. The White House wanted a pretext to start the war. This might do.

I called the team together. I told them what they already knew—that a lot of people back home were eager for us to tie what Al Qaeda and Ansar were doing in Iraq to Saddam, because that would be an iron-clad reason to invade. I added that if we found that proof then I would be the happiest guy in the world and press the button transmitting that intelligence to Washington myself.

Then I added that Washington's interest in finding this "smoking gun" was not going to change anything about how we went about our jobs. We weren't in Iraq to write fiction or shade reports; we were professionals. We were going to do our jobs by the numbers as we always did. No one, no matter what their position, was going to change that.

I didn't call the meeting because I had any doubts about my men. I called the meeting because I wanted them to hear me say out loud, to all of them, one time, one place, that we weren't playing any games with our

reporting, and that I would provide whatever top cover was required to let them do their jobs.

Everybody nodded. We were rock solid. Whatever Washington was doing, we were after the truth. We went back to work.

We never found any evidence of collusion between Saddam and Al Qaeda or Ansar. To the contrary, as one would expect, we found that Iraqi intelligence was very worried about what was happening in Ansar territory and had sent officers into the area to collect on that target just as we had. Despite his efforts toward the end of his rule to color himself as a friend of Islam, Saddam was a secular despot, and he regarded radical Islamists as just as much of a threat as we did.

We had been in country for close to two months now. The KDP had some Ansar personnel in their custody as well. In the interest of being thorough I wanted to question these guys too. Now that we were on top of the Ansar threat, I also wanted to have some time to develop key relationships with the KDP. I was concerned that our visit to that group earlier had been so brief that we might be creating the impression of some sort of favoritism toward the PUK.

I took Blue, Sunshine, and Bones with me in two of our Jeeps and headed north. The Turks stayed in PUK territory, suspicious, I think, that I was trying to trick them somehow by splitting our forces.

Before leaving Qalah Chulan I talked to Tim and Uncle about the situation with Ansar and Al Qaeda. We were as yet undetected, but that could not last forever. We had a shot. We needed to take it.

I directed Uncle to start pulling together an actual plan for how to assault and take out the Ansar enclave. We had expected Washington to produce such a plan when we flooded them with intel. None had been forthcoming, so we shifted gears. If they wouldn't start the ball rolling, we would.

The general outlines of the plan to be proposed were clear to us before we headed north. We would request US air support and "boots on the ground," likely in the form of a Ranger battalion. The operation would be designed to be quick and tightly focused. We would move rapidly, wipe out the Ansar and Al Qaeda fighters on the ground, destroy the chemical

weapons complex, and then get our military personnel back out of country as quickly as possible.

I went to KDP territory with half the team. I would return in a couple of weeks, and at that time we would finalize the plan. Uncle could use that time effectively, fine-tuning details and getting additional ground truth from the PUK and our asset pool.

None of the people we questioned in KDP custody significantly changed our perception of the threat posed by Ansar. They were largely minor players. They did cement in our minds the impression that Ansar and Al Qaeda were already working to create cells outside of the Ansar enclave with the ultimate goal of spreading jihad throughout Iraq. Those cells were already active in cities like Irbil and Dohuk, in Northern Iraq.

In our spare time we started conceptual work on an airfield to be built about 10 miles from our base on a high plateau. It would be large enough to allow us to fly in supplies on multi-engine aircraft and remote enough to be out of the public eye. Flights coming in at night would be heard, but at least we would not have planes sitting out in front of God and everyone for the general public to gawk at. The drive from the Turkish border was long, windy, and dangerous. If we were going to build up our presence in country we needed a more viable way to keep ourselves supplied.

About a week after arriving in KDP territory, Sunshine called me into the room where he had our commo equipment set up to show me a message. Given the limited amount of gear we had in country we were operating on what amounted to a relay system via our main communications package in Qalah Chulan. Messages to us from Headquarters went first to Pops, who was with Tim in PUK territory. Messages from us to Headquarters had to go back by the same route, and we only saw what Qalah Chulan sent to Headquarters if it was specifically forwarded to us by them.

Sunshine showed me the message he wanted me to see. It was a message from Qalah Chulan to Headquarters. It was Uncle's proposal for a military strike against the Ansar enclave. It had already been sent, without ever being cleared by me.

I was furious. We were operating in an unusual configuration. That did not change the fact that I was still senior officer in country and team leader.

No message of this significance and magnitude should have ever left country without my approval.

I walked around the guesthouse for a few minutes and let the steam coming off the top of my head dissipate. I went back to the communications room and reread the message. It was tight and well thought out. It was generally in accordance with the discussions I had had with Uncle and Tim in Qalah Chulan before I left. I had no issues with the substance of the message. That did not change the fact that it never should have been sent without my approval.

I sat down and typed out a short message to Tim in Qalah Chulan. It was succinct and to the point. I told him the message he had sent to Headquarters looked good, and I concurred with its substance. I then reminded him I was still team leader no matter where I was in country, that he had no authority to release messages of this import without my explicit approval, and directed him to ensure that any and all further substantive message traffic came through me before it went to Headquarters. I closed by saying that I was confident that he understood fully the significance of what had just happened and that I was moving ahead under the assumption that there would be no further repetitions of this kind of insubordination.

Tim responded promptly. He accepted full responsibility for the error. We had no further issues of this kind throughout the deployment.

Washington turned down our request for troops and air support. We reworked the plan and sent it back, asking only for air. Washington turned this request down as well. We submitted a third proposal, asking only for logistical support for the PUK and saying that we and the Kurds would handle the attack on Ansar and Al Qaeda.

This plan also was shot down. Headquarters made it clear that no plan of any kind for action against the Ansar enclave would be approved at this time. The White House was worried that any attack on Ansar might spook Saddam and cause him to take preemptive action against the Kurds before we were ready.

Ansar, Al Qaeda, and chemical weapons would have to wait. The priority was Saddam. We were to leave country, refit, integrate additional personnel, and then get back into Kurdistan as quickly as possible.

Summer was drawing to a close. The invasion, which had once been planned for late spring, would now take place in the fall. We had to hurry.

CHAPTER 8

The Return

We crossed the border back into Turkey in the same configuration in which we had entered Iraq: eight Americans and three sulky Turks in four Jeeps. Tim and I headed to Ankara with the Turks for meetings. The other six members of our team flew back to the States and took our gear back home.

In Ankara Tim and I met with senior officials at the US Embassy. The Department of State, always timid in the best of times, was shaken by the tension between our team members and our Turkish partners. The Turkish General Staff wanted to meet with us and give us a tongue lashing. I had zero interest in listening to more of the same nonsense I had been hearing for months. The ambassador insisted. We were ushered in to see the Turkish General Staff.

Our audience with the Turkish generals was much as I expected it to be. Tim and I sat in chairs in front of a table lined with brass and listened while we were rebuked for everything we had done in Kurdistan. Our Turkish minders, the two lieutenants, sat to one side, grinning and nodding and enjoying the spectacle, assuming no doubt that we had learned our lesson and would never behave so badly again.

At the end of the tirade Tim and I walked out smiling and caught the next plane back to DC. We never saw the two lieutenants again. We did vow that if Headquarters even suggested taking Turks with us when we returned in a few weeks they were going to have to find some new bodies to take our places.

We did not take Turks with us when we came back. The Turks chopped off on a plan, which provided for them sending personnel in to work out of a Turkish military compound inside Iraq, and we agreed that we would meet with them regularly and brief them on our activities. It was a much cleaner arrangement than the one we were stuck with over the summer.

That didn't mean our problems with the Turkish government ended, however. They would haunt us until the day we left Kurdistan after the fall of Baghdad. It also didn't mean that the Turks had agreed to any of the rest of the invasion plan. Nowhere in the agreement that allowed us to go back into Iraq via Turkish territory did the Turks indicate any support for arming the Kurds, the movement of American conventional forces in country or the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Back at Headquarters we moved rapidly to get full teams put together, turned around, and back on station. The chaos in Iraqi Ops had not dissipated, so we did this largely on our own. Meanwhile, the White House continued to thunder about wanting to get the invasion moving. We were six months behind schedule at least.

The plan now stood as follows in regard to Northern Iraq. Tim and I would go back in and set up two bases, one in KDP territory under my command, one in PUK territory under his command. I was still going to be the senior officer in country, but Tim would now report directly to Headquarters, not to me.

Once we had gotten settled, the 10th Special Forces Group would flow in country and set up operations. Working jointly, CIA and Special Forces personnel would prepare the battlefield and facilitate the entry of a US Army force built largely around the 4th Infantry Division. That force would number somewhere around 40,000 men. Once that force was in place, in coordination with US military forces working out of Kuwait and Jordan, the invasion of Iraq would be launched.

Early in the fall of 2002 we reinserted. Both teams moved by air to Turkey and staged out of Diyarbakir. Then, by road, in one long convoy, we moved to the border. Most of our gear was loaded on contract vehicles hired in Turkey. They weren't allowed to cross into Iraq. We unloaded everything

and put it all on vehicles the Kurds supplied. Then we started the movement from Khabur Gate to the KDP compound above Irbil.

The route we drove from Khabur Gate was roughly 300 kilometers (186 miles) in length. That wasn't the shortest route, but it was for our purposes the most secure. The more direct route to the south skirted right along the Iraqi front lines and would have left us vulnerable to sudden missile attack or artillery fire.

The road north that we chose was considerably further from the Iraqi lines. It was still tortuous—a long, winding route on a narrow road through some very difficult terrain. We were a large, slow-moving target in an area riddled with Iraqi informants. We were also carrying large amounts of cash. The danger of ambush from bandits or from Iraqi agents was significant. I planned accordingly.

We now had six 10th Group personnel with us. We also had a number of additional CIA paramilitary officers. I distributed these individuals in teams throughout the convoy and lashed them up with our Kurdish escorts. All additional team personnel were armed, locked, and loaded as well. We crawled forward, averaging maybe 25 miles an hour and hoping to be at the base and inside the KDP compound by dark.

Shortly after our departure from Khabur I got a call on the satellite phone from Headquarters. It was Iraqi Ops. They had been informed that a source with whom they were in contact inside Iraq had brought a team of volunteers to a remote location in Kurdistan where they were standing by to be met, processed, and then moved out of Iraq to a secret training location. They were to form the heart of a new anti-Saddam commando force, the Scorpions, that would fight alongside the US Army during the invasion.

Headquarters was very excited. I was directed to send all of my 10th Group and paramilitary personnel to this location immediately to begin working on this project. The rest of us would then proceed on our own to the base location and set up operations there.

“I am in the middle of the mountains with a convoy that can be seen for miles and about which Iraqi intelligence must certainly know, and you want me to take all of the personnel on whom I am relying for security and

detach them to handle processing of individuals we have never met and about whom we know nothing?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to split my forces, send part of my command off into a situation which may be a trap or simply a waste of time, while leaving everyone else and all of our equipment at the mercy of anyone who chooses to attack this convoy? And you want me to do this despite the fact that you do not actually yet have any place to train these supposed recruits nor any real idea of when this invasion is going to take place?”

“Yes.”

“This entire plan for the war in the north is based on us being ready to send a huge mechanized US Army force into Iraq via Turkey. You have no Turkish approval as yet for that force to be inserted. None of their gear, tanks, trucks, aircraft, has left the United States. It has to move by ship. That means you are weeks if not months away from having this force in place to even begin its movement into Iraq, much less being in place to launch an invasion. But you still think the urgency of processing some unknown recruits for an as yet unspecified role in the invasion justifies risking the lives of my men?”

“Yes.”

“No. Ain’t happening. I won’t do it.”

I told Headquarters to forget it. I told them I was going to proceed to KDP territory, set up operations, and get Tim’s folks moving toward their base. I said that once I had done that, and once I knew a great deal more about these alleged recruits, their location, and what we were doing with them, I would organize a team to go and process them.

Headquarters backed down. The issue was resolved. The dynamic was not. I would be ordered multiple times thereafter to do something similarly ill-considered and refuse to comply. No doubt Headquarters contemplated on more than one occasion having me removed. My bet was that when all was said and done they would accept the occasional refusal to comply with orders in exchange for what I was able to accomplish.

Long after dark that evening we finally pulled into the compound at KDP headquarters and started unloading and setting up. It was a long

process, and it was several days before Tim's PUK team rolled out and headed south.

We were finally ready to operate. In the meantime, I went to see Masoud again.

I was brought to the same room in which I had previously met Barzani: dark wood, oversized furniture. Masoud was polite, but as before, direct.

"Why are you back?"

"To prepare for the invasion."

"How do I know you will finish the job? How do I know you will not simply make a lot of noise, anger Saddam, and then go away?"

It was an eminently fair question. We had a history of shaking our fists, making threats, and then walking away, leaving the Kurds to face the consequences. God knows how many thousands of Barzani's clan had already died at Saddam's hands. The chance he was taking by harboring us was enormous, his fate and that of the people living under his rule sealed if we failed.

In Masoud's place I think I would have demanded proof of our commitment before I ever even let us in the country. It was to his credit he had let us come this far.

I was in a tough spot. Washington had been making noise about an invasion for eight or nine months now but delivered on almost nothing. None of the promised military equipment had arrived, nor did we, in fact, have any way of delivering it. The Turks had made clear many times that their land and airspace was closed to any shipments of lethal aid to Kurdish forces.

I had brought cash, but that was a small thing compared to what the Kurds needed. The US Army was nowhere to be seen. There were no aircraft in the sky. There were no tanks on the ground. All Masoud had in front of him was a small group of CIA personnel and a grand total of six members of the 10th Special Forces Group.

We weren't going to get anywhere if we waited for Washington. I did the only thing I could do; I made it personal.

"I am here to finish Saddam," I said. "I will stay until Baghdad has fallen, Saddam is gone, and Iraq is free."

“How do I know?”

“Because I give you my word. I will not leave until the job is done. I did not come here to play games. I did not come here to waste time. Forget Washington. Forget anything else. This is my pledge to you: Saddam goes. Period.”

Masoud was listening. He wasn't convinced.

I was talking to a man who had lost countless members of his own clan to the hands of Saddam. Kurdistan and its painful history were his life. He wasn't interested in what the National Security Council was putting into PowerPoint presentations back home. He wanted brass tacks and something tangible. Talking about commitment was one thing; demonstrating commitment was another.

I told him the truth. I told him how long I had worked against Saddam. I told him how many assets, many of whom I had personally recruited, had been butchered by the Iraqi regime. I told him how we had brought dozens of Kurdish assets out of Iraq in 1996 one step ahead of execution by Iraqi intelligence.

I told him how during that exfiltration one of the women in the group had given birth, how it was my wife who had gotten her to the hospital. I told him how somewhere in the United States there was a little Kurdish girl named Gina, and her photograph, taken when she was only days old, was on a table in our home in the United States. I told him that my wife still had the Kurdish dress given to her by Gina's mother—one of the few meager possessions she had brought with her when she fled Iraq—to show her gratitude.

I told him I did not know what had been said by those sent before me, and that I could not speak for them, but that I had not come to the mountains of Kurdistan just to turn around, go home, and leave a monster in control in Baghdad. I told him I would not leave until the deed was finally done, the nightmare was ended, and Saddam was gone.

Masoud paused and pondered my words. Then he told me he accepted them, that he had been waiting a long time for someone to come and cut through the vague assurances and tell him plainly that we were going to war and that Saddam's days were numbered. He promised me the full support of

the KDP and assured me that we would have anything and everything we needed.

I thanked him and returned to our base house. We had turned an important corner. The KDP was all in. Now all I needed to do was to make sure Washington delivered on its end.

A week or so later I prepared to send a team of personnel to process the recruits who had been such a hot priority for Headquarters the day we entered country. The day before the team was to launch, one of its members, Doc, came to see me. Doc had been in Afghanistan prior to deploying with us, and he had been at Mazar-e-Sharif the day CIA officer Mike Spann was killed in the Taliban prisoner riot in 2001. Doc was worried about detaching a small team and sending them off to process a large number of individuals about whom we knew so little.

I listened to Doc, took on board his points, and then met with the whole team. I explained to them that the first rule was that we brought everyone home alive. I told them that would never change, and that we would never compromise on that principle. I then told them explicitly that their safety was paramount and that they should treat all the individuals with whom they were going to meet as hostile until proven otherwise.

Maybe this group of people with whom we were to meet was composed of Iraqi patriots dedicated to the removal of Saddam. Maybe it was filled with agents being run against us by Iraqi intelligence. We did not know. We weren't going to take any chances.

Doc and the rest of the team deployed, processed the recruits, and moved them out of country. They employed rigorous security procedures, and there were no incidents. The individuals in question proved to be cowards and fabricators who thought volunteering to work with us was a ticket to the promised land. During their training outside Iraq there were a number of incidents of criminal behavior by recruits being trained, and none of them was ever judged capable of being brought back in country. They accomplished nothing.

CHAPTER 9

Base Life, Drills, and Plans for Escape

I noted earlier that CIA bases and stations are all unique. There is no standard table of organization. They are all custom built according to the area where they are located and the missions for which they are assigned. It was now my task to take the rough outline of an organizational structure I had drawn up at Headquarters so many months earlier and turn it into physical reality in the mountains of Kurdistan.

Other than my experience and what I had roughed out with the help of other team members before entering country, there was no template. We had no experience as an organization at the time, with the creation of operational bases of this type, in remote areas of this kind. I had zero guidance from Headquarters. In other words, we were winging it.

What we established, with some degree of refinement and evolution over time, was a flat, informal operational unit with what were simultaneously very clear, very well-defined standard operating procedures and lines of responsibility. We minimized process and confusion and maximized results simultaneously.

I worked out of a small office in the main base building. Hans shared the same space at a separate desk. We reviewed all incoming traffic from Headquarters, and we released all outgoing messages to DC. As time went by I relied more and more on Hans and delegated increasingly large portions of the authority to release message traffic to him. He knew what I absolutely had to see and review and kept me from drowning in the clutter. I was able to focus on the big picture and avoid being buried in minutiae.

We set up an ops branch, which included all the case officers who handled assets and ran operations. They worked out of a common space down the hall from Hans and me in the main base house. There were at first a handful of them in country. By the time Saddam fell their numbers had tripled.

No case officer left the base to meet with an asset without talking to Hans and me first. We knew every operational act, when it was happening, where it was happening, and how it would be performed. Sometimes the conversations we had with officers going out the door to meet sources we recruited were a matter of minutes in length. If we were confident that things were wired tight we agreed on the op and let people move. We weren't looking to micromanage things; we were looking to make sure everyone came home in one piece.

Sometimes the conversations Hans and I had were much longer. Sometimes we turned off ops entirely. We weren't looking for perfect; we were looking for a consistent standard of excellence.

Early on we began to set in place clear standards related to security and operating in what was by any definition a high-risk environment. As a baseline everyone was armed all of the time. That meant everyone, no matter where they were, unless in bed sleeping, was wearing a sidearm, and that weapon was loaded. In bed that sidearm was under our pillow or on the floor or nightstand next to us. The Kurds were maintaining security outside our facility, but we were never going to be in the mode of trusting our lives exclusively to someone else.

Every officer had a long gun as well, usually an M-4. That weapon accompanied the officer everywhere. If we were sitting in front of a computer typing a report to Headquarters that rifle was leaning against the wall next to us with a full magazine in it. When and if we were betrayed we were going to be ready to go into action in our own defense right away.

This focus on security extended to asset meetings. We were a matter of miles from 150,000 Iraqi troops, and Kurdistan was awash in sources working for Iraqi intelligence and Ansar. Every asset we met was a potential double agent. Every meeting was a potential ambush.

Nobody moved alone. No meetings were made in single vehicles. Backup was always standing by, and a variety of procedures I won't detail here were employed to keep those who might wish us harm from being able to set upon us and capture or kill our officers.

All this was good. Making officers brief us before they hit the street was good as well. But it wasn't enough.

The stakes were too high and the game too real to simply trust that standards were being met. We needed a way to inspect how things were really happening.

Hans and I started taking turns riding along with teams when they rolled out to meet sources we recruited. We didn't go on every meet, and when we did we didn't try to interfere with the conduct of an operation unless absolutely necessary, but we very deliberately created an environment in which officers knew that at any time without notice either the chief or his deputy might simply jump in and ride along as observers on an op.

It worked. Most of the time what we saw was work being done by the numbers exactly as it should have been. When we saw something else, our presence alone was enough to drive home the point that the work was substandard and to ensure quick changes were made.

One evening a military case officer assigned to our team, whom I will call Seamus, briefed Hans and me on an op he was running that evening. It was fairly straightforward. He and several other officers, traveling in two vehicles, were going to pick up an Iraqi source and debrief him on Iraqi military deployments on the other side of the Green Line.

Hans and I listened to the brief and chopped on the op. Then I told Seamus I was going to ride along in the car following his. Five minutes later we rolled out of the compound.

The asset was supposed to be picked up, according to Seamus, on a long, deserted stretch of roadway north of Irbil. We rolled south from our base and made the turn onto the designated street. It was jammed. On the day of the week in question there was a night market in this area. There were literally hundreds if not thousands of people swarming around us. The sides of the road were lined with cars, buses, merchants' carts, and animals.

The area had been chosen by Seamus so as to make it virtually impossible for an adversary to set up and target our team. Under the current conditions, however, it was a nightmare. A kill team sent by Iraqi intelligence or Ansar could be anywhere, and we would have no way of identifying them. Any of the hundreds of vehicles around us could be jammed with explosives.

We crawled forward through the chaos. Eventually out of the mass of humanity the asset materialized and climbed into Seamus's vehicle. We crawled forward for what seemed like another eternity. Finally we broke free of the crowds and got clear of the area. Seamus completed his debrief, and we dropped off the source.

Back at the compound when the op was done we dismounted from the vehicles. Seamus walked over to me without hesitation.

"That was a goat fuck," he said.

"No shit," I replied.

"I didn't know there was a street market there on this day of the week. I should have known."

"Yep," I responded. "That's your job."

"We could have gotten killed tonight."

"By all rights we should all be dead right now," I replied.

"Won't happen again," said Seamus.

"I know," I said. I turned and walked away. Seamus was a good man. He had shown his ass to the boss and knew very well he could have been responsible for a bloodbath. I was betting he was going to be lying awake all night kicking himself and that he would never go back on the street without making sure his shit was wired very, very tight.

I was right. His ops were impeccable from that day on, and before the mission was done he would make one of the most valuable contributions of anyone to our success in country.

Making sure everyone was armed at all times was a good, common-sense measure. We were on our own. There were no other Americans in country, nor was there any emergency force that was coming to our rescue if things went south. Still, being prepared to take care of ourselves would require a lot more than that.

We began to craft procedures based on the possibility that we would have to bug out in a hurry. Chemical weapons had always been used extensively by Iraqi forces against the Kurds. We were in range of Iraqi surface-to-surface missile units, and therefore had to face the very real possibility that anytime he wanted, Saddam could fire missiles carrying chemical weapons at our position.

We also knew all too well exactly what the situation was on the Green Line, a short distance away south of Irbil. I had been there multiple times in the company of peshmerga (Kurdish fighters) commanders. The terrain in that area was tabletop flat. The Iraqis had massed mechanized forces on their side of the line. The Kurdish peshmerga opposing them were armed with AK-47s, machineguns, and RPG-7s (rocket-propelled grenades). In a pitched fight it would be no contest.

The commander of the Kurdish forces around Irbil had told me to my face exactly what the plan was if the Iraqi Army suddenly surged across the Green Line: run like hell. The Kurds would retreat into the mountains and bleed the Iraqi Army there. Irbil would be overrun, and we would suddenly find ourselves having to move quickly to stay one step ahead of Saddam's killing machine.

That meant we needed to be ready to go on a moment's notice. With the help of a lot of input from the 10th Group guys, particularly the pilot team leader called Happy, we adopted a series of rules. Wherever base personnel went, in addition to sidearms and long guns, they would carry with them rucksacks with the bare essentials necessary to leave directly for a rally point without having to return to base. That became law.

The rule applied to everyone. If I left the base to go down the road to meet with Masoud or with his son, Masrur, head of the intelligence service, I was wearing my sidearm on my hip. My long gun went with me in the vehicle I traveled in, although I did not carry it into the meeting. Also in the vehicle with me went my ruck with my "bug-out" (survival) gear. There were no exceptions.

Each team member also packed a larger backpack with gear for an extended stay away from base. This included a sleeping bag, a sleeping pad, etc. These backpacks, labeled with each officer's nickname, were lined up

along the walls in the main base house. If we as a base were told to evacuate, this is all we would take. There would be no time wasted on packing and searching for individual items.

Putting in place these procedures was fine, as far as it went. We needed, however, a plan for moving the base as a whole and then we needed to make sure it worked and that we had it down. We drew up procedures.

We delineated exactly what would and would not move with us in the event of a true emergency. We established what we would take and what we would destroy. We worked out where vehicles would be staged, who would ride in which vehicle, and a baseline for what we thought was a safe amount of time to take in the event we were receiving incoming fire.

Then we exercised it. We woke people up in the middle of the night, advised them we were conducting a drill, and told them to break down all essential gear, load the vehicles, simulate destruction of all classified materials, and depart the compound. Once the vehicles were loaded we did not then actually leave the compound—that would have compromised security—but we rolled the entire convoy several times around the circular drive surrounding our base house while I went through the interior with Hans and Happy and checked to see what we had missed.

Then we added the possibility of chemical attack. We conducted no-notice drills in the wee hours of the morning, informed base personnel that for the purposes of this drill we were simulating the use of nerve gas, and then conducted an evacuation of the base with everyone wearing the chemical masks with which they had been provided. Anybody who has ever spent any time wearing a gas mask will know that having it on reduces your productivity and speed of movement dramatically.

We got to the point where we could go from a cold start to having all personnel and all essential gear out of the base and moving in less than 25 minutes. Then we started working on where we were going to go.

Getting off the “x” was obviously key. That didn’t answer the question as to what we were going to do next. Our job wasn’t to run away if things got rough; it was to survive and continue to function.

We began to conceptualize the establishment of an alternate location for the base. Ultimately, it took many months to take this from being an idea to

a reality, but eventually, roughly 30 miles north of our base, we established a physical location to which we could displace. It was a former motel and restaurant complex, built long ago when some enterprising Kurdish business dreamed of more peaceful times and families coming from the south to enjoy the beauty of the mountains.

We prepositioned supplies at this location, bought an entire gasoline tanker full of fuel in case, when the balloon went up, we found ourselves unable to get gas for our vehicles, and laid out what space would be utilized for ops, where commo would go, and where people would sleep. Eventually, in combination with drills, we reached the point where we had the realistic capability to evacuate our base near Irbil, displace, and be back up and running flat out later the same day.

All that assumed we would be staying in country. That was certainly the plan no matter what. I needed to face the fact, however, that as of fall 2002 there was still no sign of any of the support Washington had been talking about since the beginning of the year. Nothing at all had changed in that regard. There were now several dozen CIA personnel in two bases in Northern Iraq. No one else had showed, and as of that time nobody else was on the way.

My people were 300 kilometers from Khabur Gate, where we had entered Kurdistan. We had no aircraft or air support. On the roads in Kurdistan, if everything went to hell it would take us five to six hours minimum to cover that distance.

If Saddam decided to preempt an American invasion by moving north he could do so from a standing start. His army was just south of Dahuk near the Turkish–Iraqi border. He could very well be at Khabur Gate and have cut off our escape route in a fraction of the time it would take us to move. In that case, we would be sealed in with no plan for escape.

Running east in such an eventuality would be suicide. That would take us deeper into Kurdistan and closer to Iran. Going south was also not an option. Two Iraqi Army corps and 150,000 men blocked that path.

That left due north, straight over the mountains, through the heart of Kurdistan to the border with Turkey. It was exactly the option Xenophon had ultimately been forced to select in order to save himself and his men. I

consoled myself with the thought that whereas Xenophon had had to fight the Kurds the entire way to the Black Sea, we would have them on our side.

That did not make the idea easy to implement. The further north you go in Kurdistan the more remote it becomes. In short order you are in a region of small villages, dirt roads, and rugged mountain ranges. If we were really in trouble and there was no option but to run, we would chance it, but it would not be easy.

Before we left Headquarters I had paid a visit to an old friend who was an analyst in a section that focused on Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). He was sitting at his desk in a back office with piles of files, maps, and papers surrounding him. By the time I had made the visit I had more than an inkling as to how this whole show was going to unfold. We were going to be sent way out on a very precarious branch, and it was anybody's guess whether anyone was going to help us in a pinch.

I told my old buddy that I needed to know where the Turkish border control garrisons were along the far eastern border with Kurdistan. I didn't ask because I wanted to avoid them; I asked because, when it all went to hell, I wanted to make for one of them.

For a while my friend burrowed into a pile of papers on a long table; eventually he bobbed to the surface with what looked like a Turkish Army map. Clearly marked on it were all of the Turkish border outposts in the area in question. I spent a few minutes reviewing the map, identified a post in the vicinity of Yüsekova, Turkey, that seemed to be in roughly the right place, noted its coordinates, and thanked my colleague for his time.

Once we were in country, I put the 10th Group's personnel, who spent a lot of their time working route reconnaissance-type assignments for the US military, to scouting an escape route and crafting a last-ditch plan for us to implement if we had no choice but to run. Their end point was the border post I had selected, in the blind, based on the information I had acquired at Headquarters. They spent months deep in the heart of Kurdistan in challenging terrain, dodging minefields and bumping over virtually nonexistent roads, but they put together the plan, including the technical details of how we were going to construct rope bridges and cross critical waterways.

In the end, of course, if we had been forced to put this plan into action, crossing some of the roughest mountains on Earth would have still left us having to negotiate that one last obstacle—Turkish border defenses. I had picked our end point off a map. That didn't translate to having coordinated anything with Turkish authorities.

Along the far eastern border between Turkey and Kurdistan smuggling was endemic. There were also substantial numbers of PKK guerillas in this area, Kurdish rebels fighting to free the Kurdish areas of Turkey from Turkish rule. For all these reasons, as well as what we assumed would be an almost total lack of cooperation from Ankara if we bugged out in a hurry, it was very possible that we could cross the mountains, escape Saddam's clutches, and get shot by our own erstwhile NATO allies.

We never formulated a particularly solid plan for how to avoid this, other than to hope people in Ankara would succeed in somehow getting the Turks to help us, and that word would then get from Ankara to a very remote gendarme border post in time to stop us being mistaken for smugglers or PKK fighters and gunned down.

In the event that coordination didn't happen we were down to this. I had an American flag with me that I had brought in country. I spoke Turkish. If and when we reached the border and no one had been told to expect us I would go across first, wrapped in the flag, announcing myself as loudly as I could in Turkish and hoping we met somebody who would listen.

In the end we never had to put our *in extremis* escape plan into effect. Before the US Army ever showed up, however, there would be more than a few times when it would seem all too real a possibility that we might be left to fend for ourselves.



Kurdish woman carrying water to her home, fall 2002.



Kurdish village in KDP territory.



Kurdistan.



CIA teams scouting a possible exfiltration route.

CHAPTER 10

Recruiting Sources—Getting Tough

Having a base up and running and procedures taking shape was essential. We weren't eight guys anymore, and we weren't sure how long we would be in country. We needed structure.

We hadn't come to Kurdistan to homestead, however; we had come to prepare for war. That meant collecting intelligence, and it meant trying to make contacts with senior Iraqi military and government personnel and convincing them to come over to our side. If there was an option for Saddam to go in a coup rather than us having to depose him by force, we definitely wanted to play that card.

Early on my primary KDP contact became Masrur Barzani, Masoud's son and the head of the KDP intelligence service. Masrur was and is a personable, well-spoken man with excellent English skills. He went to college in the United States, and he has a very good understanding of Americans and their culture.

He is also a Barzani, a senior member of a clan that has faced more threats to its existence than most. You do not stay alive in the mountains of Kurdistan by thinking warm thoughts and preaching peace, love, and brotherhood. You stay alive through often ruthless actions.

Sometime in summer 2002 a number of distant relatives of Masrur were captured by Ansar al-Islam fighters, taken to Ansar territory, and held hostage. Ansar sent word to Masrur that he would either have to pay the ransom demanded or he would never see these members of the Barzani clan again.

Within 48 hours Masrur identified several dozen individuals living in KDP territory who were relatives of senior Ansar officials. They were all brought up onto the ridge overlooking Irbil and held in custody at Masrur's direction. Word was then sent to Ansar.

