Tower 13

NATHAN RITZO

HELLGATE PRESS ASHLAND, OREGON

TOWER 13

Published by Hellgate Press
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

Hellgate Press
PO Box 3531
Ashland, OR 97520
email: sales@hellgatepress.com

Editors: Jenn Zaczek and John Simon
Cover Design: L. Redding
Back cover illustration: "Conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols 1258,"
Rashid-ad-Din's Gami' at-tawarih of Tabriz (?), 14th century.
Water colours and gold on paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from the publisher on request.

Printed and bound in the United States of America
First Edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Camp Victory, Baghdad, Iraq, 2004, a strange and interesting place to be. Filled with danger, of course, being a combat zone. An enemy that, wisely, would never stand and fight peppered us daily with rockets and bombs instead. Much safer for them. On post, there was an entirely different kind of fight, like the kind in which siblings engage, full of politics and careers, more mentally than physically taxing.

I was there, at Camp Victory, from 2004 to 2005, as a soldier in the United States Army. A lower ranking enlisted man, I was never concerned with the big political battles. I was one of the ones who got my hands dirty filling sandbags so some major who hadn't bagged sand since 1987 wouldn't have to; and honestly, I was fine with that. Stress from the neck up can be worse than that from the neck down; soldiers can wash their hands of the day when it's over. The neck-up stress that keeps officers "at attention" has to be endured day in, day out.

The unit in which I served was obsessed with politics. My love and admiration for the unit and those with whom I served I felt in retrospect. Then, I felt rather differently. Ultimately, we came back, and I guess that's what's important, but there were times when the unit made the situation difficult, very difficult.

This is my story of Camp Victory. Some of it happened to me, some to friends, and some I heard from others. I relate their stories and mine as a tribute to a time and a place that played an important role in contemporary American and, indeed, global history, as well as in my life. It wasn't so great at the time, but I nevertheless feel fortunate to have been there, fortunate to have made it back with all my limbs, with the experience of having lived and survived in a combat zone. The reader will find in these pages a realistic representation of how things were at Camp Victory, however fantastic some of it might seem. Understand that what's being recounted is war. In war, things that you may not think possible happen almost daily, and however awful and hateful overall, bright spots can be found even in places like Camp Victory.

I do not intend this book to be political. You'll find no political opinions expressed here, the invasion of 2003 and the ensuing conflict neither espoused nor renounced. If you bought this book to learn my opinion about that war, return it and get your money back. If you're on the left, you had your big parade downtown and it's over; if you're on the right, we got him, they killed him, and it's over. Either way, it's over. What you'll read here is a story about war, not politics. Unless you're a supporter of Saddam Hussein or a member of the Mahdi Army, you should not be offended by this book. That's how I intended it.

Thanks, and enjoy.

Nate

Tower 13

NATHAN RITZO

Chapter 1

Sweat bubbles, a product of the hot Iraqi morning air, mingled with the dirt that permeated the air in Baghdad to form small mud balls on his neck. A typical day of deployment was beginning for Sergeant Matthew Duffy, U.S. Army. Today was laundry pickup day, something he always looked forward to. Comfort was everything here, and nothing was more comfortable than nice, clean-smelling clothes. A soldier far removed from all he knew back in the States, and subjected to the strict living standards of a deployment, comes to crave and appreciate the small stuff.

In Camp Victory in 2004, soldiers were everywhere, going about their daily business of being. Some were engaged in PT, running up the crowded road around moving Humvees and other military vehicles; others were heading to office jobs, mentally prepping for the politics that pervaded a place that had the distinction of being the headquarters for the war effort in Iraq. Hence it was top-heavy with brass for whom reminding the enlisted people of their presence seemed to represent a kind of competition.

Too many chiefs and not enough braves, in Duffy's opinion, but what did he care? He was biding his time, counting down the days like everyone else here. His

twenty-seven-year-old, powerfully built frame was not the ideal body for a soldier. The Army seemed to prefer skinny guys who could run two miles in ten minutes, but unlike a lot of the soldiers here, he was never out of shape. How in the hell do they get like that here? he wondered as he passed a female soldier who looked as if she must have gorged herself with ice cream with every meal at the DFAC and refrained from PT since arriving. Even though he was in shape, he was convinced that he could have lost weight here from raw nervousness, as he had in reception at Fort Jackson all those years ago, not that he needed to. He was usually too amped up. When he did PT, it was to relax.

Continuing up Dodge City Avenue, the main road that led to Dodge City, which was the name for the trailer park on post, and his little trailer, he gazed at the motor pool, a temporary unit that had made a dirty mess of what had once been, of all things, Saddam Hussein's polo field. When his unit had arrived at Victory in the springtime, the field had been nothing more than a great mud-filled nightmare. When soldiers left the field with the mud that caked on the bottom of their boots, their feet looked like huge turkey drumsticks. Scrubbing it off with giant brushes when they reached the building in which they worked could take as much as half an hour. Woe to the soldier who let anyone see him track in any trace of dirt into the building..

