

While foreign corporations cash in on massive contracts to supply everything from toilet paper to fuel-tanker drivers in support of the military effort in Iraq, from an individual's point of view, the consequential lure of high wages – and a little excitement – is too tempting to pass up.

WORDS
BRIAN HARTIGAN
PHOTOS
SUPPLIED BY 'SKIPPY'

It is estimated that in Iraq today there are as many as 20,000 foreign civilian contractors working in military-support roles. Among them are thousands of private security contractors – men and women employed to protect strategically important people and facilities in a very volatile environment. In fact, it is said there

PRIVATE ARMY FORMER SOLDIER

are more private security contractors operating in Iraq than there are British soldiers on the ground.

But where have they all come from? Most are highly trained former soldiers drawn from many of the world's elite forces – including Australia. Upwards of 40 of our own SASR troopers have taken discharge in the past year, and are once again heavily armed and patrolling the streets of a foreign war zone – dressed in civvies.

They are not all former SASR, however.

Meet Skippy, a former lieutenant in the Australian Army Military Police who, although will be recognised by many of her former colleagues, does not want her real name published while still operating in Iraq.

Skippy joined the Army's Ready Reserve Scheme in 1993 for the financial assistance it offered young people attending university. After a while, however, she found herself more and more enjoying the military side of life than that of a student. So, in 1997, she eventually transferred to the Army full time. She believed she could make a career in uniform.

In 1998 Skippy was advised to apply to the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and was subsequently accepted. She says she never once looked at return-of-service obligations (ROSO) nor tried to work out when she might be free to leave the Army – she didn't need to, she simply knew she would be in the job for 20-plus years.

But as time passed, she changed her mind. "As a Military Police officer, I loved my job and I loved all the courses I could attend and the opportunities that were offered," she says.

"I loved instructing on riot control and getting involved in training my troops. I worked hard to achieve the physical standards required for the MP CPP (Close Personal Protection) course, and successfully passing that course.

"However, as a lieutenant in MPs, due to be posted to captain, my career prospects did not look too good. There were the inevitable desk jobs, moving from OPs to doctrine writing to staff jobs."

After completing what she says was the most exciting, physically demanding and arguably the best course available in the Army for a female, a desk job did not appeal.

"I joined the Army to serve my country, to face new and exciting challenges and to specialise in security and I could see those ideals fading rapidly as time went by – I was not able to specialise in CPP.

"As a female in the Army, I was unable to train or even be considered for a special-forces role, so I eventually began to see the Army as a very limiting organisation for me personally."

Skippy started looking at civvy street and the deeper she dug, the more she discovered there was a whole new world out there to explore. Areas such as Iraq were crying out for good-quality CPP operatives.

Early in 2004, Skippy informed her superiors that her heart was set on operations in Iraq and it was her desire to go – in uniform or out.

With no deployment prospects on the horizon, she eventually took the bold steps towards discharge. Unfortunately, having truthfully informed the Army of her intentions, there was no choice but a full separation – transferring to even the Inactive Reserve was not compatible with her new career choice.

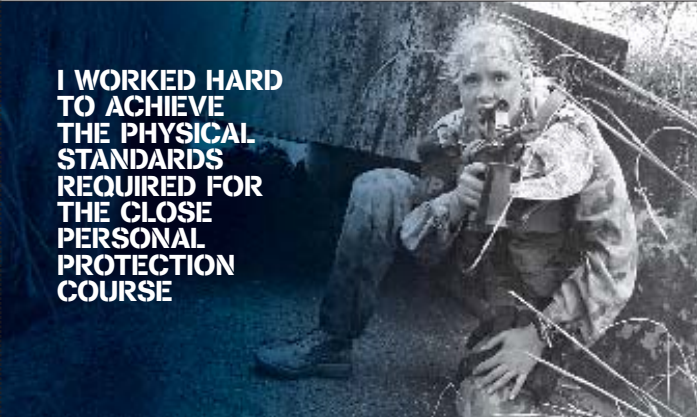
With just a little trepidation, Skippy said goodbye to family and friends in Australia and set out for Iraq in early October 2004.

