The heat is incredible, and the air feels like the exhaust from a vacuum cleaner as it flows into my lungs. I look at the Iraqi soldiers on duty, but they show no sign of giving in to the heat. In front of me is a Bailey bridge across a wide canal that transfers water from the Euphrates River to a lake further to the east. The water looks cool and inviting, and for a moment I dream of jumping in and escaping the oppressive heat. But this it not the time or place for such dreams. It is too dangerous for that.

The canal acts as an obstacle to smugglers, some trafficking in consumer goods, others in items far more deadly to the Iraqi and coalition security forces further north. This is the only crossing for many miles in either direction, so all vehicles must pass through here, and only a few weeks ago this Iraqi vehicle check point was engaged by men with automatic weapons during a night-time incident.

A distant cloud of dust signals the approach of a decrepit utility. The vehicle is stopped, and the driver searches for his identity papers, constantly coughing with a force that sounds like tuberculosis. Smiling, the driver finally produces his papers for the Iraqi guards. The vehicle is cleared and the driver pauses to speak to the guards before leaving. A translator informs a nearby Australian soldier that the driver is thanking the guards for doing their job here. The driver says it’s a sign that Iraq’s democracy is working.

Sharing the heat with the Iraqis is Sergeant Michael Groves, a platoon advisor from Australian Army Training Team Iraq 4 (AATTI4). He has been watching the Iraqis at work, and is impressed with their dedication.

“T heir standard is better than we had anticipated,” he says. “Their basic skills are really good. Now it’s just a matter of touching up the finer points of their soldiering.”
Training smart is how you could describe the engine that is driving the training team. Drawing on a lineage from the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, Australian AATTH4 has the responsibility of advising and training the 2nd Brigade of the Iraqi Army’s 10th Division. Team Four’s job is to enhance the skills of the 2nd Brigade so that it can take over responsibility for military operations within the Al Muthanna province.

AATTH4 deployed into Iraq with the Al Muthanna Task Group (MAGTF) in May 2005. The team consists of a brigade headquarters training team and a battalion training team for the 2nd Brigade’s 1st Battalion. A second battalion training team will join them when the 2nd Brigade’s 2nd Battalion is raised later this year.

In a tent at the AMTG’s base at Camp Smitty, CD AATTH4 Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Tulley tells me his team has a dynamic role to play.

“The Iraqis had already received a lot of training from other coalition nations before we arrived,” he says. “They’re now on operations, so we’re in the field with them.

Our main effort is mentoring, advising and training the Iraqis in the planning and conduct of their operations, including vehicle and dismantled patrol boats, vehicle check points and cordon and search tasks.” Lieutenant Colonel Tulley tells me he decided when the team arrived it wouldn’t be smart to train the Iraqis in things they already knew, so they spent the first two weeks looking, learning and understanding what the Iraqis were doing while, at the same time developing a rapport.

“We then worked out what levels of proficiency they had in different areas, and developed training plans that were aligned to each of their mission essential tasks. Our immediate aim was to conduct low-level counter-insurgency security and stability operations, so we’ve steered away from high-intensity war fighting because that’s something they can cover in the long term. We’re here to make them self-reliant in their immediate mission in as short a time frame as possible.”

There’s been more to it than mentoring though. The team have also been assisting the Iraqis with their doctrine, personnel, equipment and facility issues.

“It’s been a very challenging three months so far but it’s been very rewarding too,” Lieutenant Colonel Tulley says.

“They’ve been extremely accepting and appreciative of our efforts, and their feedback shows we’re providing them with a lot of new information. We’ve lifted their level of capability significantly already, and they can see it.

“There’s a new confidence in the way they conduct their operations, the level of their operations are more complex and they are taking more and more responsibility for the running of their own operations. “They are preparing to take full responsibility for the province, and that indicates to me that we are fulfilling our mission.”

The barracks of C Coy in Al Khadir, the old Bath Party star can be seen everywhere, like the latent eye of Saddam Hussein watching over the country. Even the water tank beside the railway line bears the mark, beaming across the town as a reminder of how things use to be.