The message was clear: we will not pay any ransom; we will not negotiate; if a Barzani is harmed, you will get your people back in pieces.

All of the KDP hostages were released immediately. There was no ambiguity in the message sent to Ansar. None of the people Masrur had arrested were ever harmed. They were all released, having experienced nothing more than a few days' confinement. Ansar understood implicitly, however, that the ending to the story would have been dramatically different had they not dropped their demands and complied with Masrur's instructions.

Masrur and I did not always get along famously, which had nothing to do with personalities. It was a product of our positions and factors outside our control. Masrur was often hedging his bets, focused on protecting his people against the possibility that we would leave them high and dry, again. I had no choice but to push him as hard as I could even when I sympathized with his doubts about our commitment.

As soon as we were settled into our new base, while we were still getting procedures in place and sorting out bug-out procedures, I sat down with Masrur and talked about the scope of CIA's activities in Kurdistan. Yes, we would exchange information and work jointly with KDP intelligence on a wide range of operations. We would also run our own independent operations, recruit our own sources, and move around the region as we saw fit, when we saw fit.

We were, for all intents and purposes, in an independent nation. The KDP government in our area operated as what amounted to a sovereign state. Telling the son of the ruler of that state that I would go where I wanted, when I wanted, and recruit whomever I wanted as a source was in that context unprecedented.

It was also necessary. I did not have time to waste. I was not going to allow our perception of the battlefield to be limited to what the Kurds decided to share with us. I was not going to give the Kurds complete control

over all our efforts to coopt Iraqi leaders. We were taking down Saddam Hussein, one of the most powerful and ruthless rulers in Middle Eastern history, and that was not going to happen using half measures.

To his credit Masrur agreed, and throughout our deployment stayed out of our way when we were moving independently. Our coordination with KDP remained strong, and we cooperated seamlessly on most occasions. The spirit of cooperation was, if anything, even stronger with working-level KDP intel personnel with whom we spent long hours on the street and in remote areas.

We began to recruit sources within the ranks of the Iraqi military and government agencies. They were on the other side of a militarized border. But we weren't going to sneak into Iraqi territory to approach them, which left some obvious challenges to be surmounted.

We got creative.

Along the Green Line the Iraqi Army and Kurdish forces were face to face and armed to the teeth. This was still the Middle East, however. People and goods crossed the Green Line all the time. Pathways for smuggling can also become pathways for espionage.

Let's talk about rugs. Shortly after returning to Kurdistan I received as a gift a rug with a picture of Saddam Hussein woven into it. It seemed a fitting gift. I put it on the floor of my office and made a show of walking on Saddam's face in front of the Kurds, who found the sign of open disrespect somehow both amusing and encouraging.

Other guys in the base were interested in the rug and wanted more if they could be found. The Kurds obliged, bringing not just more rugs with the same image but others that were slight variations. All of these were brought across the Green Line from Iraqi-controlled territory, and we paid for them as they were brought to us.

Months later, when the latest batch of such rugs was being delivered to the base house, I walked out of my office, admired the new acquisitions, and made a comment to the effect that it never ceased to amaze me how many Saddam rugs there were in existence.

"They are making them new for you," was the response from the KDP intel officer who had brought the rugs.

“Say what?”

“Yes, we order them. They make them. Nobody in Iraq wants a rug with a picture of Saddam on it except Americans.”

We were on the brink of war with an adversary that had killed Kurds by the hundreds of thousands in the most brutal fashion imaginable, but if there was money to be made all things were possible.

In time, we would bring much more than rugs across that border. When Headquarters could not get us vehicles because of Turkish obstructionism, we purchased, via Kurdish middlemen, Toyota Land Cruisers from owners inside Saddam’s Iraq and had them smuggled across to us. When we ran short on Thuraya satellite phones to issue to assets, via Kurdish contacts, we bought the phones in the Persian Gulf and smuggled them from there to our hideout in the mountains, for our use.

In the meantime, we began leveraging the porous nature of the border to reach out to Iraqis in the south. This was often a long, multi-stage process. We would meet with someone who crossed the Green line regularly, usually with the assistance of Kurdish intelligence. We would get this middleman on board to assist us in making contact with individuals on the other side of the line who might help us. Then we would attempt to secure that person’s assistance in making an approach to the ultimate target, in most cases an Iraqi military officer or a government official.

Sometimes, after many meetings, we would be able to bring the target across the Green Line for brief periods of time, meet him directly, and then put him back in place undetected. In other cases, we would never meet the man who was reporting to us from inside. We would have to handle all the aspects of the case remotely and “fly it by wires,” as it were.

The Middle East lives and breathes these kinds of daisy-chain conspiracies. They are relatively easy to stand up. They are also easy to tear down. There is typically some kind of preexisting linkage amongst all the conspirators. They are, for instance, all members of the same clan, or they all come from the same village. That makes them trust each other. It also means that if one of them slips up, counterintelligence professionals know exactly where to start looking for the rest of the network.

By the time we entered Iraq I had worked against Saddam's murderous intelligence services for years. Over that period we had lost a lot of assets, many of them killed in ways too hideous to describe. If Saddam thought he had a problem in a particular section of an agency, he did not play games. There was no presumption of innocence. Everyone in that section would be tortured until he found the spy, and if he could not find the spy, everyone might just be killed.

To recruit and handle sources in this environment depended on the highest standards of tradecraft. It also depended on us being hard and ruthless enough in our own right to get the job done. Being known as nice guys was not going to win the war.

Many of the officers we had in base had never operated in this kind of environment. They had worked primarily traditional "cocktail" circuit sources, where the target was wine, dine, and convince to be a source only after having met Momma and the kids. This was something very different.

Many of these officers were also very young. If they had finished a full tour somewhere else before they were sent to Iraq they were lucky. The most seasoned among them might have recruited a few low-level sources in a permissive environment. We were now on a short clock in a very dangerous environment and what we needed were agents inside the heart of one of the world's most violent and dangerous regimes.

As we pushed ahead with our recruitment of sources, and the drumbeat internationally continued to sound that war was looming, we began to see a first, tentative trickle of Iraqis coming across the Green Line and seeking to defect. They weren't sure what was going to happen, but they were worried enough that they thought it might be time to get out while the getting was good.

In the first wave of such individuals were several senior Iraqi intelligence officers and their families. They arrived as a group, numbering almost 20 persons, and were housed at our request in what had been a small hotel down the road. By the time we were done in Kurdistan we would have several such locations, effectively way stations for defectors, for which we footed the bill, all operating within a few miles of our base.

The officer who met with these intelligence officers first was nicknamed “Spock” due to his affinity for *Star Trek* films. Spock was a very good officer and exceptionally bright. He had no background in this kind of work and was visibly uncomfortable with it.

Spock met with the Iraqi officers in question. They were all mid-level members of an internal security service. They had spent their careers raping, torturing, and abusing the people of Iraq. Rather than take their chances on what would happen if Saddam fell, they were looking to make a deal and start over.

They would tell us everything. They would give us chapter and verse on Saddam’s intelligence apparatus and spill their guts on every nasty secret they knew. In exchange they wanted one thing: relocation inside the United States.

In the context of Iraqi operations, these guys were a gold mine. What they knew about the inner workings of Saddam’s Iraq and his security services would have transformed our understanding of that regime overnight. There was only one problem: the price was too high.

I had Hans talk to Spock and tell him that he needed to twist some arms. I wasn’t handing a bunch of Saddam’s killers a ticket to the States under any circumstances, and I wasn’t inclined to do much of anything else for them if they didn’t start talking first. This wasn’t a travel agency for Iraqi thugs who had suddenly decided they needed a change of scenery.

I also told Hans to make clear to Spock that a thorough debriefing was not my idea of a good end state no matter what the price. Finding out what Saddam had been up to last week was nice. But I wanted to know what he was going to do next week. I wanted these guys back inside.

Hans met with Spock. Spock seemed to be conflicted. If we didn’t help the defectors, the Kurds would likely kill them. He seemed to think that put us in a position of having to focus on keeping them alive.

Spock was also balking at pushing the Iraqis to return to their positions in Baghdad. He believed that it was almost certain their absence would have been noted by their superiors and that they would be tortured and executed. Perhaps most troubling, Spock seemed to be having an impact on the other

ops officers in the base, causing them to ask questions about how we were going to handle situations like this.

I called a meeting of the case officers, at this point fewer than a dozen men. We all went into one room at the base and I shut the door. I told them I wanted to talk about operations and how we were going to handle defectors coming north and seeking asylum. I gave Spock the chance to talk first.

Spock stood up and spoke. It was clear to me that the problem here was more one of emotion than of facts and principle. For the first time in his career, Spock was being asked to make decisions that could get people killed. He was finding it hard to handle. He didn't want the blood of these defectors on his hands if this went sideways.

I let Spock speak. Some of the other case officers started to echo his concerns. That was enough. I cut them off. I stood up. I told them all that I valued their opinions. I told them I did not pretend to have all the answers.

I then told them that there were a few things I did know for sure: that the defectors we had on hand right now were soaked in the blood of the Iraqi people, and that there was no way in hell they were being resettled in the United States; that right now, in fact, I was not going to raise a hand to help them in any way at all—if they wanted my help they were going to earn it, the hard way; that my price was this: they were going to tell us everything they knew and then they were going back across the Green Line, returning to their positions working for Saddam and reporting to us from inside; and that, if they did this, and they were very, very productive, they would be paid, and set free. If they refused, we would wash our hands of them, and they could try their luck with the Kurds.

When I was done talking the room was silent. Hans was staring at his feet. I knew he thought I had been too harsh. I believe there are times when harsh is called for and that this was one of them. We were going to war. It was time to start acting like it.

I added a few things. I told the assembled group that this was the way it was going to be for the duration, that there were going to be a lot more such defectors, and that they would all be treated the same. I said that I did not give a damn about the lives of Iraqi torturers and that my concern was for the lives of the American soldiers who were going to die before this was all

over. I closed by adding that anybody who was not fully onboard should let me know, and I would get them on the next vehicle out of country.

I walked out of my room and back to my office and went to work.

Nobody asked to go home. Spock met with the Iraqi defectors the next day. In a masterful piece of work he convinced every one of them to cooperate. We debriefed them intensely and put them back across the Green Line 48 hours later. They worked in place for the duration of the deployment and produced huge quantities of valuable intelligence.

Spock became maybe the single most valuable case officer in the base. Along the way he recruited native forces, organized attacks on Iraqi railroads, and was one of the first guys across the Green Line when Mosul fell. I put him in for a richly deserved Intelligence Star when we got home and had the honor later of attending the ceremony at Headquarters where it was awarded.

We were a small group of case officers working seven days a week and usually long into the night. I had a lot of work to do managing the base and handling message traffic. I knew it was key as well, however, that I carry my share of the load of recruiting and running sources. I was the most senior officer in the base, and I had by this point in my career more experience with operations in this area against this target than anyone else. We could not afford to have me sitting on the bench or nursing a cup of coffee in the compound.

I also knew that in a small group setting like this it was imperative that the “boss” not appear to be asking anything of anyone that he was not willing to do himself. Once we were up and running in the fall of 2002 we were making three or four asset meets a day, every day of the week. All of those were what would be considered “high risk” meetings, ones where the potential downside included getting everyone involved killed.

If I was going to push people to move at this pace and to take risks of this magnitude I needed to put my ass on the line as well. Doing ride-alongs periodically helped, but I also needed to be running my own ops and setting the example.

I might be the most experienced officer in the base, but that did not mean I was immune from the challenges facing everyone else. We were

working a tough target.

Late in fall 2002, a young Iraqi man came to us in the north. By this point he was one of dozens coming every week. He said he wanted to contact the Americans and that he was representing an Iraqi officer involved with the air defenses for a key Iraqi city.

I went to meet the young man, whom we will call Ali. After some initial pleasantries, Ali identified the Iraqi officer as his uncle and gave me his name.

Ali told me his uncle wanted to work for us, and that he wanted to know if we were interested. I assured Ali that we were and then asked what his uncle wanted in exchange. Ali indicated that he did not know but that he would return to Iraqi-controlled territory, meet with his uncle, and find out. A follow-on meeting with Ali was set for a week thereafter.

Ali returned as scheduled and advised me that his uncle wanted money, a very large amount of money. I told Ali the cost was too high and quoted him a much lesser amount. Ali went away to meet his uncle again.

The third time we met Ali advised that his uncle was very angry and insulted. He said his uncle believed we were not serious about working with him. He said his uncle was not willing to help us in any fashion unless we paid him the full amount he had originally demanded.

Ali's uncle was a big fish. Having a guy like that working for us on the inside and handing us chapter and verse on Iraqi air defenses could save a lot of American lives and go a long way to ensuring the success of any bombing campaign. In the scheme of things what the uncle wanted in payment was inconsequential. The Pentagon probably spent more than that on coffee and donuts every week.

It didn't matter. When you start letting people dictate terms to you, then you are done. Operations are all about control, and that control must always lie with the handling officer. Period.

I told Ali I wasn't going to agree to his uncle's demands. In fact, I told him I was now willing to pay even less money than before. I then directed Ali to take a message to his uncle personally from me.

I knew where his uncle worked. I knew exactly where his office was. I told Ali that if his uncle did not stop playing games I was going to make

sure that the very first smart bomb we dropped when the war started had the exact coordinates of his uncle's office programmed into it. That bomb was going to go straight through the roof of the building, land directly on his desk, and detonate. The building would be destroyed and there would not be a piece of Ali's uncle left to be found that was bigger than my thumbnail.

I held up my thumb for emphasis.

Ali broke into tears. He sobbed and begged me not to kill his uncle. He promised he could fix everything. He went away and returned in a matter of days with his uncle's agreement to work with us and, just for emphasis, a bunch of classified documents stuffed into his pants.

Needless to say, I had no idea where the building was where Ali's uncle worked—not a clue.

Threatening Ali's uncle did not bother me in the least. He was a part of an evil, bloody regime, and he deserved whatever he got. Years of dealing with his kind had trained me to push back and demand respect. Putting your arm around your source, calling him brother, and treating him like your buddy is fine when called for. At the end of the day, if he doesn't know that you will finish him without hesitation if he crosses you, you are living on borrowed time.

Putting sources in place across Iraq was fine, but we needed a way to talk to them. Sometimes we did that via intermediaries, as I indicated before. Using an intermediary, or courier, is not a perfect solution, however. In addition to being another guy who can get wrapped up, a courier can often garble the message he is carrying.

Instructions to an asset get confused. Intelligence coming back gets distorted. The ability to ask follow-up questions is limited, and the time lag, often weeks, means what intelligence you are getting is dated before you have it.

Bringing your source out of hostile territory to be met is no better. You can't smuggle a senior officer in a high-level position out of Iraqi territory into Kurdistan and then put him back in place too many times before you get caught and your boy wakes up dead.

A solution is covert communications, but handing sensitive, proprietary gear to guys you have met once or twice and about whom you know very

little is not a realistic option. There is too much danger of the gear—not to mention the mission—being compromised.

In the case of Iraq the answer was commercial satellite phones, most commonly “Thurayas”. We handed them out like hot cakes. I remember seeing a *Saturday Night Live* skit after the war was over, which depicted Saddam and his key generals sitting in a bunker having a meeting. Every few seconds the discussion was interrupted as one after another of the participants took a satellite phone call from his CIA handler.

It was almost that bad. We flooded Iraq with satellite phones, giving us real-time communications from Kurdistan with sources across the length and breadth of Iraq.

Sometimes, predictably enough, those phones were not put to the best possible use. It was routine, for example, for us to discover that one of our agents was using his phone, contrary to all guidance, to call relatives in Detroit more often than he was to call us. Or sometimes our assets were sloppy and got caught by Iraqi security with a phone for which they had no possible legitimate use. That ended badly for them.

When the invasion finally took place, one of our assets in southern Iraq decided, for some unknown reason, that it was his job to put us on the phone with every American soldier invading from Kuwait. In the course of a few hours he climbed onto a succession of American military vehicles, including an M-1 Abrams tank, and handed his phone to some startled GI who had no earthly idea to whom he was speaking or why.

Our boy’s case officer finally got him to understand that we knew where the US Army was and to go back to collecting on Iraqi forces.

Before we departed Headquarters to enter Iraq the first time, we had received a large number of briefings from analysts on the status of Iraqi military forces, what we thought we knew about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs, and the internal politics of the Iraqi inner circle around Saddam. It was the typical stuff—lots of nuanced, calculated assessments filled with caveats like “We assess with medium confidence.”

I had a lot to do getting ready to deploy, and receiving analytical briefings wasn’t necessarily at the top of my list. I remember coming out of

all of the briefings, however, wondering what kind of access we really had and where this intel was coming from.

Those questions were never really answered, at least not in a satisfactory way. All the reporting seemed to be coming from somebody else's assets or from folks several steps removed from the problem. Once we got in country and started focusing on Iraq and not Ansar, it became painfully clear why. We didn't have anything like the sources we needed. In fact, during our entire time in country we never picked up contact with a single preexisting source.

We were starting from scratch. Every source we met we recruited ourselves, on the fly with limited resources and no clear idea of when or whether we were really going to invade. We were pushing like hell, but back home the logjam remained. We couldn't change that. All we could do was keep pushing ahead.

Under the circumstances, the often junior and inexperienced officers Headquarters sent us performed miracles. They worked ungodly hours, up at dawn, pushing hard all day and banging intel reports out to the wee hours. Then they did it again and again and again, often seven days a week without any real idea of when the invasion, if it happened at all, would actually occur.

Some of the officers were Near East Division bodies with Arabic skills and some kind of background regarding where they were and who the enemy was. As time went by and we continued to add personnel to the base, these guys became less and less common. We began to get whomever Iraqi Ops could get their hands on.

Late in the fall we had a new officer, Winston, come in from the border on a supply run. He was straight out of basic tradecraft training. He spoke no Arabic. He was ethnic Vietnamese, spoke native Chinese and Vietnamese, and had grown up in Hong Kong.

I could have dropped this guy on the street in half of East Asia, and he would have disappeared. He knew every custom, every nuance; he was perfect. Putting him in Iraq, however, made as much sense as sending him to the dark side of the moon.

The day after Winston arrived I took him with me to drive down to a house we had set up with the Kurds to use as a debriefing center and help me with the debriefing of an Iraqi military officer who had just defected. I figured it would give me a chance to break Winston in and get a feel for how he was going to fit in.

Winston and I walked outside the base house and got into a beat-up old Toyota sedan we had purchased from the Kurds a little while before. As time went by and our ops expanded, we not only had to acquire more and more cars, we had to diversify our profile and work hard on blending in. I tossed the keys to Winston and told him to drive.

Winston took the keys, climbed in the car, and fired it up. We started for the house. The car we were in was a manual. It was clear in about five seconds Winston had never driven a stick.

We stalled a few times. I said nothing; neither did Winston. We made it, after a very rough few minutes, to the house and got out. Winston started to hand the keys to me. I told him to keep them.

Winston and I spent several hours working the Iraqi military officer over regarding the status of the troops at his installation, his knowledge of Iraqi war plans, and all the usual stuff. Winston was understandably quiet at first, but as the time went by he jumped in more frequently. His questions weren't brilliant, but they were well formed and on point, and he was clear, precise.

We left the house where the debriefing took place and drove back to base. By the time we had covered the few miles Winston had effectively mastered the use of the clutch. At base Winston handed me back the keys to the car.

"I never drove a stick before," said Winston.

"You do now," I said.

Winston was a good representative sample of the kind of officers we received. With very few exceptions, despite their lack of experience, they came to play. They hadn't come to Iraq to screw off or complain. They had come to Iraq to get the job done.

By the time the invasion came in spring 2003 we had recruited or debriefed literally hundreds of individuals. The intelligence reports we sent

home numbered in the thousands. On the brink of the air war we received feedback from Headquarters from a meeting with the Department of Defense concerning our intelligence posture. Per DOD almost 90 percent of their intelligence requirements had been answered by our human intelligence reporting from the field, and they had never gone into a combat operation with anything like the degree of knowledge of the enemy we had provided.

The picture when it came to weapons of mass destruction was very different.



Base personnel preparing to depart for a source meeting.

CHAPTER 11

Hunting WMD

Most people looking back on the invasion of Iraq seem to be under the impression that CIA was directed to gather intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), report back to the White House that they had found them, and then the White House made a decision to invade Iraq. That is the basis on which most questions are directed at me to this day. That's all wrong.

From day one my conversations with Iraqi Ops groups about the invasion contained almost no reference to Iraqi WMD. While collecting on Iraqi WMD programs was certainly one of the things on my very long list of operational requirements, it was never really at the top of the list or particularly emphasized. We were going to war to rid the Middle East of a tyrant and a well-established enemy of the United States and its allies. Period. Knowing what the status of his WMD programs was would be important, but it was not a necessary preface to the decision to invade.

Only later, in winter 2002, did we even understand in the field that the White House was going to justify this war on the basis that it was necessary to preempt some sort of use of WMD by Saddam. That was a complete surprise. Hearing it in Kurdistan, on pirated satellite TV, all I thought was that Headquarters must have intelligence on the matter to which we were not privy, and which was coming from sources we were not running.

It should also be remembered that, while it ultimately turned out that Saddam was largely telling the truth when he claimed to have divested himself of weapons of mass destruction, his history of use of them,

particularly chemical weapons, was so extensive that no one, especially the Kurds, ever considered for a moment the possibility that he was telling the truth. They had buried tens of thousands of their fellow Kurds who had died in horrible gas attacks launched by Iraqi forces. They had seen the devil in action, and they would never trust him.

For us, this issue of the possible use of chemical weapons was a massive concern from the moment we arrived in country. We came carrying personal gas masks and atropine injectors (nerve gas antidote). We brought no similar protective gear for the Kurds.

On the ridge where our base was located north of Irbil we were in range of Iraqi surface-to-surface missiles, all of which could carry chemical agents. Accordingly, as I have noted earlier, we practiced not only evacuating our base but doing so masked, simulating the possibility that we would have to bug out while under chemical attack. Every time we practiced that procedure we did so under the watchful eye of our Kurdish hosts, who had no ability to protect themselves from nerve agents or mustard gas at all.

Between us and the Iraqi surface-to-surface missile batteries about which we were so concerned was also a very large civilian population and a major city, Irbil. Every single one of the people living in this area was within both missile and artillery range of the Iraqi forces on the other side of the Green Line. Any day he wanted, Saddam could direct his forces to open fire. Assuming he had chemical weapons, which everyone thought he did, that meant on no notice he could gas hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children.

We were pushing the Kurds to support us. Nobody else was lining up. The sum total of the force the United States of America had been able to get in theater after months of effort was a relative handful of CIA officers and Army Special Forces personnel. The Kurds were not feeling really good about the possible ways this was going to play out.

Masrur and numerous other KDP officials made repeated, direct requests of me for help. They wanted, at a minimum, gas masks, at least one for everyone in their territory. Down in PUK territory Tim was hearing the same thing.

The answer from Washington was “no.” The cost was, in their view, prohibitive, and they didn’t have any way to get them in country anyway. I tried to take the logistics piece out of the picture by suggesting we just agree to foot the bill and leave the Kurds, skilled smugglers, to figure out where to get the masks and how to get them to Kurdistan. That request as well was turned down.

The issue never really went away. In meeting after meeting I was pushing the narrative that we, the Americans, were going to finish Saddam this time, that we were fully committed. I promised over and over again that we were not leaving until the job was done. The fact was, though, that in far too many ways we were not delivering. Our inability to provide gas masks to our Kurdish allies was just one more.

Eventually, as it played out, we took matters into our own hands to a certain extent. That seemed to be a theme that got stronger and stronger the longer we were in country. When Washington could not deliver, we found a way to do so.

All of the people working out of our base were Americans—CIA and Army. The cooking, cleaning, and clothes washing was done, however, by Kurds for whose services we paid KDP. Most of these people were women, and almost of all of them were women who had lost their husbands, sons, and brothers to Saddam’s savagery over the years.

Over time these women became like sisters to all of us. They were not allowed into the spaces in the base where we were drafting and receiving classified traffic, but beyond that they were pretty much everywhere all the time. When I rolled out of bed around five-thirty every morning, they were already hard at work making breakfast and setting the long table in one room where we all ate communally.

This fight we were in was not an abstract notion for them. They had been in it since birth, and they would never abandon their quest for freedom. We said we were in Iraq to end the nightmare that was Saddam Hussein. These women accepted that at face value, and they were completely dedicated to our success.

That was all an irrelevant abstraction back in DC, I am sure. Bureaucracies do not care much about things like pledges and having

someone's back. Men and women out on the ragged edge care about very little else.

As we moved into the winter of 2002–2003 and the US military was still nowhere to be seen, I became more and more concerned that we were ultimately going to war without any US boots on the ground in Kurdistan. The specter loomed of a war in which the invasion would be launched from the south only, and until the war was won we and the Kurds would be on our own in the north.

At some point, as I contemplated that very ugly possibility and the devastation we might suffer in the time it took for forces from Kuwait to break all Iraqi resistance, I made a decision.

I could not provide masks for all the Kurds; I did not have the power to do so. I did have more masks on hand than we needed for the people we had in country. When the time came, and the balloon went up, we would hand out those excess masks to our staff and show them how to use them. We were not going to take care of ourselves and watch people that had become our friends die around us from chemical attack.

Early in 2003, while Washington still refused to supply masks to the Kurdish population as a whole, we got a break. We received intelligence from another field station regarding a large purchase of gas masks by the Iraqi military. These masks were going to be smuggled into Iraq from Turkey and briefly across Kurdish territory in the vicinity of Dohuk.

I took the intelligence immediately to Masrur and handed it to him. I told him we certainly didn't need the Iraqis getting the masks they had ordered. I added that I really did not care what happened to the masks afterward as long as they never made it to Saddam.

The KDP moved quickly. They let the shipment leave Turkey and move in a convoy of trucks toward the Green Line. Then they pounced. A major Iraqi smuggling effort was shut down. A number of Iraqi collaborators were arrested. The gas masks disappeared into KDP stocks.

That Saddam was actively acquiring gas masks at this late date, even though he had shut down his WMD programs, may seem odd. It is, however, a perfect illustration of a key, and often misunderstood, point. While Saddam had divested himself of WMD in a desperate effort to get

out from under sanctions, he did not want his own people or his dangerous neighbors, the Iranians, to know that.

Saddam ruled by fear. He had a multitude of intelligence services, not because that was efficient, but because he wanted everyone spying on everyone else. Torture was rampant; execution was routine. Every Iraqi outside the inner circle hated Saddam. None dared lift a hand against him.

The day that the average Iraqi understood that Saddam really had knuckled under and given up his weapons of mass destruction was the day there would be blood in the streets. The day that the Iranians understood Saddam could no longer unleash massive chemical barrages as he had in the Iran–Iraq War was the day that Tehran renewed the hostilities.

It was absolutely critical for Saddam to convince his own people that he was still hiding chemical weapons and pursuing other capabilities. At this Saddam was remarkably successful.

Early in 2003 I recruited a very senior Iraqi general. I had exchanged messages with this officer for months across the Green Line, attempting to convince him to go to work formally for us. He had made sympathetic noises and sent us bits and pieces of intelligence, but played hard to get, sniffing the air and trying to make sure he did not jump before he was sure we were going to finish the job this time.

Finally, after huge amounts of effort, we got the general to agree to take the huge risk of actually coming across into Kurdish territory and meeting with us. With the assistance of our KDP allies we brought him, under cover of darkness, to one of the string of “safehouses” we operated, and I had a chance to meet with him directly.

Over the next eight to 10 hours I attempted to get as much intelligence as I could out of the general. He would continue to report to us from inside, but there was virtually no chance he was going to make the trip to meet us face to face again. This was my one bite at the apple in terms of an intensive debriefing.

The general and I covered a lot of territory. Single-handedly he brought us up to speed on the exact status of every unit in his sector. He handed us hard-copy war plans, communications information, personnel assessments

—pretty much anything you could want to help you understand the posture of the army you are getting ready to attack.

Then we turned to weapons of mass destruction. The general did not really know anything about biological weapons or nuclear programs. He had all sorts of suspicions and had heard endless rumors. In terms of things you could sink your teeth into, he knew nothing.

Chemical weapons were an entirely different kettle of fish. The general was sure they existed. He handed me in hard copy the Iraqi Army's doctrine for their use, in fact. His bottom line was this: chemical weapons will be used by the Iraqi Army in large quantities as soon as hostilities commence. Bank on it.

I asked the general how he knew this. He told me everyone knew it. He was a very senior officer. He had spent decades in the Iraqi military. He had participated in countless operations against the Kurds. He had fought for years in the Iran–Iraq War. Chemical arms were part of the standard repertoire of Iraqi operations. Nothing had changed.

I asked if there were chemical weapons on the general's base. He assured me there were. In fact, he told me there were very large quantities of such weapons in a series of storage bunkers not too far from his office.

I dragged out imagery and maps. The general and I went over them with a fine-tooth comb. Without difficulty, hesitation or contradiction, the general pointed out the bunkers on the maps and the imagery.

The general described the bunkers. I already had separate intelligence regarding them, and everything the general told me rang true.

The general described how chemical weapons were stored and transported. He explained how they were marked and what the markings meant. It all jived perfectly with what we knew about Iraqi procedures for the use and transport of chemical weapons going back to the Iran–Iraq War.

I asked the general if he was sure there were chemical weapons inside these bunkers right now. He said he was, and that he would have been aware if the weapons had been removed or destroyed.

I asked the general when the last time was he had been inside the bunkers and personally seen the chemical weapons in question.

He looked at me like I was crazy.

I repeated the question.

He told me had never been inside the bunkers. He was not allowed in. Despite his rank, since he was a regular army officer, he could not inspect the bunkers. They were under the control of the Iraqi Republican Guard. They answered to Saddam. Only they could go inside.

That's where we left the matter. To the general all of my questioning was a waste of time. I was searching for proof of something every Iraqi knew: Saddam still had chemical weapons; Saddam would use them. Questioning that was silly.

Again and again in meetings with countless sources we came to the same ending. No one we spoke to considered for a moment the possibility that Saddam had really given up his chemical arms. Everyone had a different answer as to where they were. No one could produce them or prove their continued existence.

We pumped the information back to Headquarters in a continuous stream. They came back with requests for clarification or follow-up. It was maddeningly hard to do.

A source would come across the Green Line and describe in minute detail how he had witnessed Iraqi forces burying chemical munitions in a field outside of Baghdad. He would pinpoint the field and provide intricate detail regarding what he claimed to have seen. We would be left with a story that was effectively impossible to confirm or refute. It might be gospel truth. It might be a bald-faced lie designed only to get us to fork over some cash.

The typical way to resolve these kinds of questions would be solid vetting of the source over time, or the recruitment of additional sources who might be able to shed more light on the problem. We made every attempt to do so. In the end, though, we were on a clock. We were starting from scratch, building an asset stable from the ground up, collecting on a host of requirements and doing what was humanly possible.

In too many cases, we found that all we could say was that a source about whom we knew very, very little had told us the following story, and there were no obvious contradictions. Was it true? Maybe. Was it a

fabrication? Quite possibly. It was up to the big brains in the Directorate of Intelligence to puzzle out the answer.

Chemical arms were, of course, not the only weapons of mass destruction for which we were hunting. Saddam had always been reported to have been working on biological weapons and toxins as well. Evidence for the existence of such programs inside Iraq in 2002 and 2003, however, was slim.

Unlike chemical arms, which Saddam had without question not only possessed but used in vast quantities in the past, biological weapons were much more of a question mark. To our knowledge they had never been manufactured in any quantity, and they had certainly never been used.

Still, we hunted for them relentlessly as part of our general collection on the Iraqi military. Never in the course of that collection, however, did we come across any evidence that seemed convincing regarding biological weapons. Rumors of special vans for the cultivation and dissemination of biological agents notwithstanding, it appeared to us that if there was a bio program at all it must be very small and very tightly held.

Nuclear weapons were also a concern. That may seem fanciful at this point in history, but, in fact, there was very good reason for us to consider this a real threat. In the aftermath of the First Gulf War, we had discovered that Saddam had a fairly robust nuclear weapons program underway and that it was frighteningly close to the point at which he could have built a functioning nuclear weapon. The entire program was unknown to us until the war was over.

The idea of Saddam Hussein suddenly revealing to the world that he was in possession of even a handful of nuclear weapons was terrifying. Such a disclosure would change everything. Entire cities in the Middle East could potentially be held hostage, and even a few nuclear weapons would pose a real threat to massed American conventional forces.

