

(Excerpt from A Better Basra by Caroline Jaine)

My first mortar attack (they say you remember your first and it's true)

During the day, when busy with work or in the cook-house, I was surrounded by people. The bar provided good company, and even for the short walks between the fortified buildings that made up our compound I fed on chatty banter with anyone and everyone; from the Iraqi laundry man and the one armed gardener; to exchanging a few newly learned Nepalese words with our perimeter guards. I got to know the Zimbabwean dog handlers and their dogs – Debbie the German Shepherd was a particular favourite. There were members of the Danish police who always enjoyed conversation; and I loved chatting to Taha, our one remaining Iraqi advisor. As friendly as this was, I know myself well enough to know that this constant desire for talking was largely driven by my fear of being alone.

On my first night in camp I had collapsed into slumber wearing just my sarong, yet it was weeks before I was relaxed enough to get undressed again for bed. True enough, I had managed to strip down to my swimming costume and take the occasional dip to take the steam out of the 54 degree heat, but at the pool I was not alone and therefore didn't feel as vulnerable (although in coming months I would find myself both alone and vulnerable there).

Once the day was over, and colleagues had been bid goodnight it was just me in a concrete bunker, all alone in Iraq. It was these quiet moments that were the hardest during my first few days at the Palace. My life at home was so full of friends, children and family that I rarely spent time on my own. And to be honest, even outside of Iraq I hadn't been entirely comfortable in my own company. So I faced all my demons at once – this was the extreme cold turkey approach to learning to be with yourself. My main fear was quite basically of being killed and leaving my children without a mother (I know, I know, I should have thought of that before volunteering). My second fear was (having been sternly told to acquaint myself with emergency evacuation procedures) that I would not be ready to get out in a hurry – despite the obligatory emergency bag packed by the side of my bed. Back home, some young Sri Lankan friends had joked that their parents still had a suitcase packed on top of the wardrobe “just in case” even though they were safe in Tooting. I wondered if I would become like them? My emergency suitcase was a small maroon coloured holdall, and I would often wake actually clutching at the handle of the bag and nearly falling out of my bed. It was not unlike my fitful sleep some 12 years earlier on bringing my first baby home from hospital – so concerned that my little girl would stop breathing in her sleep that I would rest a gentle hand on her chest as she slept in the Moses basket next to my bed. There was less tenderness as I clutched my holdall of course!

As well as the maroon bag, I had a small pouch that carried my passport, a pocket torch, a list of phone numbers, photos of my family, a pen, a notebook and my fags. And yes, I slept with this around my neck too for the first week or so. The other dilemma was my boots. I actually wore sandals to work most days, but I knew in an emergency my sturdy desert boots were best, plus (allegedly) you weren't allowed on a military aircraft without proper ankle covering foot attire, said the rules. My boots were difficult to lace up at the best of times and would be impossible in a hurry, so the safest option seemed to be to sleep with them on my feet, loosely tied. As you can imagine, this was not conducive to a decent night's kip.

The air-conditioner also bothered me. With it on, the air was cool and dry but it almost completely masked any outside noise. Many times a night I would rush to switch it off because my ears tricked me into hearing “something” outside. And until I actually heard my first explosion in Iraq, I wasn't really sure what sound to expect. Would it be a crash? A kerr-boom? A thud? A crack? However with the air-conditioning switched off, although you could hear a pin drop, even in the dead of night, the heat meant that it wasn't very many minutes before I was a sweltering mess – especially fully dressed with my boots on.

I didn't have to wait too long before I witnessed my first IDF attack. IDF means indirect fire – but it felt pretty direct to me (or maybe it is “in direct fire”). I was outside and on my own at the time, which is a zillion times worse than being inside - it is flipping loud outside and the ground shakes.

I had been in the bar that evening, which was another reinforced concrete building. The ceilings were high, the lights were bright and lusty MTV videos were projected onto the wall as people played darts or pool or sat and chatted on more FCO furnishing. I met another man named Chris (there were four Chrises in total!) This Chris was an ex-RAF chef who worked for KBR and managed the team of Sri Lankan cooks as well as volunteering to work behind the bar. Like any good barman he was full of quips, but the first thing I noticed about him was that, unlike the others, he had his ID card strapped to his upper arm. I took the mickey and we were instant friends.

Chris and I - together with every other heavy smoker - spent most of our evenings huddled in the disabled toilet at the bar, which was the designated smoking room. There was no air conditioning and no ventilation in a room that was built to house just a toilet and a small table. Even with the door open, by the time five of us were in there it was so crowded we were virtually sitting on each other's laps and the air thick with smoke. We managed to get at least ten people in there one night, including the much tattooed Sid, who despite being from the military side of camp, wore nasty shiny 1970's shorts. I mention his shorts only because his testicles had the habit of squeezing themselves out of them whenever he sat down – so I usually chose to sit next-to rather than opposite him for fear of getting an eyeful of bollock! Apart from his tendency to inadvertently expose himself, he was a lovely guy.