It is early morning, and a whistle is blowing to call the troops to morning parade. I am talking to Corporal Cameron Jamieson, Director of Defence Newspapers.

With the words “I relieve you, sir”, at 08:00 on 12 August 2005, a unique chapter closed in Australian naval history in Iraq’s territorial waters in the northern Persian Gulf. The radio call marked the end of command for Commodore Steve Gilmore and his RAN team in Task Force 58 – the coalition’s naval force conducting maritime security operations across the northern Persian Gulf.

While TF58 will continue to operate in the Persian Gulf under US Command, it is time for Commodore Gilmore and his team to return to Sydney to be debriefed over the success of the Australian command. Doubtless there will be many lessons learnt to be discussed, as Commodore Gilmore’s command has been the highest level of at-sea tactical command held by an Australian naval officer for 60 years.

“Having an Australian in charge of such a large coalition task force with a mission of such significance marks this a very unique opportunity for Australia, myself and the members of my team,” Commodore Gilmore says. “I think the request for Australian command is a direct reflection on the high regard the coalition forces have for the professionalism of the ADF. We have worked together over a very long period and we have gone to great lengths to ensure our interoperability is such that, at short notice, we can come together and focus on a mission, and be effective and efficient in its prosecution.”

These operations focus on a number of sub-tasks, the most critical being the protection of Iraq’s offshore oil platforms.

“TF58 also conducts maritime interception operations, including boardings, where we seek to detect, deter and deny movement across the Gulf by criminal or insurgent elements.”

“On the oil terminals we are absolutely vital to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Iraq, producing 80 per cent of the development of the country’s GDP. TF58 comprises ships from the Royal Navy, US Navy, US Coast Guard and Iraq Navy, with HMNZS New Zealand representing the RAN. Commodore Gilmore says that one of his greatest challenges was harnessing the kinetic capability of the force and bringing it together as one.

“The coalition is a very effective way of prosecuting a mission as complex as this one,” he says. “Each of the individual

Another major responsibility for Commodore Gilmore and his command team was the training and integration of the Iraqis into the Task Force.

“That was a particularly satisfying part of my command,” he says. “I was tasked with the integration of the Iraqis so they would eventually take charge of maritime security in their own territorial waters. The new Iraq Navy was established in 2003, and it has come a long way in a short time, and over the past four months, our Task Force has been instrumental in getting the Iraqis into the final straight of the integration process. We now have four oil field patrol boats integrated – not just as additional craft, but replacing coalition vessels. Iraqi Marines are also taking their place on the oil terminals which will see them take responsibility for the front-line defence of the facilities.”

One person who will be particularly sorry to see the Australians go is US Navy Captain Stephen Hampton, CO of the USS Normandy, a Ticonderoga-class cruiser that has been Commodore Gilmore’s flagship for the past couple of months. Captain Hampton says that although

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Mohammed Abaid, who has spent many years in the Iraqi Army and looks every inch a hardened soldier. Yet he has no bitterness at being taught soldiering skills by the Australians. Instead, he embraces the concept as he believes the new skills are creating a professional army that will serve the people of Iraq, relegating the memory of the old army that served Saddam Hussein to the history books.

“We are 100 per cent different now, and we have learnt so many things from the Australians,” he says. “Through the training in the barracks and out on patrols, we are becoming better at our jobs. You can see how we are developing with the help of the training team, and as our skills and equipment improve, we know that we are moving closer to our goal of being able to take full responsibility for our military operations here in Al Muthanna province.”

Later, at a monthly range practice where some training team members are qualifying on the Russian-designed AKM assault rifle, Captain Steve Howell tells me how genuine the friendship is between the two armies. He has been mentoring the 1st Battalion in their personnel and logistics staff work, and enjoys how cooperative and friendly the Iraqis are.

“They like us being here,” he says. “They like our easy-going attitude and how friendly we are. And I have a lot of respect for them. I find it quite amazing that when you look at the Iraqis and all they’ve been through, they can still smile and get on with it.”

