



One Year in Babylon

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Chapter 1

Truth and Reason show but dim,
 And all's poetry with him.
 Rhyme and music flow in plenty
 For the lad of one-and-twenty,
 But Spring for him is no more now
 ~ Robert Graves

Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel; Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge them that are carried away captive of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans for their good.
 ~ Jeremiah 24, KJV

The Grief of Waiting.

I remember playing war when I was a young boy. It was always heroic. Right and wrong were easy to distinguish. Nobody really got hurt unless they deserved it. And those that deserved it accepted their fate nobly, crumpling melodramatically to the ground, knowing that this is simply the moral order of the universe. These are naïve concepts, of course, but I came by them honestly. In so many war movies of my childhood, the hero charged the enemy recklessly. He barely sweated. He barely got dirty. If he got wounded, the ugly details were sanitized. In the movies, the portrayal of war was barely above the level of kids-play. But even in the more realistic movies of modern times, the directors and actors can miss it. Even in the ugliest view of war, an uninformed viewer can miss the point simply because he has been unmarred.

War, like love, is something that you cannot fully understand until you become intimate with it. Until you become part of its ugly reality and even the distinct beauty of its horror, it's easy to conceive of war in heroic terms in such an airbrushed, idyllic way. When something is too distant to be real, it can easily be romanticized. But when reality comes close, it is oh so different.

I had watched others go off to war in my youth. When I was a young boy, one of my best friends had a brother that was being sent to Vietnam. I remember one summer going over to his house and meeting his brother. His brother had just returned from his initial training and was preparing to go to Vietnam. The Army in its decency was giving him one last time to sow his wild oats before he left for war. Perhaps this would be the last time in a long time before he would be able to enjoy life again – home cooked food, beer, and the touch of a girl – the trifecta for a young soldier. Perhaps this would be the last time he would ever enjoy these things. I didn't know it at the time, but the finality of his actions and thoughts of his mortality, in spite of his vital youth, had to be going through his head. I never suspected as a child, and never even came close to understanding the inevitability and weight of this thought until I'd some day be a participant in war.

To me, this young soldier was a giant like the heroes of the ancient world or a hero of the romanticized war movies that I watched. He was lean and sinewy, slightly sunburned in his slim frame from many days of army training outdoors. He exuded the promise and power of youth. He towered above my young head. Had I seen more clearly, though, I might have seen his awkward, nervous desire to prove himself. I might have seen the simultaneous private, unconscious exultation in his newfound manhood, barely covering the nagging fears of failure. Semi-consciously, he had found the mother-lode of masculinity, the quickest way to manhood and its societal privileges – becoming a soldier. Yet, this was a mixed blessing, the crap-shoot of life, with the possibility of death at the end. Unconsciously, he knew this. But he would never consciously think this thought and would definitely never admit it.

Despite his untried, unfledged masculinity, he played the quintessential soldier instinctively, displaying his bravado carelessly. As we walked through the quiet suburban neighborhoods, he taught us the jody calls he had learned to march to during his training. We naively chorused his prompts: “We gonna go to Vietnam to kill Charlie Chang.” We repeated the words dutifully as if we were young soldiers responding to our drill sergeant’s prompts. “We gonna go to Vietnam now Little Liza Jane.” Again, we echoed the line in unison.

I didn’t know. War was an idealized adventure then. It was a dream with clear cut lines of good and bad, heroes and villains. It was a movie scene. My simplified conceptualization of war wouldn’t change very much until I reached young adulthood, though.

My first close encounter with war would come years later when I was a young lieutenant, fresh out of college and ROTC. I was eager and enthusiastic, trying to make my mark in the world. In those days, my zeal often overwhelmed what was truly important simply because I didn’t have enough experience about life and because, like all young men, I hungered for the spoils of life.

