

Chapter 2

Waiting

**WHEN the dawn comes forth I wonder
Will our sad, sad hearts awaken,
And the grief we laboured under
From the new-in-joy be shaken?**

**If the night be long in going,
All our souls will fix in sadness;
And the light of morning glowing
Waken in our eyes no gladness.**

**All unschooled in mirth we will not
Rouse forgotten joys from sleeping;
And the dawn our pain shall still not:
We will gaze on it with weeping.**

~ George William Russell

The Danger of Privilege.

After the drama of family farewells, most of us were exhausted. Soon after our takeoff, talk died quickly. With so much doubt, concern, and even guilt in the back of our minds, we settled wearily into our seats. From the moments that we first learned of our deployment up until the moment of our family separation, we felt as if we had been in a dead sprint. Not only were we working very long hours on sometimes tedious preparation, but we were also working with our families, to prepare them for our long separation and to squeeze every drop of enjoyment we could out of our time with them.

Then, we spent the long day of farewells at the green ramp. That in itself was exhausting enough. Savoring a chance to catch our collective breaths, I'm sure all of us were going over memories in our heads of special moments in the last few months spent with loved ones. But, mentally and emotionally, we were spent. It was almost a relief to finally start our long journey, because that would mean a separation from the previous frenetic way of life and movement onto the next phase of our life. Even if it was painful, we knew we had to go through this phase, and now that we had arrived at this point in the process, we knew that, the sooner we got through this, the sooner we would be home. This was a practicality that was voiced so many times throughout this process, but it's so hard to make the heart follow the head. All of us, family and soldiers, had sought the wisdom of practicality while going through deployment preparations because we craved at least the ruse of purpose behind everything.



(Photo: everyone settles wearily into their seats for the long flight.)

After the tornado of activity this last month, what we needed now was a brief respite to prepare for what was to come, an oasis, a pause to breathe. Unfortunately, there is no law of physics that guarantees rest for the disquieted mind. As we settled for the flight, we ran into what would be the first of numerous controversies, minor and major, over the next year. For some, these controversies were mere annoyances. For others, they signaled fragmentation in our unit and moral weakness in our unit's leadership.

Of course, the leaders could not be blamed for the rise of conflict any more than a parent can be blamed for the quibbling among their children. Whenever you put people together, there will always be conflict on some level. The intensity of that conflict depends on the maturity and self control of the people involved, or even the importance of the issues at stake. But we all knew we were facing issues of life or death. The stakes were much higher now than a mere conflict over viewpoint or purpose, and the way that the leaders would respond to such problems would be telling.

Some things might seem trivial to the leaders at the top of an organization, but hopefully, they will remember that, if such issues are not trivial to their people, then the matter is worthy of consideration. Unfortunately, our general impression was that our leaders had no time for such considerations. We sensed that they felt themselves above the fray. Perhaps they might have honestly felt that they had too many more important things to think about and must, by necessity, ignore the concerns of those people closest to them -- their staff.

But that staff, those workers, officers, civilians, and enlisted, were part of the team, part of the close family that helped enforce the commander's will. They did the coordination and checking, took the butt chewings, accepted the endless planning meetings, wrote the operations orders, and held the late hours to make sure that the commander's will was carried out; they made the numerous mind-numbing e-mails, phone calls, etc., to try to bring together disparate parties. They wrote the policies, plans, memos, letters. They came up with the creative solutions for which the commanders had no time or energy (or even imagination sometimes).

Strangely, though, the leadership not only ignored the morale of the staff, but they even went so far as to blame the staff for anything and everything that went wrong. I saw one of the finest and most respected officers get ripped down in front of everyone because he dared to point out the obvious in a meeting – i.e. that a particular commander and his staff were actively resisting the general's clear guidance. Instead of being the bigger man and realizing that, in a conflict, there is inevitably wrong on both sides, he decided instead to blame the staff, and this pattern continued throughout the deployment.

In our unit, there was a strange, dysfunctional moral system that made sweeping judgments based on the prejudice that the staff was a collection of incompetent buffoons that could do no right and the commanders were god-like heroes that could do no wrong. But the treatment of the staff gets to a deeper issue – the window to a leader's true character. The best indicator of the leader's heart is how he (or she) treats those closest to him. It's easy to maintain the façade of magnanimity to those that always remain at arm's length. But those that are closer see the flaws on a regular basis. They can't be hidden up close. And so many of these men and women that put up an image of greatness of character are deeply flawed people which becomes obvious when you spend enough time around them.