First was a training course in country, which, although physically and mentally challenging, was not too out of the ordinary for a CPP qualified former MP.

She settled in fairly quickly and, in an email home on November 11, gave her worried family an insight into her routine...

"Things here are fine. I mostly spend my

I WORKED HARD TO ACHIEVE THE PHYSICAL STANDARDS REQUIRED FOR THE CLOSE PERSONAL PROTECTION COURSE



days sitting at the client's workplace creating a security presence. When I am not doing that, we have time off for admin and doing various small tasks around the area.

"We've only had one major operation so far. I did not go on that one, but all others I will. I am trying to source some local attire (the black dishdash that covers women from head to toe), so that when we do our recons, I blend into the community.

"The guys have grown beards and dress like the local men too. I swear I actually thought they were Iraqi's when I was picked up from the airport.

"The food here is great. We eat with the Americans, so there is a huge selection of food available. I have to watch what I eat so that I won't come back weighing more than when I left. In our house kitchen we don't really cook food, but we do have a stove, microwave and fridge. The fridge is always stocked with soft drink, milk, bottled water and beer. The team normally gets together once a week for a few drinks.

"The toilet system here is crap (excuse the pun). The toilets barely work and it is the norm to throw your toilet paper in a bin and not the toilet. The drainage system is too small and clogs up quickly.

"We have a small group of cleaning staff who do our cleaning (especially the kitchen, which can get quite messy) and do the laundry. They wash and iron our clothes ready for the next day.

"I went to wash my coffee cup the other day and the lady nearly had a heart attack. She rushed over and told me not to do it. I guess she must get in trouble if us 'westerners' do any work.

"There are about three or four ladies cleaning and one man who is in charge of them all. They do all the yukky tasks and has the more elite job of ironing."

Despite settling in to her new accommodation fairly quickly, her new

colleagues and bosses were at first a little sceptical about her abilities on the job. They had already seen two other females come and go in recent months, and Skippy would have to prove her worth.

Her people-management skills as an officer came in handy in the early days as she set about sorting out an unworkable leave roster for the next six months.

On 14 November she wrote home again... "Everything is going really well over here.

I spend most of my time in the Green or International Zone. We rarely go out into the Red Zone, and if we do, then we are dressed as locals. I think we are in more danger of being shot at by the Americans than the insurgents though! I hope that alleviates any of your worries, Mum.

"I can't speak much Arabic yet. Only two words – lam (no) and na'am (yes). It's pretty limiting, but everyone in the Green Zone speaks English anyway.

"I get paid quite a bit of money to sit around providing a security presence during the day. Occasionally we will have to go out to another town, but that's a major operation for us and there is a lot of planning involved.

"When I get some photos of my team mates I will send them your way.

"I am having a great time here and enjoying myself."

A week later... "I almost got a trip out of the country with one of the VIP's. It would have been a 'swan trip' for a couple of weeks, but it fell through at the last moment.

"I've heard the elections are planned for about 30 Jan. I am due for leave that day. This will now vary depending on the threat level on the airport road and civilian aircraft leaving Baghdad around that time."

Skippy's need and desire to blend into the local community received a boost later in the month when the personal assistant

to her client gave her a scarf as a gift. She also showed the young Aussie how to wear the scarf properly and how to apply makeup like a local woman.

By the end of November Skippy was reporting a very typical phenomenon that any soldier could relate to – "sliding between very busy and dead bored".

As the only female on the team, she was assigned anything to do with female VIPs, including sitting in on personal profiling and medical interviews. By now she was fully settled in, accepted by her colleagues as part of the team and beginning to get some of the real missions she went there to experience in the first place.

Her email of 29 November reports...

"We did a really good job the other day.