I had just completed a local Army course in nuclear-biological-chemical warfare. It was a three-week school that required detailed study over all of the most horrific and crafty weapons that man could devise in the areas of nuclear weaponry, germ warfare, and chemical assault. In my youthful enthusiasm, I approached this school with the usual zealous determination that I did many of my more mundane tasks as a lieutenant. The more mundane and distasteful things are usually tossed to the lowest ranking dog, and at the time, that was me. But I sensed that these tedious tasks were my required dues to a higher position and would develop my kitbag of skills to make me more useful in the future. So I accepted them willingly because I had faith in the Army’s commitment to advancing the best, be they the most intelligent, the most willing, or the most diligent. I believed that I had all three to commend me because life had not yet thrown me enough challenges to make me doubt myself.

As I studied the material for this school, I felt that all that I studied, no matter how horrific the consequences, was merely history, merely knowledge to be ingested. But toward the end of that school, something would happen to change my naïve view.

Shortly before I went to the school, Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. There were the usual presidential press conferences and speeches, in addition to the invisible diplomatic machinations that no one would know about. In the end, Hussein did not budge from Kuwait, and George Bush convinced the world that this conflagration could not be endured.

The story of Saddam Hussein’s armies invading small Kuwait had become a major event in history at the time, simply because it was the most distressing event of the time. In the passage of years, we would find that it was a mere diversion. There were much more fearful and consequential possibilities. But at the time, we saw this event, as people did the first and second world war, as a precipitous conflagration, a zenith that was not to be exceeded.

Time would prove us wrong, at least in publicly acceptable body counts. But in the fear of the moment, I became engulfed by the menace in all its capabilities. The nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC) school which I was attending was focused on the most inhumane potentials of modern weaponry. In addition to the study of all the minutiae of the weapons’ capabilities, I was required to watch films of applications. We were shown Russian army films of soldiers applying chemical and biological weapons to animals. The result was horrific. In some cases, the Russian soldiers applied the antidote to the animals to show the possible protective effects. Regardless, these films seemed benign until they met the context of a real war.

It was then that they became all too real. And it was then that I took the threat seriously and began to worry as any man would – not that I feared death. I was too young to really worry that much about death. Like all young men, I still felt somewhat bullet-proof. But I had read enough stories and seen enough of men coming back from war in the biggest conflict of my generation, Vietnam. And I knew that even if you did not die, there were things that could happen to you that were possibly worse such as a lifelong disability that would always be painful and would always require medical treatment or the PTSD that haunted men's minds and emotions for decades afterwards (something I would know all too well later). And, even if you did pay the highest price of your life, perhaps sparing you the suffering of the living, you would leave behind broken hearts for those who never conceived that you really might die.

In any case, when Hussein invaded Iraq, we were told in secret briefings that he had chemical and biological weapons, and we were told, based on his previous practice with the Iranians and Kurds, that he was willing to use any weapons at his disposal.

When all this sunk in, I finally faced the fact of my mortality, but in those moments, I feared more for the aftermath – for what my wife would have to face. Like me, she was still very young, not yet the strong, determined woman that she would eventually develop into. I wondered what kind of life she would lead after my death. I thought of my responsibility to her and saw that I had until that point avoided one of the deepest of my commitments of a man, the issue of children. Like many young, newly married adults, I wanted to enjoy life at the point where I finally had some success and some money and could do the things I'd always wanted to do from my youth. And I wanted to enjoy my wife without the burden of caring for children.

I didn't know then how wrong my perspective was about the issue of children. Like many people, I falsely looked at them as being a negative event in which I would put out far more than I would get back, and so I had to be ready for a life of drudgery. Of course, this is the anti-life narrative that is pushed by those in certain political realms. Nothing could be further from the truth. Raising children is the most natural and wonderful experience in the world, as I would find out later. They bring experiences and joys to you that you never will find in a self-indulgent life. But that is the way with the most important things in life. The really valuable things that give you deep satisfaction and enjoyment take just a little investment of time and energy. But those things always give a return far in excess of what you put into it.