Duffy was in battalion. The soldiers in brigade occupied the giant room he had to walk through to get to his unit's office. That brigade carried more weight, much more, than battalion was not lost even on its

enlisted component. Duffy was hassled by every mean-spirited NCO in brigade whenever he passed through that room to get to his office, in spades if he was thoughtless enough to do so with mud on his boots.

Duffy was used to being yelled at. It was Army philosophy, accorded to even the suffering soldiers who got blown up and flown to Walter Reed. Why? Duffy's theory was that the Army wanted its soldiers to be tough. If you weren't tough, you had no business being in Iraq or any other combat zone. The Army had its good points, but Duffy couldn't see any of them from Baghdad. The G.I. Bill didn't matter here. Neither did political science, nor anything else he was interested in when he enlisted in the mid-1990s.

Duffy recalled sitting in the recruiter's office. He hadn't been naive, had known there was a chance he could be deployed, but hadn't thought it would be anything like this. Back then, a six-month deployment in Bosnia was about the worst one could expect. That had been his first deployment. *Hell, I could do that now standing on my head*, he thought as he continued up the road toward his trailer. Duffy had already been in Iraq for seven months, after having done a tour in Kosovo in 1999 for six.

Duffy construed as looks of approval, not bewilderment, the glances from a number of Iraqi day laborers he passed. Are these guys all just a bunch of queers? he wondered. Homosexuality was not his thing. He was married with children back home, even though the deployment had put a serious dent in his marriage. Regardless, he did not intend to have sex with any Iraqi

women either, some of whom, he had observed, were real cuties. Even though his marriage was going south at the moment due to the deployment, he was still married. But perhaps the greater deterrent had been the admonition by Sergeant Granger, a huge black guy whom he'd admired greatly when he'd pulled guard duty with him after September 11, 2001. "Don't stick it up in no foreign pussy, son! You don't want none of that shit!" the sergeant had told him. Another senior NCO had remarked offhandedly, "Just think of some of the in-laws!" So Duffy had decided on a hands-off policy, no matter how hot the property.

Who knew anymore? Random thoughts in the course of what was just another day in a place strange and dangerous from the top down and everywhere in between were interrupted by an explosion here, a guy screaming in Arabic there. Whatever. It was a combat zone.

The thuds sounded far off, like a football being punted. They drew Duffy's head toward the wall separating the Dodge City trailers from Baghdad. For a moment, he watched the mortar rounds crossing the sky like three fat mosquitoes. They looked tiny and harmless. Then instinct took over.

"Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!" Duffy screamed, ducking quickly into a bunker conveniently situated along Dodge City Avenue. Hit in the eye by debris from the explosion he reckoned had been no more than five or six meters away, he sat in the bunker, clutching his eye. It hurt. It still hurt when, after what seemed an appropriate amount of time, he lifted the palm of the

hand pressed over his eye and saw. That was all that mattered—that he could still see. His mind was an oasis of silence amid all the chaos around him. He sat in quiet shock for a tencount. Something inside Matty boy had just died, and something new was about to begin for him.

The military bearing the drill sergeants at Fort Jackson had hammered into him all those years ago kicked in. After determining that the incoming indirect fire had stopped, Duffy stuck his head out of the bunker and saw pretty much what he expected: people, injured and bloody, running and screaming. An American on the side of the road, holding onto his behind, caught Duffy's still sore eye.

"Hey, you all right?" Duffy called out.

The soldier, who was wearing Army PTs, turned to him with an agonized smile. "Ha-ha! Yeah, man! Purple Heart for getting one in the ass!"

Duffy smiled, gave him a thumbs-up, and turned to see two Iraqi day laborers on the ground, one with his leg blown off and the other looking like road pizza.

No need to worry about that guy, Duffy thought.

Duffy extracted a pair of Army-issue gloves and one of his clean undershirts from his laundry bag and then tossed it back into the bunker. He made for the Iraqi man with the blown-off leg, picking up a stick along the way. The guy was losing blood rapidly, turning white as a sheet, and praying in Arabic, some Muslim chant. Duffy fashioned a tourniquet, ripped the shirt to make a bandage, and wrapped it around the leg above where it had been blown off. He pushed the stick through the

shirt and began twisting, cranking the tourniquet down until the blood stopped flowing. The man howled in agony, but Duffy knew that he'd be okay.

Dipping his finger in blood, he looked at his watch, made the appropriate marks on the man's face—a giant T on the forehead, the time the tourniquet was applied—and was gone. Usually, he would have stayed to console, but the guy couldn't speak English, and there was too much else going on anyway. He knew he had to keep moving.

