

Iraq – First Week

Michael Maxey

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My family came with me to the airport as I left for Iraq. It was bittersweet as I had a chance to tell them I loved him and say goodbye to everyone but it hurt when my youngest son, Justin, ran down the corridor as I approached the security gate and grabbed me for a last hug and then said, “Dad, I touched you last.”

My flight out of Dulles connected to an Amman, Jordan flight in Frankfurt, Germany. In Amman, I took a military flight into Baghdad, Iraq. Travel time from my home in Fairfax Virginia to the USAID compound in Baghdad’s International Zone took 59 hours. I slept for four hours on the flight between Dulles and Frankfurt and then slept another three hours on the Frankfurt/Amman leg. We arrived in Amman at 2:30 in the morning and I was taken to a hotel to shower and sleep for a few hours. We later went to a military airport and flew into the BIAP (Baghdad International Airport) on a C-17 military transport jet.



Michael Maxey aboard C-17 aircraft to Iraq.

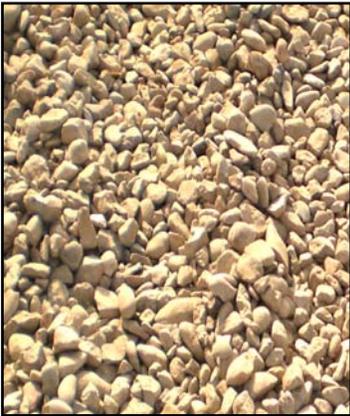
First impressions on the trip were that Europe and the Middle East do not have the same number of people traveling by air. Airports were not crowded, none of the aircraft were full to capacity, and movement into and out of airport baggage and security areas was relatively easy. In Jordan, the Customs officials X-rayed my bag and let me pass through Customs without checking my suitcases. A driver was waiting for me and took me to a hotel in Amman. The drive took 40 minutes or so and I was able to get a sense of the countryside which was mostly dry and sandy. The houses I saw were white with an adobe type construction. I was reminded of the Spanish architecture on the Mediterranean coast that Annie and I saw on our honeymoon in 1990. Along the road signs appeared indicating the direction and route to take to Saudi Arabia and Iraq. I also

saw a sign to Petra, an ancient caravan city carved from stone and now classified as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. At the hotel I was able to sleep for a few hours. The wake up call I had requested did not come but the driver (same as the one from the airport) came early to pick me up and he called to wake me. Very nice guy.

We went to the military airport in Amman and boarded a C-17 US Air Force flight to Baghdad. The flight was uneventful. We had been told that there would be an evasive dive near Baghdad to avoid possible ground to air missile attack but the approach and landing were relatively calm. As we landed I took a photo as the back of the plane was lowered – this was my first view of Iraq.



We left the airplane, formed two lines, and were escorted to a building near the runway. As we walked toward the building, we passed a group of people being brought out to board the same aircraft for a flight back to Jordan. They were, many of them, on their way home and I remember seeing smiling faces as they walked by. We, on the hand, were focused on getting our gear and moving on to the International Zone. Everyone was told that they must carry their luggage the 150 yards to the initial staging area called Sully Compound. In a building just off the tarmac, we were given instructions on how to collect our bags and get our names on the list of passengers for the armored bus, the “Rhino”, leaving later that night for the International Zone. I got my suitcase, briefcase and a small backpack and started walking toward Sully Compound.



Large gravel on trail to Sully Compound.

Footnote: It's worth mentioning that the “Alpine” backpack I found at Dick’s Sporting Goods in Fairfax Virginia was a great investment. It had a handle and wheels like a regular carry-on but could also convert into a backpack by unzipping the back and pulling out shoulder straps. This back pack really helped me make it as I trekked to Sully Compound with three bags weighing a total eighty pounds. I had to use the carry-on as a backpack because the trail to Sully has large gravel making it impossible to pull a roller suitcase.



Alpine Backpack/Carryon

After we got to Sully Compound, we were given body armor and a Kevlar helmet then shown where to store our luggage. The staff signed us up for the trip on the Rhino to the International Zone. We arrived at 3:00 pm in the afternoon and our trip on the Rhino was scheduled for sometime that night (it runs at a different time each night for security reasons). In the meantime, we were able to go on the Internet to check emails then later

we went to eat at the mess hall near the compound. Later in the evening we were taken to a nearby military camp that serves as the pickup point for the Rhino.