I had not yet arrived at that point of realization that I would find years later when my wife and I brought our firstborn into the world. At this point, I was merely going on blind faith. When I thought of the possibility of my death, and my school had well taught me the horrible possibility of that, I feared for what I would leave behind. It was then that I really examined my soul and asked what was really important in life. It was then that I finally gave in on the subject of children. My wife had already been ready for a while, but I had remained skeptical. But I was deeply touched by how unjust it would be for me to leave her with all the sorrow of my death and nothing else. At least with a child in the house, she would always have a person in which to see something of me, something that would bring back the joyous memories of our best days together. I felt that I owed her this much.

Despite all the initial angst, I ultimately didn't deploy. An experienced warrant officer was chosen over me. In the always cautious world of Army operations, the pragmatism of experience would win out over youthful enthusiasm when it came to choices for leaders. But the effect of the war and the change in my thinking was dramatic and lasting. For the first time, I truly understood the sacrifices of my chosen profession.

My wife and I started trying for pregnancy in earnest. God blessed us richly in this area as He did in so many things over the years. It was almost too easy. Not that we didn't have some worries in the beginning, thinking that it was taking too long. But once we chose this road, we became more cognizant of the people around us that were also trying to have children. For some, the struggle was a long frustrating road, so we never

took for granted the fact that she was able to conceive so quickly. She was fruitful within a year, and the joy of our first-born, a son, followed soon thereafter.

Years passed. Our nation won that war with relatively little expenditure of life, money, and materiel, so the victory was considered glorious, especially given the cloud of Vietnam still hanging over the heads of many senior leaders in the military. But despite the supposedly complete victory, years later, there was yet another war with this same man.

We watched this war play out over television unlike Desert Storm. I was stationed in Germany at the time, and my family was with me. Our nation had gone through the horror of 9/11, and the impact of that event lingered for a long time in the military community in Germany, exemplified by the maximized guard duty for our soldiers and the much more stringent entry procedures whenever you left one military enclave to enter another.

It's important to understand the big difference in security that our "forward based" soldiers encounter in the various countries around the world as opposed to what they would experience if stationed in the states. Our little military communities were spread throughout Germany at one time, each one with its own little microcosm of America, its own perimeter fence and active security measures, a little oasis of Americana as filtered through the stiff military prism. My family and I lived in one little post, but I worked at another about 10 miles away; plus, I frequently had to travel to two or three other posts in the area in order to fulfill the requirements of my job. So we always knew there were multiple opportunities for those unfriendly to the U.S. to take out their frustrations on us as targets of opportunity. Plus, we went to church in an English speaking congregation that was nestled in the German community – no special security procedures; they conducted services the same way other German churches did. But perhaps the biggest issue was the large Turkish population in many areas of Germany, immigrants who had flooded in to take lower level jobs during Germany's boom-economy. They tended to be Muslim, and from my experiences, tended to be at least skeptical if not outright antagonistic towards Americans. It was primarily this population and their connections to others in the Arab world that drove most of our security fears in this foreign landscape, although to be honest, there were few real threats that developed out of this population over time.

All in all, though, overseas duty was certainly not the same as in the states. In the states, you would assume that you were surrounded by friends and supporters (Vietnam notwithstanding). But here, you never knew. The wonderful German people were very supportive, but you always knew this was not their war, and you knew you could not necessarily count on their support, especially when it came to sending their own youth to risk life and limb. Once their government made the commitment to do just that, you knew that protests would be much more forceful and frequent and would many times be conducted right at the gates of the posts you would have to drive through. Additionally, there has been a strong pacifist streak in the Germany population for many years. I don't know if this grew primarily out of the distaste for war after the disaster of WWII, or it was a tangential movement from the Vietnam protests in the U.S., or if it was merely the desire to live peacefully once material success came to Germany to stay.