A couple of days later, while filling sandbags, it was the former lieutenant's job to tie the little piece of string around the neck of the full sandbag. While the job wasn't too taxing mentally, it was a welcome diversion on an otherwise boring day. It also gave her cause to smile as she recalled the many times she did the exact same task in the Australian Army – but for a lot less money.

Just before Christmas, Skippy wrote again to her family, who were missing her even more, given the season that was in it. To their relief, the report from the front line was, as was becoming the norm, filled with everyday domestic-type news...

"You will be happy to hear, we now have our own cooks in the house, so we are not just

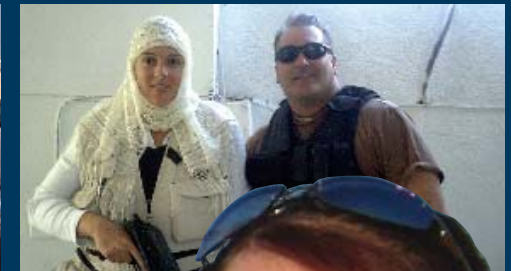
because I am a busy person with not much time for personal grooming!"

After surviving a mixture of work and parties over Christmas, Skippy was back at the computer terminal composing another letter to the family she left behind in Australia...

"I did at one stage have stomach aches for 17 days in a row. It was driving me crazy. I knew it was something in the food, but I didn't know what.

"I have now worked it out – the milk over here is not fresh. We use the artificial stuff. All the preservatives and crap in it was upsetting my stomach. I stopped using it with my cereal and have now gone onto the powdered stuff. I feel like a brand new person."

She also had further complaints about



WE HAD TO TAKE ONE OF THE FEMALE VIPs OUT INTO THE RED ZONE...

We had to take one of the female VIPs out into the Red Zone to Baghdad University. Naturally, I was the bodyguard for her. She was very nice.

"We did all the recons, planning and preparation for the event, as it was a major operation for us. When we arrived she met some people and had lunch. She wanted me to sit next to her and share her meal. I thanked her very much for the offer, took one chip out of courtesy, but I couldn't actually share her meal, because I was 'on the job'.

"Later, as she gave her lecture to a large group of people – I didn't understand a word she said – I sat nearby watching the crowd. The rest of the team were scattered around the area.

"I am glad I lowered my profile by sitting down. The people are used to seeing males all dressed up in security kit, but they were obviously not used to seeing a female. They were staring at me as though I was an alien. So I stared right back at them."

Later in the same email she mentions she sees the Aussie troops around town quite frequently. Some were former colleagues or subordinates. Now they are all mates.

eating American food any more. We have a couple of Iraqi cooks that do our meals for us. I don't have breakfast though. I buy porridge from the local PX store (American-run shop like an IGA supermarket), and coffee.

"We were initially concerned about the hygiene and so on of the cooks, but as it turns out, the food is not so bad. It's normal-type food. They cook chicken drumsticks, steak and even a spaghetti and mince dish. They also cut up tomatoes, cucumber and capsicum for salad. So I have not eaten anything too exotic.

"We do have a choice of eating either the food at the house or eating where we were previously. I was initially eating at the other place, but felt sorry for the poor bloke cooking and slaving over the kitchen. Anyway, compared to my cooking abilities, how could I pass judgement on him? I just hope the food has not been poisoned!

"P.S. Attached is a picture of me and two of my close friends. No I am not intoxicated – my hair is a mess

the inadequate plumbing. With the outside temperature as low as five to 15 degrees in the middle of winter, warm showers had become a luxury.

"We are living in a house built for five people that is currently being used to house 30. The plumbing and hot water system just can't keep up with it. Unless you get up very early in the morning, or any time after nine at night, you will have a cold shower."

"Unfortunately, if I go for a run during the day, I can't wait until 9pm to have a shower, so I have to hold my breath and shower in freezing water."

"But, no one else usually showers at night, so at least I get a nice hot one then."