Of course, there are some leaders that believe their focus should be at a higher level as they get higher in the system. But my personal experience is that the truly caring and competent leader will be able to connect with his people at all levels. This is not a difficult thing for the person who sees it as part of his responsibility, but for the one who sees it as merely a duty, caring will always be a duty that will continually be poorly executed.

The first challenge we faced that involved some of the unit leaders concerned the seating on the aircraft. To some, this would seem a trivial issue, but given the seriousness of the mission ahead, all things seemed to take on a greater significance. After finding my seat, I soon found out from others that there was a first class section on the aircraft. I had never thought about it. I hadn't noticed it when boarding, and I was generally not the type of person that was always scheming for such luxuries. To me, comfort is relative. I'm not so soft that I require a certain level of comfort, and I'm not so egotistical that I think the world owes me something. Moreover, I think of my rank and position more in terms of responsibility to others rather than privileges gained. So, it

never occurred to me to think about or ask about what I was not getting. I know when things are good enough, and that is sufficient for me.

Moreover, being accustomed to economy flight, all I wanted was a decent seat, which I had – back in a corner at a window where no one would bother me; the row only consisted of two seats, both of which I had to myself. I could see outside, and the bathrooms were convenient. I was satisfied. Besides, I thought of the alternative – flying in the jump seat of a military aircraft (an uncomfortable canvas seat on a metal frame) which I had done too many times to count. Of course, such a seat would come with the other factors of ambience – deafening noise of the engine and excessive cold or heat in the cargo area where you were riding. A normal civilian flight with nice, cozy upholstered seats and cabin climate control would do me just fine.

There were a few other pragmatic leaders like me on the staff, and I saw them around the coach cabin, but as we would find, there were many others that were more status (or ego)-oriented. Some junior soldiers or lower ranking officers took seats in the first class section. Most of these had some special office, like public affairs, or even security (which was not a small group given the healthy ego of our commander). Based on their positions, and bolstered by their excessively healthy self-esteem, these folks automatically assumed their positions were more important than others. It would have been easy to overlook them, but in a tense environment like this, even the most minute things are noticed quickly, and resentment rapidly builds.

Some of the senior sergeants (not all), who thought more highly of their own positions than they should have, also took seats in the first class section. This wouldn't be the first time that such people would take privileges that they either didn't deserve or that they took at the expense of others. And this bad habit wouldn't be confined to officers, although the officers generally had more access to privileges (or at least, that is the general perception). But this whole situation would lead to jealousy and resentment toward superiors, subordinates, and even peers. And, unfortunately, the negative feelings inevitably ripple out to subordinates who would see certain officers, sergeants, or civilian leaders as self-interested individuals that were not to be trusted or, at least, were to be avoided and resisted or stonewalled if they came around seeking favors.

But this one incident began to open our eyes to the character of those around us. You may think you know people when you work with them, but when you live and work around them 24 hours a day, especially in a stressful environment you find out some surprising things, things that they would prefer you didn't know. Many of us were naïve. We expected the world to be right, especially here in the military. Morality is supposedly indispensable in the military world. It only stands to reason that it would be given our lofty responsibility to defend the Constitution and the American way of life and given the capability for violence placed in our hands. But as with any group of people, you always find those that think and act a little more cynically or selfishly than the others around them. So, our belief in the morality of success, where the hardest worker succeeds, where the brilliant and the dedicated outshine the crafty and the laconic, would be severely challenged.

Those of higher moral sensitivity expected the whole to work together, one-for-all and all-for-one. And in many ways, we did achieve this. We accomplished much together that could not have been accomplished singularly, and we achieved one purpose on a regular basis – to defeat the enemy. But our success almost seemed like a fortunate accident sometimes when we observed the behavior of people around us. We had always expected the parts of the whole to work together, everyone dedicatedly doing their part, the beehive metaphor. That was part of our naïve belief in what we were doing -- that there was a bigger central meaning and purpose. This belief formed part of the comfort that enabled us to sacrifice ourselves and even our families, and it was part of the myth that we clung to in order to insure our safe return to the states. We had to believe that we were working for the common good and that those around us were equally dedicated. We had to believe, in short, that our current suffering had a higher purpose, that it was not meaningless.

To believe or find out otherwise would be, at the very least, disconcerting. Since we needed the possibly illusory belief that we were sacrificing for a common good, and that everyone to our left and right was equally sacrificing whether we could perceive it or not, then the spectacle of our fellow soldiers acting selfishly could be quite jarring. If you think about it, what would be the impact of those working internally only for themselves? Would it merely lead to benign morale detriments (somebody would get over and others would be uncomfortable or resentful as a result), or could it lead to danger and death? In the hyped-up environment of a deployment, the worst is always at least considered, and in the weakness of human nature, the worst scenario is usually the first thing that appears in one's mind.