As with biological weapons, the hunt for the true status of this program was maddening. Chemical weapons had always been part of the reality of the Iraqi military. The nuclear program was something entirely different, known only to a handful of individuals and operating out of secure

locations under the control of Iraqi intelligence and the Special Republican Guard.

In addition to his reliance upon fear to keep his people in line, Saddam put great trust in personal and family relationships. Organizations like the Special Republican Guard were not bureaucratic or military entities as much as they were family enterprises. The higher you went in the Iraqi ruling structure and the closer you got to things of real value, the more you found yourself in a world where everyone was linked personally and directly to Saddam Hussein himself.

That world was one of pure evil. I remember a story I had heard from a source years before while running operations against Saddam out of another Middle Eastern country. It concerned Uday, one of Saddam's sons. Uday was, if anything, sicker than his father.

Uday was at a hotel in Baghdad. He saw a young girl, maybe 13, in the lobby. She was beautiful. She was also deaf.

Uday decided he wanted the girl. He directed his bodyguards to abduct her. She was brought to one of Uday's palaces, and over the next 24 hours he proceeded to rape and abuse the girl in every depraved way imaginable. In fact, likely in ways that are not imaginable to anyone other than a homicidal maniac.

Then Uday had his bodyguards take the girl back to the hotel lobby from which she had been snatched and dump her. It wasn't the first time Uday had done something like this. It was a regular practice of his, and the expectation was certainly that the girl, like all his previous victims, would go back to her family, everyone would keep their mouths shut, and life would go on.

But this girl was not only deaf; she was emotionally handicapped as well. She didn't go home. She began to frantically race around the lobby, screaming uncontrollably, bleeding and begging for help.

The bodyguards saw this. This was unacceptable. It would not do for there to be a scene or for anyone to think ill of the ruler's son.

The bodyguards grabbed the girl, took her away, slit her throat, and dumped her body outside of Baghdad. The family was contacted by Uday's inner circle.

Your daughter is dead. You have no daughter. Say nothing or your other children will be next.

The family remained silent.

Everyone around Saddam had done something similar. These people had blood on their hands. They had been part and parcel of every atrocity that Saddam had ever committed. There was no way for any of them to seriously contemplate turning against Saddam and surviving the experience. In the unlikely event that they were not caught, tortured, and executed by the Iraqi security services, they would most certainly be tried and executed by the new government of a post-Saddam Iraq.

In short, they could not get off the merry-go-round. They had bought their tickets, and they were going to ride until the music stopped. Finding sources inside this world then was very, very difficult work that required huge amounts of time—time we did not have.

When we did develop sources who claimed to have access to nuclear programs, it was often maddeningly difficult to vet their information. In most cases we were left with claims of ongoing research efforts at some secure facility—Mosul University was a favorite choice—and no confirmation of any kind of the veracity of the information.

When we could dig into the story and make strides in terms of vetting, the results were invariably not positive. Rapidly the source's story would come apart, and he would be exposed as having concocted a lie in the hopes of striking it rich and being granted asylum in the United States or some other Western country.

Still, Headquarters continued to push us hard for information on the nuclear program. Some of that was because of the significance of the topic. Some of that, unfortunately, was because of the increasing level of interference we were getting from the Pentagon.

From day one in country my attitude toward collection had been exactly the same. We were not in Iraq to spin facts or sell a pretext for war. We were professionals. We were there to collect intelligence, vet it as best we could, and report what we had learned to Washington.

When that information fit with what the policy makers in DC wanted to hear, that was grand. When it did not, that was too bad. Our job was to tell

the truth as best we knew it. It was somebody else's job to sort out what to do with that truth.

By and large Headquarters was on board with this. It was the way CIA always did business. It might put them in a hard spot on their end sometimes, and I am sure more than once they wished I would just make their lives easy for a change, but the boys and girls back home in our outfit knew what the job was.

The Pentagon seemed to be a very different matter. Apparently, at the uppermost levels they could not understand that it was not our job to give them what they needed to sell a war. When they did not get what they wanted from us in the way of reporting, they regularly went around us.

Kurdistan was full of Iraqi opposition groups, outfits that for years had been working to one degree or another to overthrow Saddam. Some of them were legitimate groups with serious networks on the other side of the Green Line. We had extensive contacts with these fellows, met with them regularly, and leveraged their capabilities every way we could.

Many of the groups, however, were bogus. Centered largely on some individual who fancied himself the next ruler of Iraq, these groups spent most of their time and energy lobbying senior policy makers in the Department of Defense. Their access inside Iraq was minimal, and their standing with actual Iraqis nil.

Nevertheless, we received massive pressure to meet with these charlatans, and when we did not give them their due, they just went around us and communicated directly to people in DC. Then we would receive frantic messages from back home demanding to know why we were not acting on some alleged, high-priority intelligence.

Such was the case of the Kid.

One of the worst of the faux resistance leaders in Iraq was a guy I will call Lumpy. A big, sloppy, smelly mess, this guy was actually the front man for the same clown who sent us all the recruits for the useless Scorpion program—the supposed Arab shock troops that ultimately never deployed or accomplished anything. We had met this guy several dozen times, received nothing of value, passed him a lot of money, and ultimately issued what amounted to a burn notice on him. Stay away.

Lumpy contacted us sometime in the winter of 2002–2003 and advised that he had a young man, the Kid, staying with him at his compound in Kurdistan. According to Lumpy, the Kid was one of the guys who was actually designing and building an atomic bomb for Saddam Hussein. The Kid had been smuggled across the Green Line, was available to meet with us, and could tell us everything we wanted to know about Saddam's nuclear program.

Word of the Kid came to me from one of my case officers who had been contacted by Lumpy. My officer asked what I wanted to do. I told him to write up the lead and take no further action. There was in my estimation literally zero chance that this was real, and we did not have time to play around with Lumpy anymore.

A few days later I got a call from Headquarters. Lumpy had complained to his boss, who had called his contact in the Department of Defense, a very senior official. Now the Pentagon wanted to know why the hell we were ignoring this amazing, critical intelligence.

Headquarters and I had a candid conversation. We were on the same wavelength. Lumpy was an idiot, and the Kid was going to be about as much of a nuclear physicist as I was a pro quarterback. Still, Headquarters directed me to follow up. The pressure they were getting from down the river was too intense.

I accepted the assignment. I might be stuck in the mountains of Kurdistan surrounded by hostile forces and wondering if the cavalry was ever going to come. Still, I had it easy; I wasn't in DC.

Hans and I discussed the case. We called in Seamus, who by this point had clearly established himself as one of the best officers we had. He was also an Army officer, so assigning him to handle the debriefing of the Kid would not only ensure we put a very good man on the case but also demonstrate to the Pentagon that CIA wasn't playing games with them.

Seamus had Lumpy bring the Kid to one of our safehouses and then conducted maybe the single most masterful debriefing of a source of which I have ever heard. It took close to four hours, but when it was over we not only knew that the Kid was a liar, but we had his confession for the record.

The Kid was maybe 25. He spoke passable English, but honestly did not give the impression of having any substantial academic background. Despite this, he said that he was one of the key personnel working in a secret Iraqi nuclear program, and that he had designed, and was now building, a functioning atomic weapon.

Seamus took his time. He let the Kid talk and took copious notes. Page after page was filled with all the detail of the Kid's story. Then Seamus began to ask follow-up questions.

What were the dimensions of the weapon in question? What type of initiator was being used? Was it a gun or implosion-type weapon? If it was an implosion-type weapon, from where had the Iraqis acquired the wiring harnesses? How many kilos of fissile material were in the weapon? What type of fissile material was being used? How had it been enriched? What was the estimated yield and how had that yield been calculated? How would the weapon be delivered? How was it designed to detonate? If it was to be air burst, at what altitude would the weapon function?

Surprisingly quickly, the Kid began to come unglued. Over and over again he attempted to evade or said he would have to do calculations in his laboratory and get back to us. Seamus suggested he work out the equations longhand while he waited, then reviewed the Kid's halting attempts to do so.

The result was stunning. This guy couldn't even do basic algebra. He wasn't just a fake; he was a poor one.

Finally, the Kid asked to use the restroom. By this point he was soaked with sweat. Seamus let him go.

The restroom on the first floor of the safehouse, which the Kid entered, shared a common wall with an air shaft that ran down the center of the building. This was typical in Kurdistan in concrete block buildings. It meant you could get air and light to all rooms in the building even without air conditioning or, for that matter, power.

Seamus opened the door that led into the air shaft and walked over to the wall of the bathroom. From about waist level down the wall was solid. From that point up to the ceiling it was a glass window that could be opened. Seamus looked in.

The Kid was standing with his back to Seamus. He wasn't relieving himself; he was pulling reams of sweat-soaked notes out of his boxers and frantically trying to read them. Seamus turned, went back to the debriefing room, and waited.

A few minutes later the Kid came back to the debriefing room. He sat down and started to talk. Seamus cut him off.

"First, give me the notes."

"What notes?"

"The notes you have hidden in your trousers."

The Kid made a few pro forma denials and then gave up. He pulled the damp wad of notes from his pants and handed them to Seamus, who took them with disgust. Somebody had spent a lot of time compiling what amounted to a primer on how to build a nuclear weapon for the Kid. Unfortunately for him, the Kid did not spend sufficient time cramming for the exam.

Seamus wrote it all up and sent it home in traffic, including the Kid's admission that he had never been anywhere near a nuclear weapon and had no knowledge whatsoever of any effort underway in Iraq to build an atomic bomb. Headquarters was happy with the thorough and professional job. The Pentagon I think still suspected that somehow we had coopted Seamus and gotten him to kill off a valuable lead.

Meanwhile, we continued the hunt, attempting as best we could to get to the bottom of the mystery. Did Saddam have weapons of mass destruction, and, if so, where were they?

CHAPTER 12

The Boneyard—Chem and Radiation

“What is this?” I asked. I was sitting in the back seat of a Land Cruiser. It was pitch black outside. We had just picked up a source, Abdul, for a meeting, and the first thing he had done was to reach inside his coat, pull out a 10-inch length of garden hose with black electrical tape closing off both ends, and hand it to me. As I spoke I passed the hose over my shoulder to Rabbit, one of the 10th Group personnel, who was sitting in the jump seat behind me with an MP-5 submachinegun and zip lock bags for anything unexpected we encountered.

“This is a very dangerous substance. If you touch it you will die,” said Abdul. He grimaced to add emphasis.

“Abdul, my friend, you really need to work on the order of your sentences,” I said. “For instance, the part where you tell me that I will die if I touch the substance should probably come before you hand it to me.” Behind me, Rabbit, who was smart enough to be wearing gloves, had already sealed the length of hose inside two zip lock bags.

“Yes, my friend,” said Abdul.

I spent the next several minutes attempting to get Abdul to explain exactly what was in the hose. The best I could determine was that someone had brought it to Abdul—another of the ubiquitous opposition leaders waiting for Saddam to go—and told him that it was a sample of some sort

of chemical agent. According to this unnamed individual, the chemical inside was a sample stolen from Iraqi chemical weapons stockpiles.

Clearly, we weren't going to get much further than that with Abdul, who seemed to know virtually nothing about what was inside the hose. He said the individual who had brought it to him had put whatever was inside in the hose and taped it shut, and, reasonably enough, Abdul had not attempted to open the strange package and determine precisely what it was. Why anyone would think it would be a good idea to place a deadly chemical agent inside this bizarre package remained a mystery.

I moved on to discussing a range of other topics with Abdul and dropped the whole subject of chemical agents. An hour or so later we dropped him off and dragged back to base. It was the end of another very long day in Kurdistan.

Rabbit and I conferred outside the base house about the hose. Neither one of us entertained much thought that there was anything of value in it, but we weren't going to take any chances either. If this was supposed to be a deadly chemical agent, then we weren't taking it inside.

One of the pieces of gear we had at the base was a chemical detector and analyzer. It was a commercial piece of gear, and it was supposed to be able to not only detect the presence of a chemical agent but tell us what it was. We had played with it a little back home before coming to Iraq, but it had been collecting dust ever since.

Rabbit and I dragged the detector outside. We fired up the detector, put on our gas masks, held the probe against one end of the length of hose, and peeled back the edge of the electrical tape. All hell broke loose.

The alarm on the detector went off instantaneously. Lights started flashing. I looked down at the display on the top of the machine. It said "SARIN."

Sarin is a nerve agent. It is usually stored as a liquid but can evaporate and become a gas. It is odorless, colorless, and tasteless. It is also deadly.

Mild exposure causes a runny nose, eye irritation, sweating, rapid breathing, and coughing. If you have been exposed to anything more than a tiny amount, that will progress to involuntary urination, vomiting,

convulsions, and death. From the time of exposure death typically occurs in less than 10 minutes.

Sarin was one of the things Saddam used in large quantities on the Kurds. It is one of the agents that had killed at least 5,000 people in the Kurdish city of Halabja, Northern Iraq, in 1988, when Iraqi aircraft dropped a lethal cocktail of chemical weapons onto the city.

Rabbit and I stepped back. He had already pressed the tape tightly back into place. Several guys from inside the base building came to the door. They had heard the alarm. We motioned them away.

We talked for a few minutes and got organized. An hour or so earlier I had been making fun of Abdul for not warning me of a dangerous substance before handing it to me. Now we were the ones who were doing things ass backward. Inside the house we had all of our chemical protective gear, yet we hadn't used any of it other than our masks before testing the alleged chemical agent. Sarin can be inhaled; it can also kill you if it comes in contact with your skin.

Rabbit and I had the guys inside get us water, rags, and bleach. We scrubbed down our arms and hands, anything that might have touched the hose, as best we could. By this point I was already half-convinced that I was beginning to show symptoms of exposure to nerve agent. I began to wonder how long it would be before I would start having trouble breathing.

Once decontaminated as best I could I went inside and banged out the shell of a message to Headquarters, detailing everything I knew about the hose and its back story. If I was about to die I did not want the information in my head to go with me. Then Rabbit and I did what we should have done in the first place. We put on all our chemical protective gear, went outside, and buried the hose about 4 feet down in one corner of our base compound.

Once we had the hose buried we stood around and watched each other for the onset of symptoms consistent with exposure to nerve gas. They didn't come. We didn't die.

Months later we finally got a technical expert in country who could deal with whatever we had buried. Using all the appropriate precautions, he dug up our mystery substance and tested it. It turned out to be a liquid originally produced by the Soviets for use in training exercises. While harmless, it had

been created to deliberately set off chemical detectors and mimic sarin gas. How this particular item had ended up in Kurdistan and had fallen into Abdul's hands, I never found out. In terms of fooling our chemical detector and convincing it of the presence of a deadly chemical agent, however, there was no question. It had worked.

The mystery garden hose scared me half to death but ultimately proved to be no threat. Such was not the case with the radioactive source we recovered around the same time.

One day at the base we were contacted by KDP intelligence. They said they had detained an individual who was carrying some sort of alleged radiological source. It was unclear where this individual had acquired the source, but he had likely smuggled it out of the former Soviet Union and was attempting to sell it on the black market. The guy in question clearly had no real idea what he was carrying. He had the source, which was sealed inside of something that looked like a large metal pencil, in his pocket.

We responded to the location where the KDP had the individual in question, taking with us a radiation meter, what laypeople refer to as a "Geiger counter." When we arrived at the scene the KDP had already sealed the source, whatever it was, inside of a large metal safe. Where the safe had come from or why it was selected, was not explained. I assumed it was simply the biggest, heaviest thing the KDP could find on short notice, and it seemed like a good idea to get the dangerous radiological substance closed up somehow.

We took the radiation meter, switched it on, and began to approach the safe. I had worked cases involving radiological sources multiple times before and was generally familiar with how the gear worked. Ten feet from the safe our meter was maxing out. I had never heard of anyone recovering a source with the level of radiation this thing was putting out.

We backed off to regroup. We weren't just detecting radiation; we were detecting harmful radiation at a level that was immediately life threatening. Whoever the guy was who had been carrying a source this hot around in his pants wasn't long for the world. I did not want us to suffer the same fate.

We arranged to have the safe hauled in a truck to our compound. We rotated guys moving the safe regularly, so no one group was around it too

much. That was some pretty rough justice work and a long way from a professional calculation of how much radiation everyone was getting. I didn't have another option.

We buried the safe about 4 feet down, not too far from the "sarin" sample. Once we had filled the hole I ran the radiation meter over the top of it again. We were still picking up readings from whatever was in the safe, but at dramatically reduced levels. As long as we didn't camp out on top of the source we would probably be ok.

Months later we managed to get an old friend of mine named Tom in country. Tom is the rare kind of guy who revels in the recovery of dangerous nuclear and radiological sources. He has been doing it his whole life, and he and I had already been on previous operations against nuclear smuggling networks.

Tom brought with him all the necessary gear to package up the source in the safe and enable us to move it out of country. He was pretty nonchalant about the whole thing initially. When you are a guy with his kind of experience there is not a lot you haven't seen, and stuff that would terrify the average individual doesn't phase you.

All that changed once we got the safe out of the hole and opened it up. For the first time in my life I got to see Tom sweat. After taking some readings, he backed off from the source to a safe distance and then sat down with his instruments, a calculator, and a pen and paper to do some very detailed calculations on just how much radiation he was taking and how long he could safely expose himself.

Over the course of the next several hours, working in short shifts and constantly updating his calculations, Tom got the source packaged up and sealed inside of a lead-lined shipping container, so that it could be moved out of country for disposal. Watching him, one of the best in the world when it came to this kind of thing, sweating out the process, convinced me that we had made the right call by simply burying the thing and calling for a pro to handle it.

Many months later back at Headquarters I ran into Tom and got a readout on the ultimate analysis of the source we had recovered. It turned out to be Cesium-137, a highly radioactive substance used for a variety of

medical and industrial purposes. At the time it was the hottest source CIA had ever recovered.

The young man who had been smuggling the radiological source initially died not long after. He had given himself a lethal dose of radiation in a very short period of time, all in the hope that he would be able to sell the material to someone for some significant sum of money. Where the material had come from in the first place was never determined, although the packaging in which it was contained suggested strongly that it had originated somewhere in the former Soviet Union.

The truth is that the Soviets littered the landscape with radiological sources used for a variety of medical and industrial purposes. Security for most of them was nonexistent, and they were always, in my experience, ending up in the hands of somebody convinced that they were going to be able to sell them to a terrorist group or an intelligence service for a big score. What saved most of these idiots from killing themselves in the process was simply that the half-life of typical radiological sources is so short that by the time they fell into the wrong hands, they weren't dangerous anymore.

Over the course of our deployment in Iraq we had a number of sources that fell into this category come to our attention as well. When there was any question about the threat they posed we buried them in our growing toxic waste dump, pending our ability to get somebody who knew what they were doing in the handling of such things in country to process them.

In the end, everything we gathered from a wide network of sources told us a lot about the scale of the trade in such substances in the mountains of Kurdistan. It ultimately told us absolutely nothing about the state of Saddam's WMD arsenal. Not a single item we ever laid our hands on could be traced back to the Iraqi military or any other Iraqi state entity.

CHAPTER 13

Management/Leadership and Base Life

From its inception, our deployment to Iraq was characterized by a strange dynamic. On the one hand, we were in a rush. We were starting from scratch in all respects, and we had no idea when the buzzer was going to go off and the war was going to start. When I had been named as team leader in early 2002 I had been told the invasion would happen that spring. Nobody ever formally revised that schedule and put another mark on the wall. My guidance remained the same: be prepared for the balloon to go up at any time.

On the other hand, the objective reality told us something very different. By late 2002 we were still the only Americans inside Iraq anywhere. The Turks remained absolutely opposed to allowing us to bring troops into Kurdistan across their territory, and, in fact, became increasingly hostile to our continued presence in country as well. Not only did this suggest that it might be a very long time before an invasion occurred; any objective observer would have to begin to suspect at some point that no invasion was ever going to take place.

We were utterly alone. There was no rear area. We had no backup. We had no medevac. We lived in an environment when, on any given day, with no notice Saddam might start the war with a missile attack on our base, Ansar might ambush us on the road, or any of the now hundreds of sources we were working might turn against us. We were running flat out, all day, every day, but in the end we were on our own, and trying hard to keep the faith that we weren't acting in vain.

The pace and the uncertainty took its toll. As resolute as the men and women assigned to the base were, they were still human, and the unrelenting pressure of non-stop source operations, counter-intelligence and physical security threats, and the lack of any movement on the rest of the invasion plan ate away at people.

I was, for much of the time we were deployed, the only one who had a bedroom to himself. Everyone else was bunking at least two or three to a room in the main base house or in one of the other nearby buildings we commandeered or had built as our presence expanded. This made sense, because I, along with Hans, was effectively on call to handle communications with higher headquarters and other field stations 24 hours a day and needed to be able to sleep whenever I could find down time.

In practice, it meant my room was also the only place with any semblance of privacy and the one place where a private conversation might be possible. Fairly early on in the deployment team members began to avail themselves of this by coming to my room late at night and asking if I had time to talk.

On many of those occasions I was sound asleep and dog tired. On all of those occasions I got up anyway and made the time to listen and offer advice if it was wanted. Whether or not I ever said anything profound, I don't know. I was operating on instinct and the understanding that a leader's job is to take care of his people.

Marriages that were on shaky ground when we deployed fell apart under the pressure of separation and continued uncertainty. Parents and siblings died at home while team members were not only far away but unable to even discuss their locations or activities. Interpersonal problems within the base occasionally erupted into open hostility simply because no one could go anywhere for a respite or a break in the routine.

Mostly, I listened, sometimes to sobbing, for as long as it took the person who had come to see me to feel better and pull themselves together. They always did. In all the time we were deployed, no one ever asked to be sent home.

We looked for ways to get some kind of relief from the grind and pressure of our work. The Kurds had pirated satellite television and piped it

into the common living/meeting room in the heart of our main base building. What was available to watch was pretty limited, but it was a diversion.

Via the same mechanism we had pirated internet. Being able to surf the net was obviously another way for folks to get some kind of escape from being in the increasingly cold and snowy mountains of Kurdistan. It was a potential counter-intelligence nightmare as well. We weren't officially in Iraq, and nothing we were doing on the ground was fit for public consumption.

My solution, fully supported by Hans, was to treat our people like adults. We set up the internet connection, made it available to people, and told them to avoid doing anything online that would identify them in true name. No email. No checking bank accounts. Read the news. Listen to a talk show. Remain invisible.

The unstated understanding was this: it stays this way as long as we don't have an issue. When we have an issue, we pull the plug.

We never had an issue. This wasn't a daycare. This was a team of professionals who were serious about their jobs.

On typical TDY (temporary duty) deployments, officers are allowed to call home for certain periods of time at government expense. It's part of trying to keep families and marriages together in what can be a very stressful occupation.

Hans and I decided to dedicate one of our secure satellite phones to this purpose. We allowed each officer so many minutes of time per week, which approximated what the usual policy would have allowed for. It didn't make it possible for people to share the details of our operations. It did, however, make it possible for officers to hear the sound of their children's voices and to work at keeping personal relationships with loved ones alive.

It would be hard to overemphasize how important those phone calls became as time went by. I have vivid memories today of standing outside the base house up to my knees in snow talking to my wife on the satellite phone. I would look forward to those calls for days before I made them and feel recharged for days afterward.

Keeping in touch with the world outside of Kurdistan helped. We needed other ways to cut loose a little bit as well. Particularly, as the months slid by and the uncertainty regarding the invasion only deepened, it became imperative that we find other ways to unwind.

The Kurds brought us beer and, on occasion, wine. We made it available to everybody in the base on the same basis as we did everything else. Be responsible. Act like adults. When and if this becomes an issue, it goes away.

There was never a problem. I made a point of drinking a beer pretty much every night after dinner. I figured I was setting the example that it was ok to drink and also that drinking in moderation was the model. Whether or not that had any impact, I don't know. I do know that in all the time we were in country I never had to deal with any issues related to excessive alcohol consumption.

Beer was good. Ice cream was more important.

The Kurds kept us well fed. We ate what they ate, and it was fresh, nutritious food. It was also repetitive—rice, lamb or chicken, and diced vegetables most meals, with eggs and toast thrown in for breakfast. It was amazing how much you could start to look forward to any kind of change in that routine.

Available in small grocery stores across Kurdistan were vanilla ice cream bars with chocolate icing. They were Turkish, and back home nobody would have thought twice about them. In fact, back home I would probably have never eaten one. I don't care that much about ice cream. In Kurdistan I became obsessed with it.

Early in 2003 disaster struck. The Turks, as part of their never-ending effort to pressure us to quit Kurdistan and the Kurds to walk away from us, shut the border. There were a number of implications of this action. Maybe the one I cared about the most at the time was that it meant my favorite Turkish ice cream bars were no longer being shipped in country.

Every little store in Kurdistan sold Iranian ice cream as well. It tasted like dirt. Eating that stuff was not going to be acceptable. We needed to find a stash of Turkish ice cream.

I told Hans to hold down the fort, and I took Indy on a hunt for ice creams bars. Indy was our communicator. He was a great kid. As communicator he had to stay with his gear pretty much 24/7 unless someone else took the watch. That meant he could start going stir crazy after a while, and Hans and I, therefore, took turns springing him and getting him outside for some fresh air so he could remember what the sun looked like.

Indy was now my wing-man in the “great ice cream bar hunt.” We loaded up in one of the base vehicles and began scouring the countryside, two crazy white guys with guns going through every little store with a cooler in it for miles around and rounding up every one of my favorite ice cream bars we could find. The pickings were slim, but what we did find I brought back to base to ration out to the crew.

Every man has his breaking point. Ice cream was mine.

Then there was pizza.

About 3 miles from our base compound in a small Kurdish town there was a place called New York Pizza. I never did succeed in running down the origin of that name, although I was told a sort of Kurdish legend about a guy, his name now long forgotten, who had lived in New York for years, come home to Kurdistan, and decided it was time to bring New York style pizza to the mountains of Iraq.

Whoever that guy was, if he ever existed, he was long gone by the time we got to Kurdistan. Inside New York Pizza were a few guys who looked like they had never been more than 5 miles from home and something that bore no resemblance to pizza. Cooked in traditional ovens in a filthy back room filled with roosting pigeons, what New York Pizza produced was Kurdish flat bread covered in mayonnaise, ketchup, goat cheese, and lamb sausage.

Still, on occasion, we ate it. Because it was a change. Because we were starving for anything like American food. Because, if you closed your eyes and tried not to think about the taste, you might convince yourself for just a moment or two you were back home.

By early 2003 that was getting harder and harder. Nasty flatbread pizza was not cutting it anymore. So, we started working back channel deals with

folks in Ankara and Headquarters to work real pizza ingredients into supply runs. Wives and girlfriends and coworkers back home would buy bags of mozzarella and sticks of pepperoni and stuff them into the luggage of new personnel being sent out or wedge them into crates of commo gear or MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) coming our way. The first thing we would ask people when supplies came in became, “Where’s the pizza sauce?”

Then we took over New York Pizza, not fulltime, but on a periodic basis. The arrangement was simple, negotiated in a mixture of English, Farsi, and Kurdish. “We will come here every so often, take over the place, cook our own pizza with our own ingredients, and then leave. You watch. You do nothing. We will pay you for the pizza full price as if you made it, just for the ability to use your ovens.”

The proprietor might not have been a New York businessman, but he knew a good deal when he saw one. He was getting paid to do nothing but watch us cook our own food. He agreed, and New York Pizza became a regular hangout.

Pizza and ice cream were fine as far as they went. Still, down range, when the pressure is on, boys and girls find that practical jokes often help relieve the tension. As the boss I had de facto ability to assign nicknames or call signs. I usually based those on some characteristic of the recipient. A guy with big ears became “Bullwinkle.” Our Mexican-American logs officer, much to his delight, became “Lobo” (the Spanish term for “wolf”).

The teasing wasn’t by any means one way. I came back from a meeting one day to find Lobo had, with Kurdish assistance, filled my office with sheep. He said he knew I had been away from home a long time and, as a Scotsman, would appreciate the female companionship. It was days before we got the smell out of the office, and before we managed to clear the place of livestock, they had eaten Kirkuk completely off of a map I had on the wall.

In Washington it seems sometimes that all that matters are bureaucracy and lines on wiring diagrams. In the field, where things get real and bullshit means nothing, all that matters is who you can depend on. Color, ethnicity, organizational affiliation all vanish. You have the man or woman next to you, and they are your family.

We began, over time, and without ever formally deciding to do so, to compile a team soundtrack, borne of long hours in vehicles and the driving necessity to listen to something other than Arabic music. Certain songs downloaded off the internet and burned onto CDs began to gain currency throughout the team.

“Hotel California” became almost an anthem. Dark humor is often appealing to men and women in harm’s way. As the months slid by, and we remained alone in the mountains, the words “You can check out anytime you want, but you can never leave” seemed to resonate a little more every day.

Other songs perhaps echoed defiance more than anything else. “Secret Agent Man” by Johnny Rivers, “Purple Haze” by Jimi Hendrix, and “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue” by Toby Keith. A certain number like “You Can Leave Your Hat On” by Joe Cocker conjured up the image of long-delayed reunions with wives and sweethearts at some unknown time in the future.

The team had jelled. We were moving as quickly as humanly possible. Hans and I were satisfied we had built a tight ship. Still, sometimes, we needed to punch out briefly ourselves.

Our escape—indulged only occasionally and for brief periods—was driving.

We had come in country with a limited number of vehicles. As the base grew and the scope of our operations expanded, we needed more. Some we smuggled in from elsewhere in the Middle East. Some we bought locally in a deliberate attempt to acquire vehicles, which did not attract attention.

Regardless of where the vehicles came from, there was one simple rule: nobody got behind the wheel before Hans and I did. It began as a way for us to check the safety of unknown vehicles and to make clear that no one was going to be asked to take a risk leadership would not. It evolved into a way for Hans and me to unplug, leave the base, and spend maybe 30 minutes away from the pressure of command.

One day in late 2002 our logs officer, who was by that point a guy called Shaggy, came to Hans and me and said that he had another car that he thought we should buy. We walked outside. In front of base house, escorted

by our Kurdish guards, was a middle-aged Kurdish man with a beat-up old Toyota sedan.

The car looked perfect for what we wanted—something in which we could disappear onto the streets of Kurdistan and attract no attention. Hans got behind the wheel. I climbed in on the passenger side up front. The owner jumped in the backseat.

Hans turned on the ignition and prepared to pull out of the compound onto the mountain road outside. The cassette player in the car came to life and the Kenny Rogers song “The Gambler” started blaring out of the speakers.

Hans and I laughed. He turned down the volume slightly. I turned around and looked at the Kurd in the backseat.

“The Gambler”? I asked. It seemed about as out of place as imaginable in the mountains of Iraq.

“Everybody is a Kenny Rogers fan in Kurdistan,” said the car’s owner. He cocked his head to one side and squinted as he spoke as if to emphasize the extreme level of my ignorance.

Another day waiting for a war to start.



Special Forces and CIA personnel training near base house in Kurdistan.

CHAPTER 14

The Turks and Tension—Border Closed— Supply Runs

No one ever contemplated putting a team into Iraq, leaving it on its own month after month, and trying to keep it supplied and supported via a road link stretching all the way back to the Turkish border. We were to go in on our own for a month or so, then 10th Group and the rest of the US Army would begin to flow in behind us. It didn't turn out that way.

The Turks had ultimately decided to let us in, but very grudgingly. They weren't moving on anything else, and they weren't excited about the way our deployment was stretching out. In short, they wanted us gone.

Shortly after our arrival in country we had started working on the concept of building an airfield about an hour north of our base in KDP territory. There were already airfields in Kurdistan, but they were all too visible. We wanted a place where we could bring in small aircraft under the cover of darkness to support resupply, medical evacuation when necessary, and the movement of personnel.

A suitable location was found, and we even got as far as christening the place "Three Amigos" airport in honor of the two Americans and one Kurd who were in charge of the project. Grading began and continued off and on for months. The airfield never opened.

Over and over Headquarters and Embassy Ankara raised the issue of flights into Iraq from Turkish territory with the Turkish General Staff. Permission was refused, each and every time. We laid out for the Turks in

graphic detail how exposed our people were and how dangerous it was to keep running resupply convoys through the mountains from Khabur Gate to our bases hundreds of miles away. It did not matter. Anything that made our lives easier and helped us sustain our presence was opposed.