It was in this environment that I watched our cable news shows constantly (either at home or at work) as we successfully negotiated uncharted territory in our war with Afghanistan. I was amazed at our success as we used proxy's to execute much of the war. Of course, they had a big intellectual and strategic boost from our special ops soldiers that were strategically placed in the allied forces for liaison to get weapons, ammo, or air/artillery strikes, or more importantly, to advise them in the fine art of war. I watched more guardedly, however, as we entered another war with Hussein, this time on his home territory.

Like most caring military leaders, I was worried about our troops as I observed that war play out over television. I agonized at the scenes on tv, fearing for the death of our soldiers at the hands of this evil man. I knew that I probably did serve with at least some of those that were in those early battles, so the war felt

personal. Regardless of whether I knew them or not, though, I knew these were our American troops, and I could have just as easily been one of them given the variation in career or assignments. I also felt the war more personally now because of my greatly increased experience with troops, because of the greater weight of leadership, and because of my realization of the sanctity of life with the birth of my four children. Moreover, I remembered in the back of my mind that I had not gone to the last war and regretted somewhat the loss of opportunity to pay my dues and bear the same burden as my brothers in arms, but I knew even then that it was likely that I would eventually serve in this war. Time would prove me right as over the succeeding months, the war unexpectedly (at least to our military-civilian leaders) dragged on, a glorious war now morphing into a longer, more costly commitment.

The day eventually came that I was on orders to a unit at Ft. Bragg that was on the short-list for deployment to Iraq. I was on leave in conjunction with my move from Germany back to the states. I had tried very hard to get away from my job in Germany in time to take a few weeks of leave. I had been under incredible amounts of stress from the additional work that the war produced and the never ending alertness that I felt obligated to as a leader. I never found time to unwind and started feeling the stress continually build. Due to working with perfectionist bosses who were not very approachable or encouraging (save for a wonderful Deputy Commander, a Colonel who wore an SF tab), I found myself increasingly hating to get up in the morning to go to work. My normal mode had been to try to find the good things in every situation. I didn't want to be one of those soldiers that lived overseas and constantly complained about wanting to go back to the states, all the while missing an opportunity of a lifetime to travel in a beautiful country. But this daily pounding of negative messages and harsh demands by my bosses wore me down over the period of two years. I came to the point that I would rather have died than lived, and although I wasn't thinking about suicide, I still had a constant, unhealthy desire for the escape of death.

This was not the optimal way to arrive at a new unit. I thought that a few weeks of leave away from the Army would clear my head and get me ready for whatever. However, knowing that the deployment was hanging over me like the sword of Damocles, I was unable to fully enjoy my leave or to let go. My head didn't get clear, and I was sitting on an emotional powder keg.

When I finally arrived at the unit at Bragg, I took over a key section on the General's staff, which was an expected placement for this point in my career as a soon-to-be promotable major (i.e. to lieutenant colonel). Unfortunately, I found many of my people demoralized, including the hard-working and highly intelligent, very professional deputy that had been left holding the bag for leadership of this section. She was one of the finest officers I've ever worked with in my career. She was dedicated and demanding, but she had a soul; like me, she always thought first of the troops she was leading.

She actually did have a boss, who should have been working with me for the transition of leadership, but he was retiring and felt like that gave him carte blanche to forget about all his responsibilities. This man, my self-serving predecessor, was on his way out of the Army and dragging his feet all the way. He apparently had made a deal with the previous Commanding General of our unit in which he would get a certain job.

Unfortunately, he did not get that job that he thought he deserved. With a new Commanding General, all bets were off. The new General was not willing to honor a commitment which he had not made and which did not benefit the unit. In facing such a disappointment, my predecessor responded poorly, leaving a fine, young officer to take all the flack. He basically went into a few-months-long temper tantrum. He refused to show up for meetings and basically let go of all responsibility. In short, he did not care and did not care who did. And, the most egregious of all, he would not lead or take care of his people. This is strictly taboo in the Army and is perhaps the worst charge one could level against a leader (besides obvious criminal behavior).