Unfortunately, our leaders seemed unaware or apathetic about the gathering currents. The right of privilege that came with rank was too important of a principle for way too many officers and even non-commissioned officers. Many in the higher ranks of the unit enjoyed the privileges that they felt they had earned over the years. Nobody could fault them for that. Everybody understands the morality of earned privilege over the long-haul as one pays his or her dues in an organization. Everybody in our unit seemed to buy into the concept and endorse it. I guess we all dreamed of the day when we would be on the receiving end of the system, in a much more comfortable position.

But in our current situation on the aircraft, it appeared that many were claiming undue privileges without having paid anything into the proverbial pot. In fact, I watched with amazement over the course of our deployment while one particular staff section claimed privilege after privilege, living the good life for no apparent moral reason other than they worked directly for some high-ranking person in our unit. They had better quarters than their peers and even higher ranking people, and they had regular access to vehicles even for mundane personal errands while the rest of us walked (including many higher ranking officers). There's nothing wrong with walking, mind you. As for me, I preferred being outside anyway. It's one of the reasons I chose a career in the military. But to magnify the insult, this section also didn't work nearly as hard as the rest of us; they had more hours off; they were given easier tasks, etc. I can't count how many times

I would walk into their work area to find them reading, surfing the internet, etc. Nothing wrong with the troops taking a break periodically during the day and goofing off or horsing around to break the monotony of intense deployment tasks. But, for this staff section, there was a predictable pattern that remained unbroken throughout the deployment.

So be it. The world is not completely fair. That's one of life's most prominent lessons, and it's something we learn to live with. We're all big boys and girls. However, when it came time to return to the states at the end of our tour, and rewards for wartime service were divvied up, most or all of the people in this section still received the same high awards which others earned through hard hours and more danger. There's nothing wrong with giving honor to all the troops for wartime service. Unfortunately, the current Army in our current wars has been stingy with awards compared to previous Armies in other wars and other eras, and even other services in the current wars. Perhaps it is a sign of our times with the upper levels of our ranks filled with dishonorable men and women who do not really serve their country so much as have the country serve them. Truly, war is hard on everyone that must experience it. But there are limitations and moral requirements for equity in awards, especially in any military unit, and specifically in our unit.

As I noted previously, morality is indispensable in the military due to our higher responsibilities and due to our capability for violence, or more accurately, due to the human predilection to misuse violence and power when they are in our grasp. And the essential morality of equity is so easily dismissed in today's military, especially by the culture of "special" people such as you might find in the bloated halls of the Pentagon, military in name only. But there is a limit to what troops will acquiesce to, especially when they see someone rewarded or honored that, they know never did anything exceptional, never worked very hard, living through the deployment as if it were a day at camp, or rarely placing themselves in danger (at least no more than the rest of us). I was flabbergasted that many of their lower ranking officers and even junior non-commissioned officers would get bronze stars while the remainder of the staff had hard-working mid-grade officers and even senior non-coms who were flatly denied the bronze stars that they clearly deserved.

The whole idea of privilege based on position would never settle well with people put under the most extreme of circumstances. But it was something we would unfortunately live with the remainder of the tour.

Imagining the Unforeseeable

It wasn't just ourselves that we had to battle and overcome. Trying to plan for something as monumental as a combat tour, any unit would want to know as much as possible and to prepare as much as possible. Unfortunately, we found we couldn't do everything we could imagine in preparing for the deployment. There had been so many hurdles to overcome, and too many tasks to overcome in the time given. People planned out as best they could, but everyone learned the lesson that so many before had learned.

One can only cram so many experiences into the preparation. And one can only plan so much for an experience that he has never encountered. The human imagination has limits.

Furthermore, we could simulate; we could read lessons learned from others who had deployed; we could conduct our weekly teleconferences with the people we would ultimately replace, although they tended to be tedious and of limited value (serving only as a propaganda outlet for the unit currently in the box or maybe to make our commanding general feel good). We could gather as much information on our own in internet searches or e-mails to friends who were there or had just returned. We could practice (staff exercises, live fire exercises, and even site visits to Iraq of key leaders and staff); we could plan intricately to the minutest of details. But the actual experience will always be different from the speculative imagination.