We were left with moving everything—people, weapons, cash, and supplies—by road. We were also left with the reality that anytime they wanted the Turks could simply cut our supply line, or, for that matter, allow some things to flow across the border while turning critically needed items around.

Movement to the border and coordination of a crossing required approval from the Turks. That meant requesting their cooperation in advance, resulting in long waiting periods while they decided when and if a supply movement could be made. Part of the coordination process was telling the Turks everything we were bringing in country. Their approval of our manifest was never guaranteed.

The physical task of sustaining resupply in this manner was staggering. We were a base composed of a relative handful of operators. We did not have a support unit or transportation assets. When supplies came across the border, we had to dispatch a team of personnel, in our vehicles, to the border to meet trucks coming to the Turkish side.

To make life for us even more difficult, the Turks would not allow the same set of vehicles to continue into Iraq. The personnel who made the run, pulled from operational activity for the day, would then have to shift everything from the trucks that came to the border from Turkey to the trucks they had brought with them. Once everything had been reloaded in our vehicles, our personnel then had to drive back to base and, finally, unload and stow all supplies in our base.

It was backbreaking labor. A single run meant a minimum of six to eight highly trained personnel, CIA or military, out of pocket and out of action for a full day. The trip each way took half a day under good conditions. As winter set in and snow and ice became common, runs began to take much longer and became increasingly dangerous.

The physical strain of supporting this was massive. Base personnel were operating on little sleep on the best of days, meeting sources, riding shotgun

for somebody else's meet or banging out intelligence reports and operational traffic. Wedging in long days of driving and moving heavy loads just added to the pressure.

I made a point of rotating personnel on the supply run duty. Nobody was exempt other than me, because I did not feel that I could in good conscience be gone from the base for the length of time involved. More than once Hans insisted he take his turn in the barrel and came back drained from a 14-hour day, only to sit down at his desk and start reading traffic and reviewing operations.

I couldn't ride with the convoys, but I could lift boxes. Whenever a supply run would return from the border all available hands would turn out to help unload. I made a point, no matter how busy we were, of getting up, going outside, and spending some time lifting and carrying boxes and containers. My physical contribution was irrelevant. Making sure everybody knew that we were all in this together and that we all shared the load, was not.

The physical drain of sustaining supply runs was one thing. The security risk these runs posed was another. We were driving on narrow, winding roads in remote areas in often hideously bad weather. We were also hauling weapons, communications equipment, and millions of dollars to finance operations.

Hundreds of people on both sides of the border had some degree of access to the information concerning our resupply movements. We were a few dozen foreigners, mostly white males, in the middle of Kurdistan. We didn't exactly blend in.

New arrivals at the base often asked under what cover we were operating. I usually responded by playing "Secret Agent Man" by Johnny Rivers. Maybe there was one not particularly bright child somewhere in Kurdistan who did not know who we were or why we were there. Maybe. If so, we had not met him yet.

The threat of ambush of supply convoys was very real. It might come from terrorists or Saddam's agents. It might just come from some enterprising bandits who decided it made sense to kill us and take the cash

we were carrying. Either way, it meant we weren't just hauling supplies; we were on alert, locked and loaded, the entire time we were on the road.

All of this was bad enough when the supplies we needed made it to us, but this was not always the case. Sometimes the Turks blocked items we needed from coming in. Sometimes our own people did the job.

Everybody who has ever been down range is familiar with the disconnect between the field and headquarters. We were no different. Urgent requests by us were often simply ignored or bumped to the back burner.

One of our big concerns as we moved through the winter of 2002–2003 remained the possibility of the use of chemical and biological weapons by Saddam. We hadn't found the proof Washington so badly wanted, but we weren't taking any chances either. The history was clear. There were no limits on what Saddam would do.

That meant, in addition to everything else, anthrax.

The US military had acquired a stockpile of anthrax vaccine. It required multiple doses well in advance to work. I didn't know if Saddam was going to use anthrax or even if he had any. I did know that my guys, the only people actually in the fight at this point, were the ones who were going to pay the price if he did.

I asked Headquarters to acquire the vaccine and get it to us. They got a supply and flew it out as far as Turkey, where it was moved to an advance base on the Turkish side of the Turkish–Iraqi border from which our supplies staged. There it sat.

Three times in succession over a period of two months, supply runs came to the border without the vaccine. Three times in succession the excuse was that it had been forgotten in the refrigerator. Not to worry; it would be brought the next time.

The third time I reached my limit. Like I said, I did not know whether Saddam really had anthrax or not. I did know it was not a theoretical threat and that if he did use it we were going to lose a lot of very good people for no good reason.

CIA prizes decorum. Airing of disagreements is bad form. I didn't care. Some guy who was sitting warm and dry in the rear was so completely out

of the game that he couldn't bother to get me something that might keep my people alive. The first two times our vaccine was forgotten I addressed the issue back channel via satellite phone and internal email. I was assured the problem would be fixed.

The third time I exploded. By this point it had been close to a year since I had been named team leader back at Headquarters. All promises about Javelin missiles for the Kurds, the arrival of the US Army, and launching of an invasion had proved false. As far as I could tell, my people, and those at Qalah Chulan, were the only folks actually in this fight, and I was not in the mood to tolerate some guy in the rear who couldn't bother to get us the supplies we needed.

I fired off an official cable to Headquarters and anybody else who I thought should be on distribution. I pulled no punches in regard to my opinions or what action I thought should be taken to motivate the individual responsible for the problem. Headquarters wasn't happy. I did not care. We got our vaccine on the next supply run.

Turkish interference was not simply a drain on our supply situation. It impacted us on the ground inside Kurdistan as well.

Our agreement with the Turks, under which they had decided to no longer embed their personnel with ours in Kurdistan, required that we keep them briefed on our activities. In practice, what this meant was that a young Turkish officer came up to our base house from a Turkish military liaison compound a few miles away every morning for a briefing.

I was busy. I wasn't going to take time out of my day to keep some Turkish lieutenant happy. Neither was Hans. It fell to Bird, one of our reports officers, to take the duty.

Making it to our compound required navigating your way through multiple Kurdish checkpoints. At our request the Kurds gave instructions to the checkpoints that the Turkish officer should be allowed passage. This permission was granted in response to a specific request I made to Masrur Barzani personally.

The Kurds were not happy about the request. They agreed to it out of respect for me and based on my personal assurance that only this Turkish officer would pass through the checkpoints.

One morning Bird came into the office where Hans and I were working. He said he had a problem. He said the Turkish lieutenant had shown up as usual for his briefing but that he had brought another officer with him. The Kurds had allowed both officers through the checkpoints, because they used my name, but they were very unhappy and had already reported the matter up their chain of command.

I was livid. We were guests of the KDP in their territory. Our personnel were operating in immediate proximity to the compound housing the most senior members of the KDP government. They had literally allowed us into their inner sanctum to ensure our security. Now Turkish officers, by no means regarded as friends by the Kurds, had taken advantage of the courtesy extended by our personnel and my personal relationship with the Barzanis to breach Kurdish security.

I went to speak to the two Turkish officers. I told the Turkish lieutenant who was our usual contact that he had breached the trust I had in him. I told him he had no right whatsoever to use my name to bring an officer about whom I knew nothing through Kurdish security. I added, just for emphasis, that I had worked with the Turkish military for years, that I knew exactly how seriously they took security, and that if I simply walked in without prior approval to a Turkish intelligence facility I would expect to be shot in the head and have my body thrown down the front steps.

It might have been hyperbole. I got my point across. We had no further issues with Turks trying to use my name to pass through Kurdish checkpoints.

The Kurdish help in our base apparently heard my comments through the doors of the room in which the conversation took place, a good indication perhaps of the tone in which I spoke. Their summary, widely repeated to other Kurds, was that I had threatened to kill the Turkish lieutenant and throw his body out the door of the base house. It wasn't true, but it was good for my reputation.

The issue with the checkpoints and the increase in the size of our base complement led to us finally having to issue formal Kurdish ID cards to all base personnel. These would bear the signature of a Kurdish official and would guarantee safe passage. The template provided to us by the Kurds,

the same their personnel used, required a rank be assigned to each person holding a card.

For a period of time this became great sport in the base, as each individual decided what rank, in Kurdish, he or she would like to be assigned. At least one of our people fixated on the idea that he would like to be a stormtrooper. I still have my card to this day. It says I am a Kurdish general.

As we slid through the winter of 2002–2003 tensions with the Turks only got worse. Washington still did not fully grasp it, but our policy in Iraq was diametrically opposed to that of Ankara. The longer we were in Iraq the worse the impasse became.

The Turks have been fighting an insurgency led by the PKK for decades. This nasty, brutal war has turned large portions of eastern and southeastern Turkey into warzones. I was familiar with the conflict and knew intimately how ugly it could get.

The PKK is a Marxist-Leninist group with the usual twisted, virtually incoherent Communist ideology. It has employed brutal terrorist tactics for years, and Turkish soldiers captured by the PKK die hideous deaths. I had no sympathy whatsoever for the PKK party apparatus that believed that the future of Kurdistan lay in the same solutions that had worked so well for Stalin, Mao, and the Khmer Rouge.

The fact remained that the PKK fed off the very real disenchantment of a Kurdish population in Turkey deprived of basic human rights. More than once while working with the Turks in the field I had told them, “If I was born here, and you treated me the way you do them, I would be in those mountains carrying an AK-47 too.”

The Turkish General Staff did not want to hear that. They weren’t even sure they wanted to admit that Kurds existed as a distinct ethnic group. Despite the fact that the Kurds were in Kurdistan thousands of years before the Turks even thought about leaving Central Asia, the official Turkish line was that the Kurds were, in fact, simply “Mountain Turks.”

The Turkish General Staff, therefore, liked to downplay the significance of the Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey and blame any attacks on Turkish soil on PKK fighters coming from bases inside Iraqi Kurdistan. This not

only allowed them to pretend that they did not have a real problem with their own populace; it allowed the Turks a pretext under which to threaten to attack the KDP and the PUK whenever they wanted. If it were not for the safe haven provided for the PKK inside Iraq, everything would be just fine in Turkey.

The Turks began to play this card with abandon during the winter of 2002–2003. As they looked for a way to preempt our planned military action and to punish the Kurds for having turned to us for assistance, it became clear the Turks were contemplating the possibility of an incursion onto Iraqi territory. Such an action would be pegged to the necessity to root out the PKK.

The KDP position was clear. The Turks were lying. The PKK bases they claimed existed weren't there. This was all smoke. If the Turks wanted to come across the border they could so, but they were going to pay heavily.

We were in a jam. A shooting war between the Turks and the Kurds in Northern Iraq would well and truly derail our already shaky invasion plan. We needed a solution.

I offered up our good services. We proposed that we would be the honest brokers to resolve the situation. The Turks claimed there were PKK bases inside Iraqi Kurdistan. The KDP said they were lying. We would find out.

The Turks would give us the coordinates for the bases. I would send team personnel to those locations to see for themselves. We would be the eyes on the ground. We would resolve the matter.

The Turks were not enthusiastic about the idea from the beginning. For guys who said they wanted to find the PKK, they suddenly seemed very hesitant to tell us where they were. Eventually, backed into a corner by the offer, they gave us locations of bases they claimed to have pinpointed.

I sent teams to all those locations, composed primarily of 10th Group and Ground Branch personnel. Over the course of weeks, these individuals, at great personal risk physically, went to all of the remote locations on the ground specified by the Turks. No PKK facilities were found, nor did we ever find evidence those facilities had ever existed.

We had called the Turks' bluff. But it didn't end anything.

Next we uncovered a plot to blow up a hotel in Irbil.

The KDP had arrested several ethnic Turkmen in Irbil and presented us with the details of a plot to stage an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) attack on a hotel in the city of Irbil frequented by foreign journalists and those few Westerners then traveling to Kurdistan. The Kurds claimed the Turkmen were acting under orders from Turkish intelligence. The Turks responded by claiming the entire thing was a Kurdish provocation and demanding the release of the individuals in custody.

The Turkmen are ethnic Turks whose presence in Northern Iraq dates to the days of the Ottoman Empire. They are a relatively small portion of the population, but they carry outsized significance. The Turks claim a right to protect the Turkmen from abuse by the Kurds, and regularly accuse the Kurds of doing something nefarious to these distant cousins.

Once again we began to hear rumblings regarding Turkish military action. Once again we were faced with the prospect of a Turkish–Kurdish war that would end any possibility of an American force entering Iraq from the north. The Kurds said the Turkmen were terrorists. The Turks said they had been framed.

I played the honest broker card again. We would question the people in custody and get to the bottom of the case. We would let the chips fall where they may. The truth would come out, and both the Turks and the Kurds could count on our objectivity.

The Kurds agreed willingly. We could question the people they had arrested, and we could do so on our own without any Kurds present.

The Turks, interestingly enough, objected. They claimed that we were too naïve to understand how we were being led astray and that the Kurds would manipulate us. I assured them we were big boys and girls and could handle ourselves.

We pressed ahead with the questioning. Then we wrote up the results of our investigation as the facts dictated, corroborating the Kurdish version of events. The Turks were not happy; I did not care. I was eating Iranian ice cream and God-awful flatbread pizza and had already been ordered out of Iraq by the Turkish General Staff more times than I could count. I figured relations with the Turks could not get much worse. I was wrong.

In all the time that we were in Iraq only one senior CIA officer ever visited the base. That was Bob. Bob was a senior officer in the Directorate of Operations. He had been my boss in Pakistan for a while, and he went on to be the head of CIA's Counterterrorism Center. Bob is a small, wiry, buttoned down guy who looks he should be teaching at a liberal arts school in New England. He also has balls.

Bob was appointed to be the guy at CIA who was supposed to be managing all of our efforts in regard to Iraq and making sure that they were properly coordinated and directed. Rather than do what everyone else did and sit ten thousand miles away trying to tell us how to suck eggs via electronic messages, Bob did something revolutionary. He got on a plane and came out to see for himself what the hell was going on in the mountains of Kurdistan.

The Turks, predictably enough, were not happy. They had reluctantly allowed us in country. They were stonewalling Washington on everything else, and what they really wanted was for us to quit in frustration, back it up, and go home. A senior officer coming in country did not seem consistent with that. It smelled of things gathering momentum.

In the end the Turkish General Staff agreed to allow Bob in, but, according to their version of events, only on the condition that Bob bring with him to all meetings with the Kurds a Turkish representative. Nobody on the American side agreed with that, and we certainly had no intention of dragging some Turk with us to meetings with Kurdish leadership.

Bob spent over a week in country and visited both bases in Kurdistan. He had productive meetings with the Kurds, complimented base personnel on their performance, and then prepared to go home. Then we discovered the Turks intended to arrest him.

The Turkish Special Forces general in charge of the Turkish military forces in southeast Turkey had apparently decided that he was done with Americans who didn't seem to understand that they worked for Ankara. He believed Bob had promised to bring Turkish representatives with him to all meetings with the Kurds, that Bob had broken his word, and that it was long past time for somebody to reign in CIA personnel run amok.

I spoke with Headquarters at length. They were no help. They seemed to want to ignore the threat and hope nothing went sideways on us. Embassy Ankara was worse. Their attitude seemed to be that this was all our fault for not leaving Kurdistan when the Turks told us to.

In Kurdistan we formulated a plan. We would send a larger than usual component of personnel to the border when it was time for Bob to cross. I personally would go as well, on the theory that if there was going to be confrontation of some sort I should be present to make the calls that needed to be made on site. I wasn't going to delegate the responsibility for this to anyone else.

We then game planned exactly how we were going to play this at the border, particularly how we were going to try to keep things from escalating out of control. By this point relations with the Turks at the border had gotten to the point where I had a real fear of shots being fired and an incident turning into tragedy. In all of this, however, we made one thing perfectly clear. If the Turks appeared to be preparing to take Bob into custody, we were going to intervene, and we were going to do what was necessary to keep that from happening.

Bob's passage into Turkey proved, thankfully, uneventful. My sense was that on the Turkish side cooler heads prevailed, and the idea of causing a major incident with a senior US official came to seem like a really bad idea. However it played out, it was fine with me. Bob was headed home in good order, and I had many more headaches to deal with.

CHAPTER 15

Fishing for Assassins

Our base never had more than a relative handful of personnel assigned to it. At its peak our complement was not much more than a good-sized infantry platoon. We were moving very fast, however, and we were kicking up a lot of dust in a place where outsiders are few and far between.

It was not long before Iraqi intelligence knew we were there. It was not long thereafter before it became a matter of personal interest to Saddam Hussein that we be punished for having the audacity to think we could take him down. He put bounties on our heads.

Fortunately, with the assistance of our Kurdish brothers, we had a lot of eyes and ears inside and outside of Kurdistan. Also, while most Iraqis continued to sit on the sidelines in the sense of being afraid to act directly against Saddam, with increasing frequency we were identifying individuals who wanted to hedge their bets. They weren't willing to come out in the light of day and bet their lives we would win, but they were willing to provide information in exchange for the expectation that we would remember them kindly when and if Saddam did fall.

The office of Iraqi “muhabarrat”—intelligence—in Mosul, which had responsibility for the “north,” was given the ball by Saddam in regard to the bounty. He wanted an American spy, ideally alive, to parade in front of cameras, but dead if capture was not doable. All other requirements in regard to our presence in country were apparently secondary to this objective.

The methodology the Iraqis decided to use was pretty straightforward. A source would be run against us, introduced to us by an intermediary, or walked in to a Kurdish outpost if necessary. The source would offer intriguing intelligence, much of which would be true and verifiable. The source would meet us multiple times, building up, according to the plan, our trust in him. Then, the source would offer us some extremely valuable information that would be attainable only if we agreed to meet him at a location designated by him.

For example, our new-found friend, the Iraqi double agent, would reveal that he had just acquired information regarding the true hidden location of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or other valuable items. He would offer to take us there or to meet us at another location and then take us there. According to the Iraqi calculations, lured into a false sense of security by our boy's previous reporting, we would drop our guard, trust in our new friend, and allow ourselves to be positioned in time and space so that Iraqi agents could grab us and spirit us away to Baghdad for some sort of show trial and protracted torture.

When it comes to intelligence work, there is no such thing as trust. You stay alive through cold-blooded calculation and decisive action. We were forewarned and forearmed, and we acted accordingly.

The first few double agents run against us were easily identified. We met them, debriefed them, and sucked them dry of information. That was the easy part. The tricky part was what to do next and how to avoid tipping our hand to the enemy.

During World War II the British had wrapped up every single agent the Germans sent into the United Kingdom to spy. Doing that with a few guys you have identified is one thing. If you are not very careful and very clever, however, the enemy finds out that his agents are going dead and stops sending them. Or worse, he starts sending them using a different methodology, one you may not know about.

So, the Brits went to great pains to keep the Germans from finding out what was going on. They grabbed agents, doubled them—not hard to do when the choice is between execution or cooperation—and left them in place continuing to report to Berlin. The British, however, took control of

the information that was being passed and thereby were able to shape German perceptions, deny them critical intelligence, and allow them to learn only those things the Allies decided they should know.

We did much the same with the boys we wrapped up. We would agree to meet them, usually in a safehouse of some sort where we were in complete control of security. We would listen to their stories, make book on their tactics and methods, and then, after telling them how pleased we were to be working together, open the door to the debriefing room and usher in a group of our military personnel and Ground Branch guys.

Our shooters lived for this kind of thing—all gunned up, wearing vests and putting on their best bad ass faces, they would grab the shocked Iraqi, drag him away, and turn him over to the Kurds. The terrified detainee would then effectively have no choice but to cooperate in whatever manner we determined, including feeding passage material from us to his superiors in Mosul.

We played this game for months in late 2002 and early 2003. Probably a dozen different Iraqi assets were caught in our net and turned back against Saddam. All games get old after a while, however, and at some point both Hans and I got tired of waiting to see who the head of Iraqi intelligence in Mosul would send against us next. It was time to stop blocking shots on goal and time to go on offense.

We wrapped up yet another Iraqi asset sent to lure us into an ambush, and we persuaded this boy to get onboard with a plan to help us put hands on his boss in Mosul. The plan was this. Our new friend would be provided with information, including photographs, to show that he had succeeded in establishing a network of support assets in Kurdish territory and that he had already killed one American.

The boss in Mosul would then be told by our double agent that he could capture another American or Americans and to deliver them into Iraqi hands, but only if the boss himself, the head of the Iraqi muhabarrat office in Mosul, was willing to meet him, pay him a sizeable sum of money, and take custody of the Americans himself. As coached by us, our new asset was to play his role such as to suggest that he was purely mercenary, very concerned about the risk posed by grabbing American agents, and only

willing to stick his neck out if guaranteed a serious payday. In short, if he was going to bring in the ultimate prize, our man was to demand that he only deal with the head guy and that he get paid cash on the barrelhead at delivery.

It seemed a plausible enough story to tell. The guy we had wrapped up was, like most of his colleagues, the kind of fellow who would sell you his own mother for the right price. Ideological motivation and patriotism were in pretty short supply in Iraq by this point. It was, therefore, at least possible that a senior Iraqi intel officer, desperately looking to please Saddam, might buy the story, drop his guard, and come out in the open somewhere where we could grab him.

We dummied up photographs of a dead American by having one of our commo guys lie in a ditch on the side of the road with hot pepper sauce smeared on the side of his head and his neck. Silly as it sounds, in the poor-quality photos we took with a cheap instant camera, it looked convincing enough. Then via a courier who was unwitting of the fact that we were now in control of the op we got the photos to Iraqi intelligence in Mosul.

Next, we put our new asset on a locally procured satellite phone with the head of Iraqi intelligence in Mosul. One of our Arabic-speaking case officers listened in on the call to keep track of both ends of the conversation. It was a long talk, with the conversation see-sawing back and forth over where and when a meeting could take place, who the American or Americans were that would be handed over, etc. The call ended with the guy in Mosul, an Iraqi colonel who gave no true name, agreeing in principle to make the meeting and saying he would call back with a time and date.

Game over. We knew exactly what had just happened. We were dead in the water. As soon as the call was terminated, our Arabic-speaking officer turned to the asset and said, "You're done. Your boss ain't coming."

I never met the Iraqi colonel who was hunting us. He was no doubt a brutal veteran of life in a sadistic regime. He was also, obviously, no fool. Something didn't smell right to him. A dead American was one thing. A guy claiming he could capture more and spirit them into Iraqi-controlled territory was another. Maybe it just didn't jibe with what he had learned so far about how we handled our security.

In any event, he did what a pro should do: he gave no indication that he suspected anything. Then he disappeared into the mist and vanished.

No new assets were sent against us. The game wasn't over as far as I was concerned, however. The colonel in Mosul and his boys had spent a lot of time trying to kill me and my people. Their plan to capture us was even worse. Had one of us been dragged off to Baghdad, death would have been a long time coming, and ultimately a welcome relief from what would have been hideous, protracted pain and humiliation.

The Iraqi colonel may have quit. We had not.

In spring 2003, when hostilities began, we launched a sabotage campaign, which I will discuss in detail later. It involved dozens of Kurdish teams hitting hundreds of targets across the Green line. Just to close out our account with the Iraqi intelligence office in Mosul, I made sure their headquarters building was on the list of targets.

A Kurdish team smuggled a large satchel charge prepared by one of our officers into the building, emplaced it, and left. Shortly thereafter the device, activated by a timer, went off. The entire building was gutted and most of the individuals working there were killed and wounded. Whether our unnamed adversary was among them or somehow survived I never found out.

What was clear was this: he was out of the fight; we were not.

CHAPTER 16

One Team, One Fight

When CIA teams surged into Afghanistan in fall 2001, Special Forces and other military personnel were fully integrated into that effort. That meant that Army, Navy, and Air Force service members were detailed to CIA and placed fully under its control. It was a spectacularly effective arrangement, ensuring that the skills possessed by military personnel were made available to CIA, a much smaller and infinitely more nimble organization than the Department of Defense.

As effective as the arrangement was, it did not sit well with Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense at the time. Like most bureaucrats, his primary interest was not in mission accomplishment but in guarding rice bowls and ensuring the sanctity of lines on organizational wiring diagrams. Having CIA “own” his people did not please him.

Therefore, as preparations began for the invasion of Iraq in 2002, Rumsfeld made one thing perfectly clear. He would never again detail his personnel to CIA. Service members might be attached to CIA and assigned to specific locations under CIA immediate operational control, but they would not really be, to use a Vietnam-era term, “sheep dipped.” They would not truly belong to CIA.

Down range these kinds of nuances typically get shoved aside in the interest of getting the job done. Still, even when everyone has the right attitude, there are impacts that cannot simply be wished away. As much as you try not to let it slow you down, big picture decisions like this take a toll.

The single most capable and valuable 10th Group member we had at base was then Captain Sid Crews, aka “Happy.” Sid was the leader of the 10th Group pilot team attached to base. He was smart and technically proficient and, maybe most importantly, level-headed and calm. In the kind of stew of ambiguity and uncertainty in which we lived and worked, he was invaluable.

As time progressed in our deployment, and our commitments continued to expand, I was desperate for seasoned officers to serve in leadership and management positions. As good as they were, the more junior case officers, which formed the bulk of our complement, simply did not have the experience to be put in positions, often detached from the main base physically, where they would have to make key decisions and interact with senior Kurdish officials.

Sid was invaluable in a number of ways. He could have been of infinitely more value if I had been able to formally place him into positions within our CIA base where he would have been acting as a CIA staff officer, releasing CIA communications and interacting directly with Headquarters personnel. Unfortunately, I could not, because Donald Rumsfeld’s direction had effectively forbidden us from fully integrating military personnel into our organizational structure.

It was a serious weakness in our method of operation, one which caused me ultimately to make my biggest error of our entire deployment and place a very problematic CIA officer in charge of the team I sent into Kirkuk. A number of very good men came close to dying as a consequence of that decision.

Despite the limitations placed on us by higher authority, our watch word on the ground was full integration. We were one team. There was one fight. To the maximum extent possible we would treat everyone exactly the same.

CIA personnel get paid via a different set of rules than military personnel do. Put simply, CIA personnel get paid by the hour. If you work more than a certain base number of hours, you get what is, in effect, overtime. This applies even in a war zone.

This overtime is paid in addition to things like “danger pay”—additional pay given when personnel are serving in areas where the level of

physical danger is judged to be extreme. What it means is that in an environment like the one in which we were working in Iraq, officers may be making a lot of money, substantially more than the Army NCO in the same base doing largely the same work.

Late in fall 2002 we had a mid-level officer join our base who seemed to find this distinction somehow amusing. In the course of his first few days in the base he made a significant number of comments to 10th Group and other military personnel in the base about what he was going to do with all his cash after the deployment was over and how sad it was for them that they were being “screwed over.”

This quickly came to Hans’s attention. Hans, who had exceptional judgment, had already pegged this officer from the moment he walked into the base as somebody who was going to be a problem. Hans quickly surfaced the matter to me.

Hans and I yanked the officer in question into our office and closed the door. We told him to knock it off. We made crystal clear that there were no organizational distinctions inside base, and then advised the officer in question that he could either get his mind right or go home—his choice.

The officer we counseled promised to shut up. He did. He did not substantially change his stripes. He remained a mediocre performer until the day he left country.

After talking to this individual officer, Hans and I called a meeting of all CIA personnel. It was one of the very few times we ever separated out CIA officers from other base personnel, but in this case the message we had to disseminate was for that audience alone.

That message was crystal clear. We are one team. Act like it or pack your gear and get on the next vehicle headed for the border. There will be zero tolerance for any other course of conduct.

We didn’t give this speech to the CIA complement as a whole because we perceived we had a widespread problem. To the contrary, overwhelmingly all of our people, regardless of affiliation, acted like professionals and were focused on one thing—winning the war. We took this course of action because we judged the issue of unit cohesion as absolutely critical, and because we wanted everyone, CIA and military, to

have a crystal clear, “now hear this” understanding of the attitude of base leadership—“Get with the program or get out.”

There were no further issues of this kind throughout the deployment.

Most of the focus of my comments about our work to this point has been on the collection of intelligence on Iraqi forces and Ansar. 10th Group and other military personnel assigned to us, members of certain SOF (Special Operations Forces) groups that we cannot identify here plus people like combat air controllers from the Air Force, were fully integrated into that effort as well. One of the best sources we had on the Iraqi Republican Guard, for instance, was recruited and handled jointly by me and one of the 10th Group NCOs, “Angry.” Having Angry on the case frankly meant I could coast. I showed up for meetings and watched him work.

In addition to the collection of this intelligence, however, our attached military personnel had a wide range of additional requirements, which involved the collection of intelligence on the area of operations and on Kurdish forces. By this I do not mean to suggest “spying” on the Kurds. I mean that if we were preparing to bring in forces and equipment and to lash up with the peshmerga, it was critical that we find out how the peshmerga operated, what they needed, and, maybe just as importantly, what they did not need.

In practice, this meant that, more than any other base personnel, our military brothers lived on the road. Kurdistan may not look like a huge area on the map. When you start trying to navigate the often rugged terrain on frequently problematic roads, however, it becomes vast very quickly. Peshmerga units were spread across the entire area, sometimes in fairly large bases, sometimes in tiny garrisons. Our military personnel, with assistance from our Ground Branch officers, visited every single one of those locations, some of them many times.

When Special Forces was first stood up it was intended to be focused on unconventional warfare. The idea was to pick up with the concept pioneered by the Office of Special Services (OSS) during World War II of having small groups of highly trained and carefully selected individuals working with native forces and providing the training, leadership, and

technical capabilities to transform those native forces into effective fighting units.

In recent years, a great deal of the focus on unconventional warfare seems to have been lost. Increasingly, when we talk about “special forces” or “special operations,” we are not talking about our unconventional warriors but “hyper-conventional” units. These are akin to what in World War II would have been called “commandos.” They are highly trained and superbly equipped units, which are focused on direct action—finding the enemy and taking him out directly using their own capabilities. There is, ultimately, nothing unconventional in any sense about this.

What our military personnel, particularly the 10th Group members, were about was something fundamentally different. They too were highly trained and more than capable of conducting direct action. That, however, was not their primary mission. Their mission was to interface with tens of thousands of Kurdish fighters, facilitate the movement of follow-on Special Forces personnel into country, and leverage Kurdish capabilities that would allow us to bring an army to the fight rather than simply small numbers of American soldiers.

Doing this requires a lot of skill and training. It also requires a tremendous amount of patience and the negotiating skills of a seasoned diplomat. Time and again base military personnel, usually under Happy’s direction, reached out to Kurdish units, found glaring deficiencies, and encountered some substantial unwillingness on the part of Kurdish commanders to recognize or admit that change was necessary. Getting them to adjust their thinking and listen to our suggestions required both tact and skill.

Early on in fall 2002 we received a request from the KDP for us to provide advanced training to the protective details that guarded the Barzani family. I was more than happy to oblige. Our security was largely dependent on Kurdish assistance. Anything we could do to return the favor I fully supported.

The first step in any training is to assess the capabilities of the unit to be trained. You can’t put together a course until you know what your students do and do not know. Accordingly, we sent a number of our people, drawn

from 10th Group, SOF, and Ground Branch personnel, to work with the Barzanis' protective detail, watch them go through some drills, and figure out where things stood.

That's as far as we got. Only hours into the training one of the members of the protective detail accidentally discharged his pistol and put a bullet into the wall inside a residence. Based on the observations of our base personnel the only real surprise was that it took hours for this to happen. Even the most basic safe weapons handling practices were being disregarded by Barzani security officers.

Happy, who was on site when the accidental discharge happened, shut down the training and returned to base. He and I and Hans huddled. There would be plenty of times when we would elect to take serious risks in the interest of mission accomplishment. This was not going to be one of them.

In Happy's estimation none of the members of the Barzanis' security detail were ready to begin anything close to an advanced course in weapons handling or protective detail operations. If we were going to proceed with training them, we were going to have to start all over and take everybody down to the level of learning basic firearms safety and weapons handling.

Happy didn't think it was worth our time. I agreed. So did Hans. We had much bigger fish to fry. We shut down the initiative entirely.

There were many similar discoveries that awaited us as we began to fully explore the capabilities of Kurdish forces. Unlike the situation with the protective detail, however, wherein we could simply elect not to address the situation, we had to find a way to work with what we had when it came to the peshmerga. This became all the more important as we slid into 2003 and there were still no US Army troops on the ground, other than those assigned to our base, in Kurdistan.