Perhaps surprisingly, it wasn't until almost the end of December that the former military police officer mentioned weapons to any great extent.

She mentions the AK-47 she currently uses and goes on to outline some of the other equipment and stores she carries in her combat vest. Included, of course, was ammunition, as well as a radio, GPS, a knife, compass and mobile phone. She neglected to mention the 9mm Gloc holstered on her right thigh.

She reports that many operators in the country have bought their own guns.

"Every person I talk to has their own depending on their individual preferences."

"I am thinking about getting an M4. It's a good, light, versatile weapon for a female. We also jump in and out of vehicles quite regularly, so it is good for that as it can be purchased with an 11.5inch barrel (which means it is not too long and cumbersome). It can provide good, rapid firepower both at close range and out to about 600m."

"It is 5.56mm as well and better than the Steyr, I reckon."

"Unfortunately, I would have to sell it again before I leave the country."

Then, immediately changing the subject...

"Enough about guns. I still have time for facials and French manicures. It's still nice to relax in my room and be a girl."

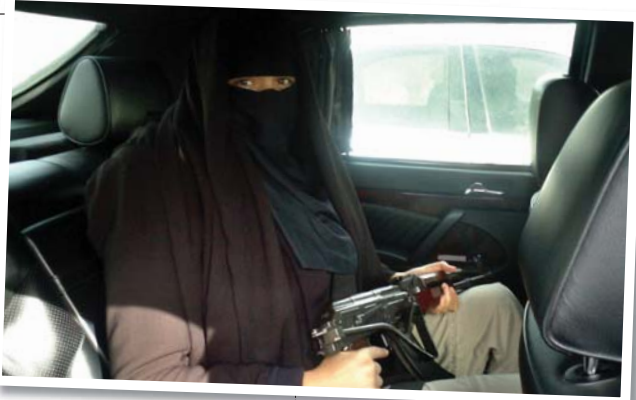
"We are getting another girl here very shortly. Hopefully she will be alright and not like the previous ones they had, then fired. Some of the guys know her and say she is good. If she doesn't work out well, they probably won't let me go on leave."

The New Year brought a noticeable change in tone...

"It is getting quite crazy over here leading up to the elections."

"Our greatest danger is travelling out along the BIAP (airport) route. It is the most dangerous road in the world. It is more dangerous than any other place that you can imagine."

"To allay your fears, Mum, army convoys and overt CPP teams are the ones being hit."



We don't look like a conventional CPP team – we blend in very well. The other groups are more overt in their vehicles and driving drills, and are much more attractive targets.

"We still have to worry more about the Americans hitting us, though."

"Fortunately we haven't been attacked

yet, but we are mostly afraid (or concerned) about the suicide bombers. People drive up in vehicles and then blow themselves up.

"The governor who was killed the other day would have had a western team on him. Apparently the bodyguard was also killed."

But even in the middle of a battle zone, even on a serious mission, there are lighter moments...

"I did a trip to Kirkuk the other day. Four of us flew by Black Hawk helicopter to a secure compound so that three of our clients could have a very important meeting with the local government authorities. That was a straightforward trip for us."

"There was one funny incident, however. We were told to make sure we wore all our kit so that we would look professional in front of the other security companies there. We were told to borrow M4 and MP5s from team mates instead of using our AK-47s – God forbid if the other companies saw us using archaic weapons."

"Anyway, there we were, looking Gucci with all the kit and weapons of a slick CPP team. But when the Black Hawk landed, one of our guys (with all his kit) fell out of the helicopter in front of all the other teams. It was hilarious. I laughed all day and half the night over that one."

Summing up her motivation for CONTACT, Skippy says that after training all her adult life to serve in combat areas, she has finally been offered the chance to do the job for real.

"It is ironic that I have been training all of my army life to do this job, but could not do it until I became a civilian."

"Sure the money over here is great, but it is not the motivating factor."