Turning around, he saw a lieutenant colonel taking pictures of a mortally wounded local national. Across the colonel's PT belt was a silver oak leaf cluster with the name "Throckmorton" next to it. The Iraqi guy on the ground, still twitching a bit, clearly had no more than thirty seconds left in his life. Ordinarily, the scene wouldn't have fazed Duffy—death and gore were hardly strangers to him—but something was different.

"Excuse me, sir?" There was no hint of deference to rank in Duffy's voice as he approached the colonel, a tall, skinny, white man with glasses and wearing PTs. Ignored by the officer, Duffy strode up to him and knocked the camera out of his hand. "Colonel Throckmorton, sir! That is completely disrespectful to that man! Please stop taking pictures."

"Excuse me, Sergeant? Are you completely out of your mind?" The colonel looked incredulous.

"Sir, that is against a regulation, what you are doing right now. You can't take pictures of fucking dead foreign nationals for you to whack off to later." Duffy picked up the camera, handed it to the colonel, and instinctively went to parade rest. He knew he'd screwed up by doing

the right thing again. The colonel was more than displeased.

"Excuse me, Sergeant?" the colonel said again, his voice only the least bit modulated by the knowledge that he was in the wrong. Which, of course, didn't matter, given his rank.

The colonel got no further and had to step back a bit as First Sergeant Jones interposed his bulk between the officer and the enlisted man. The thirty-eight-year-old Jones, a huge black man who forever looked pissed off, was not to be messed with, no matter one's rank. Funny thing, though, was that he was actually quite slow to anger, as the Bible says God is. But when circumstances warranted that emotion, the recipient came to appreciate the pissed-off expression for what it was.

"Excuse me, sir. I'll handle this," Jones said to the colonel, who looked utterly beleaguered by so much interaction all at once with the enlisted element.

Jones turned to Duffy, who was still at parade rest, and shouted the sergeant's name as he grabbed his lapel with one hand. Then he backhanded Duffy across the face with his other hand and screamed, "Have you lost your damned mind? Get your ass back to your trailer!"

Delivered by anyone else, the slap would have snapped Duffy's head around. But Duffy found himself looking up at the first sergeant from a seated position, propped up by his hands firmly planted behind him. He feigned a grin. He'd been boxing for a few years, and honestly, the slap felt pretty good. It had been a while since he'd sparred. Duffy got up, dusted himself off, and ducked into the bunker to get his laundry.

"Nice work, First Sergeant!" the colonel said to the massive chest in front of him. "Now, if you'll excuse me." He had to step back to raise his camera.

First Sergeant Jones shook his head. "My sergeant was absolutely right," he said to the colonel, his voice level as he held out a hand to take the camera. "Sir, don't take any more pictures."

The colonel, looking as much dumbfounded as angry, turned and walked away, still clutching the camera.

The first sergeant looked in the direction Duffy had gone, then down into the still open eyes of the dead Iraqi. He shook his head. He'd had no choice but to strike Duffy, even though the sergeant had been 100 percent in the right. Wishing the whole thing simply hadn't happened, he took a couple of steps, leaned down, and with two meaty fingers, drew the dead man's eyes closed.

The sergeant making his way through the maze of trailers was an absolute mess, covered in blood, dirt, and bad karma. The latter seemed somehow always to find him, and he, somehow, always managed to survive.

Dodge City was a group of identical small trailers. Three units housing two people each were arranged in little "neighborhoods." Duffy was passing the C column on his way to the I column. He knew where he was, and his laundry had stayed clean. That was as good as it got. He knew what was coming, though: an alert. All hell would break loose, and caution, extra caution, would become the watchword of the day.

Duffy opened the door of the trailer to the familiar but unwelcome aroma of two men living in the same twelve-by-twelve-foot room. His roomie was off somewhere on

a mission, a welcome respite for Duffy because the kid absolutely stank.

"Fucking gross," Duffy said to the empty room, picking up an aerosol can and, with a sweeping motion, laying a flowery scent over everything. Shaking his head, he set the can down then walked over to his side of the room, dumped his clean laundry on the bed, and opened the wall locker.

Looking back at him from the mirror on the inside of the locker door was a filthy soldier covered in blood and dirt. He shook his head and began stripping off his clothes. He started to stuff them into the laundry bag, but then, thinking he should just throw them away, pulled them back out and tossed them over by the door. He pulled on a clean pair of PT shorts, slipped into his shower shoes, and grabbed his toiletry bag. He thought about putting on a PT shirt but dismissed the idea after considering the layer of filth that covered him. Going topless could get him in trouble. Partial male nudity was, believe it or not, a major concern at Camp Victory at the time. Those who made the rules even mandated that men and women swim in PT shorts and shirts. But Duffy judged today to be an exception. He would have loved for some officer or senior NCO to stop him and ask why he wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Because it's covered in fucking blood, sir!" is what he would have said.