The original conception had been for a corps-sized US force driving across the Green Line from the north with the Kurds in support. Now we were edging ever closer to a situation in which the Kurds might be the only force of any size in an area of operations in which the Iraqis had deployed in excess of 150,000 men, with artillery, armor, and surface-to-surface missiles.

What our military personnel quickly determined was that this Kurdish force was of varying quality and generally poorly equipped for the task ahead of it. Some peshmerga units were effectively composed of fulltime soldiers and carrying first-rate weapons. Others were more like village militia and armed accordingly. All were at best light infantry.

There were no tanks to speak of. There was virtually no artillery. Even rounds for mortars were hard to come by.

Ammunition was in short supply and often old. Explosives for sabotage work or blowing bridges were sometimes so antiquated as to be unsafe to use or even move. On one occasion our 10th Group personnel went to inspect a large bunker filled with explosives and found that it was so old that the nitroglycerin in it had “sweated out” and crystallized on the exterior. In that form the explosives were dangerously unstable and by our standards should have been blown in place. The Kurds were still using the explosives regularly and continued to do so despite our protests.

Across the board what the Kurds could field was a force of infantry armed with small arms, moving mostly in pickup trucks and incapable of standing toe to toe with a modern, mechanized force in the open and winning. Something would have to change dramatically. The Kurds would need better weaponry than they had, and they would have to be able to call on US air support. Otherwise it was going to be a very tough road in the north in the absence of significant US ground forces.

Making these kinds of assessments was only one portion of the work to be done, however. The bigger, even more crucial, task was the development of the personal relationships with the peshmerga commanders that would allow us to work together as allies in combat. That doesn’t just happen; it takes a lot of work and a lot of time.

Back in Washington, where PowerPoint slides are king and plans pass for reality, none of this matters. Everything seems very straightforward. You put a pilot team on the ground. Then you move in the full Special Forces Group. Everyone “marries up,” and you go to war. Success is assumed.

In the real world, where things get done, that’s not how it happens at all. If you have good people, and you do your job, you have a chance of pulling it off. If you have clowns, bureaucrats, and charlatans, disaster follows. We

had very good people on the pilot team, and they did their jobs. The clowns, bureaucrats, and charlatans would follow later.

Month after month our guys crisscrossed Kurdistan, drinking endless glasses of tea, eating countless meals of rice and lamb, trading stories, and building the trust on which success could be built. When the war came they weren't unknown foreigners any longer. They were friends, family, and colleagues. They were the kind of people you go into battle with.

Along the way they compiled all the mind-numbing data a modern military needs. They identified how much weight every bridge could hold, so somebody later wouldn't try to drive a tank across one that could barely support a truck. They identified helicopter landings zones, drop zones for paratroopers, escape and evasion routes for troops to use *in extremis*. By the time they were done there wasn't any data of this kind that they had not provided to 10th Group back in Colorado and to the Intelligence Community.

All of this was, of course, in addition to all of the other work our military brothers were doing as part of the base: handling sources, riding shotgun for high-risk meetings, helping us take Iraqi sources off the field. One long, exhausting day was followed by a few hours' sleep and then yet another long, exhausting day. Not a single man ever faltered. Not a single man ever complained.

Our military team members and our Ground Branch personnel also developed a sideline, almost a hobby, of collecting Turkish drones. Early on in fall 2002 a drone crashed a few miles from our base. We had no idea whose it was, but our guys went out, found the crash site, and brought back to base all the pieces that could be identified. A quick examination showed that it was of US manufacture and had been sold to the Turks, who were now apparently using it to gather intelligence on us and on the Kurds.

We wrote up the find for Headquarters and just for fun hung on to the wreckage. Then another drone crashed and was recovered. Then yet another.

Pretty soon we had a big portion of a room in the main base house filled with the mangled remains of Turkish drones. Apparently, whoever was operating them was not particularly adept at keeping them flying.

Eventually, more for amusement than anything else, I showed the Turkish lieutenant who came daily for briefings our pile of debris and asked him if he wanted to take the parts back to his people. Flustered, he pretended to have no idea what I was talking about and left in a great hurry.

My personal contribution to the task of building our relationship with the peshmerga was minimal. I was buried in other tasks. I showed up when required to meet senior commanders and make sure that they understood our commitment to the fight. Otherwise I tried to stay out of the way and trusted my people to tell me when my presence was required.

On one such occasion in early 2003 I was asked to come along to a meeting of all of the peshmerga commanders in a certain portion of KDP territory. As described to us by the Kurds we were to attend as honored guests only. There would be a dinner. We would listen to an address by a Kurdish general. Then we would all go home. Easy day.

I arrived at the venue in a vehicle along with Happy and several other 10th Group members. We were ushered into a large building, greeted, and then asked to follow one of the junior Kurdish officers present. It wasn't clear where we were going, but we assumed we were being taken to some sort of meeting room where the gathering was to occur.

After a succession of doors and hallways I followed the Kurdish officer through another doorway and found myself standing on a stage. In front of the stage was a large outdoor theater area. Standing in that area were several hundred peshmerga commanders. As soon as I appeared, they all began to cheer and clap.

I turned to Happy who was right behind me. He grinned and shrugged to indicate he had no idea what the hell was going on either. I looked at the Kurdish officer who pointed me toward a podium set in the middle of the stage.

One minor detail had been omitted from the briefing I got prior to showing up for the event: I was giving a speech. They were all there to listen to me.

There are times you can take a pass. There are other times when, ready or not, it is game time. I walked to the podium. I began to speak.

I talked about Saddam. I talked about Kurdistan. I told them what I had told Masoud all those months before—that we were here to win, to end the nightmare, and to secure the future. Whether or not I was coherent I don't know. How many of them understood what I said is anyone's guess. At the end, though, there was much more cheering and clapping. Washington still needed to get its act together, but in Kurdistan we were getting ready to go to war.

CHAPTER 17

Propaganda, Transmitters, and Country Music

One of the keys to running successful operations is having fun. Intelligence work can be deadly serious. Mistakes can get you killed. You can't function, though, if you don't find ways to amuse yourself now and again ... like making the commander of the Iraqi 5th Corps listen to some good old-fashioned wailing country music for a while.

As we moved into 2003 a lot of things remained unresolved. We were still alone. The Turks were still no help, and almost a year after we had promised the Kurds Javelin missiles and other hardware we still had not managed to actually deliver anything. Nonetheless momentum was building. Ready or not we were going to war sometime in the next few months.

In preparation for that we began to focus heavily on propaganda and psychological operations. Saddam ruled by fear. We needed to begin to attack that control mechanism. We needed to start steering the Iraqi people toward the conclusion that Saddam was going to be removed and that a new day was coming.

Headquarters had its own ideas on how this should be done, developed—like most things in Washington—in a vacuum. One day, as part of a resupply run we received several boxes containing strange multicolored flags and tens of thousands of leaflets printed in Arabic and Kurdish with the same flag on them. There was no explanation as to what they were, but

an inquiry to Headquarters resulted in us being advised that this was to be the new flag of a free Kurdistan.

I was perplexed. First, I was unaware that anyone had ever made the decision that the United States was supporting the idea of a free and independent Kurdistan. That idea died in the aftermath of World War I, and we had actually been steering clear of it ever since.

Second, I had no idea where the design of the flag came from or what it was supposed to symbolize. The Kurds already had a flag that they used to symbolize the idea of a free and united Kurdistan composed of the Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia. This flag Headquarters had sent us bore no resemblance to that or any other regional flag.

We showed the flag to our primary Kurdish interlocutor, Masrur Barzani's deputy. He was as confused as we were and stated simply that that to him it looked like the flag of "some African country." He walked away scratching his head and wondering, I am sure, why Americans were so odd.

We shoved the flags and the leaflets into a burn barrel and torched them. They were more than just useless; pushing their use would have made us look like idiots.

Along with the "Kurdistan" flags we also received hundreds of small American flags. These we hung on to for future use.

Sometime in late 2002 we received an addition to our base complement. The new guy, "Jungle," was a senior officer, actually senior to me. He was, however, not sent out to take over my job. Regardless of his rank, Jungle was under the command of Hans and me.

I knew Jungle. When I was still in training, he was already out in the field running ops. Prior to joining the Agency he had been in Special Forces. He was a good man. Once upon a time, in fact, he had been a stud.

Unfortunately, by the time he got to Kurdistan Jungle had a lot of miles on him. He had slowed down. We were moving very, very fast and pushing hard. He wasn't up to it, and the stress began to show almost immediately. He was snapping at people, getting into confrontations, and showing stress fractures everywhere.

I really needed senior managers. Hans and I were stretched thin. We had brought in a number three, a chief of operations, “Snake,” to help with the workload, but we were still running out of hours in the day.

Still, I made the call that we could not plug Jungle into managing and leading agent operations or handling sources. We would put him in charge of our growing propaganda operations and figuring out how to get in Saddam’s head. The bulk of that tasking would be staff work, and somehow I felt a lot more comfortable having Jungle running meetings at base and writing message traffic than I did putting him on the street.

Jungle fired up a number of initiatives. Headquarters was still floating around in space designing flags in a vacuum, so we took charge of messaging locally. With substantial input from the Kurds, we created propaganda leaflets and pamphlets and then set up networks to take them across the Green Line and start distributing them inside Iraqi-controlled territory.

Typically, an operation would work like this. We would have thousands of leaflets calling on Iraqis to overthrow Saddam printed. Then we would have our assets smuggle them across the Green Line and into the heart of a city like Mosul. Under the cover of darkness our assets would dump literally stacks of the propaganda material at bus stops, in public markets, and at train stations.

Then our assets would melt away and disappear. With morning light the streets would be littered with leaflets telling the average Iraqi that after decades of horror a new day was coming. It doesn’t sound like much, but when you have been cut off from any news except what the government wants you to hear, for most of your adult life, this grabs your attention.

Leaflets were good. They were the first sign for a lot of people that the end was coming. Still, we wanted something that could reach a lot more people a lot more quickly. We wanted something that would be non-stop, not intermittent.

We set up a radio station.

Not far from our base was an old commercial radio station that had been off the air for years. We bought it. We hired some Kurds to run it. We got it repaired and back on the air. Radio Free Kurdistan was live.

Then we start working on content. A lot of that would deliberately be regular Arabic language and Kurdish language music. We wanted a station people wanted to listen to, after all.

We weren't doing this to provide free entertainment, however. We were doing this to send the loudest possible signal that Saddam was about to be history. I wanted to say that clearly, not just in propaganda broadcasts, but in an edgier, more personal way.

We brought defectors in country, senior Iraqi military officers who had stood up and opposed Saddam. Some of these were guys whom I had worked with in years past and who had paid a heavy price for defying Saddam. We had them get on the air and talk directly to their former colleagues inside Saddam's Iraq. We had them talk about why they were risking everything to stand up to tyranny. They promised everyone listening that a new day was coming, that the Americans were their friends, and that Iraq was on the verge of a new beginning.

It is difficult to convey the amount of personal courage it took for these men to take the action they did. They weren't on the air as anonymous voices. They were identifying themselves in true name, broadcasting so everyone could hear them, including the same butchers and assassins that were hunting our people day and night.

A good example was a gentleman I will call Pasha. Pasha was from a prominent Sunni Muslim family. He was a career military officer who had been a general at the time of the First Gulf War. Pasha was a hard man, and he was an Iraqi patriot. He was not a thug, and he was not a murderer.

In the aftermath of the First Gulf War, when the Kurds and the Shia rose against Saddam, the Iraqi military was directed to turn its fire on its own citizens. Tanks, machineguns, and helicopters were used to slaughter unarmed civilians. Pasha's unit was directed to participate.

Pasha refused. In a nation where Saddam's word was law and where people were tortured to death for the most minor of transgressions, this man had the courage to hold true to his principles and do the right thing. Pasha and his family were forced to flee Iraq and live in exile.

What Pasha did in refusing orders was remarkable enough. What he did next was even more remarkable. Instead of sliding into oblivion and starting

a new life in the West, Pasha went to work organizing resistance to Saddam inside.

I met Pasha in the mid-1990s in the Middle East. I convinced him to join forces with CIA and try to bring an end to the madness in Baghdad. For years he and I worked together, running operations into Iraq, collecting intelligence, and laying the groundwork for the inevitable demise of Saddam's mad regime. Pasha himself crossed back into Iraq countless times, ignoring the price on his head.

Now, in the mountains of Kurdistan, he and others like him thundered day and night on our radio station, talking not just to the Iraqi people but to their old colleagues. Hour after hour they spoke from the heart, willing the men of the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Republican Guard to stand aside and let Saddam fall.

This was powerful stuff. Everything we were hearing from across the Green Line via our sources said morale in the Iraqi Army was tanking. It was time, though, to add a little American touch.

We threw in some American pop and country music. It was our way of effectively signing the broadcasts. It was us telling Saddam that we, the Americans, were here, that we weren't leaving, and that we were coming for him. It was our way of calling Saddam out in front of his own people.

Day after day, week after week, we blasted Joe Diffie, Toby Keith, Sheryl Crow, and the Eagles across the Green Line. Day after day, week after week, with every note we reminded the entire Iraqi Army and anybody with a radio that the Kurds weren't alone anymore. The Americans were here; they weren't afraid, and they weren't leaving until they had Saddam's head on a platter.

Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist
And the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Toby Keith, "The Angry American"

Saddam's survival was predicated on fear. Our radio station said in the loudest, most American way we could think of, "We aren't afraid. Saddam should be."

That was better than just tossing leaflets around, and radio reached a lot of people. Still, we needed more. We needed to start showing just how effectively we could reach out and touch things inside what Saddam still thought was his territory.

We decided to set up a radio station inside Mosul.

We had a small, low-power radio transmitter brought in country. Basically, it was a radio station in a box. Then we put together a plan to smuggle it into Mosul.

The transmitter wouldn't reach very far, so we would have to get it close. The battery wouldn't last very long on its own. We would have to come up with a power source. Jungle and some other base personnel went to work on a plan.

We wanted this thing to make a statement. We wanted the most senior Iraqis we could think of to wake up one morning and find a new radio station on the air, blasting out anti-Saddam messages and Western music from inside Mosul itself. We wanted everybody to hear for themselves that the Americans aren't just up in the mountains somewhere; they're right here.

The solution came down to this. We installed the radio transmitter into the trunk of a nondescript Kurdish car and rigged it up so that it would run directly off the power generated by the car's engine. Then we rigged up the transmitter so that it would broadcast continuously in a loop songs and messages loaded onto an attached hard drive.

Before we left the States, Gunner, our shooting instructor, had given me a couple of bumper stickers for both the New York Police Department and the New York Fire Department. Gunner had assumed our team was headed for Afghanistan, and I had let him think that to maintain some measure of operational security. I took the bumper stickers now and put them on the transmitter. I did not want there to be any doubt in the minds of the Iraqis who ultimately found this thing as to who had sent it.

Kurdish assets working with our personnel then smuggled the car across the Green Line, drove it into Mosul, and parked it about a quarter of a mile from the villa where the Iraqi 5th Corps commander, the senior Iraqi military officer in the sector, lived. They dumped the car, left it running, and flipped a switch inside that turned on the transmitter.

Radio Free Mosul was on the air. The transmitter didn't have a huge range, maybe a mile or two depending on conditions. That was enough for our broadcast to start banging out of radios not only in the corps commander's compound but in dozens of other Iraqi military and government installations.

Our sources inside Mosul gave us chapter and verse on the uproar that resulted. All of a sudden the Americans and their allies weren't beaming messages in from outside. There was a radio station live in Mosul, the hometown of many of Iraq's senior military officers, and that station was telling everyone who would listen that the end of days was coming for Saddam.

The corps commander lost his mind. He ordered an immediate hunt for the transmitter and pulled in all of the electronic warfare assets he could find to help pinpoint the signal. The Iraqis proved horribly inefficient. By the time the transmitter had been located the car had run out of gas, and the transmissions had ceased.

The broadcast was ended, but it did not matter. The point had been made. We are here. We are coming for you. Pick a side. Pick one quickly, because time is short.



The CIA's radio station in Mosul.

CHAPTER 18

Chalabi and the Pentagon—Badr Corps, Marines, Supply from Space

As we slid into 2003 the mood had definitely changed. We weren't, in many ways, any closer to being able to carry out the original plan; in fact, large portions of the original plan, like the movement of the 4th Infantry Division into Kurdistan, seemed to simply be dissolving before our eyes. Yet, the message from back home was clear and unmistakable. We are done waiting. It is time to do this thing.

This meant it was crunch time on a whole range of issues. Somehow, some way, we were going to have to find solutions. Somehow, some way, we were going to start a war, and there would be repercussions.

One day at base we received a message at Headquarters. It said that a group of US Marines was in Kurdistan meeting with KDP leaders. It did not say they were coming. It did not ask us to assist. It just notified us, in a sort of “by the way” fashion, that US military personnel not assigned to our base were now nearby.

We made some inquiries with the Kurds, who seemed understandably puzzled as to why we would have to ask them where our own people were. The Marines, all three of them, were, in fact, in Kurdistan. They were staying in a KDP guesthouse all of about 3 miles away. Intrigued, I got in a car with Hans and we went to see what this was all about.

In a cluster of rooms on the second floor of the KDP guesthouse we found Lieutenant-General Henry Osman, Colonel Keith Lawless, and

Master Gunnery-Sergeant McPherson. They were alone. McPherson was hanging out a window trying to rig an antenna, so that he could communicate with Washington and let them know where the team was.

Hans and I introduced ourselves. The Marines seemed confused. They were generally aware that the CIA had a presence in Iraq, but they had been provided with no information regarding our location and no mechanism for contacting us. They had no idea that our base was only a few minutes away nor did they have any idea how large our operation was or what capabilities we had.

We asked if we could be of assistance and offered that we had been in Kurdistan by this point more or less continuously for eight or nine months and had a fairly robust setup. We could, for instance, pump out whatever message traffic the Marines wanted on our communications system and route it wherever it needed to go—unless, of course, they really wanted to keep playing with their antenna.

The Marines accepted the offer. They made it clear that they had never intended to end up in Kurdistan with a total of three guys and a less than adequate communications package. The problem had been the Turks, who had refused to allow them to bring most of their gear and who had also refused to allow them to bring any weapons. We told them we could relate.

We promised to fix the situation. We loaded them in our vehicles, brought them to our base, and got their message traffic sent. Then we hooked them up with coffee and other supplies, issued them weapons out of our stocks, and took them back to their quarters. From that point on we maintained regular contact with them through the duration of their deployment.

The Marines were in Kurdistan to meet with the KDP and discuss planning for handling refugees when the fighting began. Based on history, it was recognized that hundreds of thousands of people might flee into the mountains for shelter once the war began. General Osman and his staff had the task of putting together the plan to handle that contingency.

The Marines remained in country only a few weeks, but during that period we developed a tight bond. In many ways, we had exactly the same ethic: “get the job done.” Handicapped as we were by Turkish

obstructionism and Washington's continued inability to get the invasion plan off the ground, they nonetheless pushed ahead and did what they were sent to do. When the war finally did start I often thought how much better off we would have been had General Osman and his staff been in charge.

Shortly after the Marines arrived, Ambassador Zalmay Khalizad came in country as well. While in Iraq he met with General Osman, and I went down to the guesthouse where the Marines were staying to attend the meeting. I remember being excited about the opportunity to be present and to talk to a senior diplomat who was presumably well plugged in with policy makers in DC. This would be a good chance to get some real insight into where we were headed and also to make sure that folks at the top back home knew exactly what was going on in Iraq.

I was sorely disappointed. Khalizad made clear from the outset of the meeting that there was nothing either General Osman or I could tell him that he did not already know. The meeting was not a venue for us to brief him; it was an opportunity for him to lecture us on what the situation was and where we were headed.

I had a couple of follow-on contacts with Khalizad before he left Iraq. They were carbon copies of my first experience: he knew everything already; he asked no questions; he tolerated no interruptions. There was clearly no value whatsoever in his eyes to any of our intelligence or our insights.

Roughly in the same timeframe Ahmed Chalabi arrived in Iraq selling his very own personal brand of snake oil.

As I noted earlier, Northern Iraq was full of opposition leaders, most of whom had next to no following and were of little to no value in toppling Saddam. Of all of these individuals, however, no one could hold a candle to Ahmed Chalabi, the charlatan to end all charlatans.

Chalabi was an Iraqi politician and the founder of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), one of the best known of the many Iraqi opposition groups. Chalabi had virtually no following inside Iraq. What he did have was tremendous access to senior-level US policy makers and politicians.

Throughout my career I had seen a lot of guys and gals like Chalabi. They speak wonderful English. They dress in Western fashion. They make

all the right noises about democracy and individual freedom and convince folks in DC that if only they receive the right amount of support, measured in hundreds of millions of dollars, then they can take charge and turn their respective nations into loyal allies of the United States.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that what plays well in DC does not necessarily mean anything back in the Middle East. The guy who talks a good game in Washington quite likely has no pull of any kind with his own people, with whom his wonderful English skills and expensive suits might actually be more of a liability than a selling point.

That was certainly the case with Chalabi. While guys like Pasha were sneaking back across the border into Iraq and working hard to tear down Saddam's house of horrors, Chalabi was eating in the best restaurants in Europe and the United States, spinning tales and convincing American officials who could hardly find Iraq on the map that he was some sort of Middle Eastern George Washington.

Chalabi was also a bald-faced liar when it came to intelligence. To feather his own nest and to steer American policy over the years, he had fabricated all kinds of information and passed it to a succession of CIA officers. In response, the CIA had issued a "burn notice" on him, which, before it became a cool name for a silly TV show, meant that we had washed our hands of him. We would not meet him. We would not deal with him.

Undeterred, Chalabi had moved on to selling his bullshit to folks in the Pentagon who were oblivious to his record and contemptuous of CIA. That America's premier intelligence service had decided Chalabi was a pathological liar was of no concern. Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon didn't think there was anything CIA could do that they could not do better anyway.

Chalabi entered Northern Iraq in early 2003 and set up shop at a compound several hours from our base. He was accompanied by a US Army colonel who was his Pentagon handler. Shortly after Chalabi's arrival we got word that he was going to have some sort of gathering at his compound and address Kurdish representatives and other opposition leaders. We weren't invited, but I decided to crash the party anyway.

Along with a few other members of the base I drove down to Chalabi's compound. I had never been there before. The compound turned out to be a large, contemporary home on what amounted to an estate high in the mountains. Everything inside was top of the line, and the overall feel was of an expensive vacation home at Lake Tahoe.

We flashed our KDP identification cards, got by security, and parked our vehicles outside. There were already another 50 cars outside the main house. We walked in and joined the crowd that was jammed into a huge living room kind of space with a vaulted ceiling.

I looked around the room at the hundred or so people present. I recognized almost none of them. I wondered how it was possible that we had been in Iraq all this time and not run across the bulk of these individuals. I wondered how long most of them had been in country and in what European capitals they had been spending their time.

After a few minutes Chalabi stepped to the front of the room. He had a vaguely Arab appearance but looked like he was probably more at home in London or on K Street than he was here in the mountains of Kurdistan. He was wearing a three-piece suit, which looked like it cost more than my car back home.

The US Army colonel assigned to Chalabi came in from a nearby room and stood a few feet away. I looked at him, and he looked at me. He showed no interest in who I was. I wondered how many Americans he thought were running around Northern Iraq.

Two young Americans entered the room shortly after the colonel. One was an attractive younger woman with an eye-patch. The other was a young guy in a nice suit. The man noticed me, came over, and introduced himself. He and the woman were representatives of a high-priced lobbying firm based in Washington, DC. Chalabi was their client.

Chalabi began to speak. Everything he said was complete and utter hogwash. He claimed to have vast support inside Iraq. He claimed to have been designated to take charge of a new Iraqi government when Saddam was gone. He claimed all sorts of things, none of which were true.

Everything about him stunk of con-man. I was thunderstruck. I knew he was a fraud before I entered the room. I did not know he was a poor one.

Chalabi droned on, singing his own praises and acting like he personally was going to take Baghdad. I pushed my way over to the American colonel, leaned in so he could hear me, and said, “Can you believe anybody actually buys this bullshit?”

The colonel turned to me and looked puzzled. He had the dazed, deer-in-the-headlights look of a true believer. The last time I had seen that look had been in a small church back home in Appalachia amongst followers of a local “snake-handling” preacher.

“He’s the future of Iraq,” said the colonel.

Oh, God, I thought, you drank the Kool-Aid.

I left the gathering at Chalabi’s mountain estate not long after. I never spoke with him directly, and he showed no interest in finding out who the white boys in civilian clothes were walking around his house. I assume he knew who we were and exactly what we thought of him.

I wrote up my encounter with Chalabi for Headquarters and sent it in. Several weeks later, on the eve of the invasion, we were told that Chalabi had offered to provide the Department of Defense with the services of his private “army.” According to the message traffic, Chalabi had stated that he had a secret base in Kurdistan and that many hundreds of highly trained personnel were standing by there to go into battle alongside the US Army.

We told Headquarters what they already knew. There was no base. There was no army. There was a nice estate, probably paid for with money the US government had given Chalabi to support his “opposition movement.” There was likely an extensive wine cellar. That was it.

We made some inquiries through our extensive source network. We determined that Chalabi was in direct contact with the Iranians. His Iranian friends had agreed to provide the troops that Chalabi was passing off as his. They were all members of the Badr Corps.

The Badr Corps was and is a Shia militia group built, funded, and directed by Iran. During the Iran–Iraq War they had fought alongside the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Until the fall of Saddam they were based inside Iran. They were opposed to Saddam, but they were no friends of ours, and their goal inside Iraq was to facilitate the Iranian

domination of that nation. They were, in short, a fully bought and paid for subsidiary of the IRGC.

We wrote all this up for Headquarters. Chalabi was acting on behalf of the mullahs in Tehran. He was lying about everything. Again.

Our intelligence reports on the issue were disseminated throughout the Intelligence Community. Iraqi operations at Headquarters briefed key personnel at the Pentagon and made sure they understood exactly what was going on. Chalabi, acting on behalf of the Iranians, was feeding us Iranian proxies and passing them off as friends.

Nothing we said made any difference. Every objection we raised was ignored. When the invasion of Iraq began and US troops entered Iraq from Kuwait, US Air Force transports flew Chalabi's army, a battalion of the IRGC-trained Badr Corps, into Iraq and put them into the field alongside US forces.

Almost immediately our source network, which reached well into southern Iraq, began to light up. The Badr Corps guys weren't doing any fighting. They were spending a lot of time spray-painting pro-Iranian graffiti on buildings and telling the local populace that the Americans would be gone soon and that the future belonged to Iran.

The folks working for us inside were alarmed and puzzled. Why were the Americans in league with the Iranians? Why were we helping Iran take control of Iraq?

We wrote all of this information up as well as it came in. Again, all our warnings fell on deaf ears. The Pentagon had its own version of reality, and facts weren't going to get in the way of it.

While Chalabi proved to be a fraud and devoid of any real following in Iraq, there were others who were very much for real. In early 2003 the Kurds revealed to us that they had extensive contacts with Shia leaders throughout Iraq. In fact, the Shia and the Kurds were engaged in some wide-ranging discussions about what Iraq would look like after Saddam.

I met with Masrur Barzani on this topic on several occasions. He laid out for me the extent of his contacts. He then offered to broker a meeting between Shia leaders and me in Kurdistan to discuss post-invasion plans for Iraq in general and the future of Shia Iraqis in particular.

We reported all of this to Headquarters. Discussions then took place in Washington, DC. Ultimately, in response to our message traffic we received some very lukewarm, not to say dismissive, commentary. No one back home was aware of a Shia–Kurdish communications channel, and therefore they were inclined to believe it did not exist. Washington also believed, apparently, that it was physically impossible for Shia political leaders to travel into Kurdistan from Iraqi-controlled territory.

Not for the first time in my career I wondered what the value of intelligence was if all previously unreported facts were regarded as suspect purely because they had been previously unreported. Wasn't it our job to tell DC things the folks back home did not already know?

I also wondered why the passage of Shia leaders across the Green Line was so unbelievable. I was standing on a rug that had crossed that line. I was driving a vehicle that had come across that line. We were meeting daily with multiple sources that we had brought across that line and then put securely back in place after we were done. The Kurds were master smugglers, and everything in Iraq was for sale.

We were given a reluctant go-ahead to proceed with the meeting. A major Shia tribal chief came to KDP territory. We met and discussed our plans for the invasion, laying out our intention to finish the job and remove Saddam from power. The chief was, understandably enough, skeptical. He had heard Americans talk tough before, and Saddam was still standing. We spent a lot of time listening to the gruesome details of what Saddam had done to the Shia in 1991 while we had sat by and watched.

The chief went back across the Green Line. A short time later he returned with a full-sized delegation composed of Shia leaders from across Iraq. We listened for hours while these men unloaded years of frustration on us. They all remembered well how we had stood by and done nothing to stop their slaughter after the First Gulf War. They gave us chapter and verse.

Gradually, with a lot of help from Masrur and other Kurdish leaders, we made progress. The delegation returned to Iraq. A second delegation, with additional members not present previously, came and met with us. We

plowed much of the same ground, building trust and promising that this time we meant business.

I began to push the Shia leaders to agree to rise up and help us overthrow Saddam. This was a bridge too far. They were willing to help in many ways, but only once they saw American troops and American tanks. They had been fooled once; they would not be fooled again.

The Shia did agree to gather intelligence, and with their assistance we significantly expanded our agent network into southern and eastern Iraq. We also acquired directly from them vast quantities of information, which we wrote up in intelligence channels, on the Iraqi military and the security situation inside Iraq. When the Shia leaders went south, they took with them dozens of satellite phones to facilitate future communication.

Washington was happy to have the intelligence. They were dismissive of the possibility of working with these Shia leaders to plan for post-occupation efforts inside Iraq, and we never received any authorization to explore that topic or enlist these leaders' support in helping us manage the situation once Saddam was gone. In essence, we told them that we had the situation under control, and we did not need their help.

These guys did not own expensive suits. They did not speak English. They did not know anybody in the Pentagon. They were not represented by K Street lobbying firms. We did not need them apparently.

By early 2003 American troops were ramping up for invasion in Kuwait. The plan for a comparable American invasion force coming from the north was looking increasingly like a pipe dream. We were looking at going to war with a primarily Kurdish force in our area of operations. That made it all the more imperative that we find a way to make good on our still unfulfilled promise to provide advanced weaponry like Javelin missiles.

Sometime in January we got the first of what proved to be a series of messages telling us that arms for the Kurds were going to be brought in by air. Headquarters had procured large quantities of weapons, including anti-tank rockets, and they were going to send them to us by air. We were directed to get ready to receive those weapons.

The airfield we had wanted to build had never been finished. Even if it had been, it would not have been large enough to accommodate the

transport aircraft that were coming. That meant we needed to whistle up an airport.

There was an airport in Irbil. That was right on the Green Line. Landing large cargo aircraft under the noses of a heavily armed adversary was not an option. We needed another place.

North of our base about 45 minutes was an old Iraqi airfield called Harir. It was in reasonably good shape, but there were no facilities there. What remained was an airstrip surrounded by fields and villages.

We went to the Kurds. Together we secured trucks, forklifts, and other gear. Our military personnel set up to run operations at the site, mark the airfield, and bring in the cargo planes under cover of darkness.

Nothing happened. The Turks denied permission for the cargo aircraft to transit their airspace. It was déjà vu all over again.

“Not to worry,” said Headquarters. “We will talk to the Turks and get this straightened out. Trust us.”

Right.

Several more times we were told to prepare to receive inbound aircraft. Several more times we got the KDP to spin up the necessary support—moving trucks, gear, and hundreds of people to a remote site in the mountains. Several more times we sat, waited, and nothing came.

Shortly thereafter I was told that a solution had been identified. The cargo aircraft were going to fly down the precise international boundary between Turkey and Iran and then turn into Iraqi airspace. This would mean that they were not technically in the airspace of either country, and no one could object.

I told Headquarters I didn’t think international boundaries worked that way. I said I was pretty sure that there was no magic “neutral” space in between sovereign nations. They told me I was wrong.

Somebody somewhere ultimately agreed with me. The flight never came.

My breaking point came with the “supply from space” proposal. Late one night in Kurdistan I received a call from Headquarters on the satellite phone. Hans and I were sitting at our desks, bleary-eyed, trying to push out intelligence reports and then crash for a few hours of badly needed sleep.

It was Iraqi Ops. They announced that they had finally cracked the code on getting supplies to the Kurds. They were going to send in the cargo planes above 75,000 feet, which meant they would no longer technically be in the airspace of any nation. The planes would then dive down when they were over our location and land at Harir.