"From my perspective, it is the chance to finally put skills I've been trained to use, to good use. It is the adrenaline rush at completing a daily task without incident. It is the bonding and mateship you get from working in a team environment."

Sound familiar?



THE GOVERNOR WHO WAS KILLED THE OTHER DAY WOULD HAVE HAD A WESTERN TEAM ON HIM – APPARENTLY THE BODYGUARD WAS ALSO KILLED

I read the newspaper speculations on the events surrounding his death. Some said that he simply disappeared from a moving vehicle during the firefight. Others say he survived only to have his ambulance attacked on the way to hospital in Basrah. What was he thinking as the battle raged? Why was he willing to crawl so deep into the Devil's jaws for a story? I suppose, in the end, the commitment he felt to his profession, and our commitment to accomplishing our mission to find him, was the same Siren's song. Terry Lloyd got his story — and took it with him to his grave. My five comrades and I went looking for the answers — and it nearly cost us our lives.

SHOOTOUT IN AZ ZUBAYR

WORDS & PICS SUPPLIED BY JOE PLENZLER



CAPTAIN JOE PLENZLER AND HIS TRUSTY '12-GAUGE

The sun rose on southern Iraq on Sunday, March 23, 2003. Smoke from an oil fire drifted lazily in a futile attempt to block it. The forecast said it would get hot. We didn't fully realise just how hot it would get.

I rolled out from the camouflaged netting concealing our HMMWV that Staff Sergeant John Jamison, my Public Affairs Chief, had stencilled 'El Bandido' on the windshield. He greeted me with his usual, "Got some coffee brewing, Sir," as he stooped to awaken the green pile of camouflage that was Sergeant James Goff, our driver.

Passing on the coffee, I walked to the Combat Operations Center (COC) to find Lieutenant Colonel John Ewers, the Staff Judge Advocate (SJA), who said, "Round up the team. We're heading out to conduct another RIAT mission" (RIAT – reportable incident assessment team).

I returned to give the warning order, began packing and noticed that Jamison and Goff had further personalised the vehicle with call-signs on the doors. Jamison painted "Windows" on Goff's door – for his ugly military glasses. Goff marked Jamison's door with, "Axehole" in retaliation,

Ewers' with, "The Judge," and mine with, "Gunslinger" – a jab at my insistence on carrying a 12-gauge shotgun.

Ewers approached and said, "We're heading back to the 'Crown Jewel' where we were yesterday investigating the report of the 'mutilated body' found by 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. Division received a report last night of civilians killed in the crossfire between 1st Tanks and the Saddam Fedayeen near the Shat Al Basrah. When the shooting stopped, they reported seeing a destroyed SUV with 'TV' duct taped on the doors. We're going there to figure it out."

Lieutenant Colonel Pete Zarcone, Civil Affairs Officer, and Lance Corporal Henry Lopez, a Combat Cameraman, joined the team, so Goff requisitioned another HMMWV, that was marked 'Chow Hall.' It would not survive the day.

We departed the CP, 60 miles southeast of An Nasariyah, intent on linking up with the 7th UK Armored Brigade – the famous Desert Rats – in order to gain access to the incident site that now, due to a boundary shift, fell in their area of operations.

Jamison drove 'El Bandido' with Ewers in the front passenger seat, Zarcone in

the rear driver's seat and Lopez in the rear passenger seat. Goff and I followed.

Our 80-mile journey on Highway 8 led across a flat, sun tortured plain punctuated by fortified gray concrete highway overpasses and crude green-and-black-flag-waving mud-brick hovels. Hundreds of displaced civilians and sullen-faced former soldiers lined the roads, many of whom recently discarded uniforms to don white robes and flip-flops to begin the long walk home. The pained look on their faces reflected the full tragedy of Saddam's brutalisation of the Shia. Their eyes told a tale of torture, poverty and subjugation. I saw embarrassment and defeat in its lowest form. They were nomads in a wasteland.