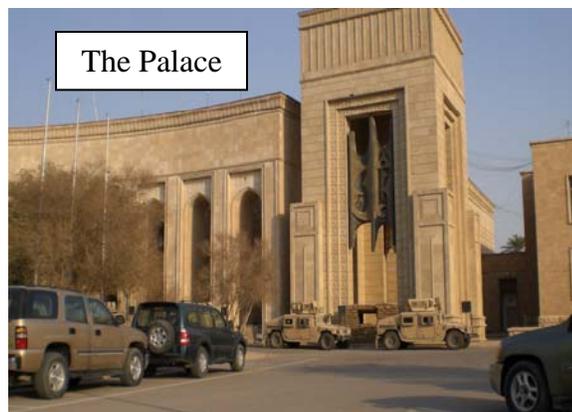
This camp was an interesting place in that it was also a staging area for soldiers going on R&R. There were many soldiers there for the night as they prepared for a flight out the next day. I was able to talk to some young soldiers from Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kalsu where I will be stationed. They were positive about the FOB and the security situation in the area. One of them told me that they were on the roads all the time and that there were no major issues. I was surprised at the number of young women in uniform and in combat. The soldier that told me about FOB Kalsu was a girl not much older than my niece, Wren Maxey, had been when she died. These young soldiers are our heroes. They fight and they are aware of the sacrifice that is being asked of them. While the soldiers I talked to were positive, I did see some graffiti in a remote spot in the camp that simply said, "Their Freedom, Our Blood."



The photo on the left is inside the Rhino, an armored bus, that took us into the International Zone. Here I am on the right in flak jacket and helmet on the Rhino.



I arrived at the International Zone at 4 in the morning and was taken to the USAID compound where I was able to get some sleep. I stayed in my trailer the next day and rested. On Saturday, I started to explore the area around the compound. There were concrete "T" walls everywhere to prevent damage from car bombs. Security guards were posted at every compound entrance. I noticed they were mostly Hispanic so I asked one what country he was from and he said, "Peru." He explained that there were more than 1,000 Peruvians serving as security guards in the International Zone and they were employed the security firm Triple Canopy. I explained that we had lived six years in Peru and that my youngest son was born in Peru. After that I stopped and talked to many of the Peruvian guards – it was a nice touch of familiarity in a strange place. I walked to the Embassy offices at the Palace and took photos along the way and at the Palace. The following photos were taken on the second and third day I was in Iraq.





Street in the International Zone



Gate to the Palace



Monument to 1958 Revolution



Humvee in the IZ



Monument to Iraq-Iran War



Palace

The week included a number of briefings on different aspects of the US strategy in Iraq which consists of kinetic (fighting people) and non-kinetic (building things) activities. The standard response to any question here is – “It’s complicated.” If you ask me what the overall strategy is for achieving our objective of a stable, democratic Iraq, I can tell you what we hope will happen but so much depends upon the Iraqis standing up and taking responsibility for their country. It would mean people would have to decide to reconcile their differences, share the wealth, and share power. That hasn’t happened in Iraq without the force of a central dominating king or dictator in 5,000 years (probably not since the city states of the Sumerians which were based kinship and clan). So the overall picture appears dim. However, the one bright spot is what is happening at the local level in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).

We now have 25 PRTs in Iraq and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has a representative on each one. I am going to be the USAID Representative at ePRT North Babil located south of Baghdad (see Attachment One). My primary job is to work with the Army Brigade Commander to develop and implement a counter-insurgency strategy that promotes Iraqi government legitimacy and meets the economic and social needs of the people in our area of operation. This work will be guided by the Army – Marine Corps Counter-insurgency Manual edited by General Petraeus. What we do here and the lessons we learn will determine how the US fights wars and secures our country for the remainder of this century. This is a historic effort and we are fortunate to be participants in it. God bless our efforts.

During the week we had briefings on the Iraqi economy – they actually have a significant amount of money but are having trouble getting the funds out to the provinces. The PRTs are focusing on ways to increase Iraqi government budget execution by working with individual ministries and local groups to get the funding moving. This has been a very successful area for the PRTs and this is one of the reasons that President Bush and others in the administrations are interested; PRTs are making a difference at the local level. This is the civilian surge that started last year and was the objective of a contentious meeting at the Department of State between Secretary of State Rice and Foreign Service Officers facing the prospect of being forced to serve in Iraq. In the end, enough people volunteered and no one was forced to serve here.

I made my first trip into Baghdad on Thursday for a meeting with a group promoting local economic growth. It was a good meeting and I was impressed with the Iraqi staff. They are true heroes in this process literally facing death everyday. I had long discussions with one Iraqi lady who at the end of our meetings indicated she could not shake hands because of Islam. Interesting – I, as a non-Muslim, have to learn the customs here. Walter Yates, my Desk Officer at the Office of Provincial Affairs, went with us (see photo on right).



The ride to my first meeting in the Red Zone was very interesting. We had two armored cars, an armored Humvee with 50 caliber machine gun on top, and a Bell helicopter overhead with two gunners. The lead car cleared intersections and the Humvee provided overall security with the helicopter acting as a scout and lookout but also capable of getting us out of there if necessary. We were dressed in body armor and Kevlar helmets.



Here are photos from the trip.



Trip to meeting in Baghdad.



Today, February 15th, was supposed to be a day off but work pretty much goes on all the time in Baghdad. I went with an Army Non-Commissioned Officer to get new and improved protective gear before I go out to my field assignment next week. The photos below show the training we went through in how to assemble, protect and use our gear. “This can save your life, so listen up.” Sergeant Jack Perry provided a great overview of what we needed to do and he got us suited up with state of the art body armor.



M.Maxey with other ePRT colleagues & military support staff.

Attachment No. 1 – Location of ePRT North Babil