Moreover, we hoped to learn from our predecessors, but their experience would be, unfortunately, unreliable. Not because of any weakness on their part. Their reality would always be different from ours. Their leaders would make different demands and would have a different mission from ours. The enemy would use different tactics with us, etc.

The difference in the tactical environment of our predecessors and what we experienced was stark. Our predecessors were able to travel from our base at Balad to Baghdad (approximately a 20 mile trip) in unarmored vehicles. My immediate predecessor had actually left the base – apparently without permission -- in an SUV to drive down to Baghdad in order to have her hair fixed. We were flabbergasted at this story of irresponsibility and self-interest if it truly happened as we had been told, but the story only serves to illuminate the difference between their security situation and ours. They entered Iraq in the vacuum of the initial armor punch into the heart of the country. There was no organized, motivated enemy that they would encounter. For them, the insurgency was still just in the planning phase. That situation would change dramatically during our tour. The insurgents would begin to implement and learn and develop their tactics of terror on our tour of duty. During our time, Iraq would be a sort of school for terror. It would take a couple of years before we and our allies would start to regain control – monetary support would start to wane, safe places would dry up...

The disorganized rabble that was supposedly not to be feared following our overwhelming victory over the Iraqi army got to work pretty quickly even after one of our political leaders publicly declared “mission accomplished.” The insurgency kicked off in full swing during our tenure. We could go nowhere without armored vehicles and a heavily armed convoy. Even then, we seemed frustratingly incapable of thwarting the roadside bomb attacks or their efficacy. I, a high ranking staff officer, typically found behind a desk or in a meeting or briefing, found myself in a completely ordinary convoy that would have turned out very badly if not for the incompetence of the insurgent that set off his IED on us. On a route that was not very heavily traveled, we were unexpectedly hit by a road-side bomb and ambush. Taking part in such a relatively unimportant

convoy on an unimportant route, we were still attacked. This incident, among many others, showed how widespread and effective the insurgency was becoming.

So, the value of our predecessor's knowledge was of limited use. They knew nothing of the problems we would face. Their talents and limitations would necessitate that they approach situations differently than our talents and limitations would. And with our infinite differences, we would arrive at totally different conclusions and solutions than those before us. Sure, there are things on the tactical level that soldiers find will work across the board, but you just can't ultimately get beyond reality.

Even the demands and understanding of our allies would be different. Our interpretations and relationships with sister units and other national units would be different from our predecessors simply because we were different people. Our predecessors worked primarily with a unit from Pennsylvania, and we would work with this same unit for a short while at the end of their tour. During the major part of our tour, we would work with units from Texas and Hawaii. The cultural philosophies of both units would bleed through in the way that they reacted to different situations. This is just a fact of life.

Lastly, another difference was that our allies might change out at the same time just as we assumed duties from our predecessors. Ironically, the most challenging coordination sometimes would be with other services rather than other nations, such as the Marines who would provide security and firepower for our various operations throughout Iraq. But we would also have to ultimately deal with army-building for the new Iraqi army such as it was.

The bottom line is that the possible experiences and interpretations and abilities they faced were infinitely different from ours. There was no way around this. It is simply a fact of life. It doesn't matter whether the subject is a military unit's changeover, or some major transition in the corporate world or what have you. Such change will always be dependent on the infinite human factors involved. Unfortunately, this fact of infinite variability makes for a difficult transition since predecessors' "lessons learned" meant very little. It would be nice to have a reliable body of knowledge that is expert and irrefutable. But nothing in life is that simple. And when you look at issues of war, what was previously already difficult is even more confused.

Add into this the factor of our fears and somewhat misguided conceptions. So many confused thoughts haunted our dreams and speculations. We were headed into a foreign country with a foreign culture. The differences in lifestyle and thinking seemed to be a mountain to overcome.

Despite the conceptual and real challenges, we desired to take our place in this war. This is what we had always trained for. And now the reality had arrived. As with any occupational field, you always want to be part of the "big game." But as with all monumental tasks in the military or even the corporate world, there is no simple path to

the huge challenges. Somehow, by design or accident, the mundane must always be encountered and addressed. It is inevitable.

Pleasant Surprise

Despite the visions of war in our heads and concerns about the immediate future, our journey by air would face a delay that would turn into a morale boost. Unexpected to us, we had to refuel at Bangor, Maine. We had only been in the air a few hours. We thought that our first stride toward Iraq would cover a much greater distance, perhaps even a landing in Europe or the Mid-East. But we were to be surprised both unpleasantly and pleasantly. When the pilot announced the need to refuel at Bangor, I'm sure that more than one person rolled their eyes. But we accepted this as we accepted so many other surprises in military training and operations. Our grudging and cynical acceptance, though, would change dramatically in short order.