Drawing my mind back to the mission, I wondered who are these men we are looking for? What will we find when we get there? How could they have gotten themselves so horribly mixed up?

At the border town of Safwan, we began our fruitless search for the 7th UK Headquarters, which had displaced during the night. Ewers decided to head to the 'Crown Jewel,' since it was a likely alternate site for their HQ.

We found a small British security unit there. Ewers and Zarcone approached the soldiers who told them that there were two UK checkpoints along the road to Az Zubayr where we could coordinate safe-passage to the incident site.

We departed, passing several burning oil manifolds. Sweat-soaked and bleary-eyed ex-soldiers wandered lazily about in small groups begging for food, water and cigarettes – most likely the shattered remnants of the Iraqi 51st Mechanised Infantry Division.

Passing a roundabout, we came to the 1st UK checkpoint. In the distance, a Challenger tank squatted on the cracked asphalt road that stretched to the dirty city on the horizon. A large cluster of shoddy, concrete-brick houses appeared on our right 10m from the road where groups of Iraqis gave a hearty thumbs up.

As our convoy passed the housing complex, I saw two men in brown robes running from the nearest building. I aimed in on them, clicked my weapon off safe, and placed the buttstock in my left shoulder to get a better range of motion in the passenger seat. I tracked them for about 15 feet when they suddenly disappeared – jumping into a fighting position. I knew then something was foul in Denmark.

Two heartbeats passed and the Iraqis popped up from the hole and volley-fired two RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenades. The football-sized projectiles streaked across the front of our HMMWVs, leaving their telltale contrails, and exploded on the wall to the north side of the road shooting chunks of concrete in all directions.

At such close range, they really should have hit us. They're such lousy shots to have led us by so much.

Time and space dilated as my training smashed into the forefront of my consciousness.

"It's go time!"

I squeezed the trigger and pumped another round into the chamber, firing round after round of 00-buckshot at our assailants.

If we can just keep them suppressed long enough to get out of the kill zone. To my left, I saw 'El Bandido' surge forward. "Goff, stay with him!" I hollered as I fired at the enemy.

Why do you want to kill me? We're just looking for a few dead men. Well, if that's the way you feel about it.

We followed 'El Bandido' – speeding into Az Zubayr. On our left, a portrait of Saddam

grinned sinisterly – waving us in to the staccato chatter of gunfire.

Iraqis scurried, desperate to get out of the way. Jamison looked for escape routes only to find that rubble and other debris blockaded each side street. We were being canalised into a series of kill zones. The entire city attempted to swallow our small convoy into the depths of its bowels.

Ewers, with a map in one hand and pistol in the other shouted directions to Jamison while shooting at the enemy.

Time lost all meaning as the moment stretched into one long, continuous, eerily detached second. Iraqi fighters appeared and shot from doorways and alleys. I felt the recoil of my shotgun as it pounded my shoulder and spat its lethal cargo at my victims. The sharp rap rap rap of Goff's M-16A2 told me that he was alive.

My God you guys are close. Must be 20 feet or less. Left to right, here's another one. Shoot. Recoil. Reload. Another. Zip zip. That was close. Crack-pump-crack. Come on Goff! Keep moving! Get us out of here.

Zarcone shouted for Jamison to pass back his M-16. First refusing, Jamison realised he couldn't effectively shoot and drive at the same time, so he gave his weapon to Zarcone, grabbed the colonel's M-9 pistol, hunkered down, and sped on.

Jamison found an unblocked boulevard heading south and took a wide turn spinning around the corner at full speed into oncoming traffic.

Zarcone saw an Iraqi to his right running to a sandbagged machine gun emplacement. The Iraqi dove for cover to avoid the fire coming from our convoy. He didn't make it.

To the left, Iraqi men armed with AK-47s, RPGs and RPK machine guns ran through an open field, jumped into fighting positions, and began firing.

