

# Baghdad Express



Joel Turnipseed

Illustrations by Brian Kelly



This is a work of memory, not of journalism. The names of those who are not my closest friends or family members have been changed to preserve their anonymity and to assure that any errors of memory are charged to me, not to them.

Joel Turnipseed

Quotation from *The Republic* by Plato, translated by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, Inc., 1973).

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Une philosophie doit être portatif.

/ A philosophy should be portable.

*Paul Valéry, JOURNALS*



## Norton AFB

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EVERYTHING PASSED QUICKLY, like the shadows of the sparse clouds sailing over the California desert. We stepped from the rubber-matted stairs of the Marine Corps bus to the sticky asphalt of Norton Air Force Base. Reflexively, we raised our hands in salute—to nobody in particular; to the sun. It was mid-afternoon on January 17, the morning after the war started.

We had gotten up early, packed our gear, and put the finishing touches on our ALICE packs and our H-harnesses: flashlights and Ka-Bar fighting knives and entrenching tools and ammo pouches and canteens and first-aid kits buckled and snapped and duct-taped in their places on nylon straps clipped to a cartridge belt, forming an H over our bodies. We checked our chemical weapons gear and gas masks. We cleaned our M-16's. We dressed for the first time in our desert camouflage uniforms, which we called "chocolate chips." We were all reservists activated as truck drivers, but the Corps' mission states that every Marine is a combat warrior.

After breakfast the day before, we had filed into a movie theater on Camp Pendleton. The screen was raised, and the only prop on the stage was a stand with a microphone. Several staff and gunnery sergeants paced the aisles while we waited. Then we heard footsteps from the wings, beating out the quick-clipped rhythms of war. A balding, six-foot colonel burst onto the stage, grabbing the microphone from its stand while still in stride, like Wayne Newton doing Patton.

"Good morning, Marines!" he said.

"Morning, sir."

“First day of a goddam war and you can’t say good goddam morning? I said, ‘Good morning, Marines!’”

“Morning, sir!”

“Ooh-Rah, I just got a hard-on. Now, you ladies and gentleman are sitting here before me wondering why I’m talking about war,” said the colonel, breaking into a falsetto: “But it’s just the deadline, sir.” He paused. “Bullshit. Sodom Insane is not going to back down, and neither are we. Why? Cause he’s a crazy goddam Ay-rab and we’re the United States Marine Corps.”

A lone voice called out from the crowd, “We’re gonna kick some Iraqi ass, sir.”

“What’d you say?” asked the colonel.

The guy stood up, about thirty rows back. “We’re gonna kick some Iraqi ass, sir.”

“Any of these other limp dicks gonna help, or are you gonna win the Medal of Honor all by your lonesome?” said the colonel. “What are the rest of you sorry excuses for Marines going to do?”

“Kick some Iraqi ass, sir.”

“What?”

“Kick some Iraqi ass, sir.”

“I’m afraid my tired old ass is going to have to retire, cause I just plain can’t hear you ladies.”

“KICK SOME IRAQI ASS, SIR.”

“Goddam, I love this shit,” said the colonel. “Gotta get my ass over there to fight alongside you Marines.” He lowered his head for a moment. “Seriously, now, I need to let you in on some vital intelligence. Barring the interference of God, we are going to be at war when you ladies and gentleman hit the sands of Saudi Arabia. Frankly, I think even God wants the Marines to go kick some Iraqi ass, with a ringside seat at the Mother of All Battles.”

He paused for a moment, lowering the microphone to his waist. When he spoke again, he was earnest, avuncular.

“I gotta be honest with you, Marines. You are going to be driving

trucks to hell. Oil fires. Bodies. Bad shit. And on the way to getting his ass kicked all the way back to almighty Allah, Sodom's going to take the lives of thirty percent of the Marines coming at him. That's right, *thirty percent*. And you gentlemen are going to be driving tractor-trailers, driving the broad side of a barn through a weapons range. Take a minute to look to your left, then look to your right. One of the three of you is coming home in a box with a Purple Heart and a folded flag."

We did as he said, and thought, "Sorry fucker next to me ain't comin' back."