(Photo: Bangor, Maine, as seen from the window upon our approach)

As we came off the airplane, we found a gauntlet of older veterans and other simply kind-hearted military supporters who lined the ramp. They offered hearty encouragement, handshakes, and hugs. They had carefully anticipated our arrival and were out in full force. It was humbling to realize these people had gone so far out of their way and interrupted their lives, making a commitments to be there in the dark, early hours and to even be enthusiastically supportive. We knew what they had sacrificed to be there, and even though we had some concept of what we were sacrificing to be in this war, we were humbled that anyone would care enough to interrupt their lives in this way to honor us.



(Photo: the airport lobby at Bangor, Maine)

It was more than a little humbling. I'm sure many of us felt a little alone already, but we accepted our feelings as simply a small inconvenience that came with military life. But to find that these complete strangers identified with our fears and cared about us was beyond words. In addition to the simple morale boost, these people also met pragmatic concerns. They offered cell phones paid for by their organization, but many were clearly their own. There was no doubt that they understood and cared. This was so unexpected, especially since it was not in an area of the country where one traditionally finds strong military support.



(Photo: sunset as seen from the windows of the Bangor, Maine, airport)

We were pleasantly surprised at the delay, but we still had a lot of traveling to accomplish. We re-boarded our aircraft. The jet started moving at 1645, and liftoff was at 1655. Thanks to our pleasant reception, we got underway with a reinvigorated sense of purpose. If possible, this made us more eager to get to Iraq and do our job.

After several more hours and a bleary wakeup, we arrived at Rhein Main Airbase at Frankfurt, Germany, at 2300 Eastern, which was 0500 local time. This was our second fueling and crew change. It was here that I discovered my watch's ability to keep two different time zones that could be looked at with the flick of a button. On one, I programmed Iraq time, and on the other, the time at home. For my entire deployment, I always kept the Eastern Time Zone on my watch. Somehow, it made me feel closer to them. I would press the button, look at the time, and try to imagine what they were doing at that time back home.



(Photo: a typical, dreary German fall day – as seen across Rhein-Main, Airbase)

At Rhein Main, we had a two hour layover. The plane was cleaned and refueled. I purchased two AT&T calling cards for use later in calling home. We had already been told that there would be calling centers in Kuwait and Iraq from which we could reach home. Also, there was an internet area at the terminal, and I was able to check my e-mail. I was pleasantly surprised to see that there was already an e-mail from my wife, Lesia. She told how they had watched the plane go out of site. Then, all emotionally exhausted from that morning, they returned home and watched movies that afternoon. I felt a deep sense of sadness and guilt that they had to go through that difficult experience.

Outside the terminal at Rhein Main, the morning was just breaking. It was a typical, dreary late fall day as I had experienced so many times in my eight years in Germany. I briefly fantasized about leaving the terminal and taking off through Germany. I know and love the country very well and can speak the language quite tolerably. But it was only a fantasy. I knew I had an obligation to fulfill, and I truly wanted to fulfill it, no matter the difficulty.

After a few hours, we finally got our call to re-board our aircraft. We settled back in, with a new crew of pilots and flight attendants. We started taxiing at 0730 local time (0130 eastern). It was 4 hours and 42 minutes to Kuwait. We had just a few more hours in the safe, controlled womb of the aircraft. Then we would be off to confront our mission – or so we thought.

Although we had been told about staying in Kuwait, we really didn't grasp what that meant – it ended up being a longer and more tedious experience than we realized. But, in order to get to Iraq, Kuwait was a necessary rite of passage. Kuwait was a roadblock of sorts. It entailed all of the mandated training, most of which was necessary and useful, but also a fair amount of annoying military filler. It was somewhat confusing to go through such mundane things, many of which we had already gone through in training back home. But it was doubly confusing to go through such delaying experiences after being impressed with the immediacy and urgency of our deployment. Most of us glibly or spartanly accepted these experiences merely because we did not have the experience to critique them.

But all the romantic Hollywood illusions of war notwithstanding, we would learn quickly that war had a healthy measure of tedium. And we would learn that war was not as urgent sometimes as people want make it. Urgency is usually driven by fear of the unknown or by prideful or legalistic demands that people want to impose on others. Once the unknown becomes known, we tend to relax, to settle into routine. This is what ultimately would happen once we got through all the hoops, moved into Iraq, and settled into our mission.