But our leadership was reluctant to go after this man, despite his moral failing as a leader. They were reluctant because his long record of good service (enough to earn him a retirement) was too important to go

after him despite his failings in the final hours of his service. Even though I detested his final actions in this job, I agreed, though with some misgivings. I felt that a man does deserve honor for a lifetime of service, even if he doesn't carry the honor all the way to the end. In the end, we're all human, and we all let others down at some point. But I still feel like such actions bring into question all that the man claimed to have stood for. I realize that, as humans, we sometimes paint ourselves into emotional/moral corners where we justify unusual acts, or we feel wronged, but such reasoning is always self-serving. The true, honorable Army leader, as contextualized in Army leadership field manuals, is a servant leader, trying always to rise above such self-serving thinking. He or she always puts the troops first. The troops eat first. The troops get paid first. The truly moral leader realizes that, although much responsibility is laid on his or her shoulders, the real debt is paid by the hard work of the men and women under your command. And if they are cared for first, and they truly believe that the leader has their best interests at heart, puts them first, and takes care of their needs in the critical moment, then they will follow you to the gates of Hell. Likewise, given such high expectations in the military environment, moral failure as a leader is usually considered one of the most egregious of sins among troops, and one which leads to the worst feelings of betrayal. This topic is explored so poignantly in *Achilles in Vietnam*.

But, in retrospect, our new Commanding General's decision, not to hire this man after retirement based on the character that he revealed, was thoroughly vindicated.

When I took over, the deputy was very stressed at the selfish mistreatment she had gotten at the hands of her supposed boss. I could tell she was demoralized. She was too young and too talented to go through that kind of soul-wrenching injustice. The moment I walked in, I wanted so badly to set things right and to give her and the remainder of my new staff a better example of what a leader does. This moral situation notwithstanding, I had my work cut out for me. It's not an easy task to get a group of people ready for a combat deployment, especially when one is still fighting personal demons.

The days leading up to the deployment left everyone with heavy hearts. We knew what was coming, and we feared the unknown. It was not so much that we feared what we would face after the separation. Perhaps our greatest fear was the impending moment of separation. We knew it would be painful, and we doubted our ability to get through that moment.

From the moment that I had confirmation that I would be deployed, my heart was continually heavy. It did not help that I had just come from a very stressful job. But now, with my heart and emotions still exhausted, I was faced with an even more daunting challenge in this deployment.

With my emotional exhaustion and the promise of more to come, I knew I had to go see a doctor for help. Unfortunately, I was afraid of two things, things which all soldiers face in this situation and which the Army has tried to ameliorate with mixed results. I knew that there was a general prejudice in the Army against anyone with a perceived weakness. If you listened to the official line, you would think this was not true. There are always briefings on what to do if you need help with psychological issues or drugs and alcohol, etc. But anyone that has been around the Army very long knows that people look at you differently once it is perceived that there is a weakness in you – or at least what they determine is a weakness. There is an underlying philosophy that hates weakness. It is a kind of egotistical perfectionism that is pushed in the military. Not a very healthy outlook, and generally not very beneficial to the troops, but this is frequently the way it is.

In entering a new job, the last thing I needed was the general perception that I was damaged goods or that I was shirking my duty to deploy. I would rather have gone through my personal Hell quietly than admit openly that I had a problem. Of course, the danger to that approach is that I would have probably held it all in until I reach the point of explosion. This last possibility worried me even more. I couldn't afford to lose control. There were too many people depending on me at work, and my family, of course, depended on me at home.

Given the bad leadership history in my new section, I felt compassion for my soldiers and felt compelled to reverse all my predecessor's failures. I wanted to restore their faith in their leaders, no matter what the cost to me personally. Thankfully, though, none of my worst fears materialized concerning the possible referral to psychiatry. The general practitioner that I saw was able to prescribe a low-level stress reducing and mood enhancing medication. And it worked like a charm, for a few months at least, until the adrenaline blast of early PTSD made it useless. But thankfully, this was long enough to get me and my team into Iraq and get us settled. In time, my problems would get much worse and develop into full-blown PTSD, but this would be after I was able to complete the majority of my responsibilities in getting my team through the worst of the taskings, the time leading up to and immediately following the deployment.