Then he was back at his schtick: "Are you afraid? Goddam right you are. Is that going to prevent you from carrying out the glorious tradition of our beloved Corps? Hell, no. You are the best-trained, best-equipped Marines ever to step foot on a battlefield. You have the utmost love and support of your country and your God. You are motivated, dedicated, die-hard, ass-kicking, sand-busting, Saddam-hating, fearless, brass-balled, spit-polished, de-luxe, hi-tech, combat warriors. Tomorrow you will be in Saudi Arabia. You will be at war. *Semper Fi*, Marines."

We had flown to Camp Pendleton the week before, on January 11. My mother and I got up at five that day, after staying up until two. It was a cold morning in Minneapolis, the snow crisp and deep blue in the moonlight. My mother's only advice to me on the drive to the airport was "Keep the enemies on the other side, all right?"

Mom. We sat quietly for the rest of the drive. The sun was just coming up as we walked to the terminal. We were alone as we walked, passed only by the occasional red-eyed passenger or airport employee steering a yellow cart.

Of the thirty or so Marines scheduled for the flight, only about half had arrived when my mother and I showed up. Clouds of smoke rose from the cigarettes of the nervous. Fathers and sons and wives began showing up in small groups, now chatting, now silently pacing. By the time the pale light of morning filled the waiting area, it was standing room only. We were flying in civilian clothes, but you could tell the

Marines by their haircuts: zero at the ear and collar, fading up to no more than three inches on top—jarheads. Wives and husbands and mothers and children were crying, calling out “Over here!” to arriving friends. I did the same.

“Well,” my friend Maggie said as we hugged, “make sure you’re home in time for the wedding.”

“If I have to go AWOL,” I said.

“That should be no problem,” she said.

Then I turned to Mark, my best friend. We both reached out, then hugged silently with one hand clasped and the other around a shoulder. Sarah, my—and what the hell was she, exactly? We had kissed once, tentatively—was standing next to us, rocking on her heels. She was beautiful but fragile—a ballerina. We had just met. We shared an awkward hug, then turned away.

A minute later I was swept up in the rush of bodies boarding a 727 for California en route to the Persian Gulf. When the plane was over Arizona, the captain polled us on the intercom, asking how many of us had seen the Grand Canyon. A few hands went up, and the flight attendant disappeared behind the cockpit door. Suddenly the plane flipped on its side, perpendicular to the ground.

“If you look down to your right, Marines, you’ll see the most glorious land in America, the Grand Canyon. I’m going to run the length of the canyon, then pull around so the other half of you can see it. It’d be a shame to die without being allowed to see this.”

We could hear the air traffic controller yelling at the pilot, telling him to return to his flight plan.

“What the hell does he know?” the pilot asked us. “He ain’t going to war.”

The pilot turned a figure eight, and for the next five minutes, I looked straight down into the Grand Canyon.

At Norton Air Force Base, we walked briskly beneath the c-5 cargo

transport plane, dropping our seabags on pallets lying in its shadow, and headed for a low-slung cinder-block building attached to the hangars, its industrial steel doors held open with orange highway cones. Inside, folding chairs were haphazardly aligned, and we dropped haphazardly into them, our arms draping over the backs, our legs splayed out before us. Some men sprawled out in sleep along the cinder-block walls, or curled up like children, embracing their rifles with the butt between their thighs and the barrel cradled in their arms. None of us had slept much the night before.

We had less than a week to prepare for war. Our first day was a roving, shuffling clusterfuck. The Minneapolis bus was the first to arrive at Camp Pendleton from LAX. Then came buses carrying reservists from Dallas and Memphis and Green Bay, Philadelphia and Whidbey Island, Washington. Long lines of Marines sauntering off the buses in civilian clothes, looking at their new surroundings with the wonder of children: men leaning over balconies, appearing on rooftops, climbing trees, gathering in circles. Then we formed into squads by reserve unit. We hurried. We waited. Finally, our staff NCOs passed word that the barracks were still locked up, and we scattered across the grounds.

I sat beneath a tree, decked out in khakis, white oxford and dark-green cardigan, and gold and tortoise shell glasses. I smoked my pipe and tried to look philosophical, holding a fountain pen over a blank page of my journal. The other Marines threw rocks and footballs at each other, smoking and joking.

At noon someone drove up to open the barracks. Drawn by instinct from our scatter around the grounds, we collected our things and thoughts, stubbed our cigarettes, and shuffled into formation—forty inches back to chest, four inches shoulder to shoulder: Marines standing at attention.