Two things struck me about the smoking room - firstly, that it might have been less of a risk to our health if we actually smoked outside in the open air and secondly - who in their right minds thought a disabled toilet was necessary in a place like this? We had to fill in a million forms and pass a medical to get here, surely anyone disabled would have been considered an evacuation difficulty?

So on about day three of my time in Basra, I emerged choking out of the smoking room, donned my body armour and helmet and prepared myself for the 100 yard dash to my pod. The bar was usually only open for two hours an evening and it was near enough closing time. I had my torch at the ready and my door key in hand. I was in good spirits, despite having drunk next to nothing (being drunk in Iraq held little appeal). I swung open the heavy metal double doors and stepped out, embarking on my scuttle home.

After just a few steps, a huge explosion shook the ground; I froze. I could hear the faint pattering of shrapnel landing nearby. Then another occurred, not quite as close but still loud. What should I do? Throw myself to the floor? Run like buggery? Hug a Hesco? Another explosion, closer this time. I felt a hand on my shoulder and I felt myself being dragged back into the bar – one of the CRG security team guys had clocked me leaving and worked out that I would have been in the thick of it and bravely headed out to pull me back inside. There were nine mortars that landed in all (no one was hurt, miraculously). By the time the ninth one landed I was back inside the disabled toilet and my new smoky friends were laughing – “we thought you were going home!?” Then the sirens started up and the recorded voice over the Tannoys urged us to stay under hard-cover. No shit. Everyone groaned as the grills across the bar were pulled meaning the bar had closed and I faced the first tedium of lock-down until the security teams had made safe the main routes. We were stuck in the closed bar for what seemed like hours.

It was true that in the first few days I couldn't sleep through being so worried about leaving my children without a mother, but once I experienced that first attack and after witnessing a couple more quiet thuds in the dead of night, it was amazing how quickly one adjusted to the situation. They say you remember your first, and it was true, I wasn't ever quite as deeply frightened as that first time outside the bar – despite the increase in attacks and the loss of life to come.

Sometimes the sirens would go off even before a missile impacted – somehow the military system could pick them up - although never to prevent or intercept I hasten to add. During the day as soon as we heard the noise of the alarms, we gathered into back corridors away from windows. Knowing which papers to grab to keep us busy, we also became adept at holding meetings in the shadows of our inner sanctum. We got to know each other quite well in this way - a bizarre form of team-building. When we were not under attack, the first floor of the British Embassy office building where we worked had a hushed, grey, museum feeling. It was a stale and creepy office, a little dirty and featureless, unlike the splendour of some of the buildings in the Basra Palace compound that lived up to the name rather better. Because of staff shortages and the mass exit of Iraqi staff we had no cleaners, so it was also dirty and dusty with overflowing bins. I wasn't surprised to learn that the room next to mine had been used as a makeshift morgue when the British army used the building at the beginning of the war. It was a cool and eerie room which I avoided. Philippa, who was Head of Chancery as well as being my manger, had her office in the former morgue. She had tried to set up a small meeting space in there using comfortable chairs – but none of us really used it. Goosebumps.

Keen to be surrounded by others, welcoming people into my office became important. There was no press and information section at all when I arrived, so I went about rearranging the office until I could offer a small reference library, pooling my own books and magazines and encouraging others to do the same. For the first time newspapers were provided (with the help of our Embassy in Kuwait). A hot desk was created for anyone who wanted to check their emails. But the sad fact was that people rarely graced my office - they just weren't passing by. Most of them were out and about meeting real Iraqis - training police or advising on agricultural projects; or simply because their security clearance did not allow them into my office building at all. It really wasn't the best place for an information point, all things considered. Eventually the newspapers were moved to a rack in the bar – a far more sensible idea. Until the bar stopped being used, that was.

My connection with the world and oddly, with my journalist friends in Basra, was via email. I would find myself glued to the screen for hours, hands dancing across the keyboard, researching online, where the cranky secure network would allow, and responding to a never ending barrage of queries from London and Baghdad. Only our military liaison officers in the room next to me stayed in their offices longer. They were making a point I think – they were military, they were hard and NO-ONE EVER worked longer hours than they did (I'm sure they were playing mine-sweeper half the time). It gave me great pleasure to call them lightweights and pussies at every opportunity and it amused me no end if I arrived first to open up the offices in the morning. It almost made up for their annoying insistence on calling me "ma'am". But I had to hand it to them; they did do a first class briefing EVERY morning in the High Commissioner's office. They used proper maps and pointy sticks and even grid references and sticky labels to describe the IDF and other attacks the British had come under in the previous 24 hours. When I first arrived I was VERY impressed; but after a few weeks once the ice had been broken between us, I began to tease them for their gallant efforts. Although different creatures perhaps stereotypically representing our organizations, we rubbed along pretty well, and when Mike, a Captain from the Territorials (a copper in real life) left Basra, he left me his desert combat uniform. His huge trousers were given away at a small birthday party for a friend after a very difficult week and they were last seen being worn over the legs of a slightly swaying American Diplomat. The shirt is used today as a painting smock and still very much treasured – a sentiment which often gets misconstrued.