Moreover, I'm almost amazed at how well the secret of my psychiatric issues was kept. I know there's much disagreement about this, and we'll probably never get to a perfect solution. One side of the issue is the concerned commander that wants to know everything that is going on and everything that will affect his or her mission and people. However, given the culture of military perfectionism (one awe shucks wipes out a thousand atta-boys), why shouldn't the soldier who is suffering be suspicious of the demand for complete honesty and, therefore, reserve the right to keep his or her issues secret so long as they do not come into the workplace. In my case, I functioned very well during the day, but this is only because of the emotional machinations I went through in ignoring or packing away and refusing to admit certain realities until I was in a safe place to let it all go. My will power got me through, but it was not an endless spring. I subconsciously knew that I would have to deal with all the baggage under the surface sooner or later.

Unfortunately, not all people felt as I did about the deployment. Surprisingly, this is something that many soldiers face when given deployment orders – they find out the shocking deepest moral beliefs or psychological make-up of their peers. Most soldiers just ruck up and go. They may have fears and questions, but they yield and suppress these things for a later time because they desire the greater good, mission completion, and teamwork with their fellow soldiers. Some, however, harbor secrets. Maybe it is not their fault. Perhaps they carry a deep, painful, and humiliating secret or wound that eats them alive from inside out – something which they never really learn how to deal with. But more importantly, perhaps they never reach the moral decision point in which they realize, this is what life has dealt them, good or bad, and subsequently they decide to either fight against their personal demon and try to make the world a better place. Or they take the opposite route of self pity, and they succumb to the demon, thinking that everyone owes them something for the pain they feel or that they will have revenge on the world and everybody in it for what they have suffered. Sometimes, you just never know who the people around you really are until you see them in a crisis point.

All of us felt the fear and trepidation about leaving loved ones. But those who harbored their secret wounds or committed to the moral path of destruction rather than betterment would employ various tactics, no matter how outrageous, to try to get out of the deployment. One of my senior sergeants came to me and my deputy asking for relief from the deployment. Her reasons seemed to be true. She had gone through a deployment already which had almost broken her emotionally. We did not want to put her through that again if we could avoid it. However, another of my senior sergeants continuously found medical issues that, if not resolved, would have kept her from deployment. It seemed from the pace and frequency of her issues that she did not want to go. Eventually, though, she succumbed to encouragement and/or peer pressure and got all her medical issues cleared. Moreover, she did a great job while she was in Iraq.

Some of my younger soldiers did not want to go and made their positions clear. All of these soldiers would end up going. They were honest people that simply felt the fear we all felt, about the unknown and about separation from loved ones. These soldiers were not the problem. The real problem was the ones who stayed quiet and went about various shocking maneuvers in order to avoid deployment. I had heard stories about Desert Storm and the lengths that people would go through in order to avoid deployment, to include young women deliberately getting pregnant with whomever.

Of our troublesome and troubled soldiers, we had one who deliberately broke his wrist. The circumstances of his broken wrist were very suspicious. He broke it on the stairs as he was going up. Eventually, he would admit to a psychiatrist that he had deliberately broken his arm. However, he was chagrined to find out that his wrist healed quicker than he expected, and the doctors promptly cleared him for deployment. Having failed this, he finally admitted to us that he did not want to deploy. We made it clear that this was his responsibility, one of the reasons he had enlisted in the Army. It was not malicious, but neither would we shirk our responsibilities to the other young soldiers by letting this young man skate out of a deployment. When a broken wrist and a manipulative confession did not work, he got a DUI. When that didn't work, he went the psychiatric route. Claiming suicidal ideation was the final trick that worked for him, although we noted and remarked that he seemed unusually chipper given his suicidal state.