I paused. I wondered if maybe the lack of sleep was beginning to get to me.

“If I understand what you are telling me, I think you intend to supply us from outer space,” I said. “Is there a lunar base involved somehow?”

The guy on the other end of the line did not see the humor in my comments. They were deadly serious about all this back home, apparently.

I told Iraqi Ops that I did not think national airspace worked the way they thought it did. I told them I could guarantee the Turks did not think so. I suggested that the aircraft being used for this mission likely could not make it to 75,000 feet.

I was assured that I was wrong about everything. I was ordered to spin everyone up and get ready. The planes were going to be off the ground within hours. They were headed our way.

I hung up and turned to Hans, who had been listening in on the conversation.

“What are we going to do?” he asked. He had a deeply pained look on his face. He had long since had enough of the disconnect between reality and Washington, DC.

“Nothing,” I said. “They ain’t coming.”

It had been a year since the first survey team into Kurdistan told Masoud Barzani that we would get him Javelin missiles and other critically needed items. We had not delivered on anything. My people were holding the relationship with the Kurds together based on personal relationships and the bonds they had forged through long hours worked together and shared risk.

That did not mean there wasn’t a breaking point. Every time we made the Kurds spin up for a supply run and didn’t deliver we lost credibility. Every time we stood around an airfield in the dark signaling for planes that didn’t materialize we looked a little weaker. Every time we promised

something and didn't come through we lost face. We couldn't take many more of these hits.

We had told the Kurds the war was going to start in the spring of 2002. We had told them they would be fighting alongside the United States Army. It was 2003, and they were still all alone. It was time to stop promising things that we could not deliver.

We didn't tell the Kurds about the "supply from space." Shockingly, the planes did not come.

Six more times Headquarters told me to spin up for inbound flights. Six more times I directed that we ignore the order. I didn't tell Headquarters that, and I didn't tell my people that. They didn't need to be put in the middle. I just pocketed the instruction.

If the flights had materialized I would have been in a tough spot. They didn't, and I knew they weren't coming. Headquarters was floundering, and I had seen enough to know that.

I also had the advantage of having an inside man, or, in this case, woman.

My wife, known to the team members as "Sultana," was serving in a senior position at Headquarters. By virtue of that, while she was not in Iraqi Ops, she was in many of the most critical meetings concerning the pending invasion. She had a secure satellite phone on her desk. I had the number.

Time and time again, especially in early 2003, when we were left bewildered by message traffic from Headquarters, I picked up the phone and called Sultana. Time and time again she cut through the bullshit, gave us the straight scoop, and told us what was really going on.

Sometimes the juxtaposition between what Sultana told us and what we were told officially was jarring. We would receive a message telling us that the Turks were on the verge of agreeing to let the US Army transit Turkish territory, for instance, and Sultana, who had been in the same meeting, would tell us something diametrically opposed. She was never wrong.

The information that Sultana provided to us became so important to our operations that base personnel would often crowd my office to listen in on phone calls with her. On occasion, at a loss to get a straight scoop from back home, they would even come to me and plead, "Call Sultana, ask her."

We were the “lost boys”; she was Wendy. There were more than a few days when it seemed she was the only one who had not gone mad back home.

CHAPTER 19

Mutiny and Training Kurdish Teams

From the beginning of our deployment to Iraq, Headquarters had been obsessed with the idea of raising an Arab force to fight alongside the United States military when the invasion came. The first President Bush had assembled a coalition of dozens of nations to participate in the First Gulf War. The second President Bush was struggling to get anybody to show up and back our play.

Our response to Headquarters' interest had always been to call their attention to the existence of the peshmerga. If they were looking for Middle Easterners who weren't afraid to fight and who would gladly sign on to take down Saddam, then there were literally tens of thousands of Kurds who would answer the call. That they were legendary fighters and already in theater only added to the attraction as far as we were concerned.

Back home the idea fell on deaf ears. Washington did not want Kurds rolling down out of the hills and across the Green Line. It wanted a force of Arabs that could be billed as a "Free Iraqi Army." Whatever it took, such a force was going to be created.

Back in spring 2002, while I was waiting to go into Iraq, I had gone to Michigan and, along with other officers, attempted to recruit Iraqis there—who had fled Iraq to escape Saddam's persecution—to help us. We had pitched them to sign up and help us recruit, train, and lead a force that

would free their nation from oppression. Not a single man accepted the offer. They had made it out. They were not going back.

The first group of recruits for this new army—ultimately christened by somebody back home the “Scorpions”—was processed by members of my team shortly after our return to Iraq in fall 2002. These were the individuals about whom I had been contacted while we were still making our way to base the day we brought our full teams in country. Once processed by base personnel, these individuals were moved out of country and taken to a secret training facility abroad.

Additional groups of individuals followed and were all moved to the same facility. There they were organized into units and trained by CIA personnel. They were also provided with the latest equipment and weaponry.

The individuals recruited for the Scorpions were said to be Iraqi patriots who were willing to die to free their nation from tyranny. Maybe some of the men in that unit fit that bill. Most of them were thugs and cowards. They were provided to us by opposition leaders who were paid by the head. Those opposition leaders sold us whoever was available with no thought to the consequences.

During training there were repeated accidents and incidents. Men were raped in the barracks. Other criminal incidents were frequent.

Irregardless, the Scorpions were moved from their secret training facility to a nearby, friendly Arab nation in advance of the March 2003 invasion. There they took possession of additional equipment including vehicles and helicopters. On paper they were now a potent strike force.

Questions about their ability to function in combat remained. A good friend of mine, a Ground Branch officer who went on to hold senior command in the Clandestine Service, was sent out to put the Scorpions through their paces and determine whether or not they could be put into action.

My friend was a very capable and experienced officer. He was also a no bullshit, “call it like it is” kind of individual. He told the truth. If the Scorpions went into action there was going to be a bloodbath, and most of the blood would be their own. They were combat ineffective and would

need additional months of training before there could be any hope of putting them to use.

One separate team of four members from this effort was brought in country with us in late 2002. They were billed at that point as being the first of many sabotage teams that would be sent to us and tasked with striking targets inside Iraqi territory when the war began. No other teams ever materialized.

We stashed this Scorpion team in a compound high in the mountains with Kurdish security. We wanted them to lay low and stay off the radar. Over a period of months we supplied them with food and shelter and catered to their other needs, most of which seemed to revolve around pornography.

In February 2003, as the war loomed on the horizon, we decided it was time to begin to spin the team up and assign it specific targets. To a man they mutinied. They refused to carry out any assignment and demanded to go home. We complied.

The Scorpions were stood down. There was no Arab army. We were flat on our backs and starting from ground zero.

Fortunately, in the interim we had pressed ahead with another initiative. We had stood up and trained dozens of Kurdish teams.

Headquarters would not, until the Scorpions crashed and burned, consider arming Kurdish units to carry out sabotage and attacks inside Iraq. We remained very concerned, however, about the possibility that the Iraqi Army might unleash a barrage of surface-to-surface missiles or artillery shells carrying chemical munitions the moment the war started. Headquarters shared that concern.

We could not provide protective gear for all the Kurds. Hundreds of thousands of peshmerga and civilians were within range of the Iraqis, and they all knew the horrors that Saddam's chemical arsenal had unleashed before. Based on recent history we could be looking at tens of thousands of Kurdish deaths if we did not do something.

Our solution was to form Kurdish teams, which would infiltrate across the Green Line, identify the locations of Iraqi artillery batteries and surface-to-surface missile units, and get those locations to us. This would provide

the kind of real-time, precise intelligence that we could use to vector in American air strikes and take out the threat before a chemical barrage was launched.

There were no guarantees, but at least it was a concrete, tangible step. It was something we could do with our existing capabilities and a minimal amount of gear from back home. We made a request for hundreds of satellite phones and handheld commercial GPS units. In relatively short order we had them.

Then we set up a training program. Magnum, Bullwinkle, and Gadget, our in-house Ground Branch officers, took charge of building it and organizing it. We needed small groups of experienced Kurdish peshmerga who knew their way around and had the wits and the common sense to handle themselves behind enemy lines.

Once we had identified dozens of such individuals and organized them into teams, we began to pump them through a hastily designed course in how to use the satellite phones, how to get grid coordinates using a GPS, and, most importantly, precision in logging targets and communicating their locations. If we were going to drop ordnance on a location, we needed to be completely certain what we were hitting and why.

The work our Ground Branch officers did on this initiative was amazing. Fewer than 60 days passed from the time the program began until teams were pushed across the Green Line. In that timeframe these officers took the entire project from a vague idea to a fully realized accomplishment.

That they did so was all the more remarkable because in mid-stream their workload doubled.

The collapse of the Scorpion project left Headquarters floundering. After many months and millions of dollars they had nothing to show for it. A lot of promises had been made about railways that would be cut, communications towers that would be dropped, and the like. Now, suddenly, there was no one to make good on those promises.

We offered to step in and fill the gap. We had almost a hundred men organized and trained to infiltrate enemy territory, remain undetected, and

operate clandestinely. If we could teach them to blow things up, they could be saboteurs too.

Headquarters, which up until now had resisted any and all suggestions of having Kurds kill Arabs, got behind the idea fast. They had no choice. It was either that or go tell the White House how none of what had been promised was going to happen.

We added three explosives experts—Sasquatch, Boomerang, and Doogie—to the mix. Bullwinkle, a former Marine officer who was one of our Ground Branch officers, laid out a course of instruction based on US military standards. We identified areas for explosives ranges and started pulling together gear.

Then we hit a snag. Bullwinkle fell apart.

Bullwinkle was a good man. He was also very junior; in fact, this was his first real deployment down range. He had been a lieutenant in the Marines, and his adjustment to the world of clandestine operations was still incomplete.

Late one evening Bullwinkle asked if he could talk to Hans and me. “Of course,” we said, and he took a seat in our small, cramped office.

Bullwinkle was visibly upset and seemed exhausted. My guess was that he was operating on a few hours’ sleep a night. That takes its toll after a while.

I asked what was going on. Bullwinkle said we were going to have to push back the deadline for having our teams trained in how to use explosives. At that point, our drop-dead date for completion was sometime in early March.

I asked why. Bullwinkle began to walk me through the program of instruction for a United States Marine Corps military explosives course. He had gotten it from someone back at Headquarters. According to the material Bullwinkle had, we would need several months to get our boys up to speed. I was giving him several weeks.

I still did not have a firm date from Headquarters as to when the invasion would start. There was beginning to be talk about 10th Special Forces Group and the 173rd Airborne Brigade being sent our way, but how

they would get in was as yet unclear. I was more certain every day, however, that we were going to war very, very soon.

Despite the chaos, despite the fact that half of the war plan was in tatters, this was going to happen sooner rather than later. We needed to get ready.

For the next 10 minutes or so I attempted to engage Bullwinkle in conversation about the details of the program of instruction he had gotten from back home and to steer him toward trimming it down and focusing only on the few things our Kurdish team members absolutely had to learn. I got nowhere. The longer we talked, the more obstinate he became.

Finally, he cut me off and told me, “I won’t do it. It is impossible.”

I was done. I had been patient; to be clear, much more patient than Hans thought I should have been. He was visibly chomping at the bit to take Bullwinkle’s head off.

I paused to make sure I was clear in what I intended to say. As fed up as I was at that moment, the reality was that Bullwinkle was not wrong. I was ordering him to take shortcuts. I was telling him to blow off approved training standards. Not only did this mean our Kurdish team members might get themselves killed down the road, but it also meant we might get people killed during the training. Some of these people might be the Ground Branch officers and explosives experts instructing.

When in command—command. We were going to war. Hard calls needed to be made. We could be entirely safe and inflict no damage on the enemy or we could do what was necessary to win.

I sympathized with Bullwinkle. I did not show it.

I told Bullwinkle that all I had heard from him so far was a long recitation of how hard his job was. I told him I did not care. I noted that if his assignment was not pretty close to impossible then we would not be doing it.

We were going to war. We were out of time. There was no option for failure. I did not need him to try; I needed him to succeed. How he did that was up to him, but one way or the other these men were going across the Green Line and hitting their targets and, if he could not make that happen,

then he needed to say so clearly, pack his gear, and head home. He would be replaced.

Bullwinkle shut up. He wasn't happy, but he probably knew instinctively in this situation that I was actually the good cop and that the deputy, Hans, was going to eat him for lunch if he pushed the matter any further. He got up and left the office.

Now all we needed was enough explosives to make this happen. What we had on hand that was serviceable would be consumed in training. What we needed was military grade plastic explosive, C-4, Semtex or the like.

We asked Headquarters. They whistled it up. CIA has a way of being able to reach out and acquire most anything when it needs to.

The Turks refused to let us bring the explosives in country. Shocker.

Washington had never really understood how totally opposed the Turks were to our course of action in Iraq. We regarded Saddam as a monster who needed to go. We saw the Kurds as the innocent victims of a sadistic regime.

The Turks saw the Kurds in Iraq as a threat to the integrity of Turkey as a nation state. A free, independent Kurdish population in Iraq would embolden Turkish Kurds and fan the flames of insurrection. Saddam might be unsavory, but he had kept the Kurds in check. The Turks, quite frankly, were in no hurry to see him go.

The Turkish decision to refuse to allow us to bring explosives in country finally seemed to communicate to Headquarters the finality of Turkish opposition. They really were not going to change their minds. They were not going to get with the program. Ever.

That was great. Headquarters beginning to clue in was welcome news. Better late than never. But it didn't solve our problem with explosives.

It was February 2003. We did not yet have a date for the war to begin, but it was smelling a whole lot like sometime in March. We were out of time to spin up our teams and arm them.

We turned to a time-honored Kurdish tradition: we smuggled in the explosives. Over the course of a couple of weeks we brought hundreds of pounds of explosives over the border into Kurdish-controlled territory, and our explosives experts went to work building satchel charges specifically

tailored to a long list of sabotage targets we and Headquarters had compiled.

Our teams were set. Our targets were marked. All we needed now was the order to strike.



CIA officers training Kurdish personnel to be deployed across the Green Line.

CHAPTER 20

10th Group, Deploying Kurdish Teams, Air War, and Hunting Fedayeen

On March 1, 2003, the Turkish Parliament formally voted to deny the United States government permission to use Turkish territory to stage an invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration, which had apparently not been paying attention to anything that had transpired over the preceding year, was stunned. Our “NATO ally” had deserted us.

In the mountains of Kurdistan it was Groundhog Day. The Turks, who had opposed our entire plan to depose Saddam from jump street, were—surprise—still opposed. We had long since accepted that this was going to be largely a “come as you are” war. Now Washington needed to clue in.

The 4th Infantry Division was never going to arrive. The corps-sized force of tens of thousands of Americans, with attack helicopters and hundreds of tanks, would never make it. We were going to improvise what we could and hope it would be enough. Eventually, on March 20, 2003, the Turkish Parliament would allow some use of Turkish airspace in support of the war in Iraq. By then bombs would be falling, and people would be dying.

The first US troops into Northern Iraq were those from 10th Special Forces Group, for whom we had been waiting for something close to nine months. Under the command of Colonel Charles Cleveland the group

moved from its base at Fort Carson, Colorado, and staged in Romania pending resolution of the issues surrounding Turkish overflight. Attached to two battalions of 10th Group for this assignment were additional troops from the 3rd Special Forces Group as well as Air Force combat air controllers and US Army civil affairs personnel.

Beginning in mid-March, 10th Group personnel flew into Iraq and landed at Harir airfield. The first flights came via a roundabout route out of Jordan and through Iraqi airspace. These aircraft took heavy anti-aircraft fire. One aircraft was damaged so severely that it had to make an emergency landing in Turkey.

Subsequent flights were allowed to cross Turkish airspace but still had to base out of Romania. This kept the infiltration pace to a crawl. Still, for the first time we had US Army personnel in some strength on the ground in Kurdistan.

A day or two after the arrival of Colonel Cleveland I went down to his headquarters to introduce myself personally. Prior to this our 10th Group personnel, including Happy, had already interfaced with their brothers in arms and ensured that we had a tight lash-up.

10th Group had set up its headquarters at that point in some vacant buildings near where the KDP leadership resided. I walked into the building where Colonel Cleveland had an office and saw a very large open room, like a factory floor, filled with desks, computers, printers, and other electronic gear. Every individual in the room seemed to be looking at a flat screen monitor and typing something.

Happy, who knew Cleveland well, was with me to make an introduction. I stopped, turned to him, and said, "What ever happened to the guys in the loin cloths who worked with the Montagnards?" Special Forces was, I thought, supposed to be about small teams of specialized folks living and working with the locals. This looked more like a headquarters unit somewhere in northern Virginia.

"Those days are long gone, brother," said Happy. He frowned. I noted that he was wearing a mix of civilian clothes and Kurdish attire like everyone in base did. Every single other man and woman in the building in which we were standing was in uniform.

My first meeting with Colonel Cleveland was, like all my subsequent meetings, cordial. He seemed thoroughly professional and highly intelligent. Unfortunately, he also made clear to me that he was organizing his personnel in such a way that he would not be my primary interlocutor.

Two battalions of 10th Group were brought into Northern Iraq. One battalion, under Lieutenant-Colonel Kenneth Tovo, was detailed to work with the PUK and with Tim's base in that area. The other battalion, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Waltemeyer, was to work with the KDP and my base.

Colonel Cleveland himself would be in overall command of a task force that would include not only 10th Group but ultimately the 173rd Airborne Brigade, US Marines, and personnel from the 10th Mountain Division. Cleveland did not intend, apparently, to have regular direct contact with CIA personnel on the ground and seemed to feel that he could get all the intel support he needed by reading intelligence reports we disseminated through Headquarters. He was delegating the task of interfacing with CIA to his battalion commanders.

There was no discussion of any kind of coordinating our sabotage efforts with his combat activities or of integrating our Kurdish teams into the broader war effort. The general feel of the meeting was more or less one of "Thanks, we've got it from here." I left with the clear understanding that Colonel Cleveland and I would not be meeting regularly.

Shortly thereafter I met with Waltemeyer. That meeting was infinitely worse.

Before the meeting I was forewarned by members of our 10th Group pilot team that Waltemeyer was a weak leader with a highly inflated opinion of his own abilities. I took that for what it was worth. It is not necessarily the job of a leader to make his people like him. Sometimes, when you are doing your job, you are unpopular.

It took me about 30 seconds into my first conversation with Lieutenant-Colonel Waltemeyer to decide that everything I had heard about him was dead on. He was arrogant. He was dismissive. He was outright rude.

Waltemeyer's clear message was that he considered the job of CIA in country to be over. He showed no interest whatsoever in the intelligence we

had to offer. He made crystal clear that he saw no value in any information or insight we had gathered over our many months in country. There was nothing I could do for him. He would take it from here.

I offered a tight lash-up with his troops and regular meetings. I suggested we work some operations jointly. I suggested integrating 10th Group's capabilities with some of our asset networks for the purpose of running operations across the Green Line. All of these suggestions were dismissed. The meeting came to an end. I was shown the door.

The feedback later via our pilot team members was worse. Waltemeyer had directed his people to avoid working with us. He wanted us out of country. His opinion of me personally was highly derogatory. In his words, I "was done" and "needed to get the hell out of his way."

Waltemeyer was also upset that the 10th Group pilot team members assigned to our base were wearing civilian clothes and sporting beards and moustaches. Apparently, his idea of unconventional warfare did not include blending in or relaxed grooming standards. Happy directed his people to ignore Waltemeyer's comments.

We worked around the Waltemeyer roadblock to the best of our ability, relying upon the professionalism and good graces of 10th Group's officers and enlisted men who understood that we were all on the same team and should be working together. It was at best a band aid solution. Our cooperation with Waltemeyer's battalion was fatally wounded by his unwillingness to cooperate.

I made crystal clear to Headquarters what the situation was on the ground and sought guidance. Up until now we had been the only folks in Iraq. Now that other people were finally beginning to flow in we needed some direction. I needed to know exactly how we were supposed to interface with the military and at what level.

I got no guidance of any kind. That remained the case week after week even after the war began. Up until this point I had been so completely preoccupied with Washington's incapacity to get troops in theater and start the war that I had not had time or energy to focus on a whole range of other questions of equal import.

What was the plan after we kicked this thing off? What were we, CIA, supposed to do then? To whom were we supposed to be reporting? And, maybe, just barely visible at this moment on the horizon, what were we going to do after we won?

In addition to gathering intelligence, our focus for many months had been on laying the foundation for an effort to convince the Iraqis not to fight. We were continuing and intensifying that effort. Now we were faced with the task of integrating that effort with the actual invasion. How were we going to do that, especially if the US military showed no interest in even talking to us?

In isolation in the mountains, focused purely on hanging on and chopping the wood in front of us, we had assumed without ever really thinking about it that somebody somewhere had a plan for how this was all going to come together. Now, as we finally began to see troops arriving and brace for the actual onset of hostilities, a terrible truth began to emerge: there was no plan.

Lieutenant-Colonel Tovo, commander of the other battalion of 10th Group in country, was a very different character from Waltemeyer. I met Tovo only a couple of times, because he and his men deployed to PUK territory and went to work there. What I saw of him was very positive. To the extent he could he was going to work with CIA—one team, one fight—and get the job done.

Ultimately, Tovo's men, along with Kurdish troops and CIA officers from Tim's base, finally did what we had recommended so many months earlier. On March 28, 2003 they assaulted the Ansar al-Islam enclave along the Iranian border and overran it. It was a positive step, but it was in no way a substitute for what we had wanted to do originally.

In boxing parlance, we telegraphed our punch. Instead of hitting when Ansar was asleep and feeling untouchable, we struck after a long, very public buildup of our forces. All of the top Ansar leaders walked across the border into Iran before the attack took place and lived to fight another day. We would pay dearly for that during the occupation when they returned to fuel the Sunni insurrection.

As 10th Group personnel flowed in country they began to fan out and to lash up with Kurdish peshmerga units. Our pilot team members were instrumental in making this happen. Long months of crisscrossing Kurdistan paid off. Within days, from a standing start, 10th Group Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs) were embedded with the Kurds and ready to go to war. Without Happy and his crew this never would have happened.

We received word not long after that the air war would begin on March 20, 2003. A few days in advance of that date we began to push our 3-4-man teams of Kurds across the Green Line into Iraqi territory. Within 48 hours we had close to 150 men behind enemy lines, talking to us on satellite phones.

Our base turned into a virtual clandestine call center, covered with row after row of antennas. Inside, day and night, case officers were talking to sources and taking down chapter and verse on Iraqi dispositions and movements. Predictably enough, as it became clear that hostilities were about to begin, the Iraqis began to disperse their units, moving out of barracks into the countryside or into unmarked residential homes.

Our teams followed them. They were invisible to the Iraqis but in continuous, real-time contact with us. As fast as an Iraqi surface-to-surface missile battery had moved and finished stringing up its camouflage netting we knew about it, and the US military had the exact 10-digit grid coordinates.

The air war started early. President Bush, based on intelligence from Tim's base, decided to go early in the hope of killing Saddam with a decapitating strike. Saddam was not killed, but it had been worth a shot. Next day the bombing began in earnest. We were at war.

In anticipation of the commencement of the air war, Kurdish leadership had for days beforehand been slowly moving northward into the mountains. Most of the families in the neighboring villages left as well. It was not a panicked run for the hills but a slow, steady movement to higher and safer ground.

The night of the first air strikes I got up from my desk and went to the kitchen in our base house to get something to drink. My eyes were tired

from reading and releasing traffic, and I needed to stretch my legs. It would be hours before I might get a chance to sleep.

I walked into the kitchen to find Snake, our chief of operations, already there. He was talking to the ladies who did our cooking, cleaning, and laundry—all of them.

Snake spoke Farsi, as did many of the women. He was engaged in an animated conversation. The women seemed very upset, some of them crying.

I asked Snake what was going on. He said that the women were worried. All of them lived with relatives in the nearby area. Their relatives were all leaving and moving out of the range of Iraqi missile and artillery batteries. The women were about to be left behind, and they wanted to know what to do.

Snake asked me what I wanted to tell the women. I paused. Every single one of these women had been through the hell of Iraqi attacks on the Kurds. They had all lost husbands, brothers, and sons. They had all seen firsthand what Iraqi chemical weapons could do. They weren't afraid of something theoretical; they had seen the devil at work.

I told the women, through Snake, that if they wanted to go they should go. We did not want any of them to get hurt because of us, and we would not fault them for leaving. I told them we would be fine without them.

The room got quiet. Then one woman, whom I always jokingly referred to as "Sheyta" or "Crazy," because she was kind of a practical joker, spoke up. Sheyta asked me what we were going to do. Where were we going?

Sheyta was a widow. She was in her forties, and dressed only in black. She had scars on her face from chemical burns. The Iraqis had given her those the day they killed her husband and most of the other men from her village.

I told Sheyta that when we left the base we were headed south. I told her that we had come to Iraq to get rid of Saddam, and that we were going to do that. We weren't going to run. We weren't going to hide.

Snake translated my words. There was a brief pause. Sheyta looked at the other women. They nodded. There was no discussion. There was an immediate, unanimous understanding.

Sheyta spoke. She said that if we were going to fight, they were too. They would not run. They would not seek shelter while we fought to destroy Saddam. Wherever we went they would go also. We had come to their country to fight for them, and they would not leave us.

She was clear, direct. She looked me in the eye as she spoke. This was a woman who would literally die before she would suffer dishonor.

I thanked her and the other women. I was, for a moment, almost overwhelmed. Every one of these women had already given more than most people could ever understand in this long, horrible war against the monster in Baghdad. No one would have faulted them for seeking shelter, yet not a single one of them took that route.

“Peshmerga,” the term used for Kurdish fighters, means literally “those who run toward death.” I have seen many brave peshmerga. Not one of them had more guts than these women.

We moved all of our household staff into spare rooms at base. They stayed with us for the duration.

On the ground at base the first, most immediate, impact of the beginning of the war was the presence of aircraft in the sky. Northern Iraq had been a no-fly zone for a decade. There had never been a plane or a helicopter anywhere in sight. There were no contrails. There were no sonic booms.

All of a sudden the sky was filled with planes. Fighter aircraft zoomed by overhead. Tens of thousands of feet up, B-52s loitered, dropping precision munitions programmed with the coordinates we had provided onto unsuspecting Iraqi positions and obliterating entire battalions in a single strike. The Iraqis were effectively powerless to do anything to stop the onslaught. We owned the air.

North of Mosul in the first few days of the bombardment an entire Iraqi mechanized brigade, taking heavy losses while holding fixed positions, responded by attempting to withdraw and redeploy. They learned quickly this was no longer an option. One of our Kurdish teams, with eyes on the brigade, called in real-time locational information for air strikes. US Navy jets effectively destroyed the entire Iraqi unit.

As the bombardment continued, we finally began to see the Iraqi surface-to-surface missile strikes that we had so long dreaded. They came at night, in volleys, sometimes as many as six at a time. They were clearly aimed at us and at the Kurdish leadership in nearby compounds. Fortunately, the aim of the crews doing the shooting was poor. Missiles hit on all sides of the base, but none closer than a few hundred meters away.

My assumption was that our teams were having a significant impact. The life expectancy of surface-to-surface missile crews was short. Even at night, if you got your missiles ready to launch you did not want to spend a lot of time fine-tuning your aim. The quicker you took your shot, the quicker you could run away and hope to survive.

The second day that we received incoming missiles we had a visit at base. 10th Group had brought with them a certain signals intelligence intercept capability. These guys were monitoring Iraqi communications and had tripped across something interesting. Somebody in our immediate vicinity was talking to the Iraqi military on the other side of the Green Line and providing them targeting data for their missile launches.

The Iraqis had a spotter.

This was not welcome news. It meant the Iraqis, if they had their stuff together, could adjust fire. Our base by this time consisted of several buildings. It was a big target. So far all the Iraqi missiles fired had been armed with conventional, not chemical, warheads, but that was no real consolation. A single missile, if it was aimed correctly, could take out our entire operation.

We went to work in combination with the 10th Group's guys to pinpoint the location of the spotter. He had to be close. The area was largely vacant now. If we focused our efforts, collectively we should be able to find this Iraqi agent and take him out before he walked a missile barrage into our operations.

We never found him. He went off the air. One day the Iraqi agent was providing data to his boss on the other side of the Green Line and lining up the next volley of missiles; the next day he was gone. Presumably, he was bright enough to rapidly sort out that Saddam had lost the war and to cut his losses. Whoever he was, he ditched his radio and walked away.

Down south the US Army and the Marines had jumped off and were driving north. Iraqi Army units in many places melted away. As they did so, however, a new threat emerged. Iraqi fedayeen units, paramilitary forces, began to stage attacks on American forces, particularly supply columns.

The fedayeen counted on the fact that they could strike and disappear. They could blend in. Conventional US forces could not find them.

But we could. They thought they were invisible. They were not.

We had dozens of Kurdish teams across the Green Line. We also had assets all across Iraq, most of them with real-time satellite phone communications capability. We put out the word, "Find the fedayeen. We want them dead."

The intelligence rolled in. As fast as the fedayeen set up a safehouse we marked it. The data went to the military and was punched into the guidance system of a smart munition on an airframe. A thousand-pound bomb blew the safehouse off the face of the earth.

The survivors of the strike moved on. They found a new location to set up. We tracked them, marked them, and ended them.

These fedayeen units were killing and capturing American soldiers. This was as personal as it gets. We weren't preparing for anything anymore. We were at war, and if you were striking our people, you were done.

I stalked the floor of the base all day, pushing people, keeping them moving, reinforcing the necessity to hit now and hit hard. Nobody walks. Nobody takes a break. As fast as we get a location, we need to move before the trail goes cold.

All Iraqi units that tried to hide suffered the same fate, particularly anybody connected to the security services. Iraqi intelligence offices shifted out of their headquarters compounds into residential neighborhoods. Before they finished setting up they were wiped out. We had a long history with these guys. They had demonstrated a personal interest in trying to kill us off. Now it was our turn to return the favor.

We also understood that the Iraqi security services were key to Saddam's control over Iraq. He ruled by fear. Most Iraqis despised him, but they knew if they acted against him they would pay a price. Destroying the

thugs who did Saddam's dirty work helped knock his legs out from under him. The day people no longer feared him was the day Saddam fell.

We were still banging out our radio broadcasts, and we were telling every asset we had inside the regime the same thing: quit, stack arms, walk away. Now we were making it all the more real by killing off the animals that had enforced Saddam's will. At the same time as the Iraqi military was being pummeled from the air, it was being freed from control by Saddam and his creatures.

10th Group personnel working with Kurdish troops on the Green Line were calling in air strikes all day long as well. Kurdish forces armed with this new air capability suddenly had the advantage. Iraqi forces were taking a beating everywhere. There were 13 Iraqi divisions in the north. For decades they had been untouchable. Now they were being torn to pieces.

Our Kurdish teams were excelling at deep reconnaissance. They were also hitting all the sabotage targets the Scorpions had originally been slated to attack. The most prominent of those targets was the rail line to Mosul, the destruction of which had been the mission of the team that mutinied and refused orders shortly before the war began.

A specially trained Kurdish team was dispatched by us to destroy this rail line. Breaking a railroad in such a way as to prevent it from being quickly repaired is not that easy. You can blow up the tracks easily enough only to find that all you have done is throw the rails around, and they can be picked up and put back down in a short period of time.

The key is that you need to cut the steel rails and make them useless. This requires special charges employed in a particular manner. We had manufactured those charges in country and trained the team designated to hit this target in their use.

We sent the team across the Green Line with instructions to hit the target. Then Headquarters called. Someone back home had thought about the operation and gotten concerned that somebody might get hurt if we blew a rail line and a train derailed.

I agreed. It was very likely somebody was going to get hurt if we blew up a rail line. Wasn't that the point? Was this really the first time anyone back home had stopped to think about this fact? By the way, we were

bombing targets all over Iraq all day, every day. Was there any concern back home as to the number of people that were getting “hurt” in that effort?

And, just for the record, Headquarters, this target was selected by you.

Headquarters ignored my questions and concerns. Somebody, somewhere had become seized with the fact that there might be civilians riding on a train to Mosul that might be derailed when we blew the rail line and might get hurt. This was now, apparently, a key issue.

We were directed to call the Iraqis and warn them that we were going to blow the rail line.