It was often dark by the time I left the office in the evening and the main motivation to stop work by then was to eat. The cook-house was closed by eight (I should say 20:00hrs) and we all know that it was forbidden to eat in one's pod. Even with the sun gone it was still very warm outside and the difference between the outside heat and my air-conditioned ice-tomb of an office always took my breath away (as did the cigarette which was usually lit the moment I stepped outside). Shining a torch around never really made me feel comfortable. It was, after all, a war

zone and remembering my grandparents' tales of blackouts during the war, flashing a light around went against the grain. But the desert night was black and the ground was rather uneven so I flicked a small credit card sized flashlight (that I kept in my body armour) on and off to guide the way. A few weeks later a female army officer friend, Olivia, taught me how to use my peripheral vision for seeing in the dark. Fond memories of her bounding around in front of me on the blackened compound shouting instructions for me not to look directly at the path. It works. Being outside at night was marginally more fun once that discovery had been made and the tiny skill made me feel ever-so-slightly less like a sissy civilian who was totally unprepared for life in a combat zone. Who was I kidding!?

The flashlight was still carried with me anyway, along with a trauma bandage, which I had been taught to apply but now dreaded being faced with a situation where testing it out became a reality. My radio was usually clipped into one of the pockets of my combat trousers, but because it was heavy and because over time I began to lose weight, if I travelled more than a short distance it would slowly pull my trousers down, if I wasn't careful. I also had to carry my pod key, my Iraqi mobile phone, phone lists, pen and paper (crucial as I never knew when a journalist would call), fags, a lighter, money (US dollars), my passport and various ID cards. This lot (together with my body armour and helmet) was supposed to go everywhere with me. I'll bet most reading this won't have ever used all the pockets on combat trousers!

A bizarre mental checklist was carried out every time I moved from one place to another, to ensure that everything was with me. Several times in fact, the mental check would be made. Sometimes three times. On return to my normal life back home in the village, I found that the whole checking-I-have-everything-before-I-go-anywhere thing was difficult to shake. I understood through my assessment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when I got back to England that I was suffering something very common – hyper-vigilance. Luckily it made me smile more than anything, sometimes we humans can be a little too adaptable and our new lives can be habit forming, but I was glad it wore off after a few months. Forgetting front door keys/purse/phone these days isn't such an unusual occurrence.

Although carrying the body armour and helmet around everywhere wasn't fun, it was clear how life-saving it was. During my first few weeks in Iraq a young soldier was killed by mortar attack at another military base in town. Rumours were flying around that he was inside a soft cover building and had allegedly died of shrapnel injuries to his head. I was moved by the death of the young soldier, as I know my tight-lipped colleagues over at Media Operations at the Air Station were, when they called to give me the press lines for the tragedy. Although the inquest showed the rumours were untrue, at the time we questioned whether we should be wearing out helmets indoors too. We rarely did (although nearer the end it became increasingly common) but we often wondered just how strong our own so-called "hard cover" buildings were, especially our pods. This was something we would find out later.

Writing again to my friends in the English village of Bourn on 31 July, I light-heartedly skipped over danger. An extract:

Dear Friends,

I missed my self-imposed deadline of emailing you on a Thursday in time for any likely Thursday get togethers, but I guess you are all on summer recess and at various sunny locations around the world, so you will forgive me.

I've been here over a week now and I am getting into a routine. I have at last been able to sleep (despite the silly nonsense going on outside at night). This I put down to a complete rearrangement of furniture in my pod.

[I am not convinced that it was Feng Shui alone that was helping me sleep – more likely acclimatisation to danger].

Please understand that I won't be able to answer all of your questions for obvious security reasons (a great line which I intend to use with my work with the media).

In my first week I have hooked up with a girl called Nadia who was working here just a few weeks (now left) and we toured the shops available to us on the compound. We found four (but only two were open). I bought some postcards and for some reason an Iraqi football shirt that doesn't really fit me. Apart from her there is no (repeat no) girl friend potential out here. Most of the likely candidates are entrenched in the male dominated society (e.g. a "girls' night in" at my suggestion was almost laughed at). So I will have to make do with my own company for the most (which is cool - enjoying swimming, Tai Chi and artistic pursuits) and the occasional bit of male company (lots of hard core 40-something's who "ain't afraid of jack shit"). Saying that, everyone has been friendly and welcoming, but I sense an amount of gossip and bitchiness akin to the Big Brother household. I asked the medics where the diary room was, I don't think they got it.

