



(U//FOUO) Camp Virginia to Camp Victory: In Kuwait

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(U//FOUO) Prior to my NIST deployment, I had often heard that the best opportunity for personal growth and self-discovery can only be found when we are completely removed from our comfort zone and forced to operate in an environment vastly different from the one in which we live. I was able to live this adage first-hand during my 90-day tour in Kuwait and Iraq at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, which turned out to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

(U//FOUO) We left Ft. Meade around midnight on March 19, and a small convoy of trucks and SUVs carried my team and our equipment down to Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. Dressed in desert cammies and carrying gear and supplies, we boarded a C-17 full of ammunition that would be used in the impending war. As we prepared for our flight across the Atlantic we were told that the US had fired its first missiles at a bunker where Saddam Hussein and some of his regime's high-ranking officials were believed to be meeting. As we approached the airfield at Camp Doha, Kuwait, I heard many unfamiliar phrases, such as "full battle rattle", "combat landing", and "MOPP 4", but the other members of my team were all in the military and were more than willing to help me assemble all my gear and prepare for whatever may await us as we landed in the war zone.

(U//FOUO) Not an hour after we set foot on the ground we were greeted by the haunting cry of air raid sirens, signaling the launch of an Iraqi SCUD missile in our direction. This process was repeated several times that day, and each time I pulled the gas mask out of the pouch around my waist and fumbled to properly secure it over my face as I ran to the nearest bunker. I admit that the question, "What did I get myself into?" crossed my mind several times as we drove through the middle of the Kuwaiti desert to a tent village known as Camp Virginia, which would be our home for the next six weeks. I laid wide-awake in my sleeping bag that first night, a little excited and more than a little scared, knowing that a war was beginning just on the other side of the border.

(U//FOUO) In the subsequent days and weeks, the incoming missile alerts became less frequent as the SCUDs were shot out of the air by the PATRIOTS that surrounded our camp, and their launchers were destroyed by air strikes. As life returned to relative normalcy, I was able to concentrate on the analysis that I was there to do. Camp Virginia served as a staging ground for troops moving back and forth across the Iraqi border, and also housed the field headquarters of the US Army's V Corps, which was in charge of all army combat divisions operating in the Iraqi theater. These were the troops we were there to support, and we provided crucial, actionable intelligence that helped them to identify targets and ensure the safety of their forces. We worked 12-16 hour days, 7 days a week, partly because the mission demanded it and partly because there was nothing else to do in the middle of the desert.

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(U//FOUO) There was a chow tent that served two hot meals a day, as well as a small gym and a large-screen TV that showed the news, but most of our time outside of work was spent trying to get some sleep. We did our laundry by hand in plastic bins, and complained about the occasional sandstorm, our lack of air conditioning, and having to use porta-johns and take showers in a trailer (if we were lucky to have enough water). Life in Camp Virginia was rough by western standards, but it was luxury compared to the conditions we would later endure in Baghdad.

(U//FOUO) Watch for the second and final part of this article, Camp Virginia to Camp Victory: Into Baghdad

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