I asked if this was a serious direction. I was told it was. I was told that the director, George Tenet, had made the decision and ordered us to warn the Iraqis of the pending attack. Who had surfaced the matter to his attention and why was never explained.

I reminded Headquarters that we had a team inside Iraqi territory. I reminded them that warning the Iraqis would greatly increase the chance that members of this team could be killed or captured. I reminded them there was a war on.

I was told to make the phone call and warn the Iraqis. End of story. No further discussion.

I asked what number we were supposed to call. I asked to whom we were supposed to speak. Nobody back home knew. They insisted a call be made nonetheless.

I wondered how many times during World War II we had warned the Nazis before we blew up a railroad. I wondered why the lives of unknown civilians on a train were suddenly of paramount importance and the lives of civilians living in cities we were bombing day and night were not. I considered blowing off the instruction as I had the directions to prepare for resupply from space. I did not.

I went to Masrur Barzani and enlisted his help. Not for the first time he looked at me like I was mad. He assisted anyway. He had someone call the main train station in Mosul. Nobody picked up the phone. Iraq was a mess on a good day. Customer service was unlikely to be a priority. Given that we were bombing the hell out of the surrounding area all day, every day, it did not seem too odd that people might not be coming to work anymore.

Our team blew the rail line. The operation went off brilliantly. None of our people were hurt or captured. We laid a 90-car train on its side. The main supply line for the Iraqi 5th Corps in Mosul was now cut. It was the first time since World War II that an operation of this kind had been carried out by CIA.

We reported the success immediately to Headquarters. Despite the Scorpions, despite Turkish opposition, and despite our limited resources, we had pulled off a real coup. Everybody in Mosul now knew that it wasn't just radio broadcasts they had to worry about. The end was near.

All Headquarters wanted to know was whether or not we had made the phone call. When I advised we had but no one had answered they terminated the call and said they needed to inform the director of the CIA right away. There were no congratulations, only the strong suggestion that we had done something wrong.

The ground invasion of Iraq had jumped off from Kuwait on March 20, 2003. Within 48 hours the 3rd Infantry Division was halfway to Baghdad. Despite the actions of the fedayeen the Iraqis were losing—and losing badly. Opposition to US forces was vanishing. Iraqi Army units were melting away.

The writing was on the wall. Baghdad would fall by early April. Opposition in the north was fading also. Mosul and Kirkuk, the two largest cities in Northern Iraq, would be in our hands in the not-too-distant future.

The Kurds were already preparing for this eventuality. Both the KDP and the PUK were lining up troops to surge into both cities. What exactly the broader plan was for managing or controlling this remained mysterious, but we did not have the luxury of waiting until that was clarified. We needed a course of action now.

We stood up a team to forward deploy to Dohuk and embed with the KDP military command there under the command of General Babakir Zebari. Zebari was the most senior and most respected of the Kurdish generals, and his troops would be the ones leading the charge into Mosul when it fell. We had developed a strong relationship with Zebari during our time in Iraq, and we knew we could count on him for complete cooperation.

Mosul was the biggest city in our area of responsibility. It was also the home of a very large Sunni Arab population, and many of the top people in the Iraqi military called it home. I needed my best man in charge of the team that would enter the city and have to deal with the chaos that would follow.

I chose Hans. He would still be deputy, but his primary role now would be as leader of the Dohuk team, and he would physically set up shop there rather than with me at base. On the one hand it was an easy decision to make. He was the man in whom I had the most trust. On the other hand, parting with his services at base left a void. More than once over the preceding months his wise counsel had kept me from making a fatal misstep.

In Hans's place I put Snake, who had been functioning as our chief of operations. Snake was a very level-headed and experienced officer as well, and he took on the responsibilities of being deputy effectively. Still, it was not ever quite the same at base once Hans had shifted locations.

Hans's team was composed of roughly eight individuals, including a number of our military personnel. This gave him the tools he needed to lash up with the Kurds in his area, gather intelligence, and continue to push the fight against the Iraqis. Now I needed to turn my attention to Kirkuk.

KDP peshmerga would clearly be the ones who would enter Mosul after its fall. The city was physically so far from PUK territory that there was no viable option for that Kurdish group to send forces there. Kirkuk was an entirely different situation.

Kirkuk was situated south of the Green Line and in relative proximity to the de facto border between KDP and PUK territory. Both Kurdish groups were organizing forces to enter Kirkuk. While the Kurds were all singing from the same song sheet at present, there was no guarantee this would continue. What exactly was going to happen in Kirkuk once it fell, especially in the absence of the presence of large numbers of US troops, was anybody's guess.

I drove down to Qalah Chulan to meet with Tim and his key people. We spent several hours discussing Kirkuk. Tim's position was clear. The PUK was going to enter the city, and they had the natural claim to it. He would

embed a team of his people with the PUK peshmerga, and his base would take responsibility for operating in Kirkuk when it fell. This would allow me to concentrate on Mosul and conserve my resources.

The idea had merit. I was stretched thin. I was particularly short of senior leaders capable of independent command. Allowing Tim to handle Kirkuk would take a lot off my plate.

Still, I was uncomfortable with the idea. Tim was living and working with the PUK, and they assumed that Kirkuk was theirs. I knew the KDP did not agree, and that they were going to send substantial numbers of peshmerga into the city as well. The idea of us not having people working with the KDP on the ground in Kirkuk bothered me. It smelled of taking sides and limiting our options.

After my meeting with Tim I returned to base in KDP territory and chewed on the question for another day. Then I made the call. We would stand up another team and embed them with KDP units on the front line opposite Kirkuk. This team, like Hans's team in Dohuk, would press the fight from the front lines and be prepared to surge forward when Kirkuk fell.

There remained the question of who would lead the team. The logical guy was Happy, but I was barred from putting him in this position, because of the legal limitations flowing from Rumsfeld's decision not to allow us to fully integrate military personnel into CIA's organizational structure. That left Jungle.

Jungle had been doing a good job running our psychological operations. He was smart, and he had a lot of experience. He remained a question mark due to his obvious difficulty in handling the stress of deployment and the pace of operations. On balance, though, he seemed the only option. I made the call and designated him team leader.

In relatively rapid fashion I would come to regret the decision.



Air strikes on Iraqi positions near Dohuk, spring 2003.



CIA personnel calling in air strikes near Dohuk, spring 2003.



CIA officers deploying a Kurdish team across the Green Line in advance of the air war.



CIA personnel getting much needed sleep at KDP installation on Green Line before start of air war.

CHAPTER 21

The 173rd Takes Harir, Losing the Surrender

On March 26, 2003, the 173rd Airborne Brigade jumped in and “seized” Harir airfield. I was told of the operation a few days in advance. More than anything else the news confused me.

Harir had been in Kurdish hands for over a decade. It was well over 30 miles behind Kurdish lines in friendly territory. It was surrounded by small villages and fields populated by goats and sheep. Our team had been in the vicinity for the better part of a year, and 10th Special Forces Group personnel were already on the ground in large numbers.

Maybe the psychological impact of a mass parachute jump was deemed to be of value. Maybe the training value of having an entire brigade jump in under real-world conditions seemed paramount. I don’t know. I do know that I was already getting a little tired of Big Army’s penchant for acting like they were the first people in country.

Over the course of the next few days, while we were waiting for the 173rd to arrive, I said on numerous occasions that I was thinking of welcoming the paratroopers in what I described as full “Hawkeye Pierce” fashion. I would put on a bathrobe, assuming I could find one in Kurdistan, and sit in a folding chair on the drop zone drinking a martini and greeting the troops as they landed by saying, “Welcome to the party.” I would also have to find a martini, of course.

It was not a serious suggestion. Apparently, though, I said it often enough and enthusiastically enough that some people in the base were uncertain. The day before the 173rd jumped in, Fury came to see me.

Fury was one of our SOF guys. He was smart and technically proficient. He was also, by general consensus, the toughest man in Iraq. I had nothing but respect for him.

Fury asked me to reconsider my decision and not sit on the drop zone. He agreed that the whole operation seemed a little silly, but he was concerned I was going to get myself killed. In his words, "These guys think this is Normandy. They are going to shoot anything that moves."

I assured Fury I was not going to the drop zone. He left. I toned down my commentary.

The 173rd arrived at night, dropping in under cover of darkness. Present on the drop zone were Kurdish peshmerga, members of 10th Group, and personnel from our base. I stayed at the base. I never bought a bathrobe. I never found a martini.

The next morning I took several base personnel and went down to Harir. It was my intention to meet Colonel William Mayville, the brigade commander, introduce myself, and see if we couldn't get lashed up with the 173rd in a way that we still were not with 10th Group. We drove down after breakfast in a couple of Land Cruisers. As was typical I was drinking a cup of coffee, and at least in my vehicle, we were listening to the Eagles.

When we arrived at Harir we found that we could not drive out on the airstrip as we typically did. There was now a machinegun emplacement on the access road. We were waved down by a group of uniformed US Army soldiers and asked to state our business.

I rolled down the window and spoke with the NCO in charge. He was covered in bright red, sticky mud as were his men. Harir airfield was in a valley. It had been raining for weeks. The ground was so soft some of the paratroopers had sunk into the mud up to their waists upon landing.

I told the NCO that we were his friendly neighborhood CIA guys and that we were looking for Colonel Mayville. He advised that he did not know where Mayville was, but that he believed the brigade command post

was down on the airstrip. He motioned vaguely as he spoke and then directed his men to let us past.

As we drove down the access road to the runway an animated conversation broke out in my vehicle. One side seemed to think that it was a little odd that we had been waved through based simply on the claim that we were CIA. The other side wondered what other explanation there could be possibly be for the appearance of a bunch of heavily armed white boys listening to rock music and speaking American-accented English in the middle of Kurdistan.

We parked our vehicles on the runway and started wandering around in the midst of a chaotic scene. Everywhere we looked were mud-soaked soldiers moving gear, setting up weapons, and trying to get organized. After several conversations with a succession of confused individuals, all wondering I am sure where we had come from, we succeeded in finding the brigade command post.

The ranking man present when we arrived was a major on the brigade staff, who I believe was the brigade intelligence officer. Once I made him understand who we were and what we wanted he explained that he did not know where the brigade commander was nor did he know where the rest of the staff was. He said Colonel Mayville had gone off to the other end of the airstrip and would probably return shortly.

We waited for roughly an hour for Mayville's return. During that time the major pumped us for routine, low-level information about the surrounding area. Most of it was basic stuff like where the brigade could find "Mo-gas" (motor gasoline) and how far it was to the nearest village. We answered all these questions, but I could not help wondering how it was possible that we had been in country writing intelligence reports all this time and yet the brigade intelligence officer had apparently never been given access to them.

Another officer in the command post joined the conversation and started asking questions about the route from Harir south. These were basic route reconnaissance questions, like how much weight certain bridges could hold. I was puzzled. Our 10th Group guys had been doing this kind of thing all

day, every day for months. There wasn't a bridge anywhere in Kurdistan they had not surveyed. I said as much.

The response was clear. None of those reports had ever been made available to the 173rd. They had basic maps of the area. That was about it. As for CIA, the staff personnel we were talking to had not even known we were in country until we showed up at the airfield that morning.

After an hour, when Mayville had still not returned, I made the call to go back to base. I left the major with contact information for me including direct satellite phone numbers.

The next day, Bird, one of our reports officers, returned to Harir and succeeded in making contact with Colonel Mayville. Over the next week we brought personnel from the 173rd to our base on numerous occasions and established a robust liaison relationship. The information they had never seen back home we provided in spades.

Then one day the cooperation stopped. We were advised that henceforth the 173rd would draw all intelligence support via CJSOTF-North (Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force—North). This was the official title for Colonel Cleveland's command, which now included the 173rd and would shortly be augmented by US Marines as well.

We were further advised that if we had any questions about the new arrangement we should direct them to Lieutenant-Colonel Waltemeyer.

Since Cleveland had also already declined to establish any direct liaison with our base and said that he would get his intelligence support via contact with our Headquarters, and Waltemeyer had made clear his disdain for CIA in general, this left us with no formal lash-up with the military of any kind. Our working level cooperation, between our officers and the 10th Group ODAs, would remain strong. Above that level, though, coordination simply did not exist.

March turned to April. US forces entered Baghdad. Fighting in the north continued, and the Iraqis continued to lose badly. Pinned in static positions, unable to even contest our mastery of the air, the Iraqi Army was target practice. Individual ODAs and Kurdish units took casualties, but the outcome was never in doubt.

In Dohuk, our guys were performing brilliantly. They were banging away at sources, collecting intelligence, and orchestrating attacks behind Iraqi lines independent of our Kurdish teams. One of Spock's sources organized tribal forces to attack an Iraqi train in western Iraq with rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons. Another rail line was cut.

Operating on the ragged edge of the operational area in the absence of large numbers of American troops, our people moved with a significant Kurdish escort dedicated to working with us. This unit, all together roughly battalion strength, gave us combat power of our own and relative freedom of maneuver.

Also embedded with Hans's people were an Air Force combat air controller and SOF personnel, including Fury. These individuals called in air strikes regularly in support of our operations and to ensure the safety of our personnel. Operating in small numbers in immediate proximity to vastly superior Iraqi forces, air support was key to survival.

One day members of the Dohuk team found themselves in a tight spot with a large number of Iraqi armored vehicles approaching. The Air Force combat air controller, Boom-Boom, attempted to call in loitering US jets to hit the Iraqis and allow the team to withdraw. The request for air support was denied. His call sign was no longer recognized.

The team escaped harm by running like hell. Back at base in Dohuk they determined that Lieutenant-Colonel Waltemeyer had intervened with higher headquarters and had Boom-Boom's ability to call in air strikes deleted from the system. Apparently, he had not considered it important to relay this information to fellow Americans in harm's way.

Hans established a work around. 10th Group personnel in the area, who despised Waltemeyer, allowed Boom-Boom to call in air using their call signs. We continued to march.

Shortly thereafter the problem reemerged. This time our SOF personnel, Fury and Gabe, found out they had been deleted from the system. Again, we came dangerously close to having people killed as a consequence.

I heard the news of the second event from Hans in a phone call later the same day. I melted down. I was effectively done with the antics of an Army lieutenant-colonel who seemed to think he was God.

Hans cut me off before I could do anything stupid. Fury and Gabe had already contacted their superiors stateside on the military side and gotten the matter resolved. They had some friends way above the O-5 level. They were once again put “into the system” and able to call for air support. Waltemeyer had been spoken to by people higher on the food chain in the Pentagon. We had no repetitions of this kind of behavior.

Then, the Dohuk team brought us the Holy Grail.

Ever since we had arrived in Iraq, in every contact with every source, we had been pushing the same narrative: Saddam is done; the regime will fall; time to jump ship; time to come to Jesus.

Every day we banged out the same message over the airwaves: quit; walk away; Saddam is not worth dying for.

The Kurds echoed the same call. Many senior Kurdish commanders, including Zebari, had begun as officers in the Iraqi Army. In the same strange way that we could smuggle rugs, sources, and cars across the Green Line, the Kurds could pass messages to old colleagues. It is time. The game is up.

The Iraqis offered to surrender. The commander of the Iraqi 5th Corps, the governor of Ninevah Province—the broader area around Mosul—the mayor of Mosul, and numerous Arab chiefs tendered their surrender. They were willing to lay down their arms en masse and take orders henceforth from us.

The implications of the surrender were potentially staggering. Fifty thousand Iraqi soldiers would lay down their arms and begin to take orders from US authorities. All the police, firefighters, and other public servants would be under our direction. We would walk across the Green Line and into the position of being able to command the entire structure of the Iraqi government in Northern Iraq.

The domino effect was likely to be significant as well. It was hard to imagine that the other Iraqi forces along the Green Line would continue the fight once all of Ninevah Province had surrendered to the Americans. Kirkuk and the Iraqi 1st Corps would likely surrender shortly thereafter. We would have what we had always hoped for—the decapitation of the regime

in Baghdad and the preservation of order and stability that an occupation demanded.

There was only one problem: Donald Rumsfeld. Just as Rumsfeld had decided our attached 10th Group personnel would not really be turned over to the full control of CIA, he had decided to impose strict limitations on who could and who could not accept the surrender of Iraqi units and Iraqi personnel.

Before the first bombs fell, Rumsfeld's position had been communicated clearly to us from back home. We, CIA, were forbidden to accept the surrender of even a single Iraqi soldier. Only uniformed US military personnel could do this. All we could do was broker the meeting.

The Iraqi leadership in Mosul had already agreed to surrender. Hans and General Zebari were in contact with them. We could have driven down to Mosul and set up shop in 5th Corps Headquarters and started drinking tea. Instead, our hands tied, we were restricted to orchestrating a meeting between the Iraqis and the ranking American officer in the sector, Lieutenant-Colonel Waltemeyer.

The way to handle this meeting was straightforward. Sit down. Stroke the egos of the Iraqis. Let them save face. Assure them that by ending the bloodshed they are serving the Iraqi nation and helping free it from a madman.

Then turn the meeting over to subordinates. Let them be the ones who wrestled with the details and figured out how the mechanics of the surrender would work. Let them be the ones forced to wade into the details of a proud Arab army laying down its arms to a foreign invader.

Waltemeyer found it not as straightforward. I was not present at the meeting. Hans was. It was a disaster.

The meeting took place on April 11, 2003, near the Green Line south of Dohuk. All of the key Iraqi leaders who agreed to surrender were present. Waltemeyer showed up late.

Waltemeyer was belligerent. He was disrespectful. He talked to the Iraqis present, all senior officers and officials, like they were servants. He laid out a long list of bureaucratic demands. None of these demands had

been discussed with either Hans or General Zebari beforehand. Everyone in the room was blindsided.

The Iraqis were furious. They had arrived with the understanding that the deal was done. Now they were being lectured and told repeatedly that until they complied with every one of Waltemeyer's conditions we would continue to attack and kill their people.

The meeting disintegrated. Insulted and shocked, the senior Iraqis present, every one of whom had already agreed to surrender to American forces, walked out. Waltemeyer made no effort to get them back.

Zebari left the meeting enraged as well. He told Hans repeatedly that Waltemeyer was going to get a lot of people killed and had no idea what he was playing at. He and Hans agreed that as bad as the meeting had been they still needed to try to save the situation. Zebari stated that he believed he could convince the Iraqis to return to the table and the surrender might still be salvaged.

As they talked and worked out the next steps they needed to take to salvage the situation, Hans and Zebari were listening to US military communications in the vehicle in which they were riding. They heard Waltemeyer come on the air. He was ordering his personnel to move south and enter Mosul. It was the first either Hans or Zebari, commander of all Kurdish forces in the area, had heard of the decision. It had not been 20 minutes since they had left the surrender meeting and started the drive back to Dohuk.

In one moment, because of the arrogance and immaturity of one mid-level officer, we had gone from total victory to total chaos. Instead of walking into Mosul and stepping into control of an existing military and civilian command structure, we would now reap the whirlwind. The cost would be enormous.

CHAPTER 22

Kirkuk and Mosul

Baghdad had fallen. I had watched on television at our base as a giant statue of Saddam was dragged down by US Army personnel. The Iraqi Army in the north began to melt away. Waltemeyer, having thrown away the surrender of the Iraqi main force, had ordered American troops into Mosul. There was only one question: who exactly was it that was going to move in?

There were maybe 3,000 American troops in all of Kurdistan at this point, stretched across a front of hundreds of miles. A few hundred of these personnel were under the command of Waltemeyer in his sector.

The overwhelming majority of the fighters in the field were peshmerga. Now Washington decided they did not want them to enter Kirkuk and Mosul. These were, in Washington's view, Arab cities, and the presence of Kurdish troops in them would cause bloodshed.

Ankara was also once again screaming from the sidelines. The Turks, terrified of the expansion of a hostile Kurdistan, were threatening to send troops, in numbers far exceeding those of US forces on the ground, into Northern Iraq. Having prevented us from executing our own invasion as we intended, the Turks now looked like they might invade themselves.

10th Group was reliant upon Kurdish peshmerga to continue to fight and to continue to advance. Yet, the official position was that we wanted Kurdish forces to remain outside of both Mosul and Kirkuk. That was all well and good, but it wasn't achievable.

Waltemeyer was sending his people into Mosul. The Iraqis were melting away. The Kurds were surging forward.

I talked to Hans on the phone. We discussed the situation. I continued to have zero guidance from Headquarters regarding any plan for the occupation of Iraqi territory. Our hope of preserving the existing Iraqi governmental structure had just been crushed by the actions of a single officer. Cleveland was technically in command of all US forces in Northern Iraq, but there was no direction coming from him of any kind.

Hans was worried. He was closer to the fire than I was at that point. I knew we were in a bad spot. He felt it much more keenly than I did. He clearly had very real reservations about moving into Mosul. He was a leader, and he was worried about his people.

I listened. I could not really answer his concerns. I had zero faith in Waltemeyer and by now I had seen enough to understand that nobody anywhere knew what we were going to do next. I had a gut feeling, though, that we needed to be on the ground and in Mosul now. It was our job to be the eyes and ears for Washington. We couldn't do that job unless we were in the mix.

I told Hans to mount up. He did so. Shortly thereafter, while Waltemeyer's people were still moving toward Mosul themselves, our Dohuk team went in. Per my direction they took five hundred peshmerga with them. I wasn't trusting the guy who had just lost the surrender to keep my people alive.

Hans and his people drove into a city that was already falling apart. Looting had begun everywhere. The team set up operations at the former headquarters of the Adnan Division of the Iraqi Republican Guard. Almost immediately they began taking fire. With the help of their Kurdish peshmerga they held on.

Two days later they relocated from the base to a villa along the river. It had belonged to a member of Saddam's family. Maybe for that reason it had not yet been looted. There was still furniture inside, and the wiring had not been stripped from the walls. That's where they were when I finally made it into Mosul.

But first, I had to deal with Jungle.

Kirkuk fell on April 10, 2003, the day before Mosul. The Kurds surged in despite all ideas Washington had about keeping them out. By the next morning Happy was on the satellite phone with me telling me that Jungle was falling apart, and that I needed to do something. In his words, “He is going to get somebody killed.”

Before our Kirkuk team ever entered the city I had spoken to Happy. He was very concerned about Jungle and had been talking to me about those concerns for some time. I told Happy that when and if he ever got to the point where in his judgment Jungle was a danger to team members he should contact me directly. In effect, I gave Happy the ability to have Jungle removed if it came to that.

It was a bad arrangement. I should have pulled Jungle from his job as team leader before we went into Kirkuk. Leaving him in place saved me having to confront the problem of finding another team leader. It could have gotten someone killed or seriously injured. Without question it was the biggest mistake I made in country.

The Kirkuk team was in the city. There, as in Mosul, all hell was breaking loose. Jungle was losing it, ignoring all advice from his team members and making decisions calculated to lead to disaster. Something had to be done.

I considered my options. I could get Jungle on the phone and fire him. I could send somebody else down into the chaos to find the team and fire Jungle. I could go myself.

I went. I had created the mess. I had put people’s lives in danger. It was my job to fix it.

I mounted up. We took a couple of vehicles loaded with men and guns and a substantial Kurdish escort armed with AK-47s, RPGs, and machineguns. We headed for Kirkuk.

The way into the city was a mob scene. Thousands of vehicles jammed with Kurds were coming out of the city having looted anything they could carry. Cars and trucks were buried under loads of furniture, clothing, wiring, mattresses, and foodstuffs. The Kurds had wasted no time.

In the distance oil wells were burning, and heavy black smoke drifted overhead. There was no sign of the Iraqi military.

We entered the city and headed for our rendezvous point with the team. Looting was still in progress everywhere. Every Iraqi government building or compound we passed had been trashed.

I saw no sign of the US military. Both KDP and PUK forces were in evidence but in small numbers. There were no police anywhere. The city was in freefall.

We found the team at an abandoned Iraqi military compound where they had spent the night. Tim's team from Qalah Chulan was there as well, headed up by Uncle. Substantial numbers of KDP and PUK peshmerga were guarding the place.

I went inside and found Jungle and his team in a covered parking area. Jungle acknowledged my presence but made no effort to brief me on the situation. He seemed very nervous and distracted. He was sweating profusely and pacing back and forth. The other team members were scattered around the area in a gaggle. No one appeared to actually be doing anything.

I told Jungle I needed to talk to him and motioned him into a vacant room off the parking area. As he and I walked in he called for several of his team members to join us. I did not want to have the conversation that would follow in front of anyone else, and I said so to him.

The other team members were already entering the room by this point. Jungle said he wanted them there. I said ok; he could have it his way.

We sat down in a circle. The room was empty. All the furniture had been looted. There was no power.

I asked Jungle to explain the situation on the ground to me and brief me on his plans. He reacted defensively and responded by saying that he had everything in hand and did not know why I was in Kirkuk anyway. I told him I wanted to make sure we had things under control and see for myself how things were proceeding.

Jungle told me he was team leader, that he would decide how to employ his team and that he did not need my input. In effect, he told me to drop dead. I reminded him that he was team leader only until I relieved him and sent him back up the hill to base. He shut up. The other team members were staring at the ground.

I was white hot. There were about 50 things that were about to come out of my mouth. None of them would have helped the situation. I got up and walked out of the room. Standing on the other side of the parking area was Uncle. I walked over to him.

I told Uncle that I was relieving Jungle. I told him that I did not have another person that I judged suitable to function as team leader. I proposed that we merge our teams on the ground in Kirkuk.

Uncle agreed. He said he would advise Tim, but that he was sure that Tim would agree as well. We hashed out team composition. In the end, I turned over to Uncle about half of Jungle's original team and brought the rest back to base with me. Uncle did not have the resources to support all of our people in addition to his own.

Before I left Kirkuk to go back to base we visited several Iraqi government installations in the city. One was the airbase, which had, like everything else, been looted. Every single room had been broken open. Virtually all the weapons and ammunition were gone.

One of the other compounds we visited had been the headquarters of one of Saddam's security services. It too had been looted. The furniture was gone. The electronics were gone. The wiring was gone from the walls. Once classified files littered the floor.

On one side of the building was a small room with a heavy metal door. Inside the room were large metal rings mounted into the walls and ceiling. There was a drain in the floor.

The walls were stained with blood. Not bright red blood—dark, black blood that had been on the walls for years. Enough blood for hundreds of victims.

It was the torture cell for the facility, one of thousands throughout Iraq where Saddam's thugs had torn people to pieces over decades of terror. It stank of fear and despair. I walked out, got back into my vehicle, and we headed back up into the mountains.

The road home was still clogged with looters carrying their spoils home. As we began the ascent to our compound and the civilian traffic dwindled away, we fell in behind a long, slow convoy of Iraqi Army vehicles seized by the KDP.

Every truck in the convoy was loaded with ammunition boxes and weapons. Many of them were pulling towed anti-aircraft guns, which in the Middle East are used mostly for anti-personnel purposes. Mixed in were all manner of armored vehicles.

All of this was headed up into the hills and straight into the hands of the peshmerga. Back in Washington they were thinking in terms of one war ending. Here in Kurdistan, the Kurds knew the next war had not yet begun.

The next day I headed for Mosul. This was the biggest city in Northern Iraq and in many ways the prize for those of us in that theater. Talking with Hans on the satellite phone, it sounded like the situation was chaotic in the city. I wanted to see for myself.

We drove down in a couple of vehicles with a substantial Kurdish escort. Once we left the mountains we were out of the flat plain west of Irbil. It felt strange after all this time to pass the Green Line and head out across territory that until only a few days before had been under the control of Saddam Hussein.

There were no Iraqi troops anywhere in sight. The entire Iraqi 5th Corps had simply vanished. There was also very little structural damage to anything we passed. Every once in a while we would see a bombed-out building or a destroyed bridge, but largely the bombing had been so precise that the surrounding area looked untouched.

About halfway to Mosul we began to pass Iraqi armored vehicles. Some of them were on the road. Some were out in the middle of the open country on either side. None of them appeared damaged. They looked like they had simply been abandoned in place.

After a few minutes I told the driver to stop and let me out. There was a T-55 tank sitting on the side of the road. I wanted to inspect it more closely.

I knew a little bit about armored vehicles, not just because it was my job to understand foreign militaries, but because I had once been an Armor officer in the US Army. I walked over to the tank, climbed on top, and inspected it.

The muzzle cover was still on the main gun. A muzzle cover is sort of a canvas sock you put over the barrel of a tank's gun to keep water and debris out of it. The first thing you do when you roll a tank out of the motor pool

and get ready for action is to take the muzzle cover off. This one had never been removed.

There was no machinegun in the mount next to the tank commander's hatch. There was no coaxial machinegun mounted inside the turret next to the main gun. There were no rounds loaded into the vehicle either for the machineguns or for the main gun.

There was no damage of any kind to the tank. It was pristine. There was barely any mud on its tracks. This thing hadn't been disabled nor had it been in combat. It had been used as a glorified taxi, and when it ran out of gas it had been abandoned.

We stopped and inspected several more such vehicles over the next 15 minutes or so. Every one of them told the same story. No blood. No bodies. No damage. The guys that had been in and probably on top of these things had not been killed, wounded or captured; they had simply gone home.

We drove on into Mosul, passing hundreds more such vehicles scattered across the landscape everywhere. There was virtually no other sign that there had been a conflict of any kind, anywhere. There were no bodies. There were no troops.

We drove into Mosul. There was scattered gunfire in the distance, but the streets were largely deserted. We made our way down to the river to the compound that the Dohuk team had occupied.

Hans came out and briefed me on the situation. He had moved the team to this location from the Republican Guard base, because they had been taking serious fire at the previous location. The situation had seemed better here initially but had deteriorated significantly overnight. Several of the peshmerga working with his team had been killed during an assault on the compound the night before.

I looked around. Every building in the compound had peshmerga armed with machineguns and RPGs on the roof. There were literally hundreds of Kurds at the location. This battalion strength force was what was allowing our team to maintain its position, nothing else.

Hans and I spoke at some length about next steps. I painted the clearest possible picture for him. Guidance from back home was virtually

nonexistent. He made clear that he had no real liaison of any kind with the US military in the city.

Hans and I mounted up with some of his team members and a Kurdish security element and headed for the Ninevah Woods. The Ninevah Woods was a park area in central Mosul. It had become a sort of urban legend for us, because so many of the sources we had debriefed over the preceding months had claimed that valuable weapons and equipment were being hidden by the Iraqis in that location to escape targeting by US aircraft. We wanted to see for ourselves what the truth of the matter was, and we were concerned that if there was material of value there looters would carry it off shortly.

I drove into the Ninevah Woods expecting, quite frankly, to find nothing of interest. I assumed most of the stories about things hidden there were lies, and that anything of value would have been carried away before we got there. I was wrong.

As we drove into the wooded area, we saw on all sides of us vehicles, stacks of crates, and containers of various shapes and sizes. Dispersed throughout the area at regular intervals were all sorts of supplies and types of equipment that the Iraqis had moved here and hidden. None of it had been touched.

Members of our Kurdish security detail spoke with some local Iraqis who indicated that there were large tanks of some sort of dangerous chemical half-buried in the ground deeper in the woods. We went to investigate.

The tanks were on a hillside. They were covered in camouflage netting. According to the Iraqis, up until a few days before the tanks had been under the control of the Iraqi Republican Guard. When the city fell the Republican Guard walked away and discarded protective chemical masks they were carrying when they did so. The Iraqis showed us the masks.

Hans and I walked over to the tanks along with our Kurdish escort. One of the Kurds climbed up on one of the tanks. He asked me if I wanted him to open it. I suggested we wait until we had personnel on site who were properly equipped to handle whatever was inside.

Hans and I conferred about the items hidden all around us. It would take days if not weeks just to catalog what was hidden here. The city was in chaos. Looters had not come yet, probably because there had been Iraqi guards up until recently, but they would soon. If there was evidence of Iraqi WMD or other material of intelligence value here we would lose it if it were not secured.

We decided to leave a platoon-sized force of Kurds to guard the area and to drive over to the airfield, where we had heard a Marine expeditionary unit had taken up position. We hoped that the Marines might agree to post a guard on the Ninevah Woods while we organized intelligence exploitation of what was hidden there.

We arrived at the airfield, got past security, and were taken to the command post. The senior officer present was a Marine major. We explained the situation and requested his help.

The major was sympathetic but declined to provide any men to assist. He made clear that the Marines were taking a lot of fire and that they were concerned simply about being able to hold the airfield and expedite the arrival of additional American troops. They were holding on by their fingernails, and they weren't going to spread themselves any thinner.