The armoured vehicles from the AMTG have moved forward to collect the training team members at the canal, and as I walk back to the refuge of an air-conditioned Bushmaster Infantry Mobility Vehicle, I learn from Sergeant Groves how the team is creating Iraqi solutions by not imposing Australian tactics and procedures on them.

“The way we would do things compared to the Iraqis is different because of their unit structure, so we have to think of ways to better their capability using their manpower,” he says. “We don’t try to enforce our western ideas and approaches on them. Instead, we’re offering a different point of view, and they can take from that, and anything else they’ve learnt from other coalition partners, and create one SOP (standard operating procedure) that suits them.”

As the convoy of Australian vehicles pulls away, I can see the Iraqis smile and wave as they resume their vigil at the bridge. Like the land they defend, they are a tough breed, able to deal with the harsh unforgiving sun.

And like us, they are a happy lot, who want nothing but the best for their families and their country.

Many things in Iraq can test your sense of humour. There’s the 50 degree heat, the sandstorms and the basic food. Then there are all the soldiers – hundreds of them.

For three Canberra-based RAAF personnel, the reality of serving with the Australian and British soldiers assigned to the Al Muthanna province in southern Iraq is not quite what they expected. But all good service personnel have approached the situation with good humour and have found the experience enjoyable – except perhaps for the heat.

The three communications and information systems specialists have been assigned to the Al Muthanna Task Group (AMTG), the 450-strong cavalry and infantry combined-arms unit sent to southern Iraq as part of Operation Catalyst. The AMTG shares Camp Smithy, located near the Euphrates River city of al Samawah, with the British Army’s The Light Dragoons. Together they make up Task Force Eagle, the coalition group assigned to assist the Iraqi security forces in the Al Muthanna province.

Flight Lieutenant Prudence Buckton says it is great to be out of her office and in a field environment where she’s surrounded by people from different countries, specialties and backgrounds.

“We work pretty closely with the British, and since we got over the language barrier, it’s been a great experience,” she says with a grin.

Sergeant Paul Garfath says he found translating army language into RAAF words was his first big challenge.

“It’s certainly very different here,” he says. “I’ve had to get used to the army way of doing things.

“While it is a joint-service environment, there is the army paperwork and regimental appointments, such as adjutants, to deal with.

“But the air conditioning makes life easier, and there are some basics shops where you can buy a cold drink. We have a welfare tent to relax in, or you can hang out in your room, which is thankfully air conditioned too.”

For Flight Lieutenant Daniel Armstrong, the opportunity to work in a real-time operational environment has been a career highlight.

“You can see the results of your work,” he says. “At home we do a lot of exercises, but here, our work impacts directly on the operations being conducted, and that’s been very satisfying.”
Exercise Long Look is coined “the experience of a lifetime”. After completing it, I can see why. Ex LL 1 was a tri-service exercise program between Commonwealth countries – in particular Australia, New Zealand and the UK – that occurs once a year, between June and October. Don’t ask me how they select personnel for it – that’s like asking a Senior Career Management Agency (wink, wink) how they select people for promotion or postings each year – but, after the nomination process and finally being selected, I commenced the admin that goes with the trip.

I looked forward to it with an open mind, yet could scarcely believe I was picked until I was on that freedom bird out of Oz. Even with a few months notice, time had flown. Before I knew it, the trip and the experience of a lifetime was here.

Approximately 120 Aussies, from private through to lieutenant colonel and equivalents from the Army, Navy and Air Force were assembled for a Spanish civilian charted flight. After nearly 22 hours in the air, with stops in Darwin, Bangkok and Milan, we arrived at RAF Brize Norton in the UK. Following dispersal to our host units after we began the exercise, I conducted adventurous training with 158 Proby (Provost Company), RAF at Land Ends. Yeah right, RAF Military Police – ‘Red Cap’, ‘Provo’s, ‘Meat Pies’ and ‘Meat Heads’ – or as they are affectionately called by the Brits, ‘Jonesy Boys’, apparently because their old uniform looked like that worn by an organ-grinder’s monkey – and he’s always on your back.