Inside the barracks, we barely had time to drop our seabags on our bunks before we got started: chow, then processing. We put new filters

in our gas masks while listening to lectures on nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. We checked out chemical weapons suits, traded our old green uniforms for new green uniforms and desert camouflage. We signed reams of paper. We double-, then triple-checked our first-aid kits. We took roll call about a dozen times. It was just days before President Bush's January 15 deadline for war with Iraq.

When we got our liberty, I tossed my newly issued chemical weapons suits and uniforms in my locker, then walked out to the rusted stairs of the barracks fire escape. The sun lit up the sky like a Grateful Dead t-shirt; it had just disappeared behind the slopes separating us from the Pacific coast. I pulled my pipe and pouch from my shirt pocket, rolling a wad of tobacco to tamp, then light, then tamp, then smoke, all in a familiar, reassuring order.

The dull clunk of metal stairs rang beneath my feet. Behind me, men wandered from bunk to bunk, discussing their preparations for war and a night at the Enlisted Club.

Below me, a voice called, "Smokin' a pipe, huh, Turnip?" It was Solter, one of the guys from Minneapolis.

"How'd you guess?"

"I smelled it. Reminded me of my grandpa. You thinking about that philosophy stuff?"

"You didn't smell that, too, did you?"

"Just figured. You going to the E-Club?"

"No, I'm gonna hit the rack early tonight. You?"

"I don't know. I better call my wife. She's worried we're gonna go to war."

"Well, we are, aren't we?"

"You think?"

"You ever hear the words *Remember the Maine?*"

"In school or something. I forget."

"They mean *We're going to war whether you like it or not, so don't fuck with us.* Tell your wife you're going to war, Solter."

I felt like an asshole. I was an asshole. Still, there was no doubt we

were going to war. There was no use lying about it. Half an hour later, Bush was on television, informing the American people.

The deadline had passed the night before we bused to Norton AFB, but we still hadn't heard if a war had been declared. Now we watched the logistics guys tool around on their dollies, loading our plane. The wire-reinforced plate glass of the hangar lobby superimposed, over this activity, the shadows of USO volunteers handing out cold pizza and flat cola. All women, they wore a uniform of red-stained apron, white perm, white sneakers and discount blue jeans. Their bloodshot eyes were swollen with purple bags. The smell of aviation fuel permeated the lobby, beyond which we could see the c-5 that would take us to war. The women stood behind the fold-out church-basement table, now serving a single Marine. As he walked back to his seat, one of them followed him, reaching up to turn on the lobby television.

The soft click, then the sharp crack of static, brought the listless to life: CNN exploded onto the screen, sending a riot alert through our nervous systems. Anti-aircraft fire and flares lit up the Baghdad skies, and sirens screamed beneath the rumble of bombs. The men who had been sleeping on the floor began queuing up at the two pay telephones, and the first few rows of seats filled with men craning their necks backward, eyes glued to the spectacle. Above the quiet shuffle of Marines shaking off sleep in a lobby at Norton Air Force Base in California, someone said, "Fuckin' A, we're going to war." I didn't hear any Ooh-Rah's.

Our flight to Saudi Arabia stopped over in Torrejon, Spain. As we stepped down the steel ramp, emerging from the belly of the c-5, we saw endless giant forms shrouded in a moonless midnight fog, a dense whiteness illuminated by sparsely placed halogen lamps, swirling floodlights, and the rotating orange and red and yellow lights of row upon row of B-52 bombers and c-5 cargo transports.

Inside the hangar serving as a transit barracks, everybody was watch-

ing CNN. I joined the crowd, still carrying my ALICE pack (a rabbit hole we were most definitely headed down, but this ALICE was “All-Purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment”). Packed around the televisions in two corners were U.S. Army Rangers, National Guardsman, and Marines; British Army and Marines; and some Canadians, all with eyes fastened on the screens. Staccato flashes of anti-aircraft tracers flying in every direction out of Baghdad. Reporters giving dispatches with sirens blaring in the background. Then we learned about Iraqi SCUDs landing in Israel. Larry Register in Jerusalem, holding a phone at a cluttered desk, being wired for sound by a guy wearing a gas mask. Lou Dobbs asking him to point the camera out the window. Sirens wailing.

“Fucking Israel, man,” someone said.

“Fucking Israel,” we agreed.