It was not the answer we wanted, but we understood the response. Somebody back in Washington was showing briefing slides with little American flags on them to signify that we had "taken" Mosul and Kirkuk and other cities. The reality on the ground was a lot messier.

Hans and I returned to base and talked more about next steps. I promised to try to get some clarity from Headquarters. Members of another team, originally slated to insert into western Iraq, had arrived. The team leader was senior to me and seemed to be under the impression that he was supposed to assume command. I told him I'd had no such word but that I would discuss the matter with Headquarters. In the meantime, I made clear that Hans would remain in command.

We left Hans and the Dohuk team and started back toward base. As we crossed one of the bridges over the Tigris we encountered an American military checkpoint. Outside of the Marines at the airfield these were the

first US troops we had seen in Mosul. We stopped and I spoke with the NCO in charge of the checkpoint for a few minutes.

The NCO wanted to know where the Iraqi Republican Guard was. I told him that I didn't think there was an Iraqi Republican Guard anymore. He said that was good. I said I wasn't so sure.

We drove off, leaving the sergeant and his half-dozen men standing in the middle of the bridge. There were no other Americans in sight. By now there was more gunfire in the distance.

As we drove back up the ridge to base we fell in behind another long convoy of looted Iraqi trucks driven by Kurds. The one directly in front of us was packed with wooden crates filled with mortar shells. As we pulled through the Kurdish checkpoint at the top of the ridge and approached our base we passed a motor pool on the left where the Kurds had always kept a couple of broken-down Iraqi tanks. There were dozens of Iraqi tanks there now, so many that they would not fit in the parking area and had been lined up on the side of the road for hundreds of meters in all directions.

We arrived at base, and I went inside and started typing message traffic to Headquarters. We had won the war. Now the real problems were going to begin.



Kurdish children near Kirkuk waving American flags given to them by CIA personnel.



Looters jamming the road to Kirkuk after its fall.



Author with KDP peshmerga in Ninevah Woods after the fall of Mosul.



Major Sid Crews (retired) on the Green Line north of Kirkuk, spring 2003.



Major Sid Crews (retired) on an Iraqi airbase in Kirkuk after the fall of the city.



Author on an abandoned Iraqi tank outside of Mosul.

CHAPTER 23

Coming Home

Shortly after my return from Mosul I was advised that I needed to start closing down the base in KDP territory and preparing to move our entire operation into Mosul. I was also told that as part of this move we were going to draw down our numbers in the north dramatically. A Chief of Station was being sent to Baghdad, shifting the focus of our operations and leaving the Kurds behind. The war was over. We did not need more than a handful of men and women on the ground in our area.

I wondered what movie Headquarters was watching and if anyone was reading the reports we were sending in. I advised that I thought that it was a very bad idea for us to pack up our operations in KDP territory. We had built a robust base there. We had a secure compound and a logistical hub.

In Mosul we would have nothing. We would be hunkered down, under fire, and exposed. I suggested that it made a lot more sense to keep staffing our team in Mosul from our base in KDP territory, sending people and supplies south as necessary and rotating personnel as necessary to keep them fresh.

I also noted that the Kurds were going to be major players in post-Saddam Iraq and that it was very unwise to cut loose of them and move our whole operation south. Such a move would not only mean we were physically detaching ourselves from the Kurds; it would mean that we would be symbolically walking away from them. After all they had done for us, this seemed unwise and unjust.

Headquarters took all this under advisement but did not formally rescind any of its directions to move the base. Meanwhile, the US Army was moving even more aggressively against the Kurds. 10th Group was ordering all peshmerga to vacate both Kirkuk and Mosul, because in the military's view the Kurds were only going to stir up the local Arab population and cause trouble.

The military also began to push back on the presence of our Kurdish security personnel in Kirkuk and Mosul. They wanted us to send them home. I explained as clearly as I could that the only reason we could operate at all in either city was because of the presence of large numbers of peshmerga working directly for us, dedicated to supporting our activities. If we pulled these peshmerga, our people were going to die.

Headquarters took no clear stance on the issue. They seemed to be increasingly going dead on the line. A Chief of Station had arrived in Baghdad, and theoretically, he should now make these calls. Baghdad was a mess, however, and our personnel had their hands full just trying to get communications up and personnel housed. It was going to be a long time before Station was really running anything in Iraq.

Word came from Headquarters that it was time to start rotating personnel out of country. Hans, Snake, and I would be among the first to go. Command of the base would be handed over to the team leader who had come in from western Iraq and lashed up with Hans in Mosul.

I handed the reins to the new boss. Hans and I made a farewell call on Masrur, who seemed surprised to hear we were leaving. He handed both of us gold watches to thank us for our help and said in parting probably the most meaningful thing he could have said: "You kept your word. You did not leave until Saddam was gone. Thank you."

Hans and I flew out of Harir with a number of other team members the next day on a C-17. After all the long months of crawling over the mountains by road, it seemed surreal to be flying out. The aircraft was filled with military personnel. I remember thinking that there were more people on that one plane than were in our entire base all the time we were alone in Kurdistan. I wondered how many of them had any real idea what was going on.

On the way home we landed in a nearby Arab country to refuel. While we were on the ground Hans and I walked over to a hangar at the military airfield where we had landed. We had been told by another CIA officer who met us on the tarmac that this hangar held the equipment that had been provided to the Scorpions.

Inside the hangar were dozens of helicopters and vehicles, all painted with the Scorpions' trademark logo and colors. It was very impressive. None of it had been used for anything. In that hangar were millions of dollars' worth of gear that had never been used in combat.

Hans and I got back on the aircraft and flew to Germany, where we spent the night. The next day we completed travel to DC and landed at Andrews Air Force base. Sultana was there waiting, faithful to the lost boys to the end.

Hans moved on quickly to his home station and his family. He was done with the nonsense by then and had no appetite for going into Headquarters and listening to their fantasy version of what was happening in Iraq. I was not as lucky. The next morning I went into Headquarters to report in.

Everything was different in Headquarters. We had won the war. We had taken Baghdad, Mosul, and Kirkuk. Saddam had been deposed. Everywhere you looked there was nothing but smiling faces and congratulations. Mission accomplished.

I was a conquering hero. We had done amazing things. I gave my Saddam rug, or at least one of them, to the Chief of Near East Division. I went and spoke to the Director of Operations. I was told to take some time off and then start reading in preparation for my next assignment. I was going out to be Chief of Station in the Persian Gulf.

It was wonderful. It was also all wrong. Back here everyone was "high-fiving" and talking smack. In the field there was still a handful of people in the middle of a disintegrating nation. In the field there was still a handful of guys standing on a bridge in the middle of Mosul trying to figure out what we were going to do next.

I had brought with me to Headquarters a picture of one of the Iraqi tanks I had inspected on the way to Mosul with its muzzle cover still on. I

showed it to everyone I could and tried explaining what it meant. I got a lot of glazed looks in response.

I started “reading in” and getting ready to go back out to the field. I tried focusing on the fact that we had done our jobs and that it was now somebody else’s turn to handle things in Iraq. I tried moving on.

Then things went from bad to worse. We dissolved the entire Iraqi Army and the whole Iraqi government. We barred anybody who had ever been a member of the Baath Party, which had ruled Iraq under Saddam, from serving in the government. This meant, in effect, that everybody who actually knew how to run anything in the vast Iraqi governmental and bureaucratic structure was now out of a job.

I was sitting at a desk in an office at Headquarters reading files related to my new assignment. Somebody had CNN playing on a television in the reception area. I heard something about Iraq and went to see what was going on.

The broadcaster was saying that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Baghdad, the American entity running Iraq at that time, led by Paul Bremer, had announced that it had dissolved completely all elements of the Iraqi defense, intelligence, and security establishments. Every single guy whose job it was to maintain order in Iraq had just been fired. That was, according to the broadcast, the CPA’s second order; the first had come shortly before and had concerned the banning of Baath Party members from government employment.

I laughed and turned to someone sitting nearby to make a wisecrack about how hopeless the press was. “That’s wrong,” I said. I shook my head. There was no way anybody, no matter how clueless, would even contemplate attempting to control a nation of 22 million people without the assistance of the Iraqi security apparatus. Everything we had done in Iraq had been predicated on the necessity to coopt the Iraqis and get them working for us.

I was wrong. Very quickly I received confirmation that in fact Paul Bremer, our man in Baghdad, had issued the order exactly as reported by the press. As bad as the situation already was, as many mistakes as we had already made, we had just managed to make the situation infinitely worse.

That we had done so without any real consultation with anyone who actually understood what was happening in Iraq was all the more mind boggling.

When Waltemeyer had refused to accept the surrender of the Iraqi 5th Corps a whole bunch of Iraqi soldiers simply melted away and went home, taking with them their weapons. A similar thing happened all across the country. A power vacuum appeared, and chaos resulted.

Still, the situation was not hopeless. In Mosul, had you put the commander of the Iraqi 5th Corps on the radio, even weeks later, and had him call all his troops back to their barracks to get paid, the only problem you would have had would have been that every unit would have been at 120 percent strength. Every man would have returned and many would have brought with them cousins, nephews, and brothers-in-law that were never actually on Saddam's payroll.

Then, it would have been Iraqi troops manning roadblocks, Iraqi troops searching homes, and Iraqi troops enforcing curfews, not American soldiers. The job of our troops would have been to stay sharp and stay ready to make sure the Iraqis continued to take orders.

The British ran India for centuries with a mere handful of British troops on the ground. At its peak, the British Army in India did not consist of much more than 60,000 British soldiers. It was the hundreds of thousands of native troops and native police who kept order in the streets. The job of the British regiments was very simple: make sure the Indians continue to take orders.

The point here is not to glorify British imperialism. The point is that the British would never in their wildest dreams have contemplated having men from Wales and Liverpool manning checkpoints or patrolling the market. We never in our wildest dreams in the run-up to the invasion contemplated such a thing either. We were taking over a country and assuming control over an existing governmental apparatus, not building a new apparatus from scratch in the middle of a firestorm.

After the dissolution of the security apparatus that opportunity was lost. We turned away a lot of men who could have helped us, most of whom hated Saddam as much or more than we did. We took away livelihoods

from these men, leaving them unable to support their families. Worst of all we signaled to these men that there was no place for them in the new Iraq and that they were now powerless.

We built a bonfire, doused it with gasoline, and struck a match. The nation went up in flames.

I left Headquarters not too long after Bremer's disastrous decision and went out to take command of a CIA station in the Middle East. Rapidly, I was drawn into the pace of operations on the ground there and reduced to following events in Iraq from a distance.

CHAPTER 24

Lessons

Policy Needs to Be Based in Reality

Policy is made by policy makers. It is based on a wide variety of factors that have nothing to do with intelligence, such as what is affordable, what is politically palatable, and what is critical to the national interests of the United States. Its making is often messy, determined more by domestic politics and opinion polls than critical thinking and analysis.

Still, with all those caveats, policy has to be based in reality. Weighing up facts is one thing; disregarding them entirely and substituting fantasy is another.

From the very outset the plan to invade Iraq and to topple Saddam was fundamentally flawed for this reason. The key policy makers involved simply did not want to deal with reality. They had their own preconceived notions of how the world worked and how things in Iraq would play out, and they simply disregarded all evidence that contradicted these notions.

They worked on the premise that the Turks were our NATO allies. They would support us in Iraq, because we were allies and because toppling Saddam was important to us.

How an alliance with the Turks, predicated on fear of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, would determine Turkish attitudes toward the Kurds and Iraq was never articulated. Why the Turks, who had been fighting an existential war with Kurdish separatists for decades, would agree to arming Kurdish forces with advanced weaponry was never explained. Why the

Turks would want a powerful dictator who kept the Kurds weak and fragmented to go away and leave a united, powerful Kurdistan on its border was never explained either.

The bottom line was that the US wanted the Turks' help; therefore, no matter what the reality of the situation, policy makers would indulge this fantasy.

US policy was not just characterized by initial errors in judgment, however, although that would have been bad enough. It was characterized by an unwillingness to learn or to reconsider mistakes made. By the end of summer 2002 it was evident that the Turks were never going to get on board with the plan to invade Iraq, yet well into spring 2003 people in the Pentagon were still counting on the Turkish Parliament to give the go-ahead for the 4th Infantry Division to land at Mersin and march inland.

The consequences of the fantasy of unquestionable Turkish support were enormous and catastrophic. The plan was to have over 60,000 American soldiers in Northern Iraq. The US went to war with roughly 3,000. There was no occupation force. The US toppled a regime and, especially after firing the entire Iraqi Army, substituted chaos.

All of this was bad enough, but policy makers ignored reality in regard to a lot more than Turkish–Kurdish hatred.

Senior personnel back home bought off on the phony representations of men like Chalabi, who offered much and could deliver nothing. There was no mystery here. Chalabi himself had been a well-known fraud for many years, but all CIA intelligence on him was simply ignored.

Washington perceived its actions in Iraq to be good for the Iraqi people: we were freeing them from tyranny. This was true. I shared the belief.

This did not mean that invading Iraq was going to be the equivalent of liberating France. US forces were not marching into a democratic nation, with strong liberal traditions and a clear national identity, and driving out a foreign invader. They were toppling a despotic regime that had ruled for decades over a deeply divided nation that was an artificial creation of European powers, and which had no tradition whatsoever of democratic government.

It was like taking the lid off a pressure cooker. A basic textbook on Middle Eastern politics would have told you that. Add to that the thousands of intelligence reports CIA produced on the brutality of the regime in Baghdad and the state of Iraqi society and anyone with even a rudimentary level of intelligence would have understood that maintaining order and control after Saddam fell was going to be job one.

Yet, despite this, with little to no thought whatsoever, US forces, under the direction of policy makers in Washington, cavalierly discarded the offer of a large portion of the Iraqi Army to surrender and then compounded the error a few weeks later by firing every single man in Iraq on whom the occupying forces needed to rely for the control of that deeply fragmented society. In the process, America not only lost their services but made them enemies.

In my experience running operations abroad I have often found that the combination of ignorance and arrogance produces a particularly lethal cocktail. Iraq was no exception.

Words Matter

America made the decision to invade Iraq because, post-9/11, Saddam Hussein was regarded as too great a threat to US national security to leave in Baghdad. He had invaded Kuwait a decade earlier. He had a history of developing weapons of mass destruction. He was a brutal, evil monster to his own people.

The US had let Osama bin Laden gather strength and paid the price. Saddam had to go before America woke up one morning and found he had stolen a march on us.

There was nothing inherently irrational about this decision. Saddam was a horrible ruler. He was a destabilizing influence. Removing him and installing in his place a more palatable and more pro-American ruler could have potentially remade the map of the Middle East in a fashion greatly to the US's benefit.

None of this had anything to do directly with the exact current status of Saddam's WMD programs or an imminent threat to launch chemical or

biological threats. What America was saying was, in effect, that they weren't going to wait until the situation got that dire. The US was acting preemptively.

This is not how the war was sold to the American people in the spring of 2003. The political calculus by this point was that only by raising the specter of an immediate WMD threat could President Bush rally the support necessary to wage war. That may have made sense to the people who got paid to focus on domestic politics. But there was just one problem: there was no intelligence to support that assertion.

The discussion since 2003 has focused on the idea that CIA got its assessment of Saddam's WMD capabilities wrong and led the United States into war on false pretenses. That is a fundamentally flawed version of events.

My team produced many thousands of intelligence reports from inside Iraq prior to the invasion. Tim's team produced many thousands more. None of those reports ever claimed that we had found conclusive evidence of the existence of Iraqi WMD programs.

That even senior Iraqi generals believed Saddam had chemical weapons, we knew. That Saddam had routinely used chemical weapons in the past, we knew. That everyone expected him to do so again, we knew.

CIA did not know whether or not Saddam retained his WMD capabilities, and we never claimed to have acquired such knowledge.

What sources outside Iraq said I do not know beyond what I have read in the press. In any event, their reporting could not possibly have been rationally judged to outweigh the body of reporting that we, the only folks actually in the country, produced. The decision to give such weight to a handful of reports from outside Iraq could not possibly have been justified on sourcing and access. It was a political call.

Words have meaning. It may seem like smart politics to magnify a threat in order to generate popular support for a war. It is not. Nor is it moral.

War is evil. People are killed. People are maimed. Lives are destroyed. When and if it is necessary, then the first thing you owe the people who will wage it is the truth.

Focus is Everything

Aside from the political calculus as to how to sell the war in Iraq to the American people in 2003, the United States' decision to topple Saddam was made on the basis that the US regarded him as a threat. It was this individual and the regime that supported him that Americans could no longer tolerate. The US needed a pro-American Iraq, one that would no longer threaten its allies and no longer oppose US policies in the Middle East.

Achieving that goal required removing Saddam from power. Of necessity, it also required the removal of those closest to him that had aided and abetted him and had so much blood on their hands that they too must be regarded as monsters.

It did not require the disbanding of the Iraqi Army as a whole. It did mandate vaporizing the entire Baathist political structure. It did not mean the sudden and precipitous remaking of Iraqi governmental structure.

And, yet, the US did all of these things. Sent to Iraq to topple a tyrant, America decided, with little or no thought for the consequences, to remake the entire political and civil structure of a nation. In the process ethnic and religious forces that had been building for 1,500 years were unleashed. The price was catastrophic.

The US followed much the same trajectory in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the federal bureaucracy seized up. The multi-billion-dollar defense establishment had no ready answer to what had just occurred. The United States' multi-layered staffs and agencies were at a loss as to how to respond. There was no plan. The Pentagon was starting from scratch. The best estimates were that America would be lucky to mount a conventional invasion of Afghanistan within six months.

And then, something amazing and miraculous happened. Into that gap stepped individuals from the Central Intelligence Agency with a bold, creative, unconventional plan to respond. Lashed up with US Army Special Forces and the United States Air Force, they put together perhaps the most audacious, most successful American military operation since World War II.

The Agency plan called for CIA teams to infiltrate into Afghanistan and hook up with native allies. In turn, those CIA teams would then facilitate the entry of Army Special Forces personnel, who would not only help train and direct local forces but also call in air support from the US Air Force. President Bush, frustrated by what he perceived as a lack of imagination on the part of the Pentagon, approved the plan wholeheartedly. On September 26, 2001 the first CIA personnel, flying in an old Russian Mi-17 helicopter, entered Afghanistan. Within weeks US Army Special Forces were on the ground.

The results were devastating. The Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies were crushed. By mid-December the Taliban had lost control of the nation and ceased to operate in conventional formations. The remnants of Al Qaeda were streaming toward the Pakistan border. There were no more than 2,500 American personnel in country.

The US had accomplished its objective. In a matter of months, the US had confronted an enemy it had tried to ignore for years and destroyed the safe haven from which it launched its attacks. All that remained in Afghanistan was to install a friendly government, provide it with the financial support it needed to remain in power, and leave behind whatever limited contingent of intelligence personnel and special operations forces that would be necessary to assist it in combating internal threats.

Then the bureaucracy came to life. What had been a war waged by handfuls of highly trained, specialized operators became the province of conventional forces and ponderous, empire-building bureaucrats.

What had begun as a narrowly focused mission with a tight focus on eliminating a threat became something much broader, with a continuously evolving and expanding mission. The United States moved from arming tribal leaders and hunting terrorists to attempting to transform Afghan culture, jump start its economy, and crush centuries of nation building and development into a matter of years. The cost in blood and treasure was staggering.

America is still paying the price. The US is no safer today than if it had never introduced conventional forces. In fact, a strong argument could be made that had the US never attempted to shift the foundations of Pashtun

culture and had never dispatched tens of thousands of heavily armed foreign soldiers to patrol the villages and mountains of the nation, it would never have aroused a broad-based backlash.

In Iraq, America went from removing a despot to an open-ended, poorly conceived exercise in nation building. The United States undertook civilian reconstruction programs that cost hundreds of billions of dollars, building schools, prisons, and power plants, and paving roads, building water treatment plants and electrical infrastructure. Many of the projects went unfinished. So much of the money was lost to incompetence and corruption that even the Special Inspector General for Reconstruction for Iraq could never really track it all.

The United States crushed the Iraqi military in a matter of weeks but spent the next nine years attempting to complete tasks at best tangential to its original missions:

- 189,000 Iraqi civilians were killed in the violence.
- 4,488 US service personnel died.
- 32,223 US service personnel were wounded.
- \$1.7 trillion dollars were spent.

In 2011 America declared that it had completed its mission in Iraq and pulled out, leaving no meaningful military presence of any kind behind. Having exhausted itself with years of nation building and major combat operations, the US now allowed its strategy to swing to the other extreme. America walked away.

Iraq spiraled into chaos again. The US is still attempting to manage the forces unleashed. The conventional wisdom appears to be that all this was the inevitable result of the decision to invade.

It was not. All of this was the result of the decision to turn the deposing of a dictator into an exercise to transform a Middle Eastern dictatorship into a liberal Western democracy and to compress that transformation into a few short months. There was a clear alternative, one that involved placing in power in Baghdad a leader who would keep the existing power structure intact and preserve security. Then, on the basis of the foundation of law and

order and security, the long, slow process of transitioning a nation ruled by fear into one ruled by laws could have begun.

We Are Not Very Good at This

In 1941 the United States, although a vast economic power, was largely disengaged from events on the world stage. In contrast to England, France, Germany, and the other great powers, the US kept its distance and attempted to avoid foreign entanglements. US governmental and defense establishments reflected this policy. The current vast bureaucracy, which Americans now take for granted, simply did not exist.

Then World War II happened. America mobilized a nation to win a worldwide conflict in which victory would depend on assembling armies composed of millions of men and fleets composed of thousands of ships. Logistics were everything. The United States was producing and shipping abroad tanks, ships, aircraft, and artillery on a scale never seen before or since.

The Allied powers crushed the Germans and the Japanese. Then the United States carved into stone the organizational structure that had run the war by creating a Department of Defense and allowing it to expand into a worldwide military-industrial complex unparalleled in human history.

And ever since, America has been looking for an excuse to use it.

When and if the United States finds itself in a worldwide conflict with other nation states in the future, Americans will be glad to have this immense capacity to organize and move men, weapons, and equipment on a vast scale. In the meantime, as the United States fights the much more common, much more limited, conflicts that will be the norm, those in power need to remember a central truth.

Bigger is not always better. In fact, in the world of intelligence, special operations, and covert action, “bigger” is usually worse. Lawrence of Arabia famously said, “The smaller the unit, the better its performance.” He was talking about his experiences in the desert in World War I. He could just as well have been talking about the performance of US forces in any number of places in the last 50 years.

What matters in the kinds of conflicts with which America has been absorbed since World War II is expertise. Layers of bureaucracy and command do not add anything. To the contrary, they make it impossible to move quickly and nimbly and to effectively deal with problems and opportunities as they arise.

Anyone with any rudimentary understanding of the history of the Turkish–Kurdish conflict would have understood that expecting Turkish assistance in providing the Kurds in Northern Iraq state-of-the-art weaponry was ill advised. Anyone who was awake and paying attention, regardless of their previous level of expertise, would have been able to see by the fall of 2002 that the Turks were never going to get on board with this concept and were very unlikely to ever enthusiastically support an effort to depose Saddam Hussein, who had been for decades very effectively keeping the Kurds weak and isolated.

Certainly, those of us on the ground in Kurdistan understood all of this. Even Headquarters, despite its location in Washington, DC, was not oblivious to the reality of the situation. Had those individuals who understood the region and the dynamics on the ground had control over the situation, it is likely that all plans predicated on the movement of 60,000 US troops into Northern Iraq and the equipping of the Kurds with Javelin missiles would have been scrapped, and we would have begun planning for operations in Northern Iraq on that basis.

In the end, the US would likely have had roughly the same numbers of personnel in various categories on the ground, but rather than being hurriedly rushed into country at the last minute without any real plan for their employment and the handling of the situation after the war was won, they would have arrived in an orderly fashion and then been able to execute movements into Mosul and Kirkuk on the basis of a detailed, well-thought-out plan for occupation. There would have been no “what do we do now” moments.

That America did not abandon a fundamentally flawed plan and begin work on a new one grounded in reality was due to the nature of the gargantuan bureaucracy in Washington, DC, and the subordination of expertise and experience to layers of command staffed by individuals with

neither. CIA could write all the intelligence reports we wanted and make endless recommendations, but they were simply ignored by the byzantine structure above us.

This dynamic crippled CIA's efforts in Iraq across the board. We knew the Scorpion initiative was a waste of time from the day we entered country, and we said so loudly and repeatedly. None of the assessments of the men and women on the ground counted for anything next to the desire of individuals back home to have a "Free Iraqi" force fighting alongside US troops.

We knew, as CIA had for decades, that Ahmed Chalabi was a fraud and an Iranian puppet. Yet, Pentagon leaders ignored all of this information and flew what amounted to a force of Iranian troops into Iraq on US Air Force planes and turned them loose in Iraq to begin work contrary to CIA's interests.

CIA personnel in country secured the full surrender of a large portion of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi military and served up on a silver platter to the US military a walk over, orderly occupation of an entire province and one of Iraq's largest and most strategic cities, and that opportunity was squandered, because the Secretary of Defense had put in place rules that made an incompetent, mid-level Army officer the only one who could speak on behalf of the American people. The most senior general in the KDP military and a senior, highly capable CIA officer were reduced to simply watching while a tragedy unfolded.

When Bremer made his ultimate decision to completely erase the Iraqi national security structure, he guaranteed catastrophe. Put in context, however, what he did was the inevitable conclusion to an effort categorized from beginning to end by the stumbling, uncoordinated actions of a giant, bureaucratic machine that did what it wanted, when it wanted, divorced from reality and oblivious to the consequences.

Thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died as a consequence. The United States leadership cannot continue to function this way going forward. The road to success in operations of this kind does not lead through the maze-like corridors of Washington bureaucracies. If you want to succeed in these kinds of endeavors you need to place your

trust in small numbers of the right, carefully seasoned people, and empower them to act decisively and rapidly.

We Better Get This Right

America cannot afford to continue to oscillate between either ignoring security threats abroad or responding to them with massive conventional and bureaucratic responses that are out of proportion to the threat posed and therefore unsustainable. The United States has demonstrated in Afghanistan and Northern Iraq our capacity to respond in a much more agile and economical fashion. The challenge is to incorporate the lessons learned in such a way that fast, flexible, asymmetric responses like this become the norm rather than the aberration.

This is not simply a matter of preference regarding strategy and the expenditure of resources. This is a matter of national survival. We live in a dangerous world. It is becoming more dangerous and more chaotic by the day. Threats are not diminishing. They are multiplying, and their ability to threaten all of us is increasing as well.

Across the globe we see the multiplication of extremist groups like ISIS and Boko Haram. This trend will continue, driven by demographics and competition for resources. The poor of the world will become more desperate, not less so, in coming decades, and the forces that have driven the rise in extremism and extremist groups will only intensify.

For many years the received wisdom has been that population growth is out of control. That's not quite accurate. In many parts of the world—the United States, Europe, and China, for instance—population growth has stopped and population totals are declining. In these areas governments are dealing with the impact of an aging population.

In the developing world, though, it is a very different story. Here the population is exploding, and nations that can barely sustain their current populations are faced with the challenge of feeding, educating, and employing vastly larger populations. Many of these nations will not meet this challenge. They will fail, and when this happens they will unleash the forces of chaos and conflict.

The impact of this population explosion in the poorest, least resilient nations can hardly be exaggerated. Nations already wracked by violence and teetering on the brink of chaos are going to be buried under billions of new citizens. Nations with astronomical unemployment rates are going to be faced with hordes of angry, unemployed young people, unable to find work, unable to feed themselves, and looking for someone and something to blame.

The impact of this population bomb will be magnified by the struggle for resources. A planet already struggling to find enough energy, water, and food will be even more desperate. Entire cities and nations may face collapse as a result.

Estimates are that worldwide demand for energy will increase by 35 percent by 2035 as compared with 2010. Fossil fuels will provide about 75 percent of this supply, with the gas sector seeing the largest growth. Most of the growth will occur in emerging economies, throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In short, while the United States is rapidly moving toward self-sufficiency in energy, the rest of the world will be locked in a desperate race to keep pace with growing demand. Competition for oil, natural gas, and coal, already fierce, will only increase. As it does so, this competition will spark conflict and soaring prices. The increased cost of energy and, in many places, its scarcity will in turn generate more conflict.

Perhaps more threatening than competition over fossil fuels, however, is the increasing difficulty of satisfying the need for the most basic resources of all: water and food. Many nations are already over-pumping aquifers as they struggle to satisfy their growing water needs. These include the three biggest grain producers—China, India, and the United States.

In India water tables are falling and wells are going dry in most states. This includes the Punjab and Haryana, two of the biggest surplus grain producers. In Gujarat water tables are falling 6 meters a year. In many areas farmers now have to use oil-drilling technology to reach water. The water table around the cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi in Pakistan is dropping by a meter a year.

Three-quarters of the water used by Beijing is groundwater. The city is drilling 1,000 feet down to find water already. That is five times deeper than 20 years ago. A study in 2000 found that in that year alone under the North China Plain, an area of intense grain production, the water table fell 2.9 meters. Around some cities in the same area the water level fell 6 meters in the same time period.

Similar things are happening all across the Middle East. Yemen has one of the world's fastest growing populations. Because of overuse of groundwater, water tables in Yemen are falling on average 2 meters a year. In Sana'a, the capital city, tap water is available once every four days.

Due to falling water tables, the grain harvest has declined by one-third over the last 40 years. Yemen now imports more than 80 percent of its grain.

Forty years ago Jordan was producing over 300,000 tons of grain a year. Now it produces only 60,000 tons and imports 90 percent of its grain. Saudi Arabia has so exhausted its water supply that grain production has effectively ceased.

In 2005 the World Bank reported that 175 million people in India were dependent for food on over-pumping of groundwater. In China at least 130 million people are being fed with grain produced by the unsustainable use of groundwater. Sooner or later, of course, the water will be out of reach.

For most of the second half of the 20th century the world had two buffers against famine. First, there was a large carryover stock of grain each year. That means more grain was being produced than used, and at the end of each year there was somewhere around 100 days of excess grain still available for the world to draw on. Second, there were large areas of idle land in the United States, which, in a crisis, could be put into production.

In 1965, when India experienced widespread famine, these buffers allowed the United States to send 25 percent of its wheat harvest to India to stave off famine. Both these buffers are now gone. There is no appreciable amount of land in the United States not in production and there are no carryover stocks of any size. The world is living harvest to harvest much as someone might live paycheck to paycheck.

We are heading into a long period of instability, and, in the middle of this whirlwind are an increasing array of deadly weapons whose proliferation is virtually certain. North Korea, one of the most unpredictable nations on the planet, has nuclear weapons. The Iranians, no matter what the Obama Administration claimed, are hell bent on acquiring them as well. Pakistan, perpetually teetering on the edge of the abyss, is furiously adding to its already massive nuclear arsenal.

Chemical weapons are widespread. Terrorist groups like ISIS have repeatedly detonated chemical VBIEDs (Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices). As these groups acquire greater and greater resources, their ability to manufacture more sophisticated chemical agents than those used to date is virtually certain. We cannot be far from the day when extremists groups bent on mass destruction will be capable of mounting large-scale nerve agent attacks on population centers.

Biological weapons are perhaps the most terrifying. Accurately described as the “poor man’s nuclear weapon,” biological weapons have the capacity to produce true mass casualty events. The technology necessary to create such weapons is the same used in biotech labs all over the world. It is simple. It is cheap. It is spreading worldwide. We cannot seriously hope to prevent the development of such weapons completely when the necessary work can be done in an apartment with mail order equipment and a handful of well-trained lab technicians.

Taken all together the kind of factors outlined above paint a picture of a violent, turbulent future. Mass migrations of impoverished populations, such as we are already seeing from Central America into the United States and the Middle East and Africa into Europe will continue and increase in scale. Poor nations will crumble under the pressure of population growth, poverty, and resource scarcity. Failed states will be common. Extremist states like that currently being carved out by ISIS will continue to plague the planet. Weapons of mass destruction will become more and more widespread.

We will need to continue to protect the citizens of the United States in this dangerous world, and we will need to do so in a way that is affordable and sustainable. America cannot invade and occupy every nation that

threatens its people nor can it simply sit and wait while threats gain strength. The United States will need to learn, or perhaps relearn, how to fight in bold, unconventional ways, which maximize its strengths and exploit the weaknesses of its enemies.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq is fading into the past. Its lessons must not. In the words of philosopher George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”



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