[Note: the "I will have to make do with my own company – which is cool" line. It couldn't have been further from the truth!]

It's my day off today (though I have put in a half day). So I am in my pod with my iPod (a theme emerging here) thrashing out some reggae and drinking diet coke (I am a virtual T-total these days). May go to the bar later. With any luck they will get the Karaoke (spelling?) out again and I can treat the troops to my second mind-blowing rendition of the Fugees "Killing me Softly" (!)

Thanks for all your emails by the way - which are really keeping me sane.

I also replied to my friends individually in this weekly email. It wasn't a very personal approach – but I remember being under some delusion that I was making some sort of important 1940's war torn despatch by homing pigeon, and as rushed as it reads, much effort was put into these emails to sound as gung-ho and chipper as I could. I continued:

Janet, it's always good to hear about the English countryside and rain. And no, nothing could really prepare me for this place. And a second "no" - I am not putting in a transfer for South Lebanon (what a mess). Enjoy Greece and regards to your other half (had no idea he was such a wild fool!)

Clair - thanks for the offer of nail varnish. Not sure it will get through the Diplomatic Bag. I have pale pink and blue, and Nadia has left me her nail varnish remover, so I am off to a flying start. I am thoroughly fed up with my four changes of clothes already (hence the football shirt purchase). See above in answer to your questions on female population: "thin on the ground" is a fair conclusion. I hope to be in Kuwait for the start of the school term - and I am trying to secure a US black hawk for the trip - watch this space.

Till next week, my pals. God I miss you all.

Was I was some kind of Bridget Jones of Basra? Good god, they really had little idea of my predicament – and by the sounds of it, neither did I. Nail varnish? A girls' night in? Reggae and diet Coke? I ask you.

Actually it was very therapeutic writing to my friends back in England. It forced me to consider the lighter side of things and to stop seeing myself as some hard-core bitch on a mission to bring about world peace. Perhaps I should have continued writing to them forever more, as the tendency to take myself a little seriously still lurks. But the girls were my life-line to a welcome reality – a reality contained safely in a world of peace, deep in the English Countryside.

Writing again to my friends a week later the tone continued to be light-touch. This time the message chirped on about how the poor internet connection was effecting my online shopping - I was trying to buy my mum a birthday present - but it totally failed to mention how the lack of

connectivity seriously hampered my operational effectiveness at work. Whilst the office was hooked up and networked, our pods would often drop out – it all depended on how many people were online and how close you lived to the main server. My military colleagues spat their tea when they learned that we had internet connections in our pods, but to be honest, especially working in press and media I felt the need to be connected to news and world events (and my email) at all times. Notwithstanding the number of occasions we were locked down in our rooms during or after rocket attacks and had no option but to work from there. I even set myself up a Basra Palace hotmail account so some level of work was achievable when access to the FCO system was impossible. Plus, as already explained, I wasn't in the habit of sleeping much, so it was good (if not always healthy) to have work to occupy some of those more lonely night time moments.

One thing that was reported to my friends back home (again in a very Bridget Jones fashion) was the discovery of Tash. Nadia, who accompanied me on that shopping trip and left me her nail varnish, was only in town for a couple of days and I was struggling once more for female company. The arrival of a female Major from the Territorial Army (with a previous military career) was very welcome. She had already done one official tour at least in Iraq, and knew many of the personalities at the base already - not least Mark Etherington, who she had shared some experiences with when he was Governor of Wasit Province during the CPA days (you will have to read his excellent book for that story!) Tash was blonde, slim and pretty but looked like she could pack a punch. She was confident, funny and highly organized and within a very short time it felt as if she had always been there and we had always been friends. She was also just beginning to fall in love with someone left behind in England (who she is now married to), so the timing for her wasn't brilliant, but it was good for the both of us to have someone to REALLY talk to about life, love and fear of IDF in those early days. Tash also introduced me to the jeep belonging to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which we commandeered at the slightest excuse to get around the base. Tash used the jeep to collect mail from the army side and we sometimes had meetings on the American side of camp – the jeep saved us from a long hot walk. We didn't have much room to take the jeep for a spin, the whole base being only about a kilometre in length, but we tried to take silly detours so that we could truck over the dusty uninhabited UN terrain around the main Palace buildings – it was as close as we got to “getting out and about”, but I remember laughing a lot and we churned up Iraqi soil in billows behind us.