Duffy grabbed his bath towel, the one he had come to absolutely love, and flung it over his shoulder. In places like this, common household items that were taken for granted back home assumed a new depth of

meaning. Such things became dependable friends that helped soldiers get through their deployments. He felt the same way about his flip-flops, which his wife had bought him before he'd left. *Best damned thing she ever did for me was buy me these flip-flops*, he thought as he stepped over the filthy clothes that had landed in front of the door and headed to the shower house to get clean and try to put the morning's events behind him.

Duffy looked back at the clock in his bedroom before closing the door behind him. Eight thirty. He was due to come on shift at nine. Duffy was an automator. He worked on the local area network and fixed the computers used by the brass at Camp Victory. Software issues perplexed him, but he was a guru with hardware. He could diagnose a problem by observing the way a machine was running before he even opened the box. But he was a soldier first, loved the Army's "Go, go, go!" mentality, loved having adventures as a grown man. Truth be told, he was an adrenaline junkie. But he'd always had a knack for electronics. The U.S. Army Signal Corps put that knack to productive use and let him hang onto the teen experience for an extra nine or ten years. A marriage made in heaven was how he saw it.

But every marriage has its problems, doesn't it? And the problem with Duffy's union with the Signal Corps was that his unit, save for an occasional convoy detail or something of that nature, never left Camp Victory. Duffy found it stifling to be in an office day after day, waiting for something to go awry so he could get up, go out somewhere, and do his job.

His senior NCOs were cognizant of Duffy's frustration.

They also perceived leadership ability in the sergeant. In a unit like his, which hadn't been deployed for more than a decade before the present rotation, these qualities made him a valuable asset. The kids in the unit, which included a fair number of "go to war or go to jail" types who, despite their checkered pasts, were intelligent enough to earn high entrance testing scores, were good, tough soldiers. Duffy mentally characterized those in the senior leadership positions, when he thought of them at all, as a bunch of fat softies who needed Richard Simmons and a diet. Granted, they all had deployments under their belts. But most were now in their late thirties and looking at retirement when they arrived back at Fort Hood. These "desktop commandos," as Duffy irreverently referred to them, were hard-nosed enough when it came to bossing around those of lesser rank, but none of them, he knew, was capable of doing what he could do.

So Duffy became the battalion's go-to boy. Every detail that needed any kind of leadership, he got it. Other E-5s, of which there was a sufficient number to share the load, always seemed to be "too busy." So the leadership details inevitably fell to Duffy. This didn't make for cheerful leadership, but it worked. It worked because Sergeant Duffy was the genuine article, a true U.S. Army noncommissioned officer. He wasn't a gentleman, but a professional whose job, as he understood it, was to get the job done one way or another. If feelings were hurt in the process, it was never a personal thing. Just business, as the NCOs who had taught him what a leader was and how to be one had told him throughout his career. He was forever grateful for those lessons.

Walking down the steps of his trailer, he took a deep breath of combat-zone air. He'd breathed it Korea, which had been at relative peace for nearly half a century by the time he got there, and in Kosovo, where he'd spent a month camped out on an Albanian airstrip to provide protection from the influx of Kosovar refugees and pissed-off Serbs who didn't like Albania anyway. Albania had smelled like sheep. The air in Iraq stank of burnt gasoline and, well, just Iraq. Baghdad smelled like death, anyway, to him, and the Iraqis had the nerve to blame the Americans! If Iraq had actually been a nice place before 2003, he could have understood.

Duffy recalled the convoy that had brought him to Baghdad from Kuwait, of the sights he saw along the way. Dead bodies by the side of the road, burned-out vehicles, little kids begging for food from the soldiers, all indelibly burned into his psyche. The convoys he'd been on subsequently, mostly to the Green Zone and back, weren't nearly as memorable as that fifteen-hour trip through the desert from Kuwait had been. Of course, they hadn't been attacked on the trip from Kuwait. Route Irish—the main route from Camp Victory to the Green Zone—was another story. Duffy had never been so happy as when he'd finished that detail. The lid had been blown off Iraq in 2004. Saddam was out of power, and the whole place was bedlam.

Duffy always took recourse to the soda bottle when people back home asked him to describe the situation in Iraq. "Shake a soda bottle for about thirty or forty years," he would tell them, "then pop the cap and watch what happens. That's Iraq. Saddam was the cap. He shook

that bottle as vigorously as he could for as long as he had it. When we deposed him that was popping the cap. And now that bottle's spewing all over the place." It wasn't a bad analogy.