Another of our soldiers tried various ways to avoid deployment. She too tried the psychiatric route. But her psychiatrist cleared her for deployment, saying that his professional opinion was that there was nothing wrong with her, that she was merely shirking her duty to deploy. He didn't say why he came to this opinion, and that would, of course, be privileged information. But my guess is that she made the mistake of telling him point blank that she did not want to deploy and would do anything to avoid it. With all other routes closed off, she showed up one morning with her beautiful long hair cut into a Mohawk. She followed this unusual stunt by following the lead of her other young colleague and making a trip to the emergency room claiming suicidal tendencies.

On one level, I understand the actions of the soldiers. I don't believe that one can completely control his or her emotions. However, there comes some point when the noble side of our nature takes over, and we acknowledge the bad feelings, but simply decide to put our selfish and petty concerns aside and do what is right. Moreover, I don't think that they fully understood the ramifications of their actions. Obviously, if they were not fit for duty or if they refused to fulfill their duty, our only recourse would be to separate them from service in the Army. It would not be a favorable separation.

They could have gone the longer path by claiming medical reasons, and they could have gotten a more favorable separation. But they were anxious to get out, fearing that something would go wrong, and their scheming house of cards would fall. So, they were willing to accept any discharge offered, whichever was quicker. In the end, they received negative discharges which would for the foreseeable future taint all their attempts at employment. Of the two, the situation was worse for the young man. He had a wife and a child, and he had no plan to take care of them when he was booted from the Army. He not only shirked his responsibility with the Army, but he had also done so with his family. It's hard to express how despicable we thought he was.

Eventually, though, our deployment team was settled, although my CG and his Chief of Staff continued to play chess with my soldiers and took a couple of my key officers away late in the game. Of what was left, however, I had a superb, although small officer staff, very bright, talented, and dedicated young officers every one of them, and we eventually gained some non-commissioned officer "diamonds in the rough" who were cast off from other sections by cliquish, petty people. Nonetheless, during this short phase immediately before and after deployment, we all settled down to focus in earnest on deployment preparation. Through it all, we tried to avoid thinking directly about the deployment, because thinking about it would bring on the fears and the grief, way ahead of the appointed time.

It was tough when I had to tell my wife about the pending deployment. It was tougher telling my children. I and my wife agonized over the right time. I agonized especially over what the news might do to them. Eventually, we settled on a time, and we told them. The response was what I thought it would be. They all cried and worried. They had seen the news reports about killed and wounded soldiers. Of course, we didn't let them see the news after that for fear of worrying them needlessly (at least, at the time, I believed it was needless).

My wife and I set out to put the best face on the deployment. I looked up all the information I could on the internet about Iraq the country, and the base I would be stationed at. I was actually shocked that I could find maps of the base and aerial pictures as well as pictures on the ground of soldiers in their daily duties. Nonetheless, this did have some positive effect on my children. It seems that we all fear the unknown much more than is warranted. Sure, my children would miss me, but they eventually adjusted, as much as is possible, after my deployment. They were especially relieved when they found out that we had the modern miracle of instantaneous communication via e-mail.

I lived continuously in a state of sorrow and dread of the day we would be separated – the day I would actually walk onto that airplane and leave them behind for a year. A year seemed like an eternity at the time. In many ways it was an eternity. In terms of the emotional and psychological impact on me, I feel now, after the deployment, as if I never completely returned. Some days, I feel as if I'll never feel completely at home again. Never be able to consider Iraq as just a past memory and never be able to put it behind me.

In preparation for this separation, the Army, in its infinite wisdom, set up something called block leave. Block leave was typically two weeks of leave immediately prior to the final deployment preparation, and it was a sacred, untouchable time for soldiers to spend with their families. Our block leave was a very enjoyable time. We went to the Tennessee mountains and visited many places that we had wanted to see for a long time. However, every minute of every day, we felt haunted by the specter, the continual reminder of the grief of separation that would follow this wonderful time together.