Wolf Blitzer at the Pentagon, confirming a SCUD landing. “. . . a massive Israeli reaction from the air force, the Israeli Air Force, which has been bracing all day for this kind of attack.”

“War’s over, boys,” one of the Rangers said. “Baghdad’s gonna be a glass parking lot before we leave this hangar.”

Richard Roth in Tel Aviv. *“We’re just listening to explosions.”*

Shaky camera shots, then cut to the studio. I sat on my pack and chain smoked, ashing on the floor like everyone else. Scenes from Dahrhan, Riyadh, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Washington, and Atlanta flickered in the blue haze. Wolf Blitzer again.

*“Obviously this rewrites all the equations for this war.”*

“War, shit pal, Israeli Air Force gonna end this thing by mornin’ chow.”

*“We know now that Israel is going to retaliate, if it already hasn’t started. The Israeli sources here in Washington tell us that the Israeli Air Force will undertake a massive retaliatory strike.”*

Charles Jaco in Saudi Arabia. *“Okay, guys, break it down. Out of here!”*

Cut to Israeli police officer standing in a pile of rubble in Tel Aviv. *“What can I say to you? War is not a summer camp.”*

From the Pentagon, Wolf Blitzer says that despite conflicting reports, it is believed that no chemical or biological warheads were on the SCUDs, eight of which hit Israel. He's doing voice-over to a live feed from Saudi Arabia, with sirens screaming in the background. *"Planes are taking off from an air base in Saudi Arabia."*

Tweaked-out screen, then distortion, then cut to Blitzer. *"We lost our feed."*

CNN—we were so tuned in they had a direct coax link to our cerebral cortex: a chain-smoking war borg in a Mediterranean hangar. Scuds in Tel Aviv. CNN. Electric night in Baghdad. CNN. Sirens in Dahran. CNN. Generals with wicked in-flight video in Riyadh. CNN, giving new meaning to "theater of war."

The webbed canvas seats of a c-5 are small and crowded, and face the rear of the plane. Now into the second day of our journey, somewhere over the Mediterranean, most of the guys slept. Unable to sleep, I meandered through Plato's *Republic*, using a pink Hi-Liter to mark the passages that would change my life:

*A man must take with him into the world below an adamantine faith in truth and right, that there too he may be undazzled by the desire of wealth or other allurements of evil, lest, coming upon tyrannies and other villainies, he do irremediable wrongs to others and suffer yet worse himself; but let him know how to choose the mean and avoid the extremes on either side, as far as possible, not only in this life but in all that which is to come. For this is the way of happiness.*

Our Staff ncos, Boomer and Landers, appeared at the head of the stairs, carrying satchels. We had MRES in our ALICE packs, so they weren't serving the in-flight meal.

A snack?

"Heads up, Marines. We're going to be passing out rounds. Three hundred and sixty per Marine. We want you to put twenty in each magazine. I know they hold thirty, but you'll trash the spring, so don't fill 'em

up. Put the rest of the rounds in the bottom of your ALICE pack. And don't lose any rounds—you gotta turn these in when we come home."

Nothing quite like a couple hundred Marine reservists, cramped ass-hole to elbow on a cargo plane, suddenly pulling out M-16's and filling magazines with 5.56 mm NATO rounds. Someone yelled out behind me, "Fly the friendly skies, motherfuckers! The Corps is coming downrange."

*Every Marine is a combat warrior.* I don't remember his exact occupational specialty, but my senior Drill Instructor in boot camp was something like a Marine Corps postal worker. Even so, he could drop your ass in a heartbeat. A bad-ass, black-belt mailman. That's the Marines. Chesty Puller, the most decorated Marine in history. Smedley Butler, author of *War Is a Racket* and the only Marine to win the Medal of Honor twice. Lee Harvey Oswald. Charles Whitman—who shot and killed fourteen people from a tower at the University of Texas; whose father literally beat him into the Marine Corps. Every last one of us field-stripped and rebuilt from the ground up at Marine Corps Recruit Depot; every last one of us could turn out to be a hero with titanium balls; every last one of us stood an equal chance of turning into a psychotic with a steady trigger finger and a firing pin trained to our pulse.