Rounding the corner, we took fire from our left and rear. More Fedayeen appeared in doorways, second story windows and sandbagged rooftop positions. Ahead, an Iraqi with an RPG prepared to fire.

"Eleven o'clock!" Jamison hollered to Zarcone whom, at first, could not see the gunner. Jamison wheeled the vehicle to the right over the median as the Iraqi fired. The screeching projectile missed and Zarcone now had a clear view of the gunner.

"What the hell is he doing?" I hollered to Goff.

"RPG! RPG!" he shouted. I couldn't see anything.

I SQUEEZED THE TRIGGER AND PUMPED ANOTHER ROUND INTO THE CHAMBER, FIRING ROUND AFTER ROUND OF 00-BUCKSHOT

AFTER THIS I'M NOT GOING TO KILL A BUG – PEOPLE MAYBE – BUT NOTHING ELSE

A slew of continuous obscenities and the report of my weapon reassured him that I was alive.

"Son of a bitch! I'm going to die in this shit-hole of a country."

Goff started cursing the canteen that fell from overhead and dangled in front of his face.

I wish I had a kid.

Straining to see Jamison through the smoke, he tightened his grip and punched the accelerator while shooting out the left side of the vehicle.

We're done for.

Goff felt his weapon violently slapped from his shoulder into the steering wheel. A bullet impacted his M-16 near the buttplate and ran down the stock just before exiting near the charging handle.

Realising I expended all of my 12 gauge ammunition, I drew my 9mm pistol and leaned out the window to shoot more Fedayeen. Bullets whizzed by, while explosions shook us to the core. Twenty metres ahead, I saw the lead vehicle taking fire from the ground floor of a building on the north side of the road. As we approached, I saw a group of Fedayeen in a wide courtyard doorway. They were laughing. Infuriated, I aimed my pistol and began firing rapidly into the crowd.

"You bastards! This should wipe that smirk off."

I will never forget the look of shock on their faces as their demeanor snapped from laughter to panic as they dove for cover and scattered like cockroaches. In a blink, we were gone.

After running and weaving for about 2km, the road came to a Y junction. Jamison banked right and headed west-northwest to find the road ending at a T, with an open field directly ahead. He slid around the corner and headed north.

Goff cut the corner very close to the curb. A door opened quickly to the right. I aimed in on the man in the doorway and, just as he fully appeared, I saw he was holding a child in his arms. I could almost have reached out and touched him. Reflexively, I released the trigger pressure and pulled the pistol towards the sky. For a split second, our eyes met. A decision made in a nanosecond was the difference between life and death – we both knew it. Rubbernecking during a firefight? You are one lucky SOB – me too. I'm glad I didn't shoot you. Life is too

precious. After this, I'm not going to kill a bug. People maybe, but nothing else.

Jamison turned west on the same road on which we entered the city. He could see that the Iraqis had placed tyres and other debris in the road, but he weaved skillfully through the obstructions. 'El Bandito' was bogging down, thanks to a shot-out front left tyre. Ewers was bleeding heavily.

Goff pulled into the oncoming traffic and accelerated. The housing compound where we took the initial two RPG shots appeared on the left.

This isn't going to be good. If I could only get a bead on them – no, I'll hit Goff. They can't possibly miss now.

Goff started to pull abreast of 'El Bandito.' "Slow down and get behind Jamison!" I shouted so that we would not place ourselves between the lead vehicle and housing complex.

Pop-pop. Whoosh! Bang-bang. The Fedayeen fired two more RPGs. The deadly projectiles raced by us and exploded harmlessly on the prison wall to our right.

These guys really suck – thank God. There's the British tank. What a beautiful sight. If we can only get past it – thank you Jesus!

Jamison passed the tank and pulled over at the checkpoint. Goff stopped and I started to get out. Just as my foot hit the deck, Jamison waved for us to follow him and pulled away. He continued for another 100m and took shelter behind two Warrior APCs at the roundabout. Jamison and Zarcone exited the HMMWV and ran to the passenger side.