This time with my family would end too soon. I would return to our final deployment preparation. Some groups of the unit had already left, and I, myself, had only about two weeks until I would depart. Since everything had basically been done, all equipment had been shipped, all training had been completed, and all instructions for preparation had been followed to the n-th degree, there was really not much left to do until that final day. The result was that I had a flood of unexpected time to spend with my family at the last minute. Most days, I only spent half a day at the office, then spent the rest of the day with my family. But, again, with the specter of separation, it became increasingly difficult to enjoy that time.

Finally, the day of separation came. I packed two duffle bags and a carry-on bag for the flight and immediate training needs after that. Our preparations that morning were all accompanied by very heavy hearts. The time came that we had to load up our vehicle and leave for the Green Ramp. The Green Ramp was a large containment area right beside the airfield where soldiers would wait, with their families, for the call to board the airplane. It was a very bizarre environment there. A band was playing but nobody really listened. No one wanted to be serenaded with upbeat music as their hearts were breaking.



Some soldiers had left their families at home, preferring farewells there with a very quick break rather than the long, torturous, drawn-out farewell. There was some validity to this choice since the time with families seemed to drag the pain out. Many sat with their families either not talking or making idle chatter in order to avoid what was really on their hearts. Those that had left families behind lay sleeping (or seemingly sleeping) on the large, wide benches.

I sat quietly with my family for the most part. I did try to make conversation, as did my wife, but it was very difficult. We took pictures of the family and waited. There were a couple of heart rending moments when there were false alarms given to board. Then, there was the actual moment as they called us to formation. From that point, we would no longer be able to hold our loved ones – only see them. Soon, we wouldn't even have that.

For that last moment, family members clutched each other as if for the last time ever. The band continued to play lively, upbeat music. The brutal irony was too much, so we either laughed at the incongruity or ignored it altogether. Of course, as noted previously, some didn't have family there to farewell them, by choice, having left family at home to avoid the very difficult moment of separation. Others by necessity such as the single soldiers whose only family was fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers. Some of these single soldiers were already stationed away from their original homes, coming from all across the country, so this was just another step, albeit of several thousand miles further.

Ironically, some took it all in stride. To some, this was just another deployment among others they had experienced. Some were going for their second, third, or even fourth times.

Finally, we were put into formation, holding our carry-ons (other baggage had already been loaded onto the aircraft). There were a few speeches and the National Anthem. Then, we filed onto the aircraft. I had seen more than one big, tough soldier shed tears before the call to load. And as we actually filed onto the aircraft, with families lining the path, I saw more tears. We loaded the aircraft and waved to our families.

I was actually relieved when I finally made it onto the aircraft. I took two of my pills in order to take the edge off my pain. Then I settled into a window seat. I tried not to look out the window since it was on the side where the families had walked out to watch us board. Finally, the airplane engines revved up to taxi down the runway. We started rolling at 1245, and we were airborne at 1325 (1:25 PM). When we were finally airborne, I

looked out the window. As we climbed to about 1,000 feet, I could see all the families standing outside the Green Ramp. I thought I could distinguish my family members. All families were waving vigorously. My heart sunk at the sight. I did not want to think about either my pain or that of my family. Yet, I was glad to have had my family at the green ramp. I wanted to spend as much time as possible, soaking up their love to last me as long as possible after deployment.

Then, the hard reality started sinking in that this was the last time I would see my family for a year. Not knowing the future, it might be the last time ever. Our year had begun. Our lives would be completely different for the next year, and we would be different people when we returned. And although we would maintain, as much as possible, the relationships with our loved ones back home, the people we worked with would become our ad hoc families. For better or worse, our deployment team were the people that were there in the flesh and these were the people who would help one another through the tough times ahead.