Back at Camp Pendleton, in the haste of checking out gear and getting our shots, we managed a day at the rifle range. I loved the cadences of the rifle range—long days of pulling targets or waiting to fire. Two hundred meters. Three hundred meters. Five hundred meters. To think: I could hit a dog target, Marine Corps nomenclature for a human silhouette, nine times out of ten in the black from more than a quarter-mile—without a scope. I watched the guys raise the targets above the slow rolling fog on the grass. The sun was just coming up beyond the berm, a six-foot wall of brown sod. Soon its horizon would be dotted with white canvases glued with targets.

"Ready on your left, ready on your right . . . all ready on the firing line. Shooters, you may commence firing when your dog target appears."

I could feel the pebbles on the asphalt firing line; feel my pulse in the

sling of my rifle. I switched focus from the end of my nose to a quarter-mile away, triangulating the rear sight of my rifle, the grey dot in the distance, and the front sight, on which I focused as I eased my body into its routine: Breathe, Relax, Aim, Stop, Squeeze.

“Cease fire! Cease fire! Unload, clear, and lock!”

More than five football fields away, a spotter marked a bull. And then there were the burnt rounds. Their nitrate-laden smoke smells like both death and childhood—somewhere between burnt flesh and the caps I shot as a kid. Unquestionably there was a romance to this—but also a kind of insanity.

It seemed like I could still smell the firing range, sitting in my cramped seat on the c-5. When I got tired of reading, I quietly slung my rifle over my shoulder, then descended to the open bulkhead below. My boots banged a dull, metallic chord on the planks running the length of the cargo bay. I marveled that I could walk in a flying cavern. Pallets stacked with our seabags, wrapped in nylon webbing, rested in a corner by several plywood crates stenciled with serial numbers and unit designations. Two mine-sweepers were chained down in the middle of the bay: heavy-tracked tanks with bulldozer blades made of steel thicker than my fist, steel whose deflecting curves rose to a blunt edge just beneath my eyes. I walked over to one and ran my fingers along the blade’s cold surface, its imperceptibly pebbled smoothness and invincible solidity.

At the far end of the bay, I climbed a steep stairwell to the short hallway between the cockpit and the officers’ deck. The crew chief rose from his seat just outside the officers’ deck.

“I’ll take your rifle, Marine.”

“It’s still open, then?” I asked. “The offer to hang out in the cockpit?”

“Yeah, just can’t let you take your rifle in there,” he replied, “for the obvious reasons.”

“Hijackers?” I asked.

“No, it’s real crowded in there. What the fuck?”

I opened the door just enough to squeeze through, and crouched be-

hind the navigator's chair. All the pilots were leaning back, chatting, while the plane flew itself.

"Evening, gentlemen," I said.

"Evening, Marine," called the captain. "Enjoying the flight? Not too rough, is it?"

We had flown through some serious turbulence, and must have jumped the cliff between a high and low pressure front, because we felt at one point like we were not only losing our cookies, but gravity as well. Hitting the wall on the other side had knocked us out of our seats.

"Yeah, that was great," I said, "really great. When everyone was done barfing, someone had the balls to yell, 'One more for Chesty!'"

"You point him out, and we'll have him scrub the deck when we land in Jubayl. What can I do for you this evening?"

We talked about flying a C-130, which I had done while enrolled in Marine Corps Platoon Leaders Class. Then we talked about ophthalmology: eye exercises to correct vision impairment, the problems of red-green color blindness and instrument panels: we went through the whole deck—the major and minor arcana of eyesight.

"You know, even though you wear glasses, you can still be a navigator," offered the navigator, sporting a pair of black-framed military issue glasses cocked above his goofy smile. I was reminded why we called them BCGs: birth-control glasses.

"So where are we anyway?"

"We're about a hundred miles off the coast of Egypt right now. If you look out, off to the right here, you'll be able to make out Alex."

"Alexandria? They used to have the world's greatest library."

"Library? Ain't gonna be a library where you're headed, Marine." The navigator looked over at the captain, raising his eyebrows.

The instrument panels and cabin lights lit the windows with our reflections, and I struggled to stare through the dark to a luminous patch of earth that was barely visible.

"I don't need a library," I said, "I brought my own. Half a seabag full of books."

Everyone in the cockpit turned to look at me.

“That’s great, Marine. They’ll probably come in real handy, like when you build a bunker out of them.”

We all laughed, then ceased abruptly. I stood behind the pilots for several more minutes, quietly gazing out the window, mesmerized by the unchanging darkness before us.