



(U//FOUO) A Leap of Faith

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Run Date: 04/12/2006

(S) Coming to work at the Agency is a leap of faith. Straight out of college and younger than much of the furniture in Headquarters, I eagerly accepted an offer to work in the Intelligence Community even though I had no clue what SIGINT was or what I'd be doing. I quickly caught on though, as the operational tempo and contagious drive of my new co-workers swept me up, and within a few months I was spouting off more acronyms than English and could expound the differences between CDMA and GSM networks, which apparently fully qualified me for my next task, deployment to Baghdad.

(S//SI) My assignment for the previous nine months was reporting on the ever-changing Iraqi telecommunications environment. It was, and still is, a rich target generating a good deal of intelligence, much of which is of interest to the NCR-Iraq* Special Projects Officer. In my collaboration with him, a working relationship developed and as my tour wound down, he offered up an invitation to come out forward to get a firsthand sense of the target I was reporting on.

(S//SI) Being new and naïve, I first had to gauge whether or not he was joking with me. Would management actually send a 22-year old to a war zone? The answer to my not-so-rhetorical question was "yes," so just nine months after leaping into the Agency I again jumped into the unknown, finding solace that no matter what happened, at least I'd miss the Maryland winter.

[REDACTED]

(U) The author at US Consulate in Baghdad

(TS//SI) On the C-130 from Al-Udeid Air Base to Baghdad International Airport, for the first time since I accepted the deployment I gave thought to what I'd signed on for, and the excitement I had been feeling took on a strong dose of reality. As I looked at the other passengers, almost exclusively Army, decked out in full armor and resting M-4s on their laps, I knew this wasn't going to be a typical TDY.

(TS//SI) Shortly after landing, and after a quick drive down route Irish, I was at the U.S. Embassy "safely" inside the green zone. I dropped my bags in my trailer and was immediately introduced to the Multi-National Force - Iraq (MNF-I) unit I'd be working with. My task for the next two months, I learned from my NSA and military colleagues, would be to take part in ongoing missions undertaken by the NCR Special Projects Officer and his MNF-I hosts. The missions were for a varied group of NSA offices and other military and government agencies, all of which required in-theatre preparation and action.

(TS//SI) My experiences over the next eight weeks were completely different from anything I had previously done at headquarters, and it took several days to realize that I was now operating in the same world I once only reported on. Each day held a new and unique challenge, and I found myself traveling all around the Green Zone, one day to the Ministry of Defense to meet with a former Saddam-era fiber-optic expert and the next to the Government of Iraq Complex to discuss their PBX system.

[REDACTED]

(U) Defaced portrait of Saddam (graffiti reads, "Iraq good, US good, Saddam donkey")

(TS//SI) There was the day I gained access to the roof of the Convention Center, which houses the parliament, in an effort to locate two new GSM* antennas, and the trip to the Ministry of Communications to meet with the Iraqi Public Switched Telephone Network leadership. On two occasions, along with some MNF-I teammates, I even made trips to the private compound of an

Iraqi minister. Definitely not the sorts of things I was accustomed to doing back at the Fort.

(U//FOUO) Even though the days' operations varied, the greater goal of SIGINT collection was the overarching thread of each mission. For a young analyst, the opportunity to see all of the different steps, stages, players, and methods that go into each source of access was invaluable. My belief in the myth of the "traffic fairy" dissolved away and was replaced by the reality of the men and women I worked with: a cadre of well trained professionals, working on several continents, at all hours, to keep current and future accesses alive and well.

(U//FOUO) Still, with all of my newly gained professional experience, it's the non-P3/ISR bullets that I seem to talk about most. The opportunity for a civilian to see the unity of the soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines we directly support, and to be accepted as a member of their fraternity was an unparalleled honor. As was the privilege of flying out of Baghdad on a C-17 rotator filled with 3rd Infantry Division soldiers going home after a year of service, and sensing their excitement to arrive home proud veterans. Simpler memories too: waking up at 0-dark-hundred to see the Rose Bowl or sharing holiday meals and finding the bond of family while thousands of miles from home. Those will remain what I value most about the TDY.

(U//FOUO) Coming back to Maryland I'm still as young, but not as naïve as I was when I left. Without a doubt the long days, joint environment, and "intel immersion" make expeditionary SIGINT the most valuable training the Agency has to offer. And in my new and wiser hindsight, I'm pretty sure those who I thought were crazy for agreeing to send a young kid forward probably knew this all along.



(U) On flight back to US

*(U) Notes:

NCR = NSA/CSS Representative

GSM = Global System for Mobile Communication

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DERIVED FROM: NSA/CSSM 1-52, DATED 08 JAN 2007 DECLASSIFY ON: 20320108