The first activity I took part in was a regimental-sized field exercise on the infamous Salisbury Plain. Somehow, though sitting on the side of the road at a traffic control point sitting in bulldust was very familiar. Only the scenery, British accents and vehicle types – including AS90 155mm tracked arty among others – were different.

Eventually, though, I was taken out of ex on approval from the Australian High Commission, via the valiant efforts of our Long Look contingent staff, headed by Major John Liddy at Australia House on The Strand in London.

July 7th – I know I will never forget it – I went in to sign my paperwork. It was also the morning the London Tube and the number 30 Bus to Tavistock were blown up by suicide bombers. Was this an omen for the operational tour to come, I thought?

I arrived in London, about half an hour before the first bomb went off. After being locked down in London for six hours, while police, fire, ambulance and bomb squads cleared the scenes and treated the dead and wounded, I signed my deployment paperwork and headed back to Bulford Camp, near Stonehenge, an hour west of London.

Within a week I was sent to Senalarga, Germany to conduct Operational Tactical Advisory Agency (OTFA) training. Here I learnt the finer points of Iraqi language and culture and foreign weapons, as well as more incident drill – Brit style – and ‘top cover’ – but more on that later.

The end of course function was a binge session in a local German pub. I was introduced to the interesting game of ‘Nails’. Try hitting six-inch nails into a log with the thin end of a minger – while you off yah tis. Last one to hit his, nail in buys a round of shots, and off it goes. Besides that, it was also very interesting to talk to diggers or ‘squaddies’ and other ranks who had operational tours of Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, the first Gulf War and two or more tours of Iraq up their sleeves.

With OTTAG finished and my Brit kit issued, I boarded a RAF bird, direct from Brize Norton to Basra for Op Telic. My host unit, 158 Proby had just returned from Op Telic – after the war-fighting phase of Iraq, renowned as the most active of the Iraq tours because of the increased number of mortar and RPG attacks, public-order incidents and IED attacks on Multi National Forces (MNF).

I worked with numerous RMP in my host unit who served on Op Telic. Some of them even had confirmed kills to their credit after being embedded with infantry units, or were hit by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and, obviously, survived.

Some of the racks of medals on these guys – lance corporals and corporals – would put most of us to shame, let alone the SNOOs’ ‘fruit salads’.

This was my first deployment on operations in 15 years – what a shame it took another Army to send me.

Anyway, 10 minutes out of Basrah air space we get the warning to don Keval helmet and body armour – that’s a funny sight to see on board an aircraft. We happened to land in the middle of the two hottest and most humid days in the past few months in Iraq. Darwin in the wet season has nothing on this place!

I spent the first night in Camp Bedouin and was greeted in the morning by the sound of a familiar Aussie accent – a fellow ‘Monkey’. After being introduced to 174 Proby OC’s Rover Group – ‘Jonny’, ‘Rob’, ‘Massive’, ‘Stu-Pid-Lex’, ‘H and Bomb Head’ – we left the APOD (aerial port of departure) for the Shatt Al Arab Hotel. The road to Basrah gently winds its way out to the river by the same name.

About 0300hr on my first night, we were awoken by people screaming out, ‘Mortars, mortars, mortars...’- insurgents firing Chinese rockets at the Shatt Hotel, from across the river. After scrambling out of bed, we donned helmets and body armour and hid behind the waist-high, Besser-brick blast walls that surrounded our tent, 10-man block accommodation. Some parts of the walls already had frag marks from previous mortar strikes. 7 Jenkins, a corporal or full swear of the Rover Group, got orders on the personal radio headset to move to the hardcover inside the Shat.

We were eventually released following that incident about 0600hrs just in time for breakfast – or scoff as they call it – and get back to work.

We found out later that a QRF (quick reaction force) went out to secure the firing point and destroyed two more rockets that had been abandoned on a makeshift firing point and set up facing our hotel.

Based at the Shatt were the Coldstream Guards and Staffordshire Infantry Regiment, who rotate between taskings of route clearance and mounted and dismounted patrols of Basra. A battery of the Royal Artillery also provided convoy protection for vehicles and or personnel in transit around Basra. Also at the Shatt were your usual REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers), medics and sigs. I was with the RMP 174 Proby HQ based at the Shatt, attached to the OC’s Rover Group.

The Rover Group is a 14-man section of RMP JNCOs (junior non-commissioned officers), armed with 9mm Browning pistols, light support weapons (SA80 5.56mm rifles) and red phosphorus to destroy electronic counter-measures equipment (ECM) if need be, and travels in lightly armoured Land Rovers. The Rover Group travels independently throughout Basra, and is the most exposed unit within the company. Bear in mind that ‘lightly armoured’ vehicles means exactly that – up to level 2 or 3 armour that would be hard pressed to stop a 7.62mm round at best. Without the new IEDs that were being smuggled across the Iranian border. Those bad boys were reported by the Weapons Intelligence Section (WIS) as being able to defeat Warrior armour, which was very worrying each time you’d mount up to leave the base. In your ‘snatch’ I saw first hand the remains of a ‘snatch’ that was penetrated by the new passive info red (PIR) censored IED. It resulted in two fatalities of the Royal Fusiliers just outside Basra, during my tour. For the next four days, I couldn’t leave the base, because I had to zero my weapon and complete the DSIO (Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration) course for our first-timers, involving standard in-theatre inoculation lectures and lessons and finishing with a live-fire ‘top cover’ shoot and red phosphorus demo. With the course complete, I could now be legally employed as part of the Rover Group.

The OC’s Rover Group was independent, but also could assist RMP HQ staff and 12 Mechanised Brigade in any admin pick-ups and drop-offs, to transporting the OC on visits to RMP Dets (detachments) at Me Olaf (a building in Basrah), Shatt Base and ‘O’ groups at Brigade HQ, Basrah Palace and the APOD. I thought the nick name ‘Red Cap’ was well merited, considering we spent a lot of time out on the ‘road on task’.

The fact was, that the less time spent outside the walls of camp, on the road, in and around Basrah, the better. As the lads explained, they were near the end of their six-month tour and wanted to get back safe, but the threat of an IED, suicide bomber or burst of fire from an unhappy local or insurgent was always present, if only you left the camp. The political tension in Basrah itself was on the incline, and daily intelligence update brought home the reality of where I was.

Civilians, Iraqi Police Service (IPS) members, my driver were all executed and attacked daily Iraqi Tactical Support Unit (TSU), conducting searches on the behalf of the border and IED. They were mainly targeting bomb-making equipment (IME). Numerous gunfire (not always celebratory) in towns or from our sentry gun pits, were the norm.

During my very first move with the Rover Group we were shot at.

My first job was as the rear discreet inside the ‘snatch’. After this, I was moved to top cover and acting in charge while Scotty, a sergeant and IC of the group, took some well-deserved R&R for a few weeks. Top cover is where you stand upright through a square hatch in the roof of the rover and provide physical and visual cover for your own vehicle and others.

The standard configuration for us was one person facing front and his mate next to him facing left or right. The rear vehicle was sometimes the front vehicle’s setup.

This system was devised by Scotty, since he was also a former Royal Marine and RMP civilian personal protection specialist (CPP). His method gave the convoy 360-degree protection, as opposed to the two-facing front and two-facing rear method that some other units used.

It was after an APOD run, on return towards Basrah, we got a call that an...
explosion was reported at the IPS checkpoint near 'Green 19'. We called in that we were five minutes away heading towards it and we would investigate. In the distance we could see a rather large vehicle convoy heading towards us down the highway, about a kilometre away. We pulled up in front of the checkpoint and got the word to dismount and ‘go firm’.

The OC spoke to the IPS guards who indicated with broken English and frantic hand gestures, a rocket launcher of some sort – ‘RPG’, the guard yelled pointing to our left. ‘Yeah, yeah!’ I thought, he’s saying someone fired an RPG at him.

It was at this point that a fellow ‘Monkey’ saw a muzzle flash. A split second later we heard the crack – no one was keen to keep their heads up listening for the thump or looking for the strike.

People outside who were going firm, now went to action on their weapons. The Q who was driving our vehicle, shouted the bleedin’ obvious, "Someone’s firing at us!" I saw one of the rover group girls outside go to action or ‘make ready’ as the POMs say, and hit the dirt. I popped up out of the hole without a thought and gave cover to her and the others as they began to withdraw.

A quick glance to the vehicle behind me confirmed the direction of fire – approximately 600m away from a bombed-out building in the distance.

The OC gave the word to mount up and bug out. As this happened, the vehicle convoy to our front was now passing through the checkpoint, past us, towards the APOD, from where we had just come. We learnt later that we may have been caught in the middle of a regular attack on MNF convoys that run that route. Looks like I was in the wrong place at the wrong time – depending how you look at it.

Another eye opener on my tour was when I was appointed IC of an RPM search team attached to a 12 Mechanised Brigade search up in Basrah. The mission was to conduct a joint search operation with IPS, TSU (Tactical Support Unit), Iraqi Army, US CPA-IT (Civilian Police Advisory Training Team) and International Police Advisors (IPA). We were to search for bomb-making equipment (BME).

This was to be an Iraqi-led operation with the MNF simply monitoring.

After briefings, hurry-up-and-wait periods and a 5am start, the search panned out to reveal no BME, just the poor, homeless slum areas of Basrah and the people who lived in them. One area we searched had a dead and decaying mule not 5 metres away from the front door of a dwelling, surrounded by awoken family members. Wild dogs or family pets scavenged through the waste remains of humans and animals. The stench nearly made me sick. A woman was milking a goat and gave the cup of milk to a child. This was poverty like I had never seen before.

Most of the MNF picked up on the vibe of the mission, realising that the people were no threat and switched from patrolling posture to armed weapons and snapping amazing and surreal photos of the locals and the landscape.

We walked past makeshift homes in the rubble, where people were still asleep – in the open, on the ground or on makeshift beds. Some people were washing under a broken tap, while the head of one family was washing his car turned-taxi with a bottle of water, taking much pride in his effort. We saw young children running around playing, while others stared at us – while we stared back in amazement.

It shocked me how they were so oblivious to the squalid surroundings they lived in. I will never again doubt my quality of life or living conditions in Australia – or the quality of life my children have. Those images of Iraq will always stay with me as a sober reminder.

The search op ended on a quite note with the IPS, TSU and MNF hierarchy shaking hands and thanking each other for the support – all via interpreters.

We pulled back to our vehicles and just smiled and waved to the locals as we left. Some Brits gave small amounts of rations and water to the smaller children that approached. It was a very humbling experience for even the most experienced soldiers.

Later during my tour, I was attached to the RPM Court Liaison Team (CLT) at Shibah logistics base. Here I took part in an search op, this time with the Royal Anglian Infantry Regiment looking for shoulder-launched weapons platforms (rockets launchers), as well as deploying with the RPM CLT on liaison monitoring visits of outposting rural courts and police stations.

During this time, an infantry call sign was hit by an IED while traversing Purple One, a checkpoint that we all travelled daily. At various times, I was also attached to the RMP Det Al Muthanna and to the British Army Light Dragons infantry unit, for patrols in the town of Al Samawah. I took part in foot patrols with the Coldstream Guards and again with the 'Staffords' on arrival back at the Shaat.

Two days before I left Iraq, four Americans from a local security firm were killed by an IED in Basra near Green 18, an area I assisted the Coldstream Guards to clear the night before.

Iraq is a very volatile country that must be seen to be believed. I am thankful for the opportunity to have served with the British Army, in particular 174 ProCoy, while in Iraq and my UK host unit 158 ProCoy, Bulford. My thanks also to the OC, staff and NCOs of the RPM whom I met while in the UK and in theatre and for taking me under their wing for the experience of a lifetime.

Obviously, I have more stories and finer detail than space allows here, but I’ll save them for a different audience in another place – perhaps where a beer or two might help my memory!

Thanks for listening, Duke.