Jamison shouted to Lopez, "Put the chock-block under the wheel."

No response.

"He's hit," Zarcone said.

Jamison yelled, "We need a medic!"

Zarcone, Jamison and several British soldiers gingerly pulled Ewers and Lopez out of the vehicle and laid them carefully on the asphalt.

I returned to the high-back and brushed spent brass and plastic shell casings off the old demo-kit I use to carry my GPS and Iridium satellite phone. I turned both on, determined our location and called the COC.

"Blue Diamond. Maj. Weede," the receiver crackled.

"Sir, Juliet 2," I said. "Two casualties.

Request immediate MEDEVAC."

I headed over to the casualties as a British medic administered a shot of morphine to Ewers. As he turned to Lopez, Jamison

reached down to check his pulse.

"You're not going to give him any of that," Jamison told the medic, "it could kill him."

"We need to MEDEVAC this one now," the medic said pointing to Lopez. "There's an aid station about 15km away. He's not looking good at all."

Jamison cradled Lopez' head and said, "You're going to be fine Marine. The bird is on the way."

"Go into my gas mask carrier and get me a dip (of Skoal)," Ewers demanded.

Damn. That's pretty funny – and hard-core – he's laying there concealing what must be excruciating pain, with both of his forearms blown open and a hole in his boot, and all he wants is a lip of snuff.

A soft thwack-thwacking of helicopter rotors began in the distance as a Brit pulled out a smoke grenade and ran to mark an LZ north of the roundabout.

Wide-open fields with small buildings dotted the area. Small bands of Iraqi men were moving around us a few hundred metres away.

I shouted to Goff, "Cover those guys and stay sharp."

Confident he had our rear covered, I asked a British soldier to help me cover the litter team when the bird landed.

The thwack-thwacking grew louder as a US Army Black Hawk MEDEVAC bird appeared, circled around the orange smoke and landed on the road.

Zarcone and a few British medics grabbed the stretchers and headed off into the whirlwind of dust.

Come on. Faster. Get them on board and get them the hell out.

The few minutes it took to load the

casualties seemed like an eternity. The Black Hawk pulled collective and eased away in a cloud of dust.

Thank God – and thank God for Brits.

We should be dead.

What would have happened if Jamison was hit instead of Lopez? We'd all be lying in that filthy street in that filthy town. We'd be lucky if they'd have buried us. Jamison and Goff really kept their heads. We should have been dead. That, and some good shooting pulled us out of the Devil's jaws.

Damn I'm proud of Jamison and Goff.

Especially Goff. He was a nervous kid. You'd never be able to tell that now. He'll be talking smack for the rest of his life. Good. He earned it.

God, it is good to be alive. I want to live for a long time and die old and worn out.

I learned months later that the reporter we set out to find was Terry Lloyd of the Independent Television News. Apparently, he and his comrades got mixed up in a convoy of Fedayeen that approached and

RIAT – Reportable Incident Assessment Team – formally established before Operation Iraqi Freedom to investigate enemy or friendly violations of the Law of War (or any other significant incident).

'Crown Jewel' – The Commanding General coined the term, "the Crown Jewel," to describe the Central Pumping Station for the Rumayyilah Oil Fields near Az Zubayr where oil is processed and stored before being pumped down to the Al Faw peninsula for loading on supertankers.

attacked 1st Tanks' position. Lloyd got his story – unfortunately, it wasn't the one he or any of us wanted. We never did find out what happened along the Shat al Basrah – we had failed in our mission.

I often think about Terry Lloyd and wonder what really happened to him. I hope that in some strange way he knows we tried to find him, and spilled some of our own blood along the way.

SOME OF THE DAMAGE, INCLUDING WHERE LOPEZ WAS SITTING

GOFF, ZARCONI, PLENZLER AND JAMISON AFTER SURVIVING AN